

## The Battle of Mount Badon

**The legends of the Dark Ages including King Arthur are less enigmatic when more attention is paid to the geography and topography of the North. It may now be possible to deduce more history through a regional analysis of the archaeological record combined with a reassessment of the earliest sources suggests North Yorkshire author Alistair Hall**

Gildas, writing in the early sixth century, is the only reliable source for a battle he calls *Mons Badonicus* (Mount Badon) which is claimed as a victory for Late Roman Britons over an enemy he describes as “the hated ones”, usually taken to be the Saxons who were first employed as mercenaries but later rebelled against their paymasters. In his early 6<sup>th</sup> century work *De Excidio* he dramatically describes the rebellion - “...a fire heaped up by the impious easterners spread from sea to sea. It devastated town and country round about, and, once alight did not die down until it had burned almost the whole island and was licking the western ocean with its red and savage tongue”. This remarkably descriptive passage (*De Excidio* 24.1-3) records eye-witness accounts of the terror that led to the Saxon War which was ultimately won by the Britons. Gildas names a Roman, Ambrosius Aurelianus, who he implies was a past emperor’s son and responsible for the final victory at Mount Badon over the Saxons. **This all seems fairly straight forward but it is the source of one of the fiercest debates in early medieval history, enter King Arthur!** The Annals of Wales (*Annales Cambriae*) and the History of the Britons (*Historia Brittonium*), both written in the ninth century but surviving in mid to late medieval copies, attribute the victory of Mount Badon to Arthur. The *Historia* which is sometimes referred to as “Nennius” (the name of the monk thought to have compiled the information) lists a further eleven battles fought by this Arthur.

Despite all this source material and debate the location and date for the battle of Mount Badon still has remained a mystery. Arthur is the subject of a considerable amount of early Celtic poetry from the 7<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Then later Geoffrey of Monmouth and the romances, in particular Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, turned the *Dux Bellorum* (battle leader) of Nennius into the mighty King Arthur that we all know from book, stage and screen. Like Robin Hood one of the easiest charades to

guess! Historians despair at the hundreds of books proposing theories about King Arthur and academic careers have even been tarnished where too much enthusiasm for Arthur has crept into otherwise impeccable work. This has led to many historians using a bargepole when dealing with the subject of Arthur, and there is a tendency to kick the Battle of Badon into the long grass of the late fifth and early sixth centuries. I remember a question put to author Nick Higham by BBC History Magazine in May 2017 asking if the story of Arthur added to our understanding of Dark Age Britain, to which he replied it was unlikely to tell us anything! This has been the default position of most academics for thirty years but there are new and important developments in archaeological and historical interpretation led by the likes of authors such as Miles Russell, Stuart Laycock and Chris Marshall who are beginning to tease out aspects of the end of Roman Britain that have hitherto been missed or misunderstood. In particular, the analysis of Late Roman military buckles has begun to show whereabouts in the country Late Roman militias were stationed. After the Roman occupation of Britain ended in 410AD soldiers who remained and those who were indigenous Britons formed into militias to fight against Picts, Scotti and Saxons who constantly raided the former Roman province. Late Roman warlords and powerful Britons such as Coel Hen, Vortigern and Ambrosius Aurelianus are thought to have raised militias. This was paralleled on the Continent where militias were also raised for security. For example, the relations and descendants of Theodosius the Great maintained a militia in Spain and there was a Breton militia sometimes referred to as *Bacaudae*. Jordanes who abridged Cassiodorus' Gothic history mentions in his work *Getica* a unit of militia known as *Olibriones* who were former Roman soldiers fighting against Attila the Hun. In future, research into the location of these finds, with more discoveries, may indicate whereabouts the front line of the Saxon War actually was.

Over twenty years ago I began to think that the key to unlocking the mystery of the Dark Ages was to find the true location of the Battle of Badon and from there try to establish a more accurate date for when it occurred. My curiosity had been stimulated by the topography of one contender in particular, Bardonia Hill, right by the M1 motorway in Leicestershire. It is definitely a *Mons* at 912

feet above sea level and the name is remarkably similar. I will not spoil the detective story that lead me near to conclusive identification, but its location, much further north than most other commentators suggest is enlightening. A northern Saxon war requires a revision in dating because the early Saxons were mostly in Lincolnshire and not Kent as otherwise implied by both Bede and the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*. In September 2019 I was fortunate to be able to discuss this subject with North Yorkshire author D.P. Kirby who students of the seventies will remember wrote "*The Making of Early England*". I met him through Snape local history society and I asked him to review my then unpublished book "*The Battle of Mount Badon*". This was rather brave as I knew him to be a published critic of the book "*The Age of Arthur*" written by John Morris. I was sent home with a list of corrections and matters to consider but one of his comments in particular struck a chord. "You know we really can't rely upon the early traditions recounted by Bede". I was already aware of this from "*An Introduction to Anglo Saxon England*" written by Peter Hunter Blair and published in 1956 who established that Gildas was the only reliable source for the arrival of the Saxons and he merely said that the Saxons were from the east. So, if two of the last century's heavyweights of Anglo Saxon history were in agreement, my own research which suggests the Jutes, known as Hengist and Horsa, first landed on the Humber estuary near Goole may well be on safer ground than I had first thought. In his book *Worlds of Arthur* York professor Guy Halsall argues that those searching for Arthur "should find new questions to ask, ones for which the evidence to hand might be able to provide plausible responses, even if ones always susceptible to refinement and correction". I agree completely and this is the objective that my book, *The Battle of Mount Badon, Ambrosius, Arthur and the defence of Britain* tries to achieve.

The relevant sources are few and can be misleading but we should never discount them or assume that they have already been studied to a point where they have nothing left to say. As recent events have ably demonstrated, historical perspective can shift with simple opinion. There is also an awkward split in the camp, because so often scholars of Roman Britain stop at 410 AD which then becomes the starting point for scholars of Anglo Saxon England and whilst there is mounting interest

in continuity, so called late antique Britain, there seems to be little to work with. This is probably because many books published covering the Dark Ages are written by archaeologists who are at least able to report what has been found and less likely to muse upon what they think might have actually happened. Perhaps the time has come for a new century fusion approach where the historical sources undergo more forensic study and archaeology is reappraised with broader, perhaps riskier, interpretation. A starting point might be a generally agreed timeline for events which dovetail not only history and archaeology but also, legend! This would facilitate an opportunity to more accurately surmise what likely happened, and where it occurred. A topographical assessment of this historical framework is essential because geography is poor in the early sources and it is well known that Gildas' knowledge of northern Roman Britain's history was suspect. There is no doubt the Roman Empire and the surviving Celtic Church knew their geography but this knowledge was gradually lost or confused over time. A reappraisal of the various locations and place names that have come down to us from early medieval sources is therefore a priority. Authors Francis Pryor in "*Britain AD*" and subsequently Barry Cunliffe in "*Britain Begins*" provide excellent baselines for Dark Age history but I believe we should now go much further. A revised study benchmarking the European influences that were extant post 410 AD would also be beneficial - trade declined but European contact did not end. Whilst we can with hindsight understand the tragedies that led to decline of the Western Roman empire I doubt that the newly-empowered warlords of the fifth century were quite so confident that the next emperors might not try to recover Britain or that the powerful Goths or Alans, by Arthur's time sweeping across the continent, might consider undertaking the task on their behalf. After all, a short sea crossing did not stop Gaiseric of the Vandals invading North Africa.

In my book "*The Battle of Mount Badon*", without straying from the accepted sources, I attempt to establish a dated framework for fifth century Britain. The big surprise is that the *Historia Brittonum*, interpreted regionally, provides much more real history than is commonly believed. Through this and by applying a broader empire-wide assessment I have established that:

- Magnus Maximus was probably the root of medieval kingship in Britain.
- Gildas' claim that Ambrosius Aurelianus was the son of an emperor was likely correct.
- The theatre for the Saxon War was most likely Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire.
- Bardon Hill in Leicestershire was the location of the famous battle called Mount Badon.
- Arthur (Arthwys Ap Mor), great grandson of Coel Hen, became *Dux Bellorum* following the death of a leader called Vortimer, and eleven of his twelve battles were a single campaign from Elmet his kingdom in the north past Doncaster and Conisbrough and then along the Trent and the Fosse Way.
- The militia of Ambrosius Aurelianus was also present at the battle of Mount Badon and subsequently the Roman elite heard of this victory and requested assistance from his son Riothamus who led twelve thousand men into Gaul in support of the emperor Anthemius.
- The optimism arising from the victory of Mount Badon was dashed within the lifetime of Gildas and Arthur had been killed some 20 years before the cleric wrote *De Excidio*.  
However, writing in c.512 AD Gildas referred to "our present security" which indicates the long peace that followed the victory.

Assigning the battle of Mount Badon to the North with an earlier date and assembling the clues accordingly all rather fits with regional archaeology and the relevant but meagre Dark Age history which incidentally suggests that the second wave of Saxon aggression in the south and south west was gradual, later and more successful.

The Battle of Badon therefore occurred in c.469 AD, seven years before the demise of the western Roman Empire. This victory demonstrated a remarkable cooperation between the descendants of the warlords originally empowered by Magnus Maximus and when viewed in this way the sources make a great deal of sense. "Then Arthur fought against them in those days, together with the Kings of the Britons, but he was their battle leader [*dux bellorum*]" (*Historia Brittonum*). I have never

doubted Arthur was an historical figure and I believe I prove this in my book. Sadly, most of the legends and literature are unlikely to be true and I cannot say if he ever visited Tintagel, Cadbury Hill or Glastonbury but his family likely had strong associations with the *Cymry* of North Wales, he was certainly a Christian of the Celtic Church and yes – he was a prominent and successful King of a large part of the north.