

The Age of Arthur

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ALL MYSTERIOUS or shadowy people and events in history attract a disproportionate amount of attention from historians, and many are also the stuff of which legends are made. Perhaps the best example of all is Arthur, whose real identity is for ever lost to us, but whose life as perceived by medieval and later writers down to Tennyson is known to virtually everybody. The spate of historical Arthuriana has, if anything, increased in volume over the last few years¹, and it is clear that the historical Arthur and his era are much more interesting than the anachronistic trappings of the Round Table tales (which do, however, incorporate some dimly-remembered facts about the Britain of Arthur). Like any term, "Dark Ages" is relative, and the period between the fall of Rome and the Norman Conquest has been portrayed as much darker than it really was, one suspects because Roman and Norman times have a special fascination for the fantasists among us. Recent work on the period from about A.D.400 to 700 has at last begun to remedy this one-sided view of the crucial era in which the nations of modern Britain have their origins.

In the book-reviewer's jargon, the most over-worked word is "seminal." This is a pity, for its meaning "pregnant with consequences" is exactly the right one to describe John Morris's book, *The Age of Arthur* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1973, xviii+665 pp, £5.35). The aim of the book is to make the history of the British Isles from c.350 to c.650 manageable, with the subsidiary objective of placing Arthur in his true historical perspective *vis-a-vis* the events before, during and after his brief spell of power. In these aims, the author succeeds admirably. Future generations of students concerned with this period will remain indebted to Dr. Morris, who has collected, analysed and interpreted a vast range of sources, as well as material from archaeology and other cognate disciplines. As he says in the Introduction (p.xviii), the interpretation he provides is a preliminary attempt to open up questions and to provide a wider context for future specialist studies. It is a sad indictment of many previous workers in this field that we have had to wait until 1973 for a framework on which to hang more detailed

work, much of which has been less than worthwhile precisely because it lacks the wider context. Not since Collingwood & Myers and Stenton² has a general overview of this formative period been attempted by an historian, and it is clear from Dr. Morris's work that even those great scholars have only told part of the story.

Because of the wide geographical coverage of *The Age of Arthur*, the rest of this review will be divided into two parts. The first covers the content of the book as a whole, and the second considers the wider implications of its findings for the history of London and its environs in the post-Roman centuries.

Only two major criticisms can be levelled against this book, one structural and the other interpretative. Footnotes and other bibliographical apparatus are, of course, the bane of the author and publisher trying to achieve a balance between scholarship and readability. The questions of what to include and where to put it need not detain us here. Dr. Morris's list of sources (pp. 522-546) is exhaustive, and will be a revelation to those who think that the Dark Ages are synonymous with illiteracy. My criticism is with the notes themselves. These are listed on pp. 547-618 and are in the form of page and paragraph numbers, giving the main sources upon which they are based in a highly condensed form, so that constant references to the list of sources and abbreviations is necessary. There are no references to notes in the text, and so one is unaware at the time of reading of supporting evidence, without constant cross-checking to the back of the book. I favour the practice of collecting notes at the end, but feel that they should be easy to use if need be. It would also have been useful in a book of this nature to have a short list of the major relevant sources at the end of each chapter as appropriate.

As for the matter of interpretation, it has long been agreed that the traditional view of the English settlement as a fire-and-sword operation, killing, enslaving and exiling the British population of the south and east is grossly misleading, and at variance with known historical facts. In making this whole

1. See L. Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (1971) and G. Ashe (ed.) *The Quest for Arthur's Britain* (1968).

2. R. G. Collingwood & J. N. L. Myers, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (1936); F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (1943).

period the Age of Arthur, Dr. Morris tends to over-react against this tradition in the role he accords to the Celtic peoples in the formation of post-Roman Britain. While it is true that they ensured the creation of an England quite different from any of the Germanic states on the Continent, and that their influence in Europe—in Brittany and in the monastic movement—was very important, it is possible that the pendulum may now swing too far the other way and provoke a response putting the English back in a dominant role. The answer is surely to avoid yet more arid debate by admitting that all peoples had a distinctive contribution to make, and then to use Dr. Morris's general synthesis as a background for local detailed studies of the interface and interaction between Britons and English, especially as we have now been provided with as near a definitive chronology as we are likely to get.

The Outline of the Book

Turning briefly to an outline of *The Age of Arthur*, the first three chapters set the period in the perspective of late Roman Britain, and discuss the sources for the study of independent Britain, including not only Gildas, Bede and Nennius, but also archaeological finds. In the case of the latter, most pagan English finds come from graves, which is in strong contrast to the Roman era, when most finds come from the living. Chapters 4 and 5 concern the government of Vortigern and its various campaigns which made the Britain of the 430's unusually secure for those times. In 442, however, came the first revolt of the Saxon federates against their British masters, although they were numerically too small to press home their advantage.

Chapters 6 and 7 concern the actual Arthurian period, and that of his predecessor Ambrosius, who led the resistance to the English after 460, culminating in the victory of Badon (?Bath) in the 490's, which halted any major English advance for over fifty years, and thereby left its impact on all subsequent events. The attempts of Arthur and his contemporaries to restore Britain to the full Roman pattern failed because economy and society had been irrevocably changed by events in the course of the 5th century, and also because civil strife broke out amongst the Britons in the post-Badon peace, which not only led to the death of Arthur in c.515, but enabled the English to gain control of the south and east after 550. As Dr. Morris says (p.139), only Arthur's personality kept his "empire" intact.

Section III concerns the "Successor States" to Roman Britain, including pagan and Christian Ireland, Scotland, the British residue and its collapse in both north and south, together with the migra-

tions to Brittany. Chapters 15 to 17 concern the origins, conquests and monarchies of the English, taking the story into the 7th century and beyond. For anyone whose knowledge of this period is limited, this section of the book represents a *tour de force* of historical research and interpretation, and they will also be of value to many archaeologists in providing a context for the somewhat sparse remains of these centuries.

Section IV is mainly concerned with the evolution of Christianity in Britain, from the time when only the Britons were Christians until the final conversion of the English in the late 7th century. The method of segregating these chapters means that there is a certain amount of overlap with Section III, and details of the same personalities must be sought in widely-separated places. For example, the activities of Paul Aurelian in Brittany are to be found on pp. 252-4 and also pp. 363-7.

In Chapter 21 ("Letters"), Dr. Morris gives an outline of the development of language, education and literature in the Age of Arthur. On p. 409 he touches on the transition from British to Old Welsh, which occurred c.600, at the same sort of period as the three main languages of Britain were first being written. He does not, unfortunately, have anything to say about the evolution of the English language at this time. The fact that Old English dialects such as West Saxon and Mercian are probably the result of geographical separation in this country, and that the continental origins of the English were so widespread (from Denmark to Flanders) would suggest that the period from 400 to 600 was crucial in the formation of a national language. Certainly the number of personal names in early place-names which are no longer current in the era of literacy implies changes which welded diverse elements into a single unit. Dr. Morris also has little to say about the reasons for the almost complete absence of interchange between Old English and Welsh, despite the fact that they both borrowed from Latin, and co-existed in many areas for centuries. In Chapter 16 (p. 314 ff.) however, he comments on the survival of large numbers of British people in England as late as the 12th century, and cites the 11th century Cambridge gild which insured its members against the contingency of attacking a Welshman.

Section V concludes the book by looking at Society and Economy in post-Roman Britain, and yet again impresses one by the sheer range of sources from which the data are drawn to illustrate life throughout the British Isles. Chapter 24 on English society is especially good, using archaeological, place-name, legal and charter evidence to reconstruct the socio-economic landscape of the 6th and 7th centuries. Here, hopefully, we shall see the end of those cheri-

shed myths about Anglo-Saxon settlers travelling in boats up rivers like the Thames and taking over the Celtic lands by force, with the new settlements named after warrior chiefs. Dr. Morris has shown throughout the book that the process whereby south-east Britain became England was infinitely more varied and complex than that, and owes as much to the policies, successes and failures of Britons like Vortigern, Ambrosius, Arthur and Cadwallon as it does to Hengest and the dynasts recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

One last point to mention is that *The Age of Arthur* is, unusually for a history book, illustrated by 36 maps, together with useful notes on them. Most of the maps are of a high standard, and reveal many spatial relationships which are only imperfectly covered by words. Like so much in the book, these maps will form a good starting point for the more detailed studies envisaged by the author in the Introduction.

London in the Age of Arthur

In a book such as this, whose aim is to cover the whole of Britain over a period of three centuries, it is to be expected that no one area will receive treatment in depth. It is, however, worth examining the evidence cited on one vexed question, i.e. the history of London and the surrounding area in the period 400-600, which has been the subject of much inconclusive debate in the past. The second part of this review therefore attempts to summarise the major threads of more recent writing on London, Middlesex and Surrey and to relate these to Dr. Morris's work.

In his survey of the early history of Middlesex³, Michael Robbins said that the post-Roman period in the county was a Dark Age in more senses than one, and despite Dr. Morris's marshalling of extensive sources of information, there is little in *The Age of Arthur* to contradict that view. After the first Saxon revolt under Hengest in 442, we know that he failed to secure London. Despite victories over the Britons at the Medway and the Cray, Hengest was driven back to Thanet and defeated by the son of Vortigern, the British king who had first invited him over in the late 420s⁴. Clearly London was a key strategic point for both sides, not only as a river crossing, but as a barrier between the Saxons of Kent and those of East Anglia.

The second Saxon revolt after 455-460 also failed

3. R. M. Robbins, *Middlesex* (1953) 14-16.
4. J. Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (1973) 55-58.
5. *Ibid.* 95.
6. Robbins, *op. cit.* in note 3, 15.
7. Morris, *op. cit.* in note 4, 470.
8. *Victoria County History, Surrey* 1 255-273.

to secure London, and as late as 468 there is evidence of trade with Gaul, despite the threat of Saxon pirates in the Thames and Channel⁵. The resurgence of the British under Ambrosius and Arthur down to 500 and beyond meant that the English were effectively contained within their original bounds, together with Sussex and (?) Essex, which had been ceded to them in the mid-5th century. Sub-Roman life continued in London and St. Albans into the 6th century, albeit at a declining level, and there are no pagan English burials adjacent to the City, in an area well excavated and abundant in Romano-British cemeteries. Robbins, quoting Vulliamy, is probably right when he says that the scarcity of early Saxon relics in Middlesex is best accounted for by the scarcity of early Saxons⁶. There are no place-names in *-ingham* in Middlesex (meaning "home of the people of") and these are regarded by Morris as being indicative of early (6th century) settlement⁷. There are, however, some names in *-ing*—viz. Ealing, *Gumeningas* (Harrow) and Yeading, which are not mentioned in *The Age of Arthur*. These may indicate the settlement of Saxon federates west of London in the 5th century to secure the city from flanking attack and all lie in typical situations in valleys of the Brent and its tributaries.

In Surrey, analogous sites are found to be five to ten miles from Roman London in the alluvial valley of the Wandle around Croydon and Mitcham⁸. Such a site in the first half of the 5th century at least, and certainly in the Arthurian era, must have been with British approval. It is therefore surely significant in the debate on Saxon origins in the Thames Basin⁹ that the grave goods of these sites are wholly different from those of East Kent, and more akin to those of the Middle Thames. The recent assertion¹⁰ that these areas of east Surrey were settled from Kent by followers of Hengest moving along Watling Street and the Pilgrim's Way after the first Saxon revolt cannot be sustained in the light of Hengest's defeat by Vortimer. It is of course possible that Hengest aimed to link up with federates from the Darent and Wandle areas in his assault on London, but he either failed to make contact or was frustrated by superior British forces.

An examination of Surrey place-names in *-ing* and *-ingham* is instructive¹¹. There are four of the latter: Warlingham and Woldingham on the chalk east of the Roman road through Croydon and near that to Lewes; Watsingham (lost), where a possible Roman

9. See C. F. Titford, "Saxon Settlements south of the Thames," *London Archaeol* 1 No. 13 (1971) 296-7; K. A. Bailey, "Saxon Settlements south of the Thames—some further observations," *ibid.* No. 14 (1972) 328-9.
10. Titford, *op. cit.* in note 9, 297.
11. E. Ekwall, *English Place-Names in -ing* (1973).

road running west from Clapham (Stane Street) towards Richmond, crossed the valley of the Hida-burn (G.R. TQ274752)¹²; and Effingham, also on the chalk, this time high above the Mole valley. All these sites could fit the pattern of federate settlement in the period before 440, protecting the southern approaches to London. Surrey names in *-ing* are more widespread, but fall into distinct groups. On the Wandle is Tooting, probably to be associated with Mitcham. On the Mole are Dorking and *Getinges* (Cobham), and in the south-west corner of the county, near the Hampshire and Sussex borders are Binton, Eashing, Godalming, Tyting, with Woking further north, all of them in or near the Wey valley. Unfortunately there are few archaeological finds to enable most of these sites to be even approximately dated, and they may be either federate settlements of the 5th century (probable in the case of Mole valley and ?Woking), or settled from western Sussex in the early 6th century when AElle had been confined east of the Arun by the British of Chichester¹³, and when pressure on resources may have prompted migration to the empty quarter of Surrey.

From the evidence available in *The Age of Arthur* it is clear that the English failed to take London and its hinterland before the final collapse of the British government in the area after c.510-520. Only the internal dissensions which preceded and caused the death of Arthur, and which figure prominently in Gildas' diatribe of c.540¹⁴ enabled the Saxons of the Middlesex-Surrey area to break out of their imposed limits. It is not apparent what political manoeuvrings took place in the years between the fall of Arthur and 568 in this area. It is unfortunate that this is the critical period for those concerned with that bothersome question of the relationship between Surrey (the south district) and Middlesex.

We have two known events in the 6th century on which to base any theory. The first is the death of Arthur at Camlann in c.515. The second is the battle of *Wibbandun* in 568, at which AElhelberht, king of Kent, was defeated by Ceawlin of Wessex and Cutha (? of the Cambridge Saxons). This battle marks the first sign of Kentish expansion recorded since the days of Hengest over a century earlier. Since the battle comes early in the long reign of AElhelberht (560-616), it may be seen as some part of a conscious strategy to gain control of London. The fact that the men of Kent fought against Saxons from the west and possibly from East Anglia suggests that the two latter groups had combined to prevent the former from attaining their goal. It is also clear north Surrey

had already passed out of British control some time previously. (Although Dr. Morris does not locate *Wibbandun*, he clearly intends it to be Wimbledon, rather than one of the other candidates which have been hotly debated over the course of the century. It is, after all, a logical place for a battle between Kent, expanding westwards, and Wessex, coming up the main south-western approach to London). No mention is made in the sources of subsequent Kentish campaigns, but by 600 they had gained control of the London area, by securing overlordship of Essex.

The supposition is therefore that the federate Saxons of the areas just north and south of London took advantage of British weakness to reverse roles with their political masters, without necessarily experiencing any increase in numbers, or even occupying the city itself. Assuming that they remained a congeries of tribes after this event, the use of the Thames by neighbouring peoples to distinguish two groups—one to the north and the other to the south—is quite logical. It may even be that the name Middle Saxons is the original one, for viewed from Kent, for example, they lay between the East, West and Chiltern Saxons. In that case, Surrey would have been a division of "Greater Middlesex," of which the present county was the northern part. Absence of any mention of kings in this area need not deter us too much, firstly because their independence cannot have lasted much more than fifty or sixty years, and secondly because there may have been sub-kings in one or both parts under the influence of Kent or some other kingdom, as happened in Surrey in the latter part of the 7th century, when we read in a charter of Frithuuald "Subregulus" in Surrey¹⁵.

It will be apparent from the foregoing remarks on the London area and its history in the period from the end of direct Roman rule to the coming of St. Augustine that Dr. Morris's book really is seminal. His handling and presentation of the sources will necessarily provoke a reappraisal of all local history in the Arthurian age. His greatest service has not been merely to present us with material in a scholarly and objective way, but to show that all of it, even hagiography and many so-called "forged" charters, contains elements of the truth, dating back in many cases to the 5th and 6th centuries. This book is a challenge to all London historians and archaeologists to look again at their charters and disc-brooches, in order to produce a history of the area in the Age of Arthur on a par with that of other periods.

12. N. Farrant, "The Romano-British Settlement at Putney," *London Archaeol* 1 No. 16 (1972) 369 for a discussion of this possible road further west.

13. Morris, *op. cit.* in note 4, 94.

14. *Ibid.* 35-7.

15. W. G. Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum* nos. 33, 39.