

An Archeological Quest for the 'real' King Arthur

For over a millennium and a half King Arthur has captivated the minds of all those who perchanced to hear the tales of his magnanimous deeds, his chivalric court, and his immortal reign. As each generation encountered the "Once and Future King", they utilized his name to propel their culture forwards. Monarchs like Henry VII (who united the house of York and Lancaster in 1485) justified their reign and lineage through the most grounded and respectable figure British history had to offer--King Arthur. This propaganda was not only accepted by the masses, but served as a remedy in a chaotic world, being viewed as the fulfillment of the prophecy of King Arthur's "Return". People put their faith in Britain's greatest warrior and protector, never questioning the validity of his actions. Nobility and peasants alike needed a flesh- and-blood historical figure, not fairy tales, and they managed to solidify such a man in their minds.

The scholarly world, on the other hand, has held nothing but skepticism towards King Arthur. As folklore began to draw in other stories and lump them together with Arthuriana, the "snowball" of accumulating tales seemed less and less credible: A man, wronged in love and by kin, able to single-handedly lead a decisive final assault at Badon hill which left 900 Anglo-Saxon warriors dead; a king said to rule for nearly 100 years; a fighter of giants and exotic, strange beasts; a ruler led by a red dragon. Indeed it is easy to see how King Arthur could be inundated by so many fanciful conjurings of the literary imagination. Yet beneath all the superfluous tales, there still remains a trace of a concrete individual, connected with a specific place and time. This is the figure scholastic minds have attempted to uncover. Based on historical documents and literary accounts, the "real" King Arthur has been linked to somewhat specific locations throughout Southern Britain, with a moderate amount of chronological success. This is where Archaeology comes in.

Any person, place or cultural object left alone in nature, will eventually be covered up by the ground. If geological fluctuations are at a minimum, then the soil will act as a natural preservative, locking up the cultural remains until they can be unearthed and analyzed at a future date. Obviously there are a lot of problems involved in this whole process. First of all, Archaeology is limited by time and money--there are only so many sites which can be excavated and funded. So the chances of sampling plots reconstructing a total picture of a culture are slim. Second, only certain human-made objects (known as artifacts) survive consistently in the ground. Pottery sherds and stone and metal tools tend to be the most durable elements and subsequently represent the majority of artifacts recovered. Artifacts made of wood or fiber decompose rapidly and end up being lost from the archaeological record. In Britain, during the era of King Arthur (367-734 AD), wood was the most common building supply used, so there is very little archaeological evidence in Arthur's Britain; however, inference is largely able to overcome this obstacle because even though wooden posts have decomposed, the post holes for the foundations are still present in many sites. But once again, what is excavated represents only a small portion of the past culture. Finally, Archaeology rarely deals with specifics. As a field, it incorporates inductive

reasoning to create very broad views of past cultures. It usually fails to isolate individual figures in history unless grave markers or other inscriptions are present. Unfortunately, 4th and 5th century Britain was Christianized and grave goods were not used. Furthermore, tombstones were very uncommon. A usual burial consisted of interring the body in a shallow grave and covering it with a pile of stones (known as a "cairn"). Without grave goods, cairns give very little concrete evidence, except for a description of the position of the body in the grave. This again minimizes what the archaeologist can discover.

There are more archaeological limitations which come into play as well in the British Isles. Southern Britain, like most of the British Isles, is an area covered with swamps and marshes. Its rolling peat and grass hillsides are perfect for absorbing precipitation and they always maintain a high saturation point. This is a curse on Archaeological remains. Flowing water quickly destroys elements in the ground, either by steady erosion processes, or by actually moving the artifacts out of their original context. Without proper spatial placing in the ground artifacts are useless because they become isolated from their prior stratigraphic relationships, making them nothing more than archaic tidbits for treasure hunters. Once artifacts are displaced they are gone for good in terms of their effective contribution to historical knowledge.

Nevertheless, Archaeology still has a lot to offer the Arthurian legend. It has set about uncovering the areas established by Arthurian literature as being associated with historic King Arthur and has attempted to authenticate those literary suppositions. Sites such as Tintagel, Cadbury hill-fort and Glastonbury Abbey become more plausible occupations of a "real" King Arthur when literature and archaeology are combined.

A REAL ARTHUR?

Before pursuing the sites commonly attached with King Arthur's lifetime, it is important to examine exactly who the most likely historic figure is for the colossal Arthurian legend. After several decades of scholastic pursuit, only one theory has managed to name a founding individual consistent with Arthurian literature and the chronological time he would have had to occupy. This man was Riothamus, the "King of the Britons" sent by Leo I in 467 to retrieve the crumbling British Isles from Saxon invasions.

As Geoffrey Ashe says, Riothamus "Latinizes to the fifth-century British style, 'Rigotamos,'" which can be translated as "supreme-king" or "supremely royal" (Ashe 1995, 15). This may have been his British name, but he probably either was given the baptismal name, Artorius, or two historical figures were lumped into one composite war-leader. This is where confusion starts to arise: Riothamus was said to have campaigned in Gaul and disappeared around 470 in Burgundy; however, the Welsh said Arthur died in Camlann fighting another Briton, Medraunt, in 539. This would place his lifespan at close to one hundred years old! So there is an obvious discrepancy which can be explained in one of two ways: First off, after Riothamus liberated the Britons, he became a legend. Stories of his accomplishments spread far and wide. As is usually the case with oral tradition, his deeds were blown out of proportion and other stories were falsely attributed to him. This would account for the heightened accounts of Riothamus' battles and his long life span. Another

explanation is offered by Geoffrey Ashe:

Late Roman times supply instances of military units named after individuals: Theodosiani, Honoriaci. Arthur's man might have been Artoriani. This force could have stayed in being after his death, recruited new members, played a crucial part at Badon, and collapsed through internal conflict at Camlann. (Ashe 1995, 21)

This connection is a bit of a stretch, but it does allow for only one Arthur, which seems more likely than two competing stories coming together as the basis for the legend of Arthur. So for the purpose of this paper, the King Arthur archaeology will be attempting to verify a single historical figure--Riothamus, also known by his baptismal name, Artorius.

TINTAGEL CASTLE

Tintagel castle in Northern Cornwall is the legendary place of King Arthur's conception and birth. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, near the end of Roman occupation in Britain, the Archbishop of London offered the throne of Briton to Constantine, having lost the power of self-reliance and having been in near ruin due to Pict invasions. Constantine ruled peacefully for ten years and had three sons--Constans, Aurelius Ambrosius and Uther. When Constantine was murdered by a Pictish assassin, the throne was up for grabs. A nobleman, Vortigern, manipulated Constans (the eldest son) and managed to gain control of Britain. Eventually Aurelius Ambrosius, and Uther Pendragon after him, reclaimed their rightful throne. Arthur was born soon after, according to Geoffrey's account.

Tintagel was originally identified as an early Christian monastery. This conflicts with Geoffrey of Monmouth's claim that a "Cornish overlord had a stronghold at Tintagel and Arthur was begotten there" (internet interview with Geoffrey Ashe). As Geoffrey Ashe continues, "Archaeology doesn't prove that Geoffrey chose an appropriate location. It points to a tradition of Tintagel's importance at the right time, an authentic tradition which Geoffrey drew upon." Indeed, Archaeological evidence points to a fortified castle more than a monastery.

In the summer of 1983, a series of accidental fires swept through Tintagel island, uncovering "a pattern of completely unsuspected foundations" (Thomas 1988, 425). Most of the newly-exposed buildings were rectangular, not circular (as was typical for Irish monasteries during the 3rd and 4th centuries). Furthermore, a long series of occupations developed from out of the ruins, ranging from potential Roman control in the third century, to the subsequent fall of the castle by the seventh century due to Anglo-Saxon invasion. Each period can be separated due to the unique artifacts associated with them.

Period I at Tintagel is within the Roman period. About 100 sherds of local Romano-British pottery come from the island" (Thomas 1988, 427). The pottery is dated between the 3rd to 4th centuries. What makes this

so odd is that no other Roman site is present anywhere in the immediate area with similar architecture or Roman pottery.

This can be attributed to either strict geographical isolation or perhaps to the fact that Tintagel was a trading post. The next period of occupation points to this explanation.

Period II (450-600) is marked by the presence of many North African, east Mediterranean and Gaulish imports, mostly pottery of Classes A, B and D, with the absence of Class E (which suggests the site was abandoned

before the end of the seventh century when Class E pottery shows up in the Mediterranean area). An Iron Gate also

shows up in this period, near the Northeast coastline. This protects Site A and Site B, where most artifacts were

uncovered (see map) and perhaps was a minor fortification. Added to ceramic finds, there are bronze artifacts and some

"slag, daub, stone and traces of glass vessels [which] were found just outside the Island Ward's curtain wall[map]." There

were also late Roman dishes, spiral grooved B.i amphorae (probably to hold wine), huge B.v Africana Grande oil

containers and many other Class B vessels (Thomas 1988, 429).

So why was so much trade occurring at Tintagel Castle? The most accepted answer was that it was "a royal citadel,

part-guarded by Nature, further embattled by man" (Thomas 1988, 429). This was its function at least in Period II. During

Period I, it seems to have served as a sort of Northwest harbor for Roman ships traveling to the mouth of the Camel River.

This would explain all the Roman artifacts found at Tintagel. The castle probably served some fiscal function in this trade

route. In fact, many Roman ceramic vessels have Roman numerals as graffiti on them. As Charles Thomas explains, this

"suggests the intermediacy of middlemen in the Western part of the Late Empire, and Class D ware raises the possibility of

Burdigala, Bordeaux" (1988, 430). So Tintagel was a fairly significant site in the British Isles. Whether King Arthur was

born there or not is impossible at present to tell, but archaeological evidence does make Tintagel a plausible site for a

flourishing kingdom. Its unique artifacts further emphasize its dominance in the area as a royal citadel and Mediterranean

contact during the 5th and 6th centuries.

CADBURY HILL FORT

Perhaps the most common element of the Arthurian legend is the Knights of the Round Table at the castle

of Camelot. Straight away it is crucial to mention that the historic connection between the Round Table

and Arthur is impossible. Camelot was a creation of twelfth century literature, first appearing in the

romance, *Lancelot le chevalier de la charette*, by Chretien de Troyes. Nowhere in early accounts is

Arthur said to have established court anywhere in Britain. In 1542, however, John Leland, King Henry VIII's Antiquary, first linked Cadbury hill-fort with Camelot, "drawing on a strong local tradition connecting the hillfort with King Arthur" (McIntosh 1986, 58) (In retrospect, the credence of these traditional tales is strengthened since the fortifications at Cadbury hill were not visible to the naked eye back in 1542. Only recent excavations have proven their existence and strengthened the validity of ancient oral tradition in Britain). Investigation of the site met with few conclusive results. It wasn't until the 1950's when a few sherds of imported pottery were uncovered that the connection seemed to hold any truth.

With revived interest in Cadbury hill-fort, Leslie Alcock studied 1970. Since the area of interest covered over 18 acres, a geophysical survey was conducted which tested for differences in soil temperature and electrical resistance, and indicated the presence of buried features (McIntosh 1986, 58) (Picture at right indicates the valued accuracy and speed of such a technique when the geophysical survey results are compared with actual excavation finds). The results of the archaeological dig were incredible: Cadbury hill did not seem to be a castle, but a heavily fortified headquarters for some great king. Four stone ramparts surrounding the inner structures, while the second, dubbed the "Stony Bank", had a coin built into it which could date no earlier than the fifth century.

The innermost rampart was the most complex. Sixteen feet thick, it incorporated a "stone-and-timber-system", a construction distinctive only to Cadbury throughout the British Isles. This becomes more relevant considering that we are told in the *Historia Brittonum* that Vortigern (literally means "over-chief" or "high king") built "a fortress in the mountains of Snowdonia. The passage states that royal workmen assembled 'timber and stones', evidently thought of as the proper materials for a fifth century high king's stronghold" (Ashe 1987, 50). Since evidence indicates that Roman pottery sherds were built into the walls of the fortress and it was strengthened before the final wave of Roman invasion overthrew the Britons, it would fall right into the same time period as Vortigern's reign. It is not inconceivable for "King Arthur" to have continued his occupation at Cadbury hill-fort, since it was already the most established fortress in the area.

Further evidence strengthens the importance of Cadbury hill-fort at the time. Eastern Mediterranean pottery, like that found at Tintagel Castle, was discovered in the interior fortress:

Among the earth and gravel packed around these posts were two sherds of Tintagel ware, the distinctive late 5th/early 6th-century imported pottery that had served as major dating evidence on other Arthurian sites. (McIntosh 1986, 73)

Either Cadbury fortress was involved in a trade route with Tintagel or the same inhabitants were transporting the pottery from place to place along with themselves. Regardless, the strong connection cannot be overlooked. In addition, a timber hall built between 460-500 was revealed from post holes in the ground, measuring more than 60 by 30 feet in its dimensions. The obvious conclusion from all this evidence is that, since Cadbury hill-fort was such an unusually large fortress for post-Roman-defended-hill-settlements in sixth century Britain, it probably housed more than an individual king and his warbands--it was large enough to hold an entire army. Only a king powerful enough to unite the neighboring kingdoms against the Anglo-Saxon threats could amass such a large army: King Arthur was said to do this before he led the British army to nearby Mount Badon.

GLASTONBURY TOR AND ABBEY

The final crucial sites linked to an understanding of a historic King Arthur are Glastonbury Abbey (the alleged location of Arthur's grave) and Glastonbury Tor (the potential literary basis for the creation of the Island of Avalon). Although the majority of support for both areas is purely speculative, there are some uncanny correlations which connect them with other Arthurian occupation areas.

Glastonbury Tor is one of four hills overlooking the flat lands surrounding Glastonbury. As Geoffrey Russel noted in the 1960's, the hill is artificially shaped and has "remnants of a ritual pathway thousands of years old, spiraling up the hill . . . a backtracking septenary spiral, which turns up also in Crete and Italy and Ireland and elsewhere, and is carved on a rock near Tintagel, Arthur's reputed Cornish birthplace" (Ashe 1987, 16). Although it was probably built prior to the third century B. C., it seems to be tied up with a long tradition of mystification. From the Welsh word, "Avallach", "Avalon" translates to "apple-place." The Welsh monk, Caradoc of Llancarfan, also wrote in 1130 that Avalon came from an old Celtic name, "Ynys-witrin" meaning "The Isle of Glass." Both these etymologies point to Avalon as an enchanted place--probably the site of an archaic Celtic Cult.

Besides Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gildas, Caradoc makes the connection between Arthur and Avalon. Recounting a sentence in Gildas' historical account of the sixth century in the British Isles, Caradoc says "Melwas, the ruler of Somerset carried off Arthur's wife 'Guennuvar' and kept her at Glastonbury. Arthur assembled troops from Devon and Cornwall to recover her, but the watery surroundings made it difficult" (Ashe 1987, 18). The tale is close enough historically to fit within the time frame of Arthur. Further archaeological evidence supports that the Glastonbury countryside was periodically inundated with water--the Tor would have indeed been an island during these floods. All these clues make the link between Arthur, the Isle of Avalon, and Glastonbury Tor too tightly-interwoven to be merely coincidental.

Glastonbury Abbey is one of the best supported sites for King Arthur, being the legendary location for Arthur and Guinevere's burial tomb, because it may have held a specific grave marker linking King Arthur to the Abbey. In 1191, the monks at Glastonbury Abbey claimed to have found the grave of King Arthur. On the stone burial was an inlaid lead cross with the inscription, *Hic iacet sepultus inclitus rex Arturius in insula Avallonis* ("Here lies the famous King Arthur, buried on the Island of Avalon"). The claim was not taken seriously until 1278 when Henry II ordered the grave to be exhumed. A man's body was found with a cracked skull from a heavy blow. A female skeleton was next to it, as well as the original lead cross. The remains were transported to the main Abbey church, but all signs of the bodies and cross mysteriously disappeared.

In 1607, William Camden published a drawing of the original lead cross which he claimed to have seen (figure at right) while in the possession of Mr. Hughes, one of the clergy men at a Cathedral in Wells. He also stated that the other side of the cross named Guinevere, but the flipside was never drawn. However, since no physical proof ever turned up, his drawing was pegged as a forgery. Raleigh Radford re-excavated the site of King Arthur's grave in 1958 to try and confirm the stories. All he discovered were the stone slabs used to line an ancient burial. The grave was indeed dug up in the twelfth century and perhaps was old enough to have been in Arthur's era, but was barren and otherwise "speechless."

Overall, the evidence at Glastonbury Abbey is highly suspect. Many critics think the original report of Arthur and Guinevere's tomb was a ploy to increase revenue for the rebuilding of the ancient Glastonbury Abbey (which burned down in 1184). However, it is also possible that the fire allowed the grave to become visible (as was the case at Cadbury hill-fort when accidental fires actually revealed previously undiscovered artifacts). Geoffrey Ashe puts it all in perspective:

We hear of rival Camelots, rival scenes of Arthur's last battle, and so forth. But all the centuries of Arthurian legend-making produced, for practical purposes, only the one grave. (Ashe 1987, 34)

As true as this may be, Ashe overlooks an obvious explanation for this phenomenon: the majority of Arthurian legend never even provides for the demise of "The Once and Future King." In fact, many tales transport him on a barge to Avalon and fully expect him to re-emerge at a later date, once again as Britain's liberator. He is never given an earthly resting place because his death, by and large, is ambiguous. Riothamus, the most likely basis for King Arthur, was said to have campaigned in Gaul and disappeared around 470 in Burgundy. The Welsh said Arthur died at the "Strife of Camlann" fighting another Briton, Medraunt, in 539. So there are more potential places for Arthur's burial site than Ashe indicates. Relatively speaking, though, his claim is sound in the sense that the literary evolution of Arthur has typically held onto the Isle of Avalon in connection with his burial site. Although few historic locations have been linked with this enchanted island, it has more or less remained a constant element in Arthurian legend.

Archaeology has sifted through the literary assertions surrounding King Arthur's lifetime and, while not proving them, has at the very least strengthened their validity. Only time will tell what new discoveries will unfold. Tintagel Castle, Cadbury hill-fort and Glastonbury Abbey seem to be strongly-supported sites in connection with a historical King Arthur, but without more specific artifacts and literary accounts, their importance is at a standstill. For all intents and purposes, archaeological excavations have only produced new hypotheses, but no new proof. Until this can be achieved, King Arthur will remain in the misty Island of Avalon, awaiting the time when he can finally resurface in the British Isles as the "Once and Future King."

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