Red Crests and Frontier Wolves
The Passage of Britain from Rome to the Anglo-Saxons

Omri Nimni
5/7/2014

A senior thesis, submitted to the History Department of Brandeis University, in partial fulfillment of the Bachelor of Arts degree.
# Table of Contents

The Fall of Rome in Britain ........................................... 5  
Celtic Britain at the Time of Caesar .............................. 6  
Claudian Britain: The Beginning of Roman Britain .......... 9  
Romanization of Britain ........................................... 10  
How the Romans Left the Island ................................ 15  
Vortigern and the Saxons ......................................... 20  
The Wolves within the Walls ..................................... 26  
Understanding Nennius ............................................ 33  
The Rise of Ambrosius Aurelianus .............................. 35  
The Battles of Ambrosius and Vortimer ....................... 39  
Setting the Stage for Arthur and Britain in the Dark Ages 42  
Riothamus .......................................................... 46  
King Arthur and the Saxon Threat Renewed .................. 51  
The Battles of Arthur ............................................ 57  
The Battle at Badon Hill ........................................... 65  
Camlann and the End of the Arthurian Period ............... 69  
Questioning Arthur ................................................ 71  
The Final Generation of Britain and its Sources .......... 74  
Understanding Aneirin’s *Y Gododdin* ......................... 76  
The Rise of Æthelfrith and the Fall of Britain ............... 81  
Why they Failed .................................................. 83  
Bibliography ....................................................... 86  

Figure 1 .................................................................. 11  
Figure 2 .................................................................. 67
A day does not go by when I am not inspired by the memory of my mother. Her and her work pushes me forward every day. Without her this entire project would never have been possible. Therefore I dedicate this work to her.
I would be remiss in not offering my thanks to the others that made this work possible. First I would like to offer the sincerest thanks to Rosemary Sutcliff. Her work, *The Shining Company*, first sparked my interest in Arthurian Britain and was a huge part of the reason behind why I wrote what I did. Secondly I would like to thank my father Yosi, my brother Oren, my advisor Professor William Kapelle, and Zelle who all offered nothing but wisdom and support along the way and without them I would be nowhere.
The Fall of Rome in Britain

The structure of the known world came crashing down when in the year 410 CE the city of Rome fell. While it is true that at this point in history Rome was merely the weaker western capital of what was once the mightiest empire of the Mediterranean its removal from the global stage is to be noted. At the height of its power the Roman Empire was like nothing the world had ever seen before and while other empires later in date have exceeded the eventual reach of Rome it can be safely said that Roman Empire can still be touted as unique and awe inspiring. Prior to its fall Rome was in control of a wide expanse of provinces and territories. While many of these various territories are interesting and spark curiosity one area in particular is unlike any other. Rome ruled far off places such as Egypt, Parthia, and Dacia and it ruled large expanses of land such as Gaul and the Rhinelands but one place that was different from all of the rest was that of Britain. Briton was an outlier. Out of all of the major provinces of the Roman Empire Britain was the only island. This fact as well as many others made Britain unique. This is where our focus must be. For as the western Roman empire begins to collapse in on itself a series of events begin to unfold in the distant province of Briton that will work to shape the nation and its identity in the decades and centuries to come.

The story of the island of Britain and how it came to be is one that is rather complex and has various twists and turns that only work to muddle any scholarly understanding of the subject. Therefore it is necessary to do two things in order to be able to properly grasp an understanding of how events took place.
There is much speculation as to whether or not various actors in this historical drama were in fact real. This possibility adds another layer of difficulty to the entire task of understanding British history, and while it is important to keep it in mind, it is equally if not more important to ensure that it does not prevent a deep and historically accurate understanding of what occurred from being achieved.

**Celtic Britain at the time of Caesar**

In 55BCE when Caesar invaded the island he fought against a Celtic people called the Belgae who had come from the continent in the recent past.¹ When Caesar came to Britain it was the first interaction that the Romans had with the island and its inhabitants. The peoples that were living in the island from the time that Caesar came right down to the invasion of Claudius almost a century later were known in a general sense as Celts. It is important to gain a basic understand of who these peoples were at the time of Caesar in order to properly understand them moving forward. The Celts of Britain spoke a language known as British. This is not to be confused with English. English was the language that was eventually formed after the various invasions of the island by the Anglo-Saxons as well as the Normans. It is important to note here that the words British and English are not synonyms. When it comes to the peoples themselves the words do not mean same thing. The term British includes the peoples that were native to the island at the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions. The British were made up of a wide number of tribes primarily Celtic ones but various others as well including the Picts and the Scots. On the other hand the English were peoples

---

who were not native to the land that is known as England today. The word “England”, from which the word “English” is derived, means Angle Land or land of the Angles. The Angles were one of many Germanic people that at some point or another throughout their history decided to leave their homeland. Therefore the term “English” is often used to refer to the invading Germanic forces that will be discussed at much greater length in another later section of this work. The language known as British is known to have been closely related to the languages that were being spoken in Gaul during the same period\(^2\). One important aspect of the culture of these Celtic peoples that was noted by Caesar himself was that of the presence of men known as *druides*. The druids were important members of Celtic society. They were essentially learned men who performed priestly functions for the entirety of society. The *druides* managed to exist from the time of the arrival of Caesar down to and through the Christianization of Britain later in history. The other major social group that Caesar made note of while in Celtic Britian was that of the *equites*. *Equites* were warriors of high social standing. The more retainers or clients that each one had, the more power and prestige they had in society. These two wealthy sectors of society together made up the highest strata of Celtic Britain for they had the knowledge and the military might to get things done. There are a few other important observations that Caesar made that are helpful in providing an understating of the native Celtic peoples. Archeological study has managed to confirm the observations of Caesar in regards to the fortifications of the Celtic world. The evidence shows the presence of various forts ranging in size which were located primarily on hill sides. It is

\(^2\) Sawyer *From Roman Britain to Norman England*, 57
also believed that some of these forts housed the royal court system of various Celtic tribes. The coinage found by archeologists also confirms another of Caesar’s assertions. The coins show that Celtic Britain was indeed subject to multiple rulers. The evidence even goes so far to suggest that not only were there a number of kings but that some type of overlordship was present as well. Before moving further along on the historical record of Britain and its people there is an important cultural distinction to make. While it is most likely true that Celtic culture at this point in time was present on the entire island of Britain it is important to note one particular cultural division. In the first century Caledonians, more commonly referred to as the Picts, lived north of the major Celtic areas of the island. There is not much available evidence that can shed light on who the Picts were, but a few things are known or at the very least inferred. It is known from the place names that have been connected to Pictish areas that their language was indeed different from that of their Brittonic neighbors. Also another interesting fact about the Picts that sets them apart from the other tribes of Briton is that when it came to succession the Picts had set up a matrilineal system. Scholars and archeologists have posited that the Picts could be remnants of an earlier phase of the island’s population that would have gotten obscured and assimilated through immigration and conquest. If that is indeed the case, that story of the Picts works to foreshadow the eventual fate of the Celts in Britain as well.

---

3 Sawyer *From Roman Britain to Norman England*, 57
4 ibid
5 ibid
Claudian Britain: The Beginning of Roman Britain

While it was Caesar that was the first Roman to come to the island of Britain it was the emperor Claudius that truly made Britain a province of Rome. “Caesar left no garrison in Britain, but he could claim that Roman authority had been asserted and accepted there. The Claudian invasion of A.D 43 was in fact caused by the renunciation of that relationship and was intended to be a permanent conquest.† When the emperor Claudius sent his forces to Britain it was truly the end of Celtic Britain, for at least the time being, and the establishment of Roman Britain. Therefore it is particularly necessary to understand what the concept of Roman Britain means to be able to the eventually fully understand the end of Roman rule in Britain and the major transformations that occurred because of it. The first thing about the Claudian invasion that is important to understand is why it took place. At the time of his accession the Emperor Claudius was seen as the bumbling cretin who somehow managed to claim the throne after the assassination of Caligula. Therefore he needed something to show that he was a capable ruler. In the world of the Roman Empire the best way to prove oneself was to conquer a new province. Therefore Claudius needed to find a place that he could conquer, and that is where the island of Britain comes into play. Claudius looked toward the island and saw a place that was ripe for the conquering if he were willing to act fast. This was due to the fact that the native tribes of were hopelessly divided. This was a common occurrence in many of the places that the Romans were able to easily conquer and Britain was no exception. Britain was shared by a number of tribes none of which were

† Sawyer From Roman Britain to Norman England, 57
willing to help any another in battle. The map displayed in figure one shows the various tribes of Britain at this time and how they were spread across the island.\textsuperscript{7} Therefore due to the division present within the tribes of Britain if Claudius acted before the British could reconcile themselves he would be able to easily defeat each tribe individually. That is essentially what ended up occurring. Claudius was able to come in and easily work his way too one of the major cities, Colchester, and claim it and its attendant lands as part of the Empire. From there Roman power and influence only continued to expand throughout the island.

**Romanization of Britain**

Once the Roman forces under Claudius’ primary general Aulus Plautius, had taken control of Britannia, it was time to make Britain culturally part of the Empire. This was to occur through a process known as Romanization. At the time of its occurrence it was most certainly not referred to as Romanization. By labeling the course of action as such it suggests to things that are not correct. The first of these assumptions is that Claudius made a conscious effort to Romanize the British populace. That is entirely false. It is unknown whether or not Claudius made a specific effort to Romanize the people of Britain. It is rather unlikely that he did though. What most likely happened was that Claudius and countless other Romans treated the new province like any that they had conquered previously and acted accordingly. The other false assumption that must be debunked is that the process happened immediately. This is most certainly not true for historians cannot pinpoint a specific date when the Romanization of Britain would have occurred. It is the widely accepted belief that process of Romanization was a

Figure 1 Map of the Tribes of Britain

8 Salway, *Roman Britain*, Map II
gradual one where both the Romans and the British were largely unaware of what was occurring.

The term Romanization is vague. It is difficult to say exactly what being Romanized truly entailed especially when it comes to Britain. This is primarily due the gradual nature of the process. Therefore it is necessary to establish a working definition of the concept and then move on to develop an understanding of what its implementation meant in Britain. Romanization at its core is essentially the assimilation into the culture of the Roman Empire. Even that general formulation contains problems. That is due to the fact that it is difficult to define what Roman culture really was. “Whatever Romanisation was, it did not mean the wholesale importation of Italian culture…”⁹ This quote refers to the fact that the Roman Empire contained a huge expanse of territory and was home to a vast number of different cultures. Therefore it is a difficult task to attempt to define what Roman culture was and by extension what exactly occurred during Romanization. One of the best ways in which to investigate the culture of the Roman Empire is by examining their practices. The practices in question are those that were performed by higher levels of the social order on a regular basis. A few of the most notable of these types of things include the wearing of togas, the frequenting of bath houses or arcades and the holding of lavish and expensive banquets. Now that some basis for an understanding of Roman culture has been established it is possible to delve into what Romanization was actually like. “The Romans had never tried to eliminate provincial cultures… But there was an

attempt to bring at least the British aristocracy into what was becoming a universal Roman aristocratic mindset.” This same tactic of using the provincial culture to the advantage of the conqueror is not new idea. The idea of not condemning the local cultures but instead gradually folding them into the overall culture of the conquering force is something that has been seen throughout the historical record. A well known example of a conqueror that would use this technique was Alexander the Great. It is well known that when Alexander came and conquered places such as Babylon and Egypt he was very merciful and accepting. Essentially what he did was to attempt to fold the existing culture and government into that of his empire. He made adjustments at the top of the system to ensure that everyone knew that he was in fact the supreme ruler of the known world but that being said he did not condemn the cultures of the provinces that he took under his control. “This [change] was achieved largely through the kind of gentle persuasion offered by Agricola to the British aristocracy, as reported by Tacitus…whereby they were urged to build towns, to compete for honour, to acquire an education, to speak Latin, and to wear the toga.” Although the introduction of Roman rule into the island of Britain seems to have been very gradual and not forceful there was in fact one major change that the Romans brought to Britain. Prior to Roman rule of Britain it was customary for any resident of Britain to possess a weapon and therefore be part of the military force that defended the island. When the Romans came this changed drastically. Under Roman rule only members of the legions could carry a weapon. Therefore in order

---

10 James, *Britain* 41
11 ibid
for a citizen to have a “glorious” military career they had to enlist within the
Roman army where on average they would be required to serve twenty five years.
This disarming of the general populace is an important fact to note about the
Romanization of the British people.

While it is true that when Rome came to Britain they did not forcibly
remove any of the existing culture it would be incorrect to state that they did not
take control of the island. This is to say that at any point within the rule of Roman
Britain regardless of how many provinces the island was divided into the rule of
Britain was in the hands of an outsider and therefore a colony of Rome. This was asserted through a wide variety of onsite positions held by Romans or those with
direct Roman authority. The highest of these positions was the Roman governor in Britain. The governor was the representative of the empire within the province.
All of the administration of the province ran through the governor. While that was true it is also a fact that the governor still had to answer to the supreme authority of Rome itself. Later in the history of the province of Britain it became necessary for the governors to lose much of their military role. In response two military positions were established. The first of these military positions was known as a
dux or duke. The dux had military authority across the entire province of Britain to which he was appointed. Therefore instead of the governor having control of all of the military power, responsibilities were divided between the governor and the
dux. Furthermore military power was often subdivided even further. The second position that was created was that of the comes or count. The comes also had military duties but they were on a much more local level than that of a dux. For
example “there was a count of the Saxon Shore, the commander of the coastal defense system set up in the south-east to defend Britain from Saxon raiders.”

After seeing the specifics of how Roman Britain was administered it is clear that while the British aristocracy may have remained intact there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that it was Rome who ruled. While the fact is undoubtedly true that Rome’s presence was felt in Britain it is also true that the indigenous culture of Britain was never extinguished. Regardless of the extent to which things on the island changed under the rule of Rome deep down it the cultural identity of the British people stayed intact. A well known historian who specializes in this period known as Edward James describes this phenomenon in the following way:

No amount of Romanization, in Gaul, appears to have eradicated that basic identity in Gaul; we may assume that things were no different in Britain. As in Gaul, it may have been the emergence of new indigenous political institutions in the wake of the collapse of the Empire which did more to bring about new forms of identity that several centuries of Roman rule had done.

How the Romans Left the Island

Now that an understanding of the changes that took place during the Roman occupation has been established it is possible to move onto a more difficult task. That is of developing an understanding of how the native peoples responded to the changes that took place as a result of the departure of Rome.

The first thing that must be noted in relation to the fall of Rome in Britain is the external pressures that were facing in the Western part of the Roman Empire in the year 410 and afterwards. The 410 CE sack of the city of Rome by Alaric and his army of Goths can be seen as a paradigm shift as far as the power

12 James, Britain 45
13 James, Britain 64
structure of the western empire was concerned. Over the course of the next forty years of so the entire structure of parts of the western Roman world would change due to the fact that the Empire was beginning to crumble. The chief concern of the discussion here is the events that took place on the island of Britain. It was not only the city of Rome itself that faced pressure from outside forces. The Gallic Chronicle notes that in the year 409 CE Britain was already under threat of attack by Saxon forces.\textsuperscript{14} This pressure from outside forces was felt within the bounds of Britain to a degree equal to what was occurring in Rome itself. While the first major changes that are pertinent to this examination of British history occurred later in the fifth century CE to understand why they occurred at all it is necessary to study the earlier years of the fifth century.

The first historical actor that is important in regards to how the Romans left Britain is that of Constantine III. Constantine III was effectively the last Roman emperor who had a strong presence within Britain. It is all but impossible to pinpoint the exact year when Roman presence was no longer a major factor in Britain. This is primarily due to the fact that while the city of Rome may have been sacked and fallen to the hands of invaders its influence long exceeded the prosperity of the city itself. While there are a few major events that coincide with the fall of Rome in Britain there is no one event that truly exemplifies the whole process. For about fifty years or so after Alaric’s sacking of Rome the presence and influence of the once great empire began to recede in a many provinces and Britain in particular. One of the events that is clearly associated with the fall of Rome in Britain occurred under the tenure of Constantine III. It is difficult to put

\textsuperscript{14} Salway, \textit{Roman Britain} 434
an exact year on the following occurrence due to the fact that it was a gradual process but the fact is that it did happen at some point during the rule of Constantine III. What occurred was a removal of Roman personnel from the island of Britain. This took place in two distinct stages. The first of these stages was the work of Constantine III himself. This was an era, as we saw previously, characterized by conflicts between “barbarian” invaders and the Western Roman Empire. Therefore the actions of Constantine III were most likely done in response to the growing “barbarian” threat. Constantine III removed the majority of the Roman military presence from the island of Britain. He ordered the vast majority of his troops away from Britain and into mainly Gaul as well as other provinces of the empire. While it is true that most of the soldiers were removed from the island some portion had to stay behind. “On the military side, it is difficult to imagine that, whatever troop withdrawals that may have been made by Constantine, the whole military apparatus had been dismantled by him. The skeleton, at least of a command and maintenance structure, must have remained.”15 The reason behind this action of Constantine III is simple to understand. He needed more troops to shore up the failing defense in the Rhinelands. “Barbarians” were putting a great deal of pressure on the Roman forces there and Constantine III needed to reinforce them. Therefore he took men from a province, Britain, which was not under direct threat and moved them to where he thought they would be most useful. This was in fact the first stage and it most likely aided in the precipitation of the second one.

15 Salway, Roman Britain 436
The second stage was in fact very similar to the first. During the reign of Constantine III the Roman officials were removed from the island of Britain as well. Contrary to the previous removal of much of the Roman military from the island this removal was much more of an expulsion. Again the details of the event itself are shrouded due to the lack of available evidence. That being said is it well understood that the event did in fact take place. What happened was that after the Roman military forces were removed from the island the people of Britain started to put pressure on those Roman authorities that remained. This eventually built up to a head and led to a revolt of sorts that ended when the officials of Constantine’s administration were forced to withdraw to the continent. There is one major cause for the expulsion the officials. It stands to reason that the previous removal of much of the military forces from Britain the administration of the entire island had become extremely thin. For part of the way the Roman’s enforced their rule was through military presence. Therefore a weakened administration leaves room for enforced change from the bottom. This is essentially what happened. The British people took advantage of the removal of the Roman military to assert their own will. They forced the last remnants of the Roman system to remove itself and therefore effectively ended Roman rule of Britain.

There is no single year in which we can claim, with confidence, that the Roman occupation of Britain ended – suddenly, definitely and forever. In T.S. Eliot’s words, the end was marked, not by a bang, but a whimper. The process now appears to have covered a good half-century, and the selection of some such horizon as A.D. 400 (or 410, or 425) to mark off Late Roman from sub-Roman times is an aspect of convenience rather than reality.\(^{16}\)

The statement provided by Professor Thomas is one that holds a great deal of weight and it also suggests the best way to handle the events that will be discussed further within this work. While certain events seem to suggest the end of Roman rule it is extremely difficult to pinpoint an exact date or event that marks the fall of Rome in Britain. This is due to two major factors. The first is often true of a great deal of history. Things simply happen much more gradually then we imagine. It is impossible to say that one day Britain was Roman and the next day it was not. History happens slowly. In the case of Roman Britain it may have been about a fifty year process. The second factor that makes the pinpointing the date of the fall of Rome in Britain is difficult has more to do with the Roman Empire itself. In many Roman provinces including that of Britain it is very clear that the influence of the culture and people of Rome was felt in the province after the major forces or presence of Rome was no longer a factor in the province. This fact makes it even more difficult to discover any exact date for many provinces seemed Roman in appearance even though they were most certainly no longer ruled directly by Rome. These difficulties make it necessary to move from the removal of the administration of Constantine III fifty years or so in the future to the first mentioning within the historical record of a man by the name of Ambrosius Aurelianus. For it was under the rule of Constantine III the concept of Roman Britain began to deteriorate, and it was under Ambrosius Aurelianus when Celtic Britain began to emerge. Therefore since it cannot be determined exactly when this shift took place we will fast-forward along on the historical timeline to a time when the shift to Celtic Britain had already been set in motion.
Vortigern and the Saxons

Roman power in Britain has become a fixture of the past. In the years following the eventual fall of the Roman administration the ones who would fill the void left behind had to be determined. It must be remembered that regardless of the nature of the Roman presence within Britain the influence of Roman will continue to be an important factor within the development of the structure of the slowly emerging government. It was impossible to undo the impact that the presence of the Roman Empire had upon the Britons and how they functioned as a society. The extent of the changes that took place on an individual level within Britain cannot be quantified because of the way the Roman Empire interacted within the island. In conjunction with all of the possible influences that Rome left on the island it was the natives of the island that pushed the entire nation and its people into the next stage of history. Therefore the most logical approach to understanding this period of British history is to begin with developing an understanding of certain historical actors that played a major role within the restructuring of Britain in the post Roman period.

Prior to any historical account of who any of these various actors were and what they did it is necessary to make a statement about the evidence available from this period. The quality of the evidence from this period is rather low. This is due to two major factors. The first of these detrimental factors is the sheer lack of evidence. There is no specific reason for the absence of information; it is a general factor of the time period itself. The period of history in which these events took place is often referred to on a larger scale as the dark ages. This label is in
reference to the lack of historical documentation from various European countries throughout this time period. The other reason as to why the quality of much of the evidence coming out of this time period is of a lower quality is that it is often biased in one way or another. This is for two major reasons. The first is that much of the major primary source material coming out of this period are from religious writers. While this is often true of any written work coming out of medieval Europe that does not reduce the fact that these religious text are often centered more on religious concerns such as condemning one King or another for something irreligious instead of actually recounting the history. The other way in which the sources tend to be biased is that they are only written by one side. An example of this is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a major work of the period, which is written from the point of view of the Saxons and therefore glorifies them to the slight detriment of the historical record. This is also true on the other side such as with sources about Arthur written only by the British. The historical evidence that is available is difficult to use and many theories are still being questioned to this day. Therefore it is necessary to find the more probable and well supported scenario and use it as a base to build upon.

After the fall of Rome in Britain things were not at any sort of stand still. The peoples who were not part of the province of Roman Britain seized upon the opportunity to attempt to take over parts of Britain when the province was weak. In the years and decades following the end of a Roman presence within Britain the peoples of the north known as the Picts and Scots began to grow bold. They began to move southward putting pressure on the British people. In the beginning
the Britons were able to hold back their northern enemies but eventually it
became too great of an ordeal. This simple fact led to the myriad of events that are
about to unfold and shape the history of Britain and the British people beyond
measure.

Things begin to unravel in the middle of the fifth century CE. According
to the work of the venerable Bede events that took place within the year 446 CE
are those that set everything else in motion. The venerable Bede published his
major work *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in the year 731 CE.
The work is a historical account of the nation of Britain and its people from
approximately its founding to the eventual takeover of the Anglo-Saxon peoples.
Much of Bede’s work especially when it comes to the period currently under
discussion is based upon the previous work of another medieval writer from an
eyear period known as Gildas. Gildas was a British clergyman who is believed to
have been born in the early sixth century in the kingdom of Strathclyde. His major
work *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* or *The Destruction and Conquest of
Britain* is the primary source for much of the current knowledge of the sub-
Roman period of British history. It is most well known for being the work from
which Bede gathered a great deal of his information. Through Bede the work of
Gildas is one of the best primary sources that is available on this period of British
history.

Bede tells us that in the year 446 the pressure that was being put on the
Britons from their neighbors to the north was becoming too great. For it is in the
year 446 that the British people made an appeal to Aetius of Rome for help. Bede recounts the events quite clearly:

Aetius, a man of high rank, who was also a patrician, held his third consulship together with Symmachus. The wretched remnant of the Britons sent him a letter which began: ‘To Aetius, thrice consul, come the groans of the Britons.’ In the course of the letter they unfolded their sorrows: ‘the barbarians drive us to the sea: the sea drives us back on the barbarians; between them two kinds of death face us: we are either slaughtered or drowned.’

From this selection from Bede’s work it becomes apparent as to what occurred. The British began to feel overwhelmed by the fact that the Picts and Scots were pressing upon them from the north all the way to the water. The Britons had nowhere to go and they were running out of options. Therefore they decide to make an appeal to Rome. It cannot be stated for certain as to why they first tried to make an appeal to Rome but the rationale behind it can be rather accurately guessed at. The first possible rationale is that Rome was still one of the most powerful nations in the world at that time. While it is true that Rome was suffering from its own barbarian related problems and that the city itself had been sack by Alaric only thirty-five years before Rome, particularly in the East, was still as force to be reckoned with. The fact of the matter is that if the Britons were in fact able to secure the help of Aetius and Rome then their problem with the Picts would have been a distant memory. The other part of the rationale behind this appeal to Rome is that Britain, especially at the top parts of the social order, most likely still felt fairly Roman. The presence of Roman officials within Britain was something that many people left alive had experienced themselves. Therefore Britain may have still felt connected to the Roman Empire and therefore was

---

willing to depend on its aid in a dire time of need. It is also important to note here that in regards to Rome some contingents of the Britons would not have wanted their help. This is not because they did not take the threat of the Picts and Scots to the north seriously it was because they did not want a re-imposition of Roman rule on the island. They may have feared if the Romans were again to set foot on the island it would take centuries to remove them once again.

The British people were in dire need of assistance and they called to Rome for help but their cries would land on deaf ears. “In spite of all this they were unable to obtain help from [Aetius], seeing that he was at that time engaged in a deadly struggle with Blæda and Attila, the kings of the Huns.” In this passage Bede reveals the reason as to why Aetius and Rome did not come to the aid of the Britons who called for it. The reason is simple. Rome was in enough trouble of its own cause not only by the threat on the power Huns but from the other barbarian peoples that the Huns displaced as they moved west. The Huns themselves were of a primary concern to the Romans and that is why they sent Aetius to contend with them. The peoples that the Huns forced to move further west were also a threat to the Romans for they were looking for new lands to settle in and the Western territories of the empire looked extremely promising. The fact that the Roman military was occupied with their own concerns is the primary reason as to why they did not and could not come to the aid of Britain.

With no help coming from Rome the Britons had to find help from somewhere else or risk defeat at the hands of the Picts. The conflict with the Picts and Scots took place under the rule of one man. “Guorthigern, Vortigern, reigned

---

18 ibid
in Britain, and while he was reigning he was beset with fear of the Picts and Scots” 19 This man known as Vortigern is an extremely important historical actor for the actions that he take lead to major changes in the makeup of what Britain is and what it will become. The information at hand that pertains to Vortigern is very limited. He is referred to as the *superbus tyranus* for this is the name that Gildas bestows upon the ruler of Britain during this time period. Therefore other historians have equated Vortigern with the *superbus tyranus* mentioned by Gildas. Other historians state that the name Vortigern is not truly a name but a loose Welsh translation of the concept *superbus tyranus* and therefore Vortigern is merely a title bestowed to someone whose name has faded from the historical record. Regardless of who he was the actions that he took next changed everything.

With no help coming from Rome the British had to do something. Gildas details what is to happen next. “Then all of the members of the council, together with the superbus tyranus [Vortigern] , were struck blind; … they devised that the Saxons… should be let in the island… to beat back the peoples of the north.” 20 Knowing that the Saxons are the consummate enemies of the Britons this action seems like absolute lunacy. Present knowledge about the situation would make it seem as though Vortigern was making a rash and out of the ordinary action. The truth of the matter was that this practice was not so unusual. “Vortigern continued the line of British tyranni in the 420’s and 430’s, and likewise

continued the Roman policy of settling Germans as *Taeti* or *Foederati* for the defense of Britain.” This is exactly what Vortigern did. He exercised his power as the king of the Britons, or *Tyrant*, and entered into a contract with various tribes of Germanic people, primarily the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons. The contract essentially stipulated that in exchange for them coming to the defense of the British people the Germanic peoples would be given land in Britain by Vortigern the king to be settled and used to make a living.

**The Wolves within the Walls**

The die was cast. Vortigern had invited the sea wolves in beyond the gates, and he and Britain would soon suffer the consequences. When Vortigern invited the Saxons into Britain to aid in its defense it was actually not the first time they had come to the island. During this period the Saxons came in three distinct waves. These waves are often referred to as *Adventus* the first of which was not the one instigated by the actions of Vortigern. The first of these Saxon *adventus* took place around the year 428 CE. It was made up of a small contingent of people and it is said that they came out of necessity. This necessity is probable the same force behind much of the movement of other Eastern European tribes in this time period, that of the threatening and expanding presence of the Huns. As the Huns continued to move further and further West those peoples that got in their way were pushed out of the land and forced to find a place to live elsewhere. This is most likely what happened to the Saxons of the primary *Adventus*. It was in fact the second *Adventus* that was brought about by Vortigern. He invited the

---

21 Reno, *Historic Figures* 86
22 The term Saxons is often used to refer to the various tribes of Germanic peoples.
23 *Adventus* is simply the Latin word for coming.
warbands of the powerful brothers known as Hengist and Horsa onto the island in order for them to fight against the Pictish threat brewing in the north. The place in which Vortigern settled his Saxons was known to the Romans as the island of Tanatus and to the Britons as the Isle of Thanet. In the present day Thanet is no longer an island but it is connected to mainland Britain. Back in the time of Vortigern Thanet was an island on the southeastern tip of the British mainland located to the east of the city of Canterbury. There was also a third and final Adventus the details of which will be discussed later on in this work.

At first the actions of Vortigern appeared to be a stroke of genius. He brought in the Saxons, and they aided the Britons in pushing back the Picts and keeping them at bay. After the fighting was done with things began to unravel and Vortigern’s plan begins to be seen as the mistake that it would truly become. Prior to looking further down the line of the historical record it is of the utmost importance to look at what else was happening amongst the British while Vortigern was king.

There is never just one side to any good story, and the same can be said about this one. While Vortigern was leading the majority of the British host into an alliance with the Saxons that would eventually prove fatal another Briton who foresaw the folly in the actions of Vortigern was beginning to make moves against him and his new Saxon friends. This man was known as Ambrosius Aurelianus. Ambrosius was a Briton like any other living in this period. The evidence is once again sparse or questionable as to whom Ambrosius was. Some scholars even suggest that either he did not exist or that the actions that are
attributed to him should in fact be connected to another man. When looking at the evidence that is available it quickly comes to light that Ambrosius was in fact a historical figure. Not only did he exist, but he was a crucial factor in the outcome of the chaotic and violent events that were to come to pass. Without Ambrosius Aurelianus this first generation of native Britons would have been overrun by the Anglo-Saxons. With Ambrosius Briton will survive; without him it would have most assuredly fallen.

The Historia Brittonum depicts a young boy by the name of Ambrosius who grew up during the reign of Vortigern. This boy is the same man who in the 460’s at the age of about forty was Britain’s savior.24 This mention of Ambrosius in the Historia Brittonum helps to establish the context within which he acted. If he was a child when Vortigern became king he was witness to everything that Vortigern did especially when it came to the Saxons. While he was indeed affected by all of Vortigern’s actions he was also young enough that when the time came he was able to lead the opposing forces for a long portion of time.

Aside from Ambrosius being of the right age to effectively stand against Vortigern another important part of who he was and why he was so integral to the British cause was his Roman background.

The lineage of Ambrosius is one that is of great interest and import to the study of this period. Gildas states the following in regards to it: “Their leader, [the Britons] was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a gentleman who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm. Certainly his parents, who

24 Reno, Historic Figures 72
had worn the purple, were slain in it.\textsuperscript{25} What the selection from Gildas is trying to get at is that Ambrosius was in fact of Roman decent. Not only that but he was the descendant of Roman royalty. The storm that Gildas is making reference to is most likely the time of turmoil following the collapse of Roman control in Britain. It stands to reason that while things were falling apart in the 420’s and 430’s the parents of Ambrosius, who were in some way connected to the Roman Emperor, were killed. The fact that Ambrosius comes up later in the historical record shows us that not only did he survive but that he was taken to safety somewhere on the island in order to preserve his life. This would suggest that there was some contingent of the British population that was sympathetic to the Romans and therefore held some sort of allegiance to the parents of Ambrosius and upon their deaths to Ambrosius himself. Aside from the possibly suspect account of Gildas there are other aspects about Ambrosius that suggest that he was in fact not only of Roman decent but that he was in one way or another connected to the emperor. The first thing about Ambrosius that shows his connection to the Roman past of Britain is in fact his name. In this period he is one of the few major players, on the British side, to have such a clearly Roman name. Compared to Vortigern and his three sons Vortimer, Catygern, and Paschent for example Ambrosius very clearly stands out. Catygern and Paschent were names from Welsh. Derivations of their names are found inscribed upon Eliseg’s Pillar which is a Welsh monument from the period.\textsuperscript{26} Ambrosius Aurelianus is in fact a Roman name and therefore it is simple reminder that we are dealing with someone who is a Briton but has clear

\textsuperscript{25} Reno, \textit{Historic Figures} 75
\textsuperscript{26} Reno, \textit{Historic Figures} 98
connections to the Roman past of the island. Another detail about Ambrosius that shows his connection to the upper echelon of Rome is his close association with the color purple. Ambrosius is associated with the color purple which was the standard color that signified the emperors of Rome. It is also believed by various scholars that the insignia of Ambrosius was in fact some combination of a dragon and the color purple which are both symbols of connections to royalty be it British or Roman.\textsuperscript{27} The final piece of evidence that is available that helps to strengthen the link between Ambrosius and Rome comes from the \textit{Historia Brittonum} which is believed to have been written by Nennius in circa 820 CE. This work refers to Ambrosius in two ways. It gives him the titles “the great king of all kings” and “the son of a Roman consul”. The first title can be thought of as another way in which someone can be called the emperor. The second title is self explanatory. It states that Ambrosius was the son of a Roman consul. All of these factors work to show that Ambrosius was in fact of Roman decent which made him an unique individual. The Roman lineage of Ambrosius would come to play a greater role in the coming struggle with Vortigern and the Saxons.

The dates of activity that are associated with Ambrosius Aurelianus are approximately from 422 CE to 460 CE.\textsuperscript{28} His name is not mentioned in conjunction with that of Vortigern until the time of the second Saxon \textit{Adventus}. Once the Saxons who came at the request of Vortigern under the leadership of Hengist and Horsa had thoroughly defeated the Picts things began to unravel. The first step was the third and final \textit{Adventus}. Once Hengist had defeated the Picts he

\textsuperscript{27} Reno, \textit{Historic Figures} 72
\textsuperscript{28} Reno, \textit{Historic Figures} 73
knew that in order to maintain the foothold that he has just been given in the prosperous land of the Britons he would need more men. Bede relates the following about Hengist’s host:

First they fought against the enemy who attacked from the north and the Saxons won the victory. A report of this as well as of the fertility of the island and the slackness of the Britons reached their homes and as once a much larger fleet was sent over with a stronger band of warriors; this, added to the contingent already there, made an invincible army. Hengist saw an opportunity that he could take advantage of. He therefore sent word back home and summoned his son Octha and his cousin Ebissa along with their respective warbands to come and bolster his position. This wave of Saxon reinforcements was the third Adventus. The newcomers made the same deal with Vortigern that Hengist and Horsa had done previously. Even now it begins to seem as if the Britons as slowly losing control while those that they viewed as barbarians were beginning to take control. With Hengist and Horsa at the head of this formidable force they began to move against Vortigern and the Britons. As the numbers of Saxons began to increase, the island of Thanet quickly became too small for them and they became increasingly restless and a point of concern for the local population closest to the island. We once again turn to the words of the venerable Bede for what happened next.

They [the Saxons] suddenly made a temporary treaty with the Picts… and began to turn their weapons against their allies [the Britons]. First they made them provide a greater quantity of food; then, seeking an occasion for quarrel, they insisted that unless they received still greater supplies, they would break the treaty and lay waste to every part of the island.

---

29 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 51
30 ibid
Now Vortigern had to reckon with the people that he had called in for aid. The threats of Hengist had worked. Therefore a gathering was called in order for everything to be discussed. Vortigern was powerless to stop the onslaught coming from the Saxons that he had ushered inside his gate.

Hengist and his forces came to feast with Vortigern. The accounts of why what happened next are a bit hazy for Nennius tells us that it was due to the work of the devil. What is certain is that Vortigern made the mistake that would cost him his seat of power and eventually led to a reshaping of Britain that no one had seen since the Romans. The events that took place at the banquet had dire consequences and the historian Nennius recounts them as follows:

After the keels had come, Hengist made a banquet for Gourthigirn [Vortigern] and his soldiers and his interpreter, who was called Ceretic. And he bade the girl\textsuperscript{31} to serve them with wine and beer and they drank heavily and were drunken. Whilst they were drinking, Satan entered in the heart of Gourthigirn that he loved the girl and demanded her of her father through his interpreter and he said, “All that thou demandest of me thou shalt obtain, though it be half of my kingdom.”\textsuperscript{32}

This account is inherently suspect for multiple reasons. It is all but impossible to know for certain based on the evidence available whether or not the description of the events that Nennius gives are accurate or whether they ever took place. The fact that even Nennius gives Satan as the explanation for Vortigern’s actions shows that even he is unsure as to why Vortigern did what he did. If we accept Nennius’s account of the banquet, excluding the involvement of Satan, it does help to explain what happened next. At this banquet whether because of Hengist’s daughter or not Vortigern promised to give the Saxons the region of Britain that

\textsuperscript{31} The Girl is Hengist’s daughter called Renwen or Renwien and was known for her beauty

\textsuperscript{32} Nennius, “History of the Britons” 59
was to become known as Kent. This action was the final blow. Vortigern gave up British lands to foreign barbarians in a way that did not follow the previously adhered to custom. Unlike before when he first brought in Saxons this time Vortigern made a decision that affected the entire kingdom. When the British ruler of the area that had be given to the Saxons and the British people learned of the betrayal of Vortigern they became furious. They would not stand for such treacherous actions. The British people needed a new ruler. “Because of his concubine, Vortigern loved the Saxon people above all of the other folk. The Britons therefore immediately deserted Vortigern and elevated Vortimer to the kingship.”

Vortimer who was the eldest son of Vortigern is thought to have abandoned his father at this point. This would mean that he took any forces that were loyal to him over his father and tried to impede the movements of the Saxons at every turn. The truth of the matter is that in order to push back the huge contingent of Saxons Vortimer would need help.

**Understanding Nennius**

Prior to going any farther with the narrative it is important to gain a better understanding of who Nennius was and why he is an important source. This is a necessary step for later on we will begin to rely on the word of Nennius when it comes to the battles of Arthur. Therefore prior to relying on him any farther it is imperative to establish him as a valid resource. Scholars have a wide variety of opinions on Nennius. The first thing that must be noted about Nennius is that he was a compiler. He attempted to bring together source material in regards to the history of Britain that he felt was important and should not go unstudied. In the

---

33 Reno, *Historical Figures* 106
preface of the *Historia Brittonum* itself Nennius states the following: “I, Nennius, disciple of Elvodugus, have provided to write some excerpts, *quae hebitudo gentis Britanniae deiecerat,*” which the stupidity of the nation of Britannia had cast off.”34 From this selection it is clear that Nennius felt that he was filling in the knowledge gap about British history that would have definitely been neglected if he did not preserve the proper information. This is one of the reasons why Nennius is a valued source. While history has proven the words of Nennius true, for he is one of the major sources from a period that otherwise has very little written material, it is natural for Nennius to voice his own worth and validity. Therefore we must turn to other scholars in order to fully see the validity of the work of Nennius. One renowned scholar that holds the works of Nennius in high regard is that of Peter Berresford Ellis. In his book *The Druids* he places great emphasis on the historical contributions of Nennius. He states that the *Historia Brittonum* “is a primary source for British Celtic History.”35 In addition to Ellis Frank Reno, a well known scholar of the Arthurian period offers an interesting point in regards to Nennius. He states the following in his work *Historic Figures of the Arthurian Era:* “By his own admission in the Preface, Nennius questions his ability to compile this information about Wales, but readers shouldn’t be so quick to jump on that bandwagon by labeling his efforts as the ramblings of an ignoramus.”36 Reno shows that Nennius was well aware of the task ahead of him and was able to produce a cogent text regardless. Even though at times the accounts of Nennius may seem a bit farfetched it would be a disservice to history

34 Nennius, “History of the Britons” 7
36 Reno, *Historic Figures* 251
to disregard him as a creditable source. Even if he states clearly false things such as Arthur killing nine hundred men single handedly it does not mean that everything else that he states about Arthur is not true. As Ellis states within his book Nennius is a primary source and one that cannot and should not be ignored. For if we do ignore Nennius we lose a valuable resource for a historical period that is severely lacking in primary work. Now that an understanding of the value of Nennius has been achieved we are able to resume the narrative with the Rise of Ambrosius.

**The Rise of Ambrosius Aurelianus**

That help would come in the form of Ambrosius Aurelianus. During the time in which Vortigern was giving swaths of land away Ambrosius was not part of his host. It is not exactly clear why Ambrosius was possibly at odds with Vortigern prior to the events involving the giving of Kent to Hengist. One possible explanation is that Ambrosius belonged to what can be called the Roman party. If so, he would not have fully supported the actions of Vortigern in regards to the original calling in of the Saxons. He would have put his faith in Rome over trusting the Saxons. Ambrosius was no friend to the Saxons. That being said something had to be done. If Ambrosius were in Vortigern’s place and he waited for Rome and did not call in the Saxons it would have surely been disastrous as well. As stated before it was not that the Romans would not help the Britons it is that they could not help them because they were too busy protecting their empire from an ever present and increasingly powerful Attila and his Huns. Therefore it unlikely that the Romans would have ever come to the aid of Ambrosius, and he
therefore would have had to face the Picts and Scots alone. While this would have most definitely been a problem for him the decision was out of his control for.

Vortigern was king and the Saxons were brought in. Once the Saxons were brought in Ambrosius would have most certainly not supported them or Vortigern. This would have meant that he was in direct opposition to the rule of Vortigern and therefore an enemy that Vortigern feared because of his perceived lineage connections to Rome. His Roman connections may have led some Britons to have viewed Ambrosius as the one who should be ruling Britain. This is where we see the influence of Rome on the island. For to some Britons it had to be the descendent of the emperor who was king and no one else.

The island of Britain was divided. On one side there is Vortigern and his allies. The truth of the matter is that at this point in time Vortigern was most likely the shadow of a ruler. While he remained in power as king of the Britons the true power lay in the hands of Hengist and his warbands. On the other side was Ambrosius Aurelianus. At this juncture Ambrosius and his forces can be likened to a resistance movement. That is not to say that they did not have support. Especially with the addition of Vortimer and his forces Ambrosius was a force to be reckoned with as seen from the battles to be discussed later on. That being said he had yet truly to burst onto the scene until now, for he was confined to some semblance of secrecy due to the fact that like so many resistance movements later in the history of the world what he was doing could easily get him killed. After his forces were bolstered by those of Vortimer Ambrosius took
up the role of the leader of the Roman Party in direct defiance to the rule or Vortigern and his Saxons.

After Ambrosius had emerged onto the scene as the head of the forces in opposition to Vortigern and the Saxons the war for Britain truly began. There are various battles that are attributed to Ambrosius in which he fought against the Saxons and was often victorious. It is an important yet extremely difficult task to recount the battles that the Britons fought against the Saxons. This is primarily due to the fact that there is a great deal of overlap between Ambrosius and one of the most famous kings of Britain, Arthur. It has been determined that the era of Ambrosius began in approximately 422 CE and finished in the early to mid 460’s. The age of Arthur is believed to have begun in the 470’s with an intermediate and short lived ruler by the name of Riothamus presiding over the intervening years. The close proximity of these two major kings makes it difficult to accurately determine who did what. Not only were the reigns of both of these great kings close chronologically, but it even possible that Arthur served under Ambrosius as one of his primary commanders prior to taking the crown of Britain for himself. Therefore it is a difficult task to identify the battles to be attributed to Ambrosius while he was at the head of the Britons. The same problem that is caused by the presence of Arthur in the historical record is created by the existence of Vortimer. In regards to Vortimer the problem is that he is listed as fighting Hengist and his Saxons at the same time that Ambrosius would have been in battle against them. There are two major schools of thought in regards to who Vortimer was. The first is that he was the eldest of Vortigern’s sons who along with his two brothers
Catygern and Paschent defected to the side of Ambrosius once Vortigern had unlawfully given land to Hengist in exchange for his daughter. The second school of thought is that Vortimer is another name for the famous King Arthur of legend and therefore all of the exploits of Vortimer are actually those of Arthur. While equating Vortimer and Arthur would make the history of the period a simple affair it is not a strong enough argument to accept. The primary argument that Vortimer was in fact a separate historical figure is the one that for the sake of this discussion will be adhered to. Vortimer was the eldest son of Vortigern and fought against his father under the banner of Ambrosius. The Historia Brittonum informs us that evidently any battle in which the British fought against the Saxons could appear under any of those names as well as that of Vortimer. Therefore in order to determine who was directly responsible for leading the British the approximate rules of each of these major players must be used as a guide. If the battle falls under the time when Ambrosius is believed to have ruled, then the battle was led by Ambrosius regardless of whether or not Nennius lists it under the name of another. While it is a difficult task it is also a necessary one. To truly evaluate the action of Ambrosius and to see how and why he was successful it is extremely pertinent to look at his body of work and in the case of Ambrosius that would be his battles.

This task is not a simple one. Even when one uses the dates of the reigns of these leaders to help organize things, the sources themselves add a great deal of confusion. Not only do different sources give the credit for a battle under Ambrosius to someone else but no one source is complete. To get at the heart of

---

37 Reno, *Historical Figures* 179
the matter one has to use at least three primary texts in order to be able to establish some semblance of a battle list for Ambrosius. Even once this is done there will undoubtedly still be holes and unanswered questions which will most likely remain that way due to the lack of evidence.

The Battles of Ambrosius and Vortimer

The first of these major texts that aids in the understanding of the exploits of Ambrosius is the work of Nennius known most commonly as the *Historia Brittonum*. Within this work four battles are listed within the time frame of Ambrosius under the name of Vortimer. In regards to the first battle Nennius provides very few details. All he states is the following: “The first battle [was] on the river Derguentid.”38 It is known from other accounts of battles between the Britons and Saxons that it was a very common occurrence for the two sides to meet in battle at a river crossing. Out of the twelve battles that are listed under the name of Arthur seven of them took place at a river crossing. The reason for this is a simple tactical one. A stable river crossing is a natural chokepoint. If one side were to let the other side cross it would give their enemy an advantage for they would not be isolated to the river crossing but yet still have the river to their back making it difficult for them to be outflanked and outmaneuvered. Therefore what both sides had to do was to meet in battle on the actual crossing point of the river. Another reason why these river crossings would have been important to both sides was for the purposes of supply. If a major river had only one or two crossing points the side that was in control of them would therefore be able to adequately supply their troops while the other side would suffer for it. In addition with

---

38 Nennius, “History of the Britons” 67
supply lines comes communication which is another integral part of any
successful military operation.

In regards to the second battle Nennius has a bit more to say: “The second
[battle] on the ford, which is called in their language Episford, in our language
Rithergabail,\(^{39}\) and there Hors fell together with the son of Guorthigirn, whose
name was Categirm.”\(^{40}\) This battle is unique and important for two reasons. The
first is that it mentions historical actors by name. Both Hors or Horsa and
Categirn or Catygern are names that have been mentioned before. Not much is
known about either one’s specific exploits but it is known who they were. We
know that Horsa was the brother of Hengist and was his second in command up
until his death. Catygern on the other hand is known to have been the middle son
of Vortigern who along with his brothers, Vortimer and Paschent, took up arms
against him and fought against the Saxons for Ambrosius. The other extremely
important feature about this battle is that it confirms the account of Nennius.
There is in fact another primary source that also recounts the occurrence of this
battle. An entry from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle describes Ayleford: “Here
Hengist and Horsa fought against Vortigern the king in the place which is called
Aylesford and his brother was killed.”\(^{41}\) While this annal is important because it
supports Nennius, it also possesses some contradictions. It is important to note
that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a primary text that was written for one specific

\(^{39}\) Nennius. *Nennius’s “History of the Britons,” Together with “the Annals of the Britons” and
“Court Pedigress of Hywel the Good*. Also *The Story of the Loss of Britain* Edited by Arthur W.
Wade-Evans. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1938.: Rhyd yr afael (in
modern Welsh, “the ford of the holding” and attempt to translate *Agaelesthrep*, read
“Agaelesford,” said to be Aylesford in Kent. (Footnote 5)

\(^{40}\) Nennius. *“History of the Britons”* 67

purpose. It was written by the Saxons for the Saxons. The intent of the document was to aid in the glorification and remembrance of the triumphs of the Anglo-Saxons. This is not to say that it fabricates events in any way. It just skews them in favor of its intended audience which was not composed of Britons. The entry also has two additional flaws that are important to note. The first is very basic. It neglects to mention that Catygern also died in the battle as previously stated by Nennius. It also states that Hengist and his forces fought Vortigern the King when at the time of the battle the only one that it makes sense for Hengist and Horsa to be taking up arms against is Ambrosius. Despite these difficulties in the entry about this battle in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it still is important for it helps to corroborate some of the statements made by Nennius.

The third battle that Nennius attributes to Vortimer is recounted below:

“…the third battle he fought in the plain by *Lapis tituli*, which is on the Gallic sea, and the barbarians were overcome and he was victorious.”\(^42\) There are a great many things to consider regards Nennius’s information about these battles. The first is that even though Nennius mentions four battles, he only goes on to discuss three at length. This is due to the fact that the location of the final battle as well as the details were not known Nennius. The second important fact about the account of these battles is that they are referred to by their Welsh names. Those names were Crecganford, Ayleford and finally Wippedesfleot. These place names are important to make note of for they are the names that Nennius actually used when he recounted the battles. The other piece of information of note is that while Nennius would have us believe that the third battle was the final one, such was

\(^{42}\) Nennius, *“History of the Britons”* 67
most certainly not the case. While not much is known about the fourth battle mentioned by Nennius in the *Historia Brittonum*, if it had not occurred Nennius would not have mentioned it in sequence with the other better documented battles of the era of Ambrosius. While the third battle may not have been the final battle in the era of Ambrosius the fact remains that Ambrosius was in fact able to be successful against the Saxons. He was able to hold back the invading forces of the Saxons and keep them from gaining any further ground as well as at certain points confining them to the island of Thanet and the area around Kent.

While the information on the exploits of Ambrosius Aurelianus is scarce, it is imperative to understand his historical significance and how he defined the transitional period of Britain from Roman to British. From the outset Ambrosius was a natural leader. For those who no longer supported Vortigern or those who had never supported him to begin with Ambrosius was the perfect man to follow. His heritage provided him with instant appeal in the eyes of a vast number of individuals. He was the best of both worlds. Ambrosius was of Roman imperial decent making him someone of high esteem and note. At the same time he was raised in Britain and therefore was viewed as being just as much of a native as anyone else. Those who felt that Vortigern was no longer the man to follow needed someone to rally behind and Ambrosius was the perfect man for the job.

Not only was Ambrosius an easy and natural rally point for those dissatisfied with Vortigern and his Saxons but he was an important historical actor without whom the British resistance to the Saxons would have surely failed. The actions that Ambrosius himself was credited with are not numerous, but they were
important. For it is easy to see historical figures as static beings, that things happen around them and that they have little impact on what occurs in the end. This is not the case for many historical actors especially Ambrosius. For he had personal agency and enforced change upon the history of his people through his personal feats.

As discussed previously, Ambrosius’s battles against the Saxons were important events. In later generations the British people they will wish that they still had someone like Ambrosius who was able to hold back the Saxons. Due to the lack of detailed information this accomplishment may seem rudimentary in nature. The truth of the matter is that Ambrosius was able to repel an invading force that most certainly outnumbered his host by a great deal which would not have been an easy task for anyone. Not only was he able to hold back the Saxons, but he had to do it while in a power struggle against the tyrant Vortigern. Aside from the actual fighting of these battles against the reinforced host of Hengist Ambrosius accomplished something else that must be recognized in order to fully appreciate him as a leader and as an important historical actor. Ambrosius was able to unite the princes and chieftains of the island of Britain in order to fight against a common foe. This is evident based upon the presence of men such as Vortimer who was a high ranking member of society in his own right. In the time of Ambrosius there were many different and distinct tribes on the island of Britain. This would mean that each of them had a prince or of a chieftain that felt that he had some say in how things should be done. Along with this many of the more northern tribes may have felt that the concerns of the south were not
concerns of theirs. With all of these things working against him Ambrosius was able to unite the various peoples and tribes of the island into a formidable fighting force that was able to hold back the impending invasion of the Saxon forces.

**Setting the Stage for Arthur and Britain in the Dark Ages**

While it is true that Ambrosius was an important historical figure in his own right he laid the foundation for an even greater man to follow him. Ambrosius set the stage for Arthur. Arthur is the best known historical figure of this period and possibly of all of British history. The feats of the great King Arthur would not have been possible without Ambrosius. Ambrosius preserved the Britain that Arthur would later have to defend again. Without Ambrosius there would have never been an Arthur because the British forces would have failed and Britain would have become an Anglo-Saxon nation. Ambrosius is often relegated to the margins of history while Arthur is glorified in story and legend but in truth his career was impossible without the other. Ambrosius had great deeds of his own, but in the end Arthur would surpass them all. Ambrosius defined his generation and preserved Britain for the British for at least the time being. This was no simple task but he was fit for the job and managed to succeed.

The logical next step is to investigate his successor, the great king Arthur. While that will be the next major portion of this work there are a few important things to cover prior to moving on to the next generation. The first task is to consider how Britain and its people transitioned from the Roman era to the so-called dark ages. Due to the lack of tangible evidence coming out of Britain during this period much of what is known is based on looking at other Roman
provinces that were abandoned by the empire and extrapolating from this basis to what may have happened in Britain. The province that is believed to be the closest in comparison to that of Roman Britain is the province of Noricum.

In the provinces of Rome such as Noricum and Britain the central government that the empire provided was important. One major concern that was handled by the Romans for each one of their provinces was security. With the support of Rome invaders would think twice before attacking even a seemingly weak opponent. In the early fifth century when the power of Rome began to crumble and it was forced to withdraw from many of its provinces things began to change because that central authority and the army were no longer present. Therefore the people of the provinces had to fend for themselves. “…by the 460’s, the citizens of these small towns had become responsible for their own protection, putting together small forces to defend their walls – citizens militias, in fact. Walls and/or citizen guards are mentioned at Comagenis, Faviana, Lauriacum, Batavis, and Quintanis.” These are examples of how the people of the provinces adapted to the fact that the Roman Empire would no longer be able to help them if they were attacked. In addition to attempting to build up local military power the people of provinces such as Noricum and Britain began to relocate. That is not to say that they left the province they were in but they did move within it. They began to abandon the old Roman villas and major cities. The reason for this was that it would easier to protect themselves if they were not in these large towns that were an easy target to raiders. This was because not only

---

would their smaller numbers be better suited to defend a smaller area but if they moved themselves up into the mountains for example the landscape would help to protect them as well. There is archeological evidence that supports this practice occurring in Britain. “Archeological data shows that all four major towns, Verulam, Silchester, Wroxeter, and Caistor-next-Norwich, along with minor ones were not in fact destroyed as Gildas suggests but were abandoned and fell to ruin.”

As the people of Britain abandoned the cities that they had lived in during the Roman era the economy of the island change as well. With a move away from larger towns it can be inferred that trade took a dip and agricultural pursuits were the main focus of the average citizen living in the small and often remote villages that were now the norm in Britain. The abandonment of the cities and the economic changes that came with it can be cited as the beginning of the decent to the so called dark ages for not only Britain but many other former provinces of the Roman Empire.

**Riothamus**

Another important subject that is necessary to elucidate prior to delving into the academic quagmire regarding Arthur concerns a little known king of the Britons known as Riothamus. The timeframe that has been attributed to Ambrosius Aurelianus is 420-460 CE. This estimate contains a margin of error. The same can be said about the years that have been posited for Arthur, 475-540 CE. The concern that arises is what happened in between these two famous kings. There are at least ten to fifteen years that are not accounted for under this chronology. This is where Riothamus is believed to enter onto the stage. At the

---

44 Reno, *Historical Figures* 88
end of the rule of Ambrosius the Saxons had been successfully held at bay.

Riothamus then became king of the Britons and ruled for roughly ten years of relative stability on the island of Britain. Unlike his predecessor or successor there is no evidence of Riothamus engaging in any sort of conflict on the island of Britain. Prior to looking into the possible exploits of this little known king it is necessary to develop a better understanding of who he might have been.

There is a great deal of speculation and confusion regarding the true identity of Riothamus. Just as with many of the other historical characters of this period, it is difficult to determine if Riothamus is a new and distinct person or is actually someone described under another name or title. As was seen previously in regards to Vortigern, Riothamus too is a title that may have been given to a ruler as a sign of prominence. Therefore there are various interpretations that state that Riothamus was in fact a distinct person but rather a title referring to one of the major figures of the time such as Ambrosius, Vortimer or even Arthur. While it is difficult to prove definitively that Riothamus was a person by looking at the evidence surrounding him and his exploits it begins to appear rather unlikely that Riothamus was just someone else described under another title. In his work Reno discusses how Geoffrey Ashe handles the question of Riothamus. “Riothamus could have been the title of another royal or prominent Briton.”

“Through a process of elimination he considers and rejects the British heroes of the day including Vortigern, Vortimer and Ceredig, Then just as tersely he rejects

---

45 Reno, Frank *Historic Figures of the Arthurian Era*
Ambrosius based upon the fact that Gildas does not call him a king.” 47 This is not the strongest argument. Once more information is considered it will become increasingly difficult to believe that Riothamus was not an independent historical figure.

Now that the speculation and questions as to who Riothamus was have been laid bare, we should consider the exploits that have been attributed to him. Aside from ruling in the seemingly stable interim between Ambrosius and Arthur, Riothamus is recognized for one other major feat. During the lull in the war at this time Riothamus, who was known to be the supreme ruler of the Britons, crossed over the channel to join the Romans in their fight against the Visigoths on the continent. 48 This informs us of two very important things. The first is that the relationship between the Britons and the Romans after the Romans had withdrawn from the island was still one of mutual protection. Contrary to the ideas presented by Geoffrey of Monmouth the Britons and Romans were still allies. There is even record of correspondence between a Roman and Riothamus. “Sidonius Apollinaris corresponded c.470 with a man named Riothamus, complaining to him that certain Britons ‘a crowd of noisy, armed, disorderly men were enticing slaves away from a friend.” 49 A later Roman source provides the following information in regards to Riothamus:

Jordanes provides further information about this individual: Now Euric, King of the Visigoths, perceived the frequent changes of the Roman Emperors and strove to hold Gaul in his own right. The [western] emperor Anthemius heard of it and asked the Britons for

---

47 Reno, Historical Figures 69
48 ibid 72
aid. Their king Riothamus came with twelve thousand men into the state of the Bituriges by the way of the ocean, and was received as he disembarked from his ships.\textsuperscript{50}
The second and even more important fact that this endeavor of Riothamus shows is that Ambrosius was in fact successful. Ambrosius was able to hold back the Saxons so effectively that the king who followed him was able to take a host of men to a foreign land and fight there. If Ambrosius had not been successful this would not have been possible.

Not only did Riothamus go over to the continent and fight, but he was actually successful to a degree. It is believed that he actually fought a successful battle against the Saxons at what is known today as Angers in Brittany.\textsuperscript{51} Aside from this one brief mention of the battle at Angers in which Riothamus was involved there is no other significant information detailing any of his other battles in Brittany or anywhere else. The only other available information in regards to the battles of Riothamus is not a successful one. While still engaging the Saxons and Visigoths Riothamus suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of the Visigoths. Jordanes states the following: “c.468 Euric, king of the Visigoths, came against them with an innumerable army, and after a long fight he routed Riothamus, king of the Britons, before the Romans could join him.”\textsuperscript{52} The source suggests that Riothamus may have overextended himself by going across the water to fight on the continent. “After his defeat, Riothamus fled with his followers to the district of Lyon and sought refuge among the Burgundians.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{50}Synder, \textit{An Age of Tyrants} 82
\textsuperscript{51}Reno, \textit{Historical Figures} 72
\textsuperscript{52}Synder, \textit{An Age of Tyrants} 83
\textsuperscript{53}ibid
This is the last bit of information that is available to us about Riothamus for after he fled Brittany he is not mentioned in the historical record again.

Now that an outline of what is known about Riothamus has been established, it is clear that he was not the King Arthur of legend. This is because after Riothamus suffered a defeat in Brittany he was never heard of again. Arthur is the next major figure that is mentioned in the historical record after the fall of Riothamus. If Riothamus and Arthur were in fact the same individual then it would be inconsistent to say that he disappeared into Burgundy and then became the leader of the British forces against the Saxons only a few years later.

Confusion between Vortimer and Riothamus is also unlikely. Nennius records the death of Vortimer as following soon after his victorious battles which would have predated the appearance of Riothamus. The only other possibility left if Riothamus were not a separate person would be Ambrosius. While out of the three of them he would have been the most inclined to aid the Romans, this too is difficult to accept because of the length of the career that would be required. His era of activity is already thought to have been about forty years or so. Adding another ten to fifteen to that already substantial number makes it very unlikely. It is particularly unlikely that pushing either sixty or seventy years old Ambrosius would have sailed across to the continent to fight in a war that did not directly affect him. In all likelihood if Ambrosius was alive and still in power at this time he would have sent a force behind another in his stead. It has yet to be proven without any doubt that Riothamus was in fact a real historical actor. Regardless of that fact his actions do show us one very important thing. They show us the
strength and stability that Ambrosius had brought to the island with his defeat of the Saxons. That stability and peace is what Arthur will work so hard to preserve and defend in the years to come.

**King Arthur and the Saxon Threat Renewed**

The study of King Arthur is a complex endeavor. Very few historical figures are as enveloped in legend and conjecture as Arthur. Countless accounts and stories have been told about the famous king ranging from children’s fiction to scholarly books. The man and his era has captured the fascination of countless individuals. The truth of the matter is that due to the lack of historical material coming out of this period many different things have been stated as fact about Arthur. In order to attempt to make sense out of all of the ideas about King Arthur, it is imperative to stick to the historical timeline. If one loses track of the point in time under discussion a great deal of confusion and frustration will ensure. The only way to begin to understand the Arthurian era and the man himself is to work through it linearly and then once that is done draw conclusions based on what has been seen and understood.

Prior to delving into the veritable quagmire that is the study of this period of British history it is important to note that there are those who hold to the belief that Arthur never existed. No figure is under more scrutiny than Arthur. Many scholars write him off as either not having existed or as having been someone else. One of the main reasons behind this skeptical position on Arthur is the many legendary stories associated with him. The name of King Arthur is more often connected to the quest for the Holy Grail. Once any scholar moves in the direction
of studying the grail they have disappeared into the study of legend and folklore and are no longer operating within the realm of academic history. To be able to properly evaluate Arthur and his historical importance it is imperative to remove the grail from the situation. It is not sound practice to deny the existence of Arthur on the account of his constant connection with the legendary grail. They are mutually exclusive subjects and should be treated as such. Therefore to those who deny the existence of Arthur I implore them to reevaluate the material evidence and try to separate the fantastical from the historical for once the barebones of the endeavors of Arthur are understood then his importance to the history of the British people while be revealed.

There is a great deal of uncertainty in regards to when the rule of Arthur started and ended. The beginning of his reign is believed to be around either the year 470 CE or 475 CE. The reason for that is that Arthur is thought to have been active in a military sense prior to his ascending to the command of all of the Britons. The end of his rule it is a far more difficult matter. There are sources that state that Arthur ruled until his death in 539 CE. But that date is up for debate as well. The only date that is supported in a variety of sources and by the archeological evidence is that of the famous battle of Badon Hill which took place sometime around 518 CE. Due to the myriad of possible times and dates attributed to Arthur it is necessary to say that his rule began in the 470s and most likely ended in the 540s. Therefore the first step to understanding King Arthur is to start from the beginning and work our way along while maintaining a tight grip
on the historical timeline in order not to get lost or bogged down in extraneous details.

The first problem in this exploration of the historic King Arthur is to establish who was he and where came from. These two questions are important steps in building a foundation on which later information will depend. In regards to these questions there are two distinct schools of thought. The first is that Arthur was a territorial ruler. This would mean that he was a prince or chieftain somewhere in Britain during the later years of the rule of Ambrosius. He would have been the descendent of a line of native British chieftains and just like Ambrosius would have been British. The other school of thought is that Arthur was a freelance military operator. This is to say that he offered out his services to the highest bidder and therefore had no specific allegiances or ties to any specific part of Britain. Even if this were true Arthur was not a foreigner. Even if he was a mercenary Arthur was without a doubt a man of British ancestry. This is clear because of the fact that he does later become a great king of all the Britons which was a title and position that it would be unlikely to have been held by a non-Briton. The truth of the matter is that no definitive conclusion can be reached in regards to the origins of Arthur because of the fact that the evidence that is available today just does not cover those details. Judging from his later exploits it seems more likely that Arthur was some prince or chieftain and not a mercenary for hire. This is because it seems like a far more plausible scenario for the kings, chieftains, and other leaders of Britain to put their trust in one of their own rather than someone whom they paid. It does not seem that the Britons would make the
mistake of bringing in outside help a second time. Therefore the more likely scenario is that Arthur was a young prince who proved himself and slowly came into a role of commanding all of the British army and eventually was crowned king.

Prior to moving forward in our understanding of who Arthur was a person it is necessary to consider the historical context. After the years of relative peace and stability things began to change. The word relative is used here for while many of the historical texts make it seem as though there was no conflict after the final victory of Ambrosius that is not to be believed. In the intermediate years between the reigns of Arthur and Ambrosius things may have been stable enough for the likes of Riothamus to go and fight on the continent, but the period was probably characterized by constant hostilities along the borders between the Saxons and the Britons. What this means is that while no land was actually being taken by either side the border between them was still a hot zone. Small unnamed battles and skirmishes most certainly took place here resulting in no grand shift of power, but they led no cessation of conflict either. In this world we find Arthur. The Saxons are still a constant threat to the native Britons and their way of life and while Ambrosius was successful in pushing the Saxons back they were slowly regrouping and gathering strength under their new leaders Othca and Ælle, the sons of Hengist, just waiting for the perfect time to strike at the heart of Britain once again.

The years of study of Arthur and the historical period he is associated with has led to a lot of speculative thought in regards to his character. Attempting to
understand what kind of character Arthur had is an impossible endeavor because
the evidence is difficult to come by. It is and always will be impossible to
accurately determine if Arthur was a good or bad person. The only thing that can
be done in a moderately academic way is to look at the information that is
available about Arthur and then evaluate what Arthur meant to the people of his
time and how he worked to shape the subsequent events. Most if not all of the
information that is available to us in the modern age about Arthur revolves around
his battles. Therefore to understand and evaluate his importance to British history
it is imperative to look at the battles that have been attributed to him.

As previously mentioned in this work the late Roman military system that
would have most certainly been present in Britain included specific titles. These
titles were held by unique and prominent military individuals. They consisted of
dux or duke and comes or count. As previously discussed these positions came
with their own specific responsibilities and honors. In some of his first battles
Arthur is listed as holding the title of dux. This title could suggest some
interesting things about this early Arthur. The first thing is that due to the fact that
he is referred to as dux and not king tells us that he was not yet a king. Therefore
it is entirely plausible to posit that at this juncture Arthur may have been fighting
on behalf of another king. If that were indeed the case, there are a number of
speculative ideas as to whom Arthur could have been fighting in place of. If we
hold to the idea that Arthur was a descendent of some king or chieftain then the
logical conclusion would be that he was fighting in the place of his father or uncle
or whomever it may have been who was the king of his tribe at that time. Another
claim that has been made in regards to this situation is that Arthur may have been holding the place of an aging Ambrosius. All of these possibilities and others are merely speculative claims that have yet to be established. Regardless of why Arthur was there or who he was, it is unlikely that he was yet thought of as king.

Aside from this subject the fact that Arthur was referred to as dux highlights an important piece of information about British society. Regardless of how much time had passed, Roman influence had not faded. The fact that Arthur was listed as dux and not by some other British or Welsh title informs us that the influence of Rome was still being felt even in the time of Arthur. More than a generation after the 410 CE fall of Rome, the titles that were an integral part of the Roman military were still being used in the distant province of Britain. As it has been seen before and will without a doubt be seen again no transition in history is clear. Even though the Romans left Britain, it is impossible to remove them and their influence from the island entirely and that fact is clearly shown through the continued use of the title of dux in the time of Arthur.

After the time during which Arthur was referred to as dux, he was called by other grand titles in connection with other battles. It is believed that his colloquial title was that of high king while his more formal title was that of emperor. These conclusions are drawn from the Mabinogion and other texts like it. These texts, of which the Mabinogion is one of the better known examples, are collections of short stories and other prose works that were produced by medieval Welsh writers. The events that took place within stories such as these cannot be accepted as historical fact. That being said, it is reasonable to believe that the
titles given to Arthur in them are probably relatively accurate. This is because the writers of the stories would have most likely just referred to Arthur in the same way that he was referred to in real life for this was the only way that they knew him. This can be seen by the fact that the titles that are bestowed upon Arthur are not outlandish or unbelievable. The *Mabinogion* is not referring to him as the grand magician or the Sultan of the Arabian Desert.

Regardless of the way in which people made reference to Arthur the fact of the matter is that he was a warrior. The majority of the literary evidence that is connected to Arthur consists of either accounts of his battles or his specific actions in those battles. To understand the merits of King Arthur the next logical step is to go through the literary accounts of his battles.

**The Battles of Arthur**

The primary literary source that provides a detailed list of the battles in which Arthur was most likely involved in is that of the *Historia Brittonum*. It provides a list of twelve battles in which Arthur is credited with leading the British forces against the Saxons. The chapter of the *Historia Brittonum* that contains this battle list does not include the battle at Camlann. Camlann which is mentioned in the following chapter is believed to have been Arthur’s final battle in which he perished. Before delving into the specifics of the twelve battles there are a few important facts to make note of. The first thing is that it is believed that Arthur was facing the Saxon forces under the leadership of Octha. As previously stated Octha was the son of the previous leader of the Saxons, Hengist, who came over in the third *Adventus* and was primarily stationed up in the northern parts of
the island in order to help hold back the Picts. After the death of Hengist, sometime prior to the ascension of Arthur to the kingship, Octha came down south to rule the Saxon people from Kent in his father’s place. Sources, such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, also mention another son of the late Hengist known as Ælle. Octha is mentioned in a more prominent manner than Ælle. The most likely explanation for this is that Octha was the eldest son of Hengist and therefore already had a significant war host under his direct command. Therefore if Ælle were in fact younger than Octha, he would doubtlessly be expected to fight for and on behalf of his brother who had become the effective head of the family at the death of their father. Aside from who Arthur was fighting there are important things to note about how and where he fought as well. While looking through the battles that are recorded in the Historia Brittonum it has been discovered that seven of the battles were fought at river crossings. We have already seen the same trend towards battles at river crossings in the battles of Ambrosius. Apparently in the generation following Ambrosius leaders had the same idea about ground and terrain that were advantageous for a battle. Another important piece of information in regards to the battles of Arthur is that it is almost certain that the main body of Arthur’s troops were in fact mounted. This fact will play an important role in many of the battles of Arthur to be discussed later on in this work. The final thing that is important to note about these battles in general is that all except the famous battle at Badon can be called into question. This is due to the limited evidence that is available to the historian of today in

regards to this period. Not only is there uncertainty of whether or not these battles took place and whether or not Arthur fought in them but also it is nearly impossible to accurately determine where exactly these battles took place. Overall there is a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to Arthur and in particular his battles.

Now that the background has been established it is possible to go through each of the twelve battles to see the agency and worth of Arthur as king of the Britons. The first step in looking at the battles of Arthur is to begin with the references to Arthur and his battles that Nennius makes in the *Historia Brittonum*. In regards to some of the battles Nennius is the only source and what he says is in very brief. On the other hand when it comes to, Badon, Nennius is not the only source. Nennius’ emphasis on some battles to the detriment of others is due to the simple fact that he viewed certain battles, such as Badon once again, to be more important and therefore deserving of attention and focus.

Nennius sets the scene as follows: “At the time the Saxons were waxing strong in number and were increasing in Britain. When Hengist was dead, Octha, his son, passed over from the northern part of Britain to the kingdom of the Kentishmen…” As previously discussed the British forces were no longer standing against Hengist but against his heir Octha. The first battle that Nennius records is the one in which Arthur was not yet referred to as king. Nennius states that “the first battle was at the mouth of the river, which is called Glein” Aside from also informing us about the fact that during this battle Arthur was fighting

---

55 Nennius, “History of the Britons” 74-75
56 Nennius, “History of the Britons” 75
under the title of *dux* and not that of king, Nennius does not go into any further detail about this first encounter. Therefore from the fact that Nennius fails to provide any great detail on this battle makes it seem unimportant. Based on what we know about Arthur and the Saxons there are a few possibilities about what may have happened at this battle. We do not know who was victorious. That being said we can make an educated statement based upon the way in which each side fought. We already know that the fundamental difference in fighting styles between the Arthur’s Britons and Octha’s Saxons is that the Britons fought from horseback. This fact could have given them an advantage over the primarily dismounted troops of the Saxons. The reason for that is that in the mouth of a river there is bound to be water or at the very least mud. The British cavalry would not have been hindered by these conditions of the terrain while the Saxons would have been. Aside from this possibility there is little else that can be inferred or known about this battle due to the sheer lack of information on it.

The next four battles that Nennius recounts are given even less attention than the first encounter. Nennius states only the following: “The second, third, fourth, and fifth [battles] on another river, which is called Dubglas and is in the region of Linnius.” 57 While Nennius offers virtually no information on these battles other than a vague location, it is still possible to make an educated guess based upon what he says. From the information provided to us by Nennius tells us that four battles between the Britons and Saxons took place on the same river. From there it is reasonable to conclude that the river was of some importance or the river may have just been at a natural meeting point between the bases of the

57 Nennius, “History of the Britons” 75
two sides resulting in numerous engagements there. Either way the fact that multiple battles were fought upon the same river informs us of something in addition to the fact that the battles were just fought there.

In regards to the next battle Nennius continues to provide very little information. He states that “the sixth battle [was] on river which is called Bassas.”\(^{58}\) The description of this battle that is provides no information except location. The one thing that is does in fact do is to emphasize the fact that many of the major battles between the Britons and Saxons took place on or by rivers as was previously stated. Aside from that this battle was clearly believed to be of little importance and therefore the details of it are lost to the annals of history.

The seventh battle is recounted by Nennius in the following way: “The seventh was a battle in the wood of Celidon, that is Cat Coit Celidon.”\(^{59}\) In regards to this battle a bit more can perhaps be extracted from Nennius. The editor of Nennius’ work, W. Wade-Evans, sought to identify the location of of the seventh battle: “Cad Coed Celyddon, ‘the battle of Celidon wood,’ perhaps the dense woodland which formerly existed between the Severn and the Cotswold Hills; the word Celidon may survive in Cheltenham.”\(^{60}\) The fact that it was fought in woodland and not by a river is an important piece of evidence. It is possible that the infantry of the Saxons had a leg up on the cavalry of the Britons in this

\(^{58}\) Nennius, “History of the Britons,” 75
\(^{59}\) ibid
different terrain as opposed to what may have occurred when it came to fighting in the mouth of the river.

In regards to the eighth battle Nennius still neglects to provide important information such as who won or how many lives were lost. That being said he does go on to embellish the battle from a Christian point of view which is not surprising as he was in fact a monk. Nennius recounts the eighth battle in the following manner: “The eighth was the battle at Castellum Guinnion, in which Arthur carried the image of Saint Mar, ever virgin, on his shoulders, and the pagans were put to flight on that day…”\(^6\) In the end of the selection Nennius continues to venerate and thank the virgin Mary and Jesus Christ for aiding the British forces in their victory of over the Saxons. The fact that there are these religious references in Nennius’ account of the battle informs us of a number of realities and possibilities of Arthur and his era. The first thing is that the era of Arthur was in fact a Christian one. The Roman Empire had already been a Christian nation for a hundred years prior to its departure from the island. Christianity had plenty of time to sink down to the roots of British society. The fact that the Britons were Christians and Nennius himself was in fact a monk explains the references to Jesus in the account of this battle. The reference is important because it shows us how Arthur was perceived by the generations after him. Those looking back and recording the history of Arthur believed and saw him as an overtly Christian leader. Whether that was in fact the case or not is difficult to prove. Nennius states that Arthur carried the sign of the Virgin Mary on his shoulder. This claim is a mistranslation of the Welsh word ‘scuit’ which

\(^6\) Nennius, “History of the Britons” 75
actually means shield.\footnote{Alcock Arthur's Britain 71} To say that Arthur carried a Christian religious symbol on his shield is a fairly plausible scenario. For it would have been a common practice for any soldier of this period and later to put a cross or another religious symbol on their shield when going into battle. Therefore it is not out of the realm of possibility that Arthur was an overtly Christian ruler.

Nennius informs us of very little in regards to the ninth battle. He states that “the ninth battle was fought at the City of the Legions.”\footnote{Nennius, “History of the Britons” 75} There is a great deal of speculation as to where this ‘City of the Legions’ actually was. Wade-Evans, provides one possible location. He thought that the City of the Legions was “Caerleon on Usk, where two streams, Lechou and Amir, [meet].”\footnote{Nennius, “History of the Britons” 75 (Footnote 6)} While this is a valid hypothesis I would like to present another. It is possible that this ‘City of Legions’ that Nennius referred to is actually the modern day city of York. The reason that I suggest this is that back in the time of Arthur the city of York was referred to as Eburacum. Eburacum was often referred to as “the city of the Legions or of the Eagles”. Therefore it could be possible that Nennius is using the term ‘City of the Legions’ to make reference, in a more colloquial manner, to the city of Eburacum. If that is the case, this battle is more important than previously suggested by the lack of detail provided by Nennius. If in fact the battle took place at Ebruacam it would have been a major city and fort that the Britons would have fought very hard to defend. In that case the battle there and most likely the feat of protecting the city would be a major accomplishment of King Arthur. The flaw in the theory that this ‘City of Legions’ was in fact modern day York is that...
York is in the more northern parts of Britain. The conventional wisdom in regards to Arthur’s battles holds that most if not all of them happened in the more southern parts of the island. That is not to say that a battle in the north could not have happened but a southern location is more likely for the battle such as Caerleon like Wade-Evans suggested. If in fact York/Eburacum was the location the fact that it is so far north would have made it that much more important for Arthur to defend and therefore more important in the study of Arthur to make note of it. The fact is we will never be certain where exactly many of Arthur’s battles actually took place.

The tenth battle is described much way as the earlier battles. Nennius states that “[in] the tenth battle he [Arthur] fought on the shore of the river, which is called Tribuit.”\textsuperscript{65} Not much else can be learned from this brief description that was not already thought of when discussing other battles. The description that Nennius provides of the eleventh battle is just as brief as that of the tenth, but it at least provide slightly different information. The description is as follows: “The eleventh battle occurred on the mountain, which is called Agned.”\textsuperscript{66} Unlike the account of the tenth battle which provides very little new information, the eleventh at least shows us that the battles took place on some variety of terrain. From the eleventh battle we know that fortified positions on mountains or hills would have been important strategic positions that both sides would have tried to control.

\textsuperscript{65} Nennius, “History of the Britons” 75
\textsuperscript{66} ibid
The Battle at Badon Hill

The twelfth and final battle that is mentioned by Nennius is without a doubt given the most attention and therefore is believed to have been the most important. Therefore a substantial amount of time and research has been devoted to looking into this subject and as a result we are confronted with denser scholarship. This battle goes by many names but is most commonly known as the battle of Mount Badon. The description provided by Nennius is as follows: “The twelfth was on Mount Badon, in which there fell together in one day nine hundred and sixty men in one onset of Arthur, and no one laid them low save himself alone.”67 From this account along with scholarship on the battle many things can be understood. First we consider Nennius’ objective. Arthur could not have vanquished over nine hundred men with his own hand. It is obvious that Nennius is trying to make the entire event seem more poetic and make Arthur seem more like a hero of legend by embellishing and exaggerating the facts. The fact the number of men that Arthur is said to have killed is clearly inaccurate it should not be used to discredit the entire list of battles or Arthur’s presence at the battle. In all likelihood Arthur was at the battle of Badon hill and his efforts there turned the tide of the battle. What may have happened is that the Britons may have been struggling against the Saxons. Then Arthur made a heroic charge and managed to kill or route a large number of Saxons and thus the battle was won for the Britons. If this was the case, it would be an easy step for a British historian over three hundred years later to glorify Arthur exponentially.

67 Nennius, “History of the Britons” 75
The Easter Annals state that the Battle of Badon Hill took place in the year 518 CE. This is off by thirteen years from the dates that Bede provides for he states that Badon occurred forty-four years after the Saxons arrival in 456 CE in which case Badon would have occurred in 500 CE. It is hard to say exactly when the battle actually took place. Eighteen years is not a large margin of error especially when one is dealing with a period that has very limited written evidence. The Easter Annals tend to be more reliable than the dates provided by Bede because of the fact that Bede was working off of Gildas whose main purpose for writing was to condemn the actions of past kings that he felt did not behave in a way that adhered enough to the principles of Christianity. Therefore the exact dates of things such as battles were not of any particular concern for him.

Aside from the fact that the exact date of the battle of Badon is debatable the location of it is also uncertain. Scholars posit at least six different locations where the battle may have been fought. The map in figure two shows some of the possible locations of the battle of Badon as well as other battles that were previously mentioned by Nennius. One of the most renowned Arthurian scholars, Leslie Alcock, believed that due to the language and other evidence a case can be made for a theory that the battle of Badon hill took place on a hilltop overlooking the city of Bath. The idea that Bath may have been the site of the battle is supported by the fact that a few of the other battles took place in that area. Therefore if the area was in fact hotly contested it would be highly plausible for

---

68 Alcock, *Arthur’s Britain* 71
69 ibid
Figure 2 Map of Possible the Sites of the Battles of Arthur

Alcock, *Arthur’s Britain* 62
the decisive victory to happen in the same region. Also, unlike the problem with the location of York, the city of Bath is in the southwest of Britain which fits with the conventional wisdom of where the battles between the Britons and Saxons took place.

Regardless of where or when the battle of Badon hill took place, it is clear that it was the decisive victory for Arthur against the Saxons. Arthur’s victory at Badon cemented his legacy as the pinnacle of British military prowess of the medieval era. Gildas by way of Bede offers a brief account of the battle: “…first the Britons won and then the enemy was victorious until the year of the siege of Mount Badon, when the Britons slaughtered no small number of their foes…”

This second literary reference helps to affirm the fact that not only did Badon happen but that the victory was in fact decisive for the Britons. While it is believed that Badon was not the final battle that Arthur fought against the Saxons it was the most important. This is because it helped to protect the land of the Britons for decades afterwards. Peter Salway believed that it was a “British victory that at the end of the fifth century was to set back further Saxon aggression in Britain for fifty years or more.”

This view presented by Salway is held by the majority if not all of the major scholars of Arthurian Britain. This is why Badon is held in such high regard. It as seen as the moment in this period when Britain and Arthur triumphed over the barbarian invaders that wished to oppress them. For the next fifty years or so the war between the Britons and Saxons would cease. The victory of Arthur at Badon ensured the preservation of

---

71 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 55  
72 Salway, *Roman Britain* 498
native Celtic culture of Britain for a generation. In the years following Arthur there would be struggles and conflicts with threats new and old and the Britons would look for someone to fill the shoes of the Great King Arthur but to no avail. At the time of Badon and for generations to come after Arthur was seen as the height of military prowess. No Briton was to ever surpass the military exploits of Arthur.

Camlann and the End of the Arthurian Period

Badon was clearly the turning point in the conflict between the Britons and the Anglo-Saxons. One additional battle after Badon is attributed Arthur. Some scholars believe that while Badon was Arthur’s greatest, battle Camlann was in fact his final one. Very little information is available about Camlann. Nennius makes his a brief reference to Camlann in another one of his works the Annals Cambriae also known as the Annals of the Britons. The 537 entry in the annals states the following: “The Action of Camlann, in which Arthur and Merdraut fell. And there was a pestilence in Britain and in Ireland.” This entry has prompted a wide variety of questions and speculation. To delve into the theories about who Merdraut was is too great of an endeavor for this inquiry, but other quandaries will be discussed here. The big questions about Camlann are where and when it took place. The Annals states that the battle took place in the year 537 CE. This date fits in nicely with the date that Nennius previously provided for the battle of Badon of 518 CE. The problem with these dates is that Arthur would have had to have started his military career at the age of fifteen in order to make it feasible for him to have survived to 537 CE. It is not unheard of.

73 Nennius, “History of the Britons” 86
in the historical period under discussion for men to fight in battle at an age as young as fifteen. Other scholars posit that the battle of Badon occurred between the years 490-500 CE. If this were the case, they then suggest that Camlann occurred in the year 518 CE and that Nennius miss labeled the battles. The uncertainty around the date and over whether or not Arthur could have lived to fight in the battle has led to an interesting idea about who fought at Camlann. Geoffrey Ashe proposed that a pseudo Arthur fought at Camlann fifty or sixty years after the death of the real Arthur.\textsuperscript{74}

Aside from the question about chronology, the other major question in regards to Camlann is where the battle took place. Many scholars have neglected even to attempt to answer this question. The one major theory that seems to hold some traction is that the location of Camlann is at Charford. This place on the southern coast is referred to within the pages of the \textit{Anglo-Saxon Chronicle} by a number of other names such as “Camboglanna” and “Cerdic’s Ford”. The idea that Charford is the actual location of the battle of Camlann is speculation based upon educated guessing. When it comes down to it discovering exactly where and when the battle of Camlann took place much has yet to be settled. The most logical decision is to rely on the written sources that are available to us which state that the final battle in which Arthur perished took place in the year 537 CE at a place known as Camlann which has yet to be unearthed.

\textsuperscript{74} Reno, Frank D. \textit{The Historic King Arthur: Authenticating the Celtic Hero of Post-Roman Britain}. Jefferson, NC: McFarland &., 1996. 186
Questioning Arthur

Now that what can be known about the battles of Arthur has been discussed, it is possible to evaluate Arthur and his historical importance. The first step is to consider the views of various scholars that state that Arthur is pure fiction. One of these scholars is N.J Higham. Mr. Higham has devoted a great deal of time and effort to studying the writings of Gildas. Using Gildas as a guide he deconstructs part of the post Roman era of Britain. Since Gildas does not name any king who performed the deeds that are attributed to Arthur, he puts forward the following conclusion:

If the ‘War of the Saxon Federates’ was won by the Saxons, rather than the British … then no such heroic period of British triumphs existed. There was, therefore, no heroic age fit for the deeds of a King Arthur. In that case, there is, and was, no case for inventing a character to fulfill the role of British commander in this ‘mother of all battles’ – a role which Gildas, of course, left unfilled. In reality, King Arthur was no more than a requisite British hero whose appearance… was necessitated by the fundamental misunderstanding of Gildas’s text by less erudite Welsh scholars…

In this selection Higham summarizes his overall argument and the arguments of other scholars that Arthur was not real. In making this argument he draws upon what he feels in the best evidence of the time period, the written work or Gildas. Higham essentially believes that if Gildas did not record it, it is not true. By relying sole on the word of Gildas Higham has overlooked crucial evidence by focusing on Gildas alone that may support the existence of Arthur. Not only that but it is imperative to understand that Gildas was writing in a certain way and had his own short comings. For example it is clear that Gildas rarely mentioned

---

anyone by their name, including individuals that are real such as Vortigern, Ambrosius and Hengist.

While there are scholars like Higham that argue that Arthur was merely a fiction there are also scholars of equal or greater merit that suggest the opposite such as Leslie Alcock. He discussed some of the evidence surrounding Arthur. One of the major questions that Alcock raises is this: if Arthur was indeed a fiction then who fought the battle of Badon which is even praised by Gildas as turning the tide in the battle against the Saxons? The only other individual that could have logically fought at Badon would have been Ambrosius. Aside from other factors that make this unlikely the way in which Ambrosius and Badon are recorded make this possibility unlikely:

If Ambrosius had indeed won Badon, as well as the first ‘God-Given’ victory against the Anglo-Saxons, this would have surely been remembered and magnified. There would have been no occasion for later ages to attribute victory to Arthur, still less to invent Arthur for the purpose. In this sense, Ambrosius is the touchstone to prove the genuineness of Arthur.76 What Alcock is suggesting is that a hero such as Arthur would not have been invented to fit the period because if it were not him that did these deeds the one who had done them would have been equally glorified. Aside from this poignant interpretation of the historical record Alcock also uses archeology as a foundation for much of his research. In the legends of Arthur there has always been one place that is constantly connected with him, that of Camelot. The location of this famous Arthurian site continues to elude many scholars. To delve into the fieldwork that has been done to find Camelot is a task to be covered in greater detail elsewhere. The important thing to note is that all of the possible locations of

76 Alcock, *Arthur’s Britain* 359
Camelot contain archeological evidence that supports a presence there in the time of Arthur. Whether Camelot is truly at Cadbury, Caerleon, or was just a figment of the imagination of eighteen century French poets evidence is present to support an occupation of these places in the Arthurian age which provides a tentative foundation for working towards proving the existence of Arthur.

When looking at the arguments of scholars such as Alcock and Higham I find myself siding with Alcock and his camp. That is not to say that the existence of Arthur should be taken as a given for there is not enough information available at present to determine that. There is is enough evidence in the written record and the archeological one to say that it is fairly likely that Arthur existed. He was not the man who killed hundreds on his own or went on fantastical quests for magical objects. He was in fact a great leader of men, and he helped to preserve his culture and people for the next generation. There are two major things that are imperative to understand. The first is that it is known that when it came to leading and fighting in battle Arthur had no contemporary equal. He was seen as the height of military achievement on the island for at least the next century if not up until the Norman invasion. Every British general after him tried to be him as best they could. He was seen as a military hero for he was one. From a young age he was able to lead vastly different groups of people who all wanted to be back at home working their farms into battle and was able to beat a war hardened group of Saxons numerous times. Arthur’s name slipped into legend for a reason, for at the time of his life he was truly seen as great. The other thing is that Arthur was able to continue the work of Ambrosius. He fought all of his famous battles especially
that of Badon, in order to push the Saxons back. His victories managed to hold back the Saxon invasion for another fifty years. Just as Ambrosius did before him Arthur too was able to hold back the Saxons and preserve British culture. While the deeds of Arthur were great in the eyes of those around him the Saxons were not beaten for good. It would fall to the next generation to repeat the same feats that both Ambrosius and Arthur did but without someone like those two great leaders this generation would not be up to the task.

**The Final Generation of Britain and its Sources**

Now that what occurred in the generations of both Ambrosius and Arthur has been properly understood it is time to look at the generation that came after. This generation, from approximately 545-610 CE, would be the last effectively to rule the island of Britain. At the end of this generation the Saxons finally managed to take control of the island and begin the long, slow process of Anglicizing the native peoples. While it is clear what happened at the end of the generation in question, the reasons behind why it happened are no entirely understood. Therefore it is necessary to comb through the available evidence to determine why this final generation was not able to do as generations before and hold off the Saxons.

Before delving into lists of battles and historical figures it is imperative to understand where much of this information actually comes from. While some of it does come from the sources that we have seen before such as Bede and Nennius, a great deal of it also is derived from British epic poetry. Therefore to properly understand the sources of the information it is necessary to gain a better grasp on
what the British epic poems were like and how they were used. The best example of an epic poem dating from this time period is the work of the poet Aneirin known as *Y Gododdin*. It is a work that focuses on the exploits of a band of warriors called the Gododdin from which the work takes its name. While a great deal of historical information can be gleaned from works like *The Gododdin* the truth of the matter is that these works were not histories. These poems do not even resemble other epic poetry of the past. When one reads the *Iliad* or other works of Homer they are written in a narrative yet poetic style. *The Gododdin* on the other hand does not follow that same structure. *The Gododdin* is a long list of elegies memorializing the great deeds of the men within it. To gain any historical information from the work it is necessary to piece through it very carefully. The reasons why *The Gododdin* is organized in this particular fashion are twofold. The first is that while it is referred to as a poem the fact of the matter is that *The Gododdin* was a song. It was not meant to be read, but rather it was intended to be performed. This piece was intended to be sung along to harp music in the great halls of the various kings of Britain in order to immortalize the deeds of the men about which it spoke. Aneirin, the man who is credited with the creation of the work, was a bard. He was one of the four famous and greatest of bards from this period. Since *The Gododdin* was intended to be performed as a song it had a non-narrative structure. The other reason as to why *The Gododdin* does not resemble other epic works is that its purpose was not to record history. The fact that the works of Aneirin as well as other British and Welsh poets report historical events was purely accidental. The purpose behind the production of *The Gododdin* and
other works like it was to glorify the men about whom it was written. In doing that Aneirin also recorded a snapshot of his generation and how they fought with the Saxons. It is for this reason that we will delve into the pages of *The Gododdin* in order to understand how and why the generation that came after Arthur was the last. It is important that we do not write off the non-historical value of these poems as well. They are indeed epic works that have considerable artistic and cultural value. In the culture that produced these poems every man’s actions could be seen as great as long as the proper song was written about them. These recorded songs held power within them for everyone wanted to live on in the memory of their people after they died.

**Understanding Aneirin’s *Y Gododdin***

Even though *The Gododdin* was not written as a narrative it does tell a story that is indicative of what occurred during this period. The reason it is necessary to turn to these epic works for historical detail is because the other sources that are available to study from this period are scare and very fragmentary. Therefore it is necessary to use works such as the *The Gododdin* to help complete the picture of this time period. From *The Gododdin* we gain an accurate bare bone outline of what occurred during this generation. But prior to delving into that, it is necessary briefly to set the historical stage. After the death of Arthur and the battle of Badon it is known that the Saxons were kept at bay for about fifty years. The Saxons had not been expelled from the island. Rather, they were confined to certain areas in south eastern Britain. While confined to these limited areas the Saxons did two important things. First they continued to gather
strength. With a foothold established on the island more warriors and settlers were attracted to their cause. Therefore while the land holding of the Saxons did not grow for a time their population continued to slowly increase. Second the Saxons began to settle and become normalized. What this means is that they began to make the part of Britain that they were in control of their home. They began to farm and herd animals and overall they started to act like their British counterparts. This regularization of the Saxons will continue from this point on and will play an important role in the aftermath of this generation. After the period of relative stability brought about by Arthur had passed the Saxons began to get restless again. To serve an ever growing population they needed more land. In addition to the Saxons already present on the island new groups began to come in this time period and were eager to taste the spoils that Britain had to offer for themselves. The most important of these newer groups of Saxons were those under the leadership of Ida. Ida and his forces landed in the area of Lindesfarne in northern Britain around the year 547 CE. While there is not much recorded about him he was still important for he is credited with founding the dynasty at Bernicia. The king of this northern kingdom that would later engage in a conflict with the British was Æthelfrith. It is because of the actions of Æthelfrith in Bernicia, later called Northumbria, which ultimately spells doom for the native Britons. Prior to the time of The Gododdin it is known that some sort of conflict took place between the Saxons and the Britons. “Nennius is definite in telling how various northern British princes, led by the king of Rheged, Urien, and his sons, fought with Ida’s successors; and that Urien was betrayed and killed when
besieging the English at Lindisfarne.” It is clear that things had begun to change by this date. New English peoples had started to be engaged by the British. The British knew that the threat of the Saxons was an ever present one and after the failure of the attack led by Urien the British were looking to discover their next move. Now that the gap between Arthur and The Gododdin has been filled it is time to discuss what The Gododdin reveals about this period.

The Gododdin informs us that in 593 CE Æthelfrith became king of Bernicia. In addition in the year 605 CE Æthelfrith joined Deira to his kingdom of Bernicia thus doubling his size and power. At this the British felt that it was time to deal with the growing threat posed by Æthelfrith and his forces. Therefore one of the more powerful kings of the Britons decided to organize a war band to combat the growing threat. This fighting force was called the “Gododdin”. The Gododdin was organized by a British king or chieftain by the name of Mynyddog. He is often referred to ‘Mwynfawr’ which meant the wealthy or the luxurious. This indicates that he would have easily been able to fund and support a fighting force purely based upon his own wealth. The “Gododdin” was made up of three hundred or three hundred sixty-three mounted warriors who were recruited from across Britain. “Mynyddog had gathered together an army of warriors, chiefly his own men from the Gododdin itself, but others too from other parts of Britain such as from ‘beyond Bannog’, from ‘beyond the sea of Iuddew’, from Aeron, from Elfed, and from Gwynedd including Rhufoniog, Eifionydd, and Mon.” By forming the Gododdin Mynyddog attempted to create a force that would serve the

---

78 Aneirin, The Gododdin 4
purposes of Britain as a whole and not the interests of one specific king. The center of kingdom of Mynyddog was at a place called *Din Eidyn* or ‘the fort Eidyn’. It is believed that Eidyn was the modern day city of Edinburgh. Here at Eidyn Mynyddog feasted and trained the men of his new fighting force in order to make them loyal to him and to make them ready to be unleashed against the Saxons. The text of *The Gododdin* tells us that after this training Mynyddog decided that it was time to unleash his men against the growing threat of the English. The text makes no mention of who led the “Gododdin” into battle and therefore it is safe to say that it was not Mynyddog himself who led them. This would mean that the king was either too old or was ill in some way and therefore he could not lead the men. Once the “Gododdin” was set loose they met the English host at Catraeth. The conventional wisdom in regards to Catraeth is that it is Catterick in northern Yorkshire also known to the Romans as Caturactonium which is regarded as being the capital of the Northumbrian kings. The two sides met there at Catraeth and there the forces of Mynyddog were utterly annihilated. The text of *The Gododdin* speaks of one surviving warrior as well as the poet Aneirin who crafted the poem and was said to have been at Catraeth. The aftermath of this defeat of the British at the hands of Æthelfrith was to be felt for the years to come. Prior to discussing the aftermath the rationale behind the actions of Mynyddog must be more clearly understood.

It is impossible to know for sure why Mynyddog did what he did. He spent a great deal of time and money to train a force of about three hundred horsemen in order to send them to their doom against a Saxon host that was said
to number in the thousands. The question is why Mynyddog did this. It will never be known for certain the answer to that question but there are few factors that may have influenced his decision. The first possibility is that he could have underestimated the strength of his enemy, but such a mistake was not likely. Prior to the conflict with the Gododdin Æthelfrith had managed to combine the forces of Bernicia and of Deira. Not only that, but he had also repelled an attack in 603 CE by the formidable Aedén of Dál Riada. Therefore the previous exploits of Æthelfrith make it hard to believe that anyone could have underestimated him. On the other hand, Mynyddog may have overestimated the power of his own forces due to the fact that they were cavalry. After all mounted men will always have the advantage over infantry, the example of Arthur made that particularly clear, and this consideration may have clouded Mynyddog’s vision and influenced his decision. Numerology could have influenced the decisions of Mynyddog The number three-hundred had a certain significance. Stemming from examples of the three-hundred soldiers at Thermopylae, the Theban Sacred Band, and even the Companion Cavalry of Alexander the Great a connection between the number three-hundred and power was forged. This factor could have made Mynyddog believe that his forces were more powerful than they truly were. The final and most logical possibility is that Mynyddog expected reinforcements. It is highly likely that the Gododdin were just the first wave sent to tie up the Saxons until a proper British host could be gathered. If this were the case, the decision to send out the Gododdin would have appeared far less suicidal. The fact of the matter is

79 Dál Riada is what today is known as Ireland.
that this British host never materialized and the entire endeavor of Mynyddog against the Saxons failed as the Gododdin were slaughtered.

*The Gododdin* informs us about the survivors who managed to return from Catraeth. Aside from that, the poem does not detail much else about the aftermath of the defeat and the rise of the Anglo-Saxons to power on the island. In order to understand what happened next it is necessary to turn to a combination of other sources. By using the work of Bede in conjunction with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* we will be able to further understand what happened after Catraeth and why it was important.

**The Rise of Æthelfrith and the Fall of Britain**

In the final chapter of the first book of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* he tells of the supremacy of Æthelfrith king of Northumbria: “He [Æthelfrith] ravaged the Britons more extensively than any other English ruler…For no ruler had subjected more land to the English race or settled it, having first either exterminated or conquered the natives.” 80 From this selection it can be plainly seen what occurred after the failure of the last British offensive at Catraeth. Since no one, not the British or the kings of Dál Riada, could stand against the might of Æthelfrith and his war host he began to move through northern Briton conquering the land as he went. This continued until he had established the English Kingdom of Northumbria that was not to be trifled with by anyone else on the island. For further evidence of what Æthelfrith was able to accomplish we must turn to the pages of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for it gives an account of the English exploits of this period. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

80 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 117
essentially confirms what was already known from previous sources. The
chronicle attributes three major events to the time of Æthelfrith. The first is that
he combined the forces of both Bernicia and Deira. Therefore he is credited as the
first king of the region known afterwards as Northumbria. Second is that
Æthelfrith and his forces defended themselves from the invasion from Dál Riada.
Last, it informs us how Æthelfrith defeated the Britons and began to conquer the
land. The one additional piece of information that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
does emphasize about Æthelfrith and the aftermath of Catraeth is that Æthelfrith started
a dynasty. Æthelfrith was the first king of Northumbria, and he began the process
of conquering the rest of Britain but it did not stop there. Like any dynasty the
successors to the king tried to bring glory to themselves as well. This was no
different in the case of Æthelfrith and Northumbria. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
describes what occurred once Æthelfrith had died. The 617 CE entry of the
chronicle states: “Here Æthelfrith, king of the Northumbrians, was killed by
Rædwald, king of the East Anglians, and Edwin, Ælle’s offspring, succeeded to
the kingdom, and conquered all of Britain except for the inhabitants of Kent
alone…”\(^81\) This entry of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle shows us that Æthelfrith was
successful in establishing a kingdom that would go on to eventually control all of
Britain.

This information about how successful Æthelfrith was before and after his
defeat of the British at Catraeth puts the battle in a new light. It is clear that the
“Gododdin” was the last effort of a divided generation of Britons to stop the ever
increasing power of the Saxons. With the failure of the “Gododdin” at Catraeth,

\(^81\) Swanton, Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 24 (617)
the entire generation of Britons failed. They failed to preserve their culture and their way of life like Arthur and Ambrosius had done in the past. The post-Arthurian generation of Britons failed Britain when they lost, and they left their island and their home open to conquering by the likes of a powerful leader such as Æthelfrith. From this point on Britain would no longer be British it was well on its way to become English for all time.

**Why they Failed**

Knowing that what happened at Catraeth only removes part of the mystery surrounding these events. We also need to know why these events happened. Why did the generation of Britons fail? The answer to this question like so many other things related to this period of history cannot be established beyond debate. There is no firm single piece of evidence that explains why the post-Arthurian generation failed. We need to combine all the evidence that has been gathered and discussed throughout the entirety of this work and make inferences and educated guesses. For it is necessary to take the knowledge that has been gained here one step farther and synthesize something new out of it.

Looking back over all of the evidence at hand seems to disclose a simple answer. The final generation failed because they had no Arthur. The Britons of the post-Arthurian generation had no strong leader. Throughout the investigations of both the first generation and second one it became clear that they were each defined by one great leader. The first generation is stabilized and brought together by the work and will of Ambrosius Aurelianus. He was a powerful leader for a wide variety of reasons. The one man that the Britons felt that they could follow
and therefore they rallied behind him and he had enough natural talent and leadership skill to be able to effectively lead them against Hengist. That is why the first generation was successful, for they had Ambrosius. The second generation continued the string of powerful and capable leaders with the most famous king Britain ever saw, King Arthur. With his superior military ability Arthur was able to lead from the front in a series of successful battles that culminated in the glorious British victory of Badon Hill. As discussed previously, it was common knowledge that Arthur was at the height of military prowess for his time, so much so that he was revered for his leadership for generations to come. Therefore he was able to hold back the Saxons for nearly fifty years. When we come to the third generation the role of glorious leader was sorely lacking. One can make the case that Urien of Rheged was a leader who could have led this final generation. That argument is extremely weak. Urien could not even manage to unite the various tribes of Briton into one fighting force such as both Ambrosius and Arthur did before him. He failed so miserably in this regard that he was betrayed by his own men an outcome that shows that he was not a leader of the same caliber of Ambrosius or Arthur. The other possibility was Mynyddog. In a Britain divided and scattered after the failed attempt by Urien, someone needed to unite them. That man could have been Mynyddog. If we subscribe to the most likely rationale as to why the Gododdin failed, lack of reinforcements, then it is likely that Mynyddog also failed to unite Britain in the same way as his predecessors had. He could not manage to bring together a British fighting force bigger than three hundred loyal warriors. Even the text of *The Gododdin* itself
Nimni | 85

tells us that there was no one who was as strong of a leader as Arthur or Ambrosius left in this final generation of Britons. Anierin writes the following about an unnamed member of the “Gododdin”: “He stabbed over three hundred of the finest, he slew both the centre and the wings, he behaved worthily in the forefront of the most generous army; he gave out presents from his herd of horse in the winter. He gluttoned black ravens on the rampart of the stronghold, though he was no Arthur…” 82 Even though the individual to whom this passage is referring to is unknown, it exemplifies an ever present fact about the Gododdin and the generation as a whole. No matter the military prowess of any one man they were not Arthur. Arthur was not only a great warrior, but he was also a great leader of men. This generation may have had great warriors, but they had no great leader who could unite them and that is why they failed.

This final generation of Britons had no leader to push them past the Saxons. That is not to say that no leaders were present. The Britons did not have one but the English did, Æthelfrith. Excluding the fact that he was not British Æthelfrith was most certainly the leader, from this period, whose talents and prowess can be most compared to the likes of Ambrosius or Arthur. This comparison seems out of place due to the fact that Æthelfrith was the primary enemy of the British forces. Still he unified his people, led them to victory numerous times, and founded a long lasting period of stability. These are all things that can be attributed to Arthur or Ambrosius as well. Just as it is impossible to study British history without studying the great leaders such as Arthur the same can be said about Æthelfrith and Northumbria: “The continuous

82 Anierin, *The Gododdin* 112
history of Northumbria, and indeed of England, begins with the reign of Æthelfrith, son of Æthelric and grandson of Ida, king of Bernicia."\textsuperscript{83} This passage shows that Æthelfrith was in fact a great leader and therefore was able to lead his people to victory and to essentially begin the Anglicizing of all of Britain. When it comes down to the conflict between Æthelfrith and the Britons, the Britons were divided and leaderless because they had no Arthur. On the other hand, the Saxons had the likes of Æthelfrith to lead them. This fact shows how important a strong leader is to a generation, and it is why the last generation of Britons failed in the way that they did and why the Anglo-Saxons were successful in the end.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Thomas, Charles *Britain and Ireland in Early Christian Times, A.D. 400-800*, 1971