DUX BELLORUM

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the accuracy and intent of the term *dux bellorum*, leader of war, as used in the *Historia Brittonum* with regards to Arthur. A discussion of Post-Roman archaeology, supplemented with contemporary historical documents, will establish that no Roman commands, such as the *dux Britanniarum* or *comes Britanniarum*, survived into the "Arthurian" period of the late fifth or early sixth centuries. A broader search of historical records will indicate that a linguistic cognate of *dux bellorum* was twice conferred on Celtic kings when leading a coalition of tribes in times of mutual threat according to the historical record; one was known to the author of the *Historia Brittonum*. A review of *Historia Brittonum* scholarship will show it came to its present form in c. 829 Gwynedd, ruled at the time by Merfyn Frych. The contemporary historical context was that the British kingdoms had been pressured for decades by the English and were specifically invaded by Wessex at around this time. This will be followed by a discussion of several biases in the history including a focus on Gwynedd's dynasties and Merfyn in particular and British success against the English when united and failure when they were divided. Arthur was the best example of the latter agenda and because of this the most likely example of what Merfyn hoped to create. A summary of Merfyn's political career in this context can be used to explain Arthur's entire description in the work.

Keywords: King Arthur, Historia Brittonum, Merfyn Frych, Dux Bellorum, Post-Roman Britain

Arthur[1]

In Chapter 56 of the *Historia Brittonum* Arthur is credited with fighting alongside the British kings as a *dux bellorum*, "battle leader" in twelve victorious battles against the Germanic invaders, the last at Mount Badon. This passage has

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[1]   The author would like to convey his gratitude for the insights and suggestions given by the examiners. Any mistakes that remain are, of course, those of the author.

traditionally been the basis for any claims that Arthur was an historical character. The more optimistic scholars have noted that several of the battles rhyme and the possible confusion of *iscuit* (shield) and *iscuid* (shoulder) in the *Historia Brittonum* and *Annales Cambriae* have suggested they may have been taken from an Old Welsh poems listing Arthur's battles (Chadwick and Chadwick 1932: 154-5; Jones 1964: 3-21). Based on this assumption, scholars and layman alike have researched the battles' locations (Jackson 1946: 44-57; Breeze 2015a: 20-30; Breeze 2015b: 158-61; Breeze 2005: 75-90). Others have concluded the battle list was composed of conflicts elsewhere dedicated to several different individuals in poetry (Dumville 1986: 1-26; Green 2007: 19-21).

Less focus has been placed on the title given Arthur, *dux bellorum*. *Dux* is a term that occurs widely in Roman records (Millar 1993: 191), though it was only under Diocletian that it became a specific position in the military. In fact it was the highest military rank within a province; each *dux* could function independently of a governor, thus hypothetically preventing any regional attempts to seize the throne (Southern 2001: 271-3). Later, Diocletian divided the provinces into *dioceses*, each run by a *vicarius* who also had the power to authorize a *dux* (Southern 2001: 153-7). Use of the term in the west carried on beyond the Roman Empire and into the period of the *Historia Brittonum*'s composition. A record states that Olgerus, *dux Daniæ,* rebuilt the monastery at Cologne in 778. The title continued well into the Middle Ages, eventually transforming into the English duke, French *duc*, and Venetian *doge*.

Because of the use of the term during the Late Roman Empire, two schools of thought have developed with regards to the office of *dux bellorum* in *Historia Brittonum*. The older is that Arthur somehow inherited the Late Roman office of *Dux Britanniarum*, which entailed the maintenance of a system of fortifications designed to guard the northern frontier (Chambers 1927: 242-3). The more recent is that he was the prominent warrior or captain of a king who, acting as a Roman governor, may have given him independent control of his army (Breeze, In Preparation). Both of the theories are unlikely.

Dux Britanniarum

The belief that Arthur might have been a *dux Britanniarum* is based on several assumptions. First, that one of the office's functions was to combat Germanic intruders. In fact the *dux Britanniarum* office was created in the fourth or early fifth centuries for the sole purpose of defending Roman Britain from the northern Britons and Picts. The chain of fortifications involved, therefore, faced north. The *dux Brittaniarum* command would have been useless in fighting an eastern threat such as the Germanic tribes as they expanded westward from the coast. If Arthur

is to be considered a *dux Britanniarum*, then we must assume he fought against northern Britons and Picts and the identity of his enemies was changed at some point between the historical reality and the writing of the *Historia Brittonum*.

Second, there is an assumed scribal mistake of "Britanniarum" to "bellorum". One can hardly imagine someone versed in Latin would confuse Britain with war, though the author must allow for the possibility.

Third, there is the assumption that the office might have survived well into the fifth century. This is unlikely. *Dux Britanniarum* was a largely independent command, using primarily *limitanei* according to the *Notitia Dignatum* (Fairley 1899). *Limitanei* were Roman citizens recruited locally (Luttwak 1976: 130-45; Lee 2007: 175). They served as full-time soldiers (Strobel 2011: 268; Treadgold 1995: 161), permanently garrisoning fortifications along Hadrian's Wall and its support stations (Southern and Dixon: 1996: 29 and 33), along with possibly other duties (Treadgold 1995: 93; Elton 1996: 204-6). Their pay came from the Roman Empire, they did not receive food and land locally, nor were they given a place to stay by local landowners (billeting) in exchange for their service.

Because the *limitanei* were paid by the empire they probably did not receive money after Constantine left for Britain in 407, and definitely not after his death in 411 because Britannia had no mint. It is therefore not surprising that the only continental mention of the *dux Britanniarum* office after Britannia ceased to be a Roman province is to be found in the *Notitia Dignitatum* of c. 425, and the source for its British information is known to date from no later than 400 (Collins 1991: 89-90).

Further, there is no archaeological evidence of Roman soldiers much after 400. Our first insular records, Patrick and Gildas, also contain no suggestion of the command. To the contrary, when Gildas says Romans returned to build two walls after his Honorian Rescript, he implies there were no remaining Roman soldiers stationed in Britain after 410 (Gildas 1.15 and 1.18). Nor do Irish sources make any mention of what would have been a significant military presence. Alcock once pointed out that the title *dux* was a common one in Late Roman Britain (Alcock 1971: 60). He likewise dismissed the connection with *dux Britanniarum*. Work since then has concluded that many of the *limitanei* of this command eventually developed into the localised primitive British kingships of the fifth century (Collins 2013: 29-43), the period roughly during or before when an historical Arthur would have been active. In short, the theory that any leader of the fifth century might have possessed the title of *dux Britanniarum* is an outdated one.

Geographically the *comes littoris Saxonici per Britanniam* makes more sense for someone combatting the Germanic tribes. It was the command structure defending the east coast against the Germanic tribes *Historia Brittonum* speaks of. However it is impossible to imagine any copyist or collection of copyists so

badly misspelling the title. Even if it was conceivable, this military group was also composed of the *limitanei* which developed into localised British kingships during the fifth century (Collins 2013: 29-43). By the late fifth century there would have been no soldiers to command.

It is equally unlikely the title is a mangled form of *comes Britanniarum*, which as a mobile unit would explain the broad area which Arthur's battles cover in the *Historia Brittonum*. This is not because the theory would require replacing *comes* with *dux* in addition to *Britanniarum* with *bellorum*.

The problem is that as a *comes Britanniarum*, Arthur would have controlled a force originally composed of roughly 25% non-Romans (Elton 1996: 148-9). Culturally, the non-Roman segment appears to have been dominant as regular military units of the fourth century began to adapt foreign dress, customs, and culture (Elton 1996: 144-5). If the garrisons of the northern and eastern frontiers, manned by Roman citizens, transformed into war-bands or disappeared during the course of the fifth century it seems unlikely that units composed of mixed cultures and dominated by Germanic customs would have retained their original purpose as protectors of the island, without payments from Rome, for the decades up to Arthur's career. It seems more likely that, if they didn't assimilate with the incoming Germanic invaders, they also became a part of British kingdoms long before the end of the fifth century.

Dux Bellorum

Non-royal captains are common in the oldest British literature, most notably *Y Gododdin* where Hyfaidd is called a centurion, while Cynri and Cynon are singled out as leaders (Aneirin A5 and A18). At first glance, this would make Breeze's theory a more likely one. However a king might also be described as a battle leader. Cunedda is a battle lord and Cadwaladr's name is literally the native form of "battle leader" ("Marwnad Cunedda" 287). The leader of an alliance, such as Urien in the *Historia Brittonum*, might also be described as a battle leader.

What has convinced enthusiasts and scholars alike that Arthur was not a king has been the rest of the passage, where we are told Arthur fought **with** the British kings and later that he was a *miles* or soldier (Chapters 56 and 73, respectively). For many, the implication has been that if he fought with kings he was not a king himself, that if he were a mere soldier he could not be a king. The latter reference is easily dispensed with below. Chapter 73 is part of the *Memorabilia* section, which as will be seen was written by a different author.

The former is a more complex discussion. The author of the *Historia Brittonum* had access to Gildas and Orosius (Dumville 1974: 439-45; Guy 2015: 27-8, 43-5), as well as Bede. Gildas made an oblique reference to Boudicca of

which the *Historia Brittonum* author may or may not have been aware (Gildas 1.6). Orosius gave an abridged version of Vercingetorix's revolt from Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* (Orosius Chapter 6.11). Both individuals were originally rulers who were elected war leaders in a time of common threat, a situation similar to Arthur in *Historia Brittonum*. Knowing this it is hard to believe the author would have recognised Arthur as anything other than a king.

Charles-Edwards has made the interesting point that *dux bellorum* as described in the *Historia Brittonum* seems to have similarities to the English *Bretwalda* mentioned in Bede and elsewhere (1991: 24-5). In both cases, only kings held the position. Kingdoms swearing fealty to a *Bretwalda* often avoided conquest. This title was also not inherited by blood; if Bede is any indicator whomever defeated the *Bretwalda* normally became the new one, with client kingdoms switching allegiances immediately in order to come under the protection of the most powerful king. But unlike *dux bellorum*, the term appears to not have been in common use (Fanning 1991: 1-26). Keynes has suggested the term was an artificial one which only came into use during the ninth century for its own political reasons (1999).

Alternatively, Higham views the treatment of Arthur from a literary perspective and has suggested the Bible heavily influenced the way Arthur was described. Following Gildas, he draws parallels between Vortigern and Pharoah and notes that Patrick is explicitly called a British Moses. Higham then mentions the many biblical references in *Historia Brittonum* before pointing out that in calling Arthur a *dux bellorum* any biblically literate reader would have understood the implied comparison to Joshua, who is actually called a *dux belli* (*Exodus* 17.9). Though not a king, Joshua was the political leader of the Israelites upon the death of Moses, effectively making him the ruler. By extension, a biblical comparison implies Arthur was seen as more than a military leader by the author. Whether the term and position *dux bellorum* was taken from Orosius or the Bible, in using it the *Historia Brittonum* author indicates that he saw Arthur as a king.

It is also significant that, although he was a popular figure among the Welsh long before Geoffrey of Monmouth completed his work between 1123 and 1139 (though generally it is believed to have been finished c. 1138), no other source calls Arthur a *dux bellorum* (Geoffrey 2007: vii). Arthur is mostly referred to as a king. His war-band in *Culhwch ac Olwen* consists of heroes and gods from Ireland to Brittany (Culhwch 1992). His royal station is implied in *Annales Cambriae*, where he is named in a document devoted exclusively to kings and ecclesiastics (517 and 537). Only the elegaic *Y Gododdin* refrains from the title, though here he is also called neither warrior nor captain (Aneirin 1969: B38). It is hoped that a deeper examination of the *Historia Brittonum* might help to explain why its composer chose this unique and historically ambiguous title for Arthur.

The Historical Context of the *Historia Brittonum*

Traditionally, what we know as the *Historia Brittonum* has been seen as a product of the fourth year of Mermenus (Merfyn Frych)'s reign, i.e. about 829 Gwynedd (Siddons 2006: 800-2; Dumville 1994: 406; Dumville 1974: 441). We can be certain it was written in Gwynedd by the internal evidence. With Gildas, Ambrosius was a pan-British hero. He is for the first time associated with Gwynedd in *Historia Brittonum*'s pages. The *Historia Brittonum* goes so far as to have him rule from there (*Historia Brittonum* Chapter 42), though he does grant kingdoms to people well outside that kingdom. The connection is all the more striking because it clearly leaves Ambrosius' career overlapping that of Cunedda's descendants (Gildas 25.3; *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 48).

One of the British origin-legends is of Powys, which might at first glance suggest it could have been written there. However, this is clearly only part of a *vita*, likely the *Liber Beati Germani* which is mentioned elsewhere. In the tale, the saint dethrones a corrupt king and installs a commoner who is more respectful of the saint's stature (Chapter 56). The protagonist then goes on to have dealings with Vortigern while the new king, coincidentally (?) with the same name as the contemporary Powysian king, is forgotten. As Dumville pointed out, the slant of the story may not mean it was put into the *historia* to undermine Powys, but it is also clear the story was not designed to strengthen its dynasty either, a strategy which makes no sense if the *historia* was written in Powys (Dumville 1975: 59-60).

Nor would the document have been written in the south. While it is true there are elements of the *Historia Brittonum* which do dwell on that region in some manuscripts, these are exclusively found within the *Mirabilia* and *Civitates* sections. As Higham has noted, several elements of both pieces indicate they were composed by a different author, possibly at a different time, from the *Historia Brittonum* so that their southern perspective must be considered separately from the *historia* (Higham 2018: 179-80).

Something similar can be said of the "Harleian Genealogies", so called because they appear in the Harleian Recension manuscripts. Due largely to Guy's work, it appears that the initial addition was made during the reign of Rhodri Mawr during the third quarter of the ninth century, likely about 858. However the final version was clearly made in or shortly after 954 in Dyfed, probably at St. David's (Guy 2015: 27-8, 43-5; Guy 2020: 53-78).

As well with the *Annales Cambriae*. It has been established that the A-, B-, and C-texts ultimately derived from a manuscript kept in St. David's from the late eighth century when the obits of Dyfed bishops are first recorded (Hughes 1980: 67-85; Hughes 1980: 86-7; Lloyd 1928: 380). It remained in St. David's during its entire period of composition (Oates 1982: 81-7; Hughes 1980: 68-9,

86-8; Lloyd 1928: 380; Dumville 1984: 209, 224-6; Dumville 1984: 51-9), which ended the year before the Battle of Llanwrst in 955 (*Annales Cambriae* and *Harleian Genealogies* 1888: 144). A Gwynedd source, possibly from Abergele, appears to have contributed to the annal for years spanning from the early eighth century to roughly 858 (Guy 2015: 27-8). Similarly the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* were used until between 911 and 954, the span between when the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*'s source ends and the first major Irish event there that is not found in the *Annales Cambriae* (Evans 2010: 67-72). However the original was kept in Dyfed and only added later.

A recent paper has suggested a different time and place for the writing of the extant *Historia Brittonum*. As the *Chartres* recension omits Merfyn, it suggests the *historia* was written before his reign (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2020: 61-4). As the *Gildasian* and *Vatican* recensions end with Ida and the rise of Bernicia in the mid-sixth century and there is evidence that the work was generally expanded upon, it is argued the original version ended at this point (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2020: 55). The modifications of two terms in the manuscripts are then used to fill out a manuscript stemma which supports this argument.

The theory that an original text would have ended with a Northumbrian origin legend is, however, unlikely. The Britons would not have initiated an English origin legend, especially when Bernicia was just one of several Northumbrian kingdoms as late as the mid-sixth century (Miller 1975: 241-61; Moisl 1983: 103-26; Johnson 2014: 144, 154, 162, and 204). This leaves the Bernician origin legend to the English, who are even less likely to have finished a history in the late sixth century. Edwin was not converted until roughly 627, and he was Deiran. Oswald was the first Bernician Christian king, and he ruled from 634. Before Christianity the English would not have had the ability to compose a history, and it would have made little sense for someone in the mid-seventh century to stop recording their kingdom's history a hundred years earlier.

The stemma which follows is based on the scholar's understanding of the Celtic languages. This can be critiqued, as indicated by contrasting approaches to the "Twenty-Eight Cities of Britain" in late manuscripts of this text (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2015: 1-19; Breeze 2016: 1-16). With this in mind, the proposed transmission of the place-name "breguoin cat bregomion" in *Chartres* to "Agned" in *Harleian* through a mistake in copying *br(eg)uoi(n) id* does seem plausible (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2020: 57-8). However, both manuscript and linguistic experts have agreed that a Welsh speaker with access to native legend would have made the change from *Harleian*'s "in monte qui dicitur Agned" to "in monte qui nominatur Breguoin ubi illos in f'ugam uertit, quem nos cat Bregion appellamus" in *Vatican* (Dumville 1975: 384; Jackson 1946: 44-57; Jackson 1949: 48-9), which for Dumville had a common ancestor with *Chartres* (*Historia Brittonum* 1985: 53). Under the above conditions assuming the more recent theory is the better one seems premature.

The second term used to create the stemma is "Thanet". Convention is followed in assuming the original word was *tanet*, yet in the stemma *canet* from the *Chartres* manuscript is assumed to be a closer derivation than the identical *tanet* from *Harleian 3859* (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2020: 58). This is clearly an error. Given the impossibility that an early version of the *Historia Brittonum* ended in the later sixth century along with the problems of the suggested stemma, the case for *Chartres* as the closest to an Ur-text is discredited. The manuscript was truncated, which might explain its omission of Merfyn.

Historia Brittonum's origin in Gwynedd is significant to understanding its context. Recently Charles-Thomas has suggested webs of alliances for two rival early ninth-century Gwynedd kings which may have involved Mercian kings along with Briton, Irish and Manx rulers (Charles-Edwards 2013: 471-8). As Higham has pointed out, the Gwynedd civil war which erupted in 812 may have been a result of the withering series of raids and battles into Wales initiated by Offa in the middle of the eighth century which continued into the ninth. A specific excuse may have been a bovine plague that would have decimated the wealth of the British kingdoms (*Annales Cambriae* 810) and a lightning strike which destroyed Gwynedd's capital at Deganwy (Higham 2018: 177-9; *Annales Cambriae* 811). Both of these events would have been perceived as supernatural events that demonstrated the incapacity of the Gwynedd king to hold power (Kelly 1988: 18 making use of *Audacht Morainn*, chapters 12-21). The war ended in 816 with the ascension of Hywel son of Caradog, but the consequences were more far-reaching. Mercia had taken advantage of the situation to conquer or gain influence over much of mainland Gwynedd.[2] It was only Mercia's internal dissension beginning in 823 which saved Gwynedd from conquest. In 825 Hywel died, leaving no clear and absolute successor.

This would lead to the accession of Merfyn Frych son of Gwriat, presumably from Man (Sims-Williams 1995: 11-20; Jones 1990: 29-44; Charles-Edwards 2013: 467-71). There are a variety of ways by which this might have come about (Charles-Edwards 2013: 472-9). What is important here is that he assumed the throne by making use of his power and situation; it does not matter if Essyllt was Gwriat's wife while both were in exile on Man, or while Gwriat ruled over the island, or even in the less likely event that Essyllt was married to Merfyn (Sims-Williams 1995: 18; Charles-Edwards 2013: 473-5). Merfyn did not have a legitimate claim to the throne. If Gwriat married Essyllt, it was not under conditions acceptable for Merfyn to be considered a potential heir to the

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[2]   There was a battle at Llanfaes in 818 whose participants are unknown. As Llanfaes was where Hywel held court and was on Anglesey it may have been further evidence of Mercia's incursions, or that the civil war continued even after Hywel took the throne.

Gwynedd throne and if Merfyn married her it was to legitimise an illegal act (Charles-Thomas 2013: 475; Sims-Williams 1995: 18).

It is also highly unlikely that the otherwise promiscuous Gwynedd royal family would have had no more legitimate options, including sons from secondary marriages (Charles-Edwards 2013: 478). This means that to retain power Merfyn needed to eliminate all those with better claims to the throne than him (Kirby 1976: 97). It would also have meant taking pains to demonstrate he deserved to rule.

Historia Brittonum's Agenda

It has been argued the history was a vehicle for uniting the Britons against the English (Chadwick 1958: 29-34). Several scholars have noted that Ecgberht of Wessex invaded Wales in 830, suggesting Merfyn may have been part of an alliance Wessex defeated (Kirby 1992: 189-95; Thornton 2004). If so the *Historia Brittonum*, which is relatively short, could have been written in haste for the purpose of uniting the Britons against Wessex (Higham 2002: 176-8).

In contrast, Charles-Edwards has pointed out that the author speaks only of the fifth to the seventh century and shows an interest in the Britons in general and not a specific kingdom or agenda (2013: 437-52). He lays out the history's outline. Following Gildas, the author assigned Vortigern a pan-British role. Germanus is active in Powys. Hengest is given Kent. His relatives are settled along the Wall. Ambrosius is active in Gwynedd. Vortimer retakes Kent but after his death it is retaken. Vortigern is confronted by Ambrosius, he flees to Gwrtheyrnion where he dies. Patrick is abducted into slavery, he escapes, trains, and returns to convert the Irish. Arthur fights his twelve battles. There is a discussion of several Northumbrian kings. It is pointed out that Ida is Maelgwn's junior contemporary. Urien and then Mercia lead an alliance against Northumbria (2013: 439-40).

At a glance, this overview demonstrates exactly what Charles-Edwards has said, a pan-British history of the fifth through the seventh centuries. But the author is known to have received his information from Bede, a *Northern Memorandum*, and the *Kentish Source*. All these sources ended toward the end of the seventh century. Other sources were available, all ending by roughly 700. There were several poems, an origin legend for Dal Riata, and potentially the Abergele history mentioned above. But if time was a factor, retrieving and making use of those sources may have been problematic. It is also possible, even likely, that the information which did find its way into the *historia* was chosen for a specific reason.

Comparison with the *Historia Ecclesiastica* seems to undermine this argument. Bede makes use of every available source to write his post-Roman

history, from Gildas to an extensive personal library and the *Kentish Source* (Campbell 2004; Meyvaert 1996: 831-43; Farmer 1978: 26). As with the *Historia Brittonum*, the uneven nature of the sources emphasizes different kingdoms at different times – most notably Kent in his case. However, from the moment Edwin is converted and Northumbria has the ability to record history Bede's home kingdom becomes the center of the history until near his own lifetime. Gwynedd at no point in *Historia Brittonum* becomes the center of the narrative.

However, this lack of focus was because of different prejudices and different means of pushing those biases. Once this is understood the scope of the *historia* can be more fully understood. An underlying theme was support for the original Gwynedd royal house. Though as a means of dynastic propaganda it likely existed well before the ninth century (Miller 1978: 530-2; Johnson 2020: 5-8), *Historia Brittonum* is the first extant instance where the Gwynedd origin legend appears. The descent includes the Roman figures Tacitus, Paternus Red Cloak, and Æternus – a clear attempt to connect the kingdom with the legitimacy of Rome; Patern's cloak has often been seen as a mark of Roman status (Rhys 1882: 118; *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* 484).

The *historia* was influenced by Merfyn's reign in particular. Cunedda, a famous Bryneich king, was fitted into the lineage as a son of Æternus (*Cunedda, Cynan, Cadwallon, Cynddylan* 45). Evidence for this can be seen in his description as an *atauus* of Maelgwn, or great-great-grandfather. Without him in the lineage, Tacitus would be the appropriate person for that title, the founder of the line. Cunedda also becomes the King of Manaw of Gododdin – a direct parallel to Merfyn's migration from the Isle of Manaw, or Man (Chapter 62; Miller 1978: 515-7). He then ejects the Irish from Anglesey, presumably as Merfyn was expected to eject Wessex. His "descendant" Cadwallon had originally performed that feat (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein* triad 62).

Later genealogies show that Merfyn claimed descent from Elidyr through Llywarch Hen, a first cousin to Urien (Jesus College MS. 20). As Elidyr was also the name of Merfyn's grandfather (Ford 1970: 450; Charles-Edwards 2013: 467-71), this would have been a natural lineage to adopt.

It is therefore not surprising that Urien features in the Historia *Brittonum* where he is the head of a coalition which successfully beats back the Northumbrians to Lindesfarne. In the *historia* he is one of only four Britons who successfully lead fights against the English. His death, at the hands of an ally, neutralizes all his successes (*Historia Brittonum* Chapter 63).

The treatment of his death is vastly different in the contemporary works of Taliesin and the later poems attributed to Llywarch Hen (Koch 2005: 1652; Taliesin 1935; Sims-Williams 1996: 25-56; Rowland 1990). This suggests the author has here altered history to suit his agenda. More recent scholarship confirms this. Work on *Y Gododdin* has suggested it may represent a different

perspective from one of the battles in the Taliesin poems, in turn leading to the possibility that the forces extolled in both groups of poems were composed of both British and English leaders, and that Urien was not the coalition leader as he is portrayed in *Historia Brittonum* (Aneirin 1997: xxxv-xli). The Urien we see in the *Historia Brittonum* may bear little resemblance to the historical figure.

When might these severe changes have been made? Certainly not within living memory of his death; as long as people were alive that knew better history could not have been changed. Even if Urien died as early as 550 this puts us into the seventh century (Dumville 1988: 3-4; Aneirin 1997: xvi-xxxiv). By that time Urien's family no longer had the political strength for such a change to have had any political impact. Much after that the *Northern Memorandum* was in Northumbrian hands, not to return to British possession until the eighth century, with the British acceptance of Roman Christianity in 786 (Jackson 1963: 20-62; Aneirin 1997: cxx). In Gwynedd, no person before Merfyn would have found any value in padding Urien's career.

Urien's career is also an example of a third theme, that of success through unity and failure through division. Vortimer uses his father's united British forces to win a series of battles despite Hengist's repeated reinforcements from the continent (*Historia Brittonum* Chapter 43). The circumstances of his death are left vague, though it is implied that his father's friendliness with the enemy made his eventual failure inevitable (*Historia Brittonum* Chapter 44).

Finally there is Arthur, who fought with the British kings in twelve battles against the Germanic invaders beginning with Badon. Gildas had said that Badon and a few lesser battles that followed had brought the Britons roughly four decades of peace (26.1). By connecting Arthur with that battle, the author suggested that Arthur had been responsible for that peace.

As the lone story of complete success in the *historia*, Arthur would have made for the perfect historical example to express Merfyn's goal; to lead a coalition of British kings against the English. It is in this light that we are best rewarded by looking at how Arthur is treated in the document. Arthur is called a *dux bellorum*, a leader in war. The author and anyone familiar with either Orosius, Caesar's Gallic campaign, or Boudicca's revolt would have recognized the title as a royal one. It has been seen that Merfyn had no legal claim to the throne and must have taken it by force and political manipulation. By stating that other kings were more noble than Arthur, the author may have hoped to avoid divisive commentary by conceding the point. By stating Arthur had instead been selected to lead because he was best suited for the position, he would have implied the same was the case with Merfyn.

Finally, the *historia* worked its themes through omission, especially that of British Christian unity against the English. It did not mention Cadwallon's contributions, but these had been displaced in favor of Cunedda. From the *vitae*

tradition we know that Maelgwn's career involved invasions of British kingdoms, which did not find a place in the *Historia Brittonum*. Gildas had portrayed him as the head of a coalition (33.1), so chapter 62 refers to him as a "great king" and uses him to establish Gwynedd's priority over Northumbria (Koch 2013: 180).[3] Rhun appears twice in the *Welsh Triads* and is mentioned in *The Laws of Hywel Dda*, but all this pertains to a campaign north against the Britons, so that he is predictably absent from the *historia* as well. Cadwallon son of Cadfan campaigned successfully in Northumbria, breaking its power before himself dying. But he did it in alliance with the pagan king Penda, which the *Historia Brittonum* conveniently ignores (Bede 3.1; *Historia Brittonum* Chapter 64). Most relevant here, despite the fact that the author likely knew about Camlann, which was a more fundamental element of Briton lore than Badon, it should hardly come as a surprise that it was omitted.[4] Whether he had followed the implications of the *Annales Cambriae* entry and wrote that Arthur died in battle against the Germanic peoples or the Galfridic narrative that he fell against Medrawt, the addition would have weakened one of *Historia Brittonum*'s key themes.

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[3] Placing the death of Maelgwn at the same year as Ida's ascension demonstrated Gwynedd's dynasty was older and therefore more prestigious.

[4] The *Annales Cambriae* entry bears the same concise quality of the *Northern Memorandum* entries, suggesting it was present in the source material the *Historia Brittonum* author used (Jones 1964: 6). The early triads also indicate a strong and consistent tradition of the legendary Arthur with Camlann.

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