BBC TWO With the BBC's new series *Ancient Britain* airing this month, David Musgrove talks to Richard Bradley about when and why henges and stone circles were built across Britain

Britain's prehistoric stone circles

STONEHENGE IS, for many of us, the one place that represents Britain's prehistory. The celebrated stone circle standing proud on Salisbury Plain with its trademark lintel-topped sarsens has been an enduring source of fascination for millennia. The first monument there, a circular ditch and bank, was dug in c2900 BC, and a timber or stone circle erected inside it. Then, much later, in c2400 BC, the first monoliths of local rock were brought in. Over the course of the next several hundred years, stones were put up, taken down, moved around, added to, and then finally re-erected to the shape we see today.

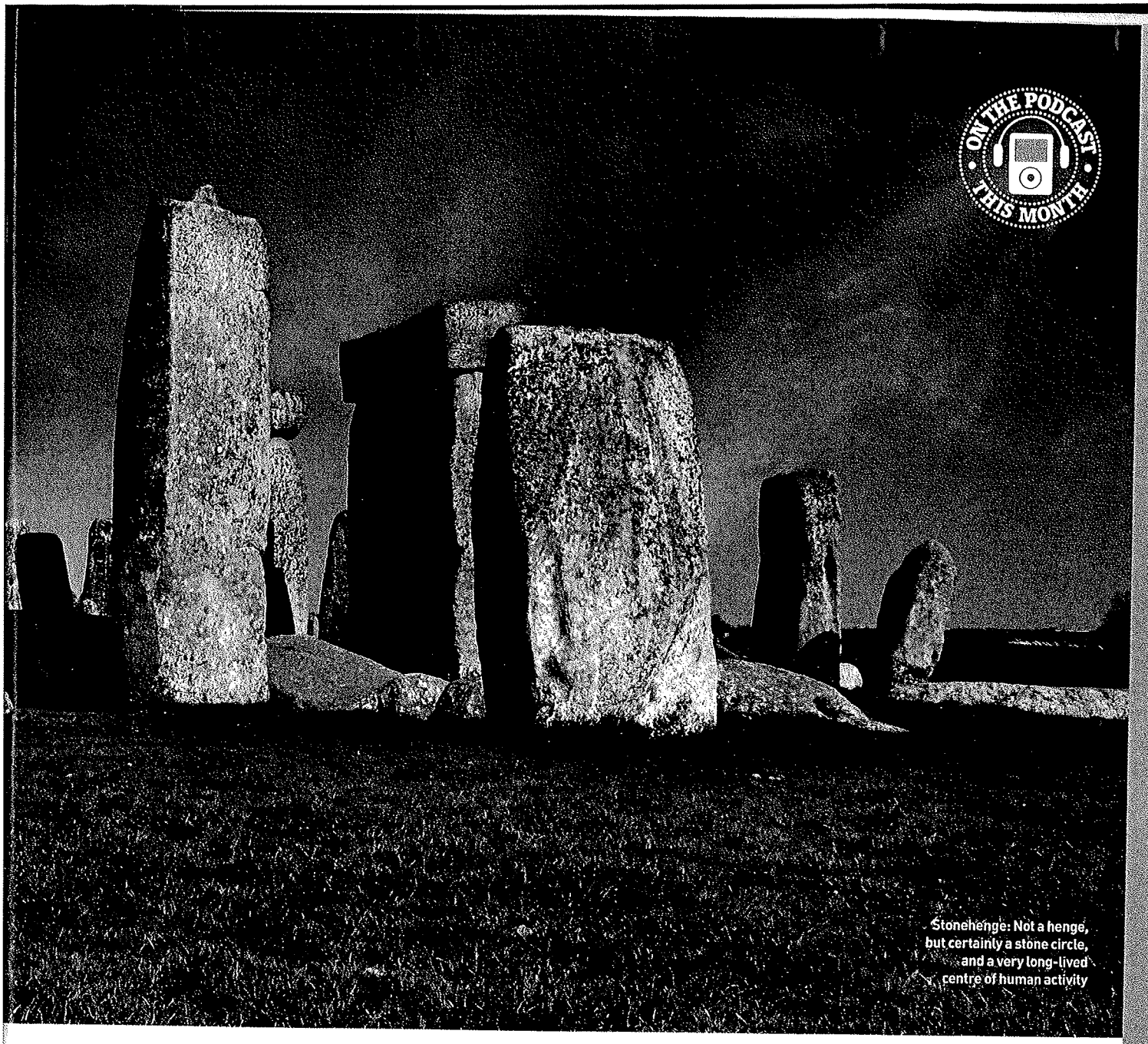
Stonehenge is undeniably a stone circle, but it's not a henge, even though it has lent its name to the group of monuments that go under that title. The concept of the 'henge' was introduced by a man called Thomas Kendrick in 1932 and technically, a henge is a circular earthen bank with a ditch inside it and one or more entrances through the bank. At Stonehenge, there is a circular bank, but it is inside a ditch, so these elements are the wrong way round. Nevertheless, stone circles and henges do appear to be connected parts of a tradition that developed in Britain from around 3000 to 2000 BC – in other words, during the later Neolithic period (when agriculture began here) and moving into the earlier Bronze Age (when we see the first use of metals, from about 2400 BC).

Stone circles are often positioned within henges, sometimes in replacement for earlier timber circles, so there is a link between the two types of monument, though it's not an absolutely clear one, as Richard Bradley explains: "Henges and stone circles are separate things that often coalesce. You've got plenty of stone circles that don't have henges, and plenty of henges that don't have stone circles. They each can pursue an independent existence but they are both different expressions of a more basic idea that special places ought to be circular, which seems quite natural to us, but large parts of Europe don't have circular monuments in prehistory."

It's possible that the tradition has its origins in northern Britain, perhaps in Orkney, and spread south from there. Stone circles number 1,000 across the country, while there are around 120 henges known. Given the large size of some of these places, the construction of these monuments would have required a considerable number of people to build them. They indicate a "massive control of labour" in the view of Richard Bradley, and what's particularly odd is that we don't know where

CORBIS

BBC History, January 2011



Stonehenge: Not a henge, but certainly a stone circle, and a very long-lived centre of human activity

these labourers lived. Their monuments survive, but their houses (rare exceptions aside, particularly in Orkney) are lost to us, so in the later Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age, these henges and stones circles seem to have been the prime concerns of the people who built them.

What we do know is people were coming from a distance to these places. Settlements are not always found in their immediate vicinity. Combined with finds of exotic objects in and around the circles, the evidence from isotope analysis of the bones of animals eaten at these sites points to the fact that people were travelling to get to them. "I think we can start to talk about pilgrimage," says Richard Bradley. What were they coming to do? Well, eating seems to have been a big thing. Feasting, particularly on pork, is attested by excavated remains of animal bones.

Similarly, archaeological finds indicate that burial and commemoration of the dead also appears to have been going on. There was the deliberate deposition of unusual objects in the ground. Also, the observation of basic astronomical events would appear to have been practised, as many of the monuments have alignments that lend themselves to the solstices.

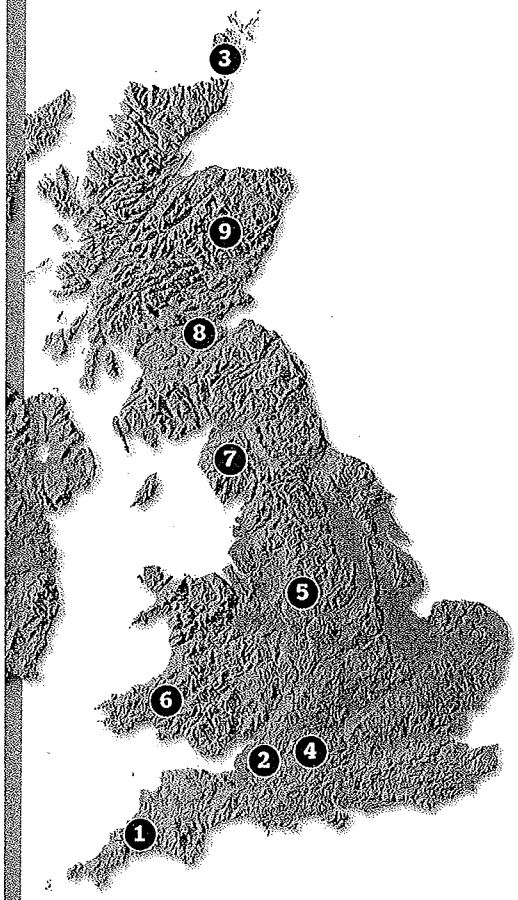
Those are the main things that we can talk about with any sense of certainty, but of course that hasn't stopped archaeologists and others from coming up with a multitude of theories about the purpose of these places.

What's interesting is that their role seems to shift over time, notes Richard Bradley: "There's a gradual change from public buildings – big houses I call them – where we see wooden structures with a lot of animal bone and a lot of debris, to stone settings usually with cremation burials. Then there's a very last phase of use at stone circles which is perhaps more northern than southern. They were used all over again in the late Bronze Age (1200–800 BC) as cremation cemeteries and cremation pyres."

So these circular monuments have had a long life and no doubt have meant different things to different people. That's an attribute they maintain to this day, as anyone passing Stonehenge on a solstice will be able to confirm.

Richard Bradley is professor of archaeology at Reading University and author of The Prehistory of Britain and Ireland *(Cambridge UP, 2007)*

▶ Turn the page to discover nine places that tell the story of the prehistoric passion for the circle



1 The Hurlers, Minions, Cornwall

2 Stanton Drew, Bath & NE Somerset

3 The Ring of Brodgar, Orkney

4 Avebury, Wiltshire

5 Arbor Low, Derbyshire

6 Gors Fawr, Pembrokeshire

7 Castlerigg, Cumbria

8 Cairnpapple, West Lothian

9 Tomnaverie, Aberdeenshire

1 The Hurlers CORNWALL

Where you can see how stone circles sat within ritual landscapes

ONE OF THE interesting points about henges and stone circles is that they don't exist in isolation. They are often surrounded by burial mounds, to create wider ritual landscapes. At The Hurlers, on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall, there are three well-preserved stone circles arranged over open ground in a line, a grouping which is unusual in itself. As with many of these sites, we don't have definite dates for their construction, but they are assumed to be late Neolithic or early Bronze Age. Not far away at Rillaton was an early Bronze Age burial mound, which was dug into in the 19th century. It turned out to be one of the richest early Bronze Age burials discovered. A skeleton was found along with a fabulous gold cup, the Rillaton Cup, and numerous other objects. Curiously this cup found its way into the royal household where it was used to store the collar studs of King George V, before it was passed on to the British Museum, where it can still be seen today.

▶ *www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/hurlers-stone-circles/*


The Hurlers stand on open ground on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall

ROSIE SPOONER

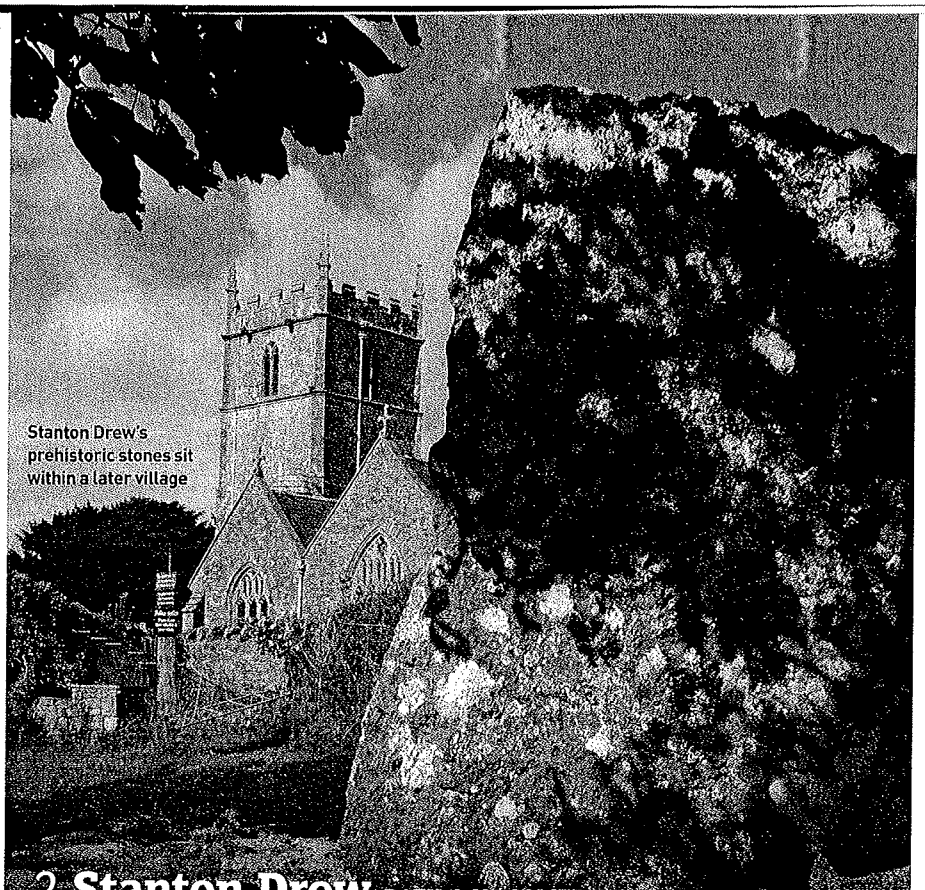
3 The Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness ORKNEY

Where the tradition of henge building may have begun

ORKNEY IS A paradise for Neolithic enthusiasts, so much so that a large part of it has been designated as a World Heritage Site. Aside from the astonishingly well-preserved Neolithic village at Skara Brae and the magnificently atmospheric chambered tomb of Maes Howe, there's a stunning pair of stone circles – the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness – opposing each other across an isthmus. The sharp, sometimes triangular, standing stones are set in breathtaking scenery and are worth visiting for that alone.

Their significance in this story is great. The radiocarbon dates from excavated material at the Stones of Stenness suggest that it's towards the beginnings of both the henge and stone circle traditions. The site is also associated with a style of pottery – grooved ware - that seems to originate in Orkney and travel south with henges and stone circles. As Richard Bradley notes: "The odds are that the henge idea originates in the north and the west."

Even more interesting however is that these henges and circles lie within a much larger Neolithic



Stanton Drew's prehistoric stones sit within a later village

ALAMY

2 Stanton Drew BATH & NE SOMERSET

Where stones replaced timber circles

IN AND AROUND this small village south of Bristol, there are three stone circles grouped together, along with a three-stone cove (a cove being a horseshoe-shaped arrangement of stones) in a pub garden, plus some bits of avenues of paired stones leading into the circles. It adds up to one of the largest collections of prehistoric standing stones in the country.

There doesn't seem to have been a substantial earthwork here, but geophysical survey has suggested that the stones replaced timber structures, one of which is probably the biggest timber setting that we know of from the Neolithic. The process of replacing timber with stone is repeated elsewhere across the country and might be associated with the idea of moving away from the use of public places linked with the living to more private sites of the dead. Interestingly, the stones used here come from a number of different local sources, so it may be that different groups of people were contributing labour and materials.

▶ *www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/stanton-drew-circles-and-cove/*

landscape including several Neolithic settlements (they survive here because the paucity of timber meant that house construction was in stone rather than wood).

The late Neolithic village of Barnhouse is completely contemporary with the nearby Stones of Stenness, and another settlement near the Ring of Brodgar is under excavation now. It's very unusual to see settlements so close to these types of monuments and the fact that the evidence survives in Orkney adds an extra dimension to the stone circles and henges here.

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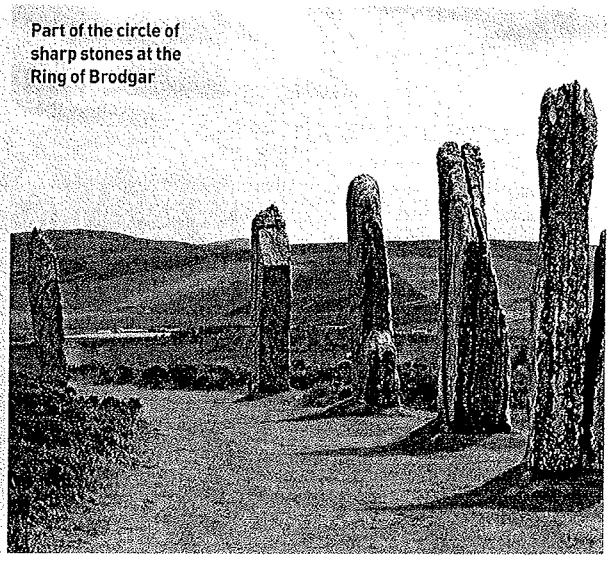
▶ *www.historic-scotland.gov.uk*



Part of the circle of sharp stones at the Ring of Brodgar

4 Avebury WILTSHIRE

Where you can consider how a henge might have altered reality

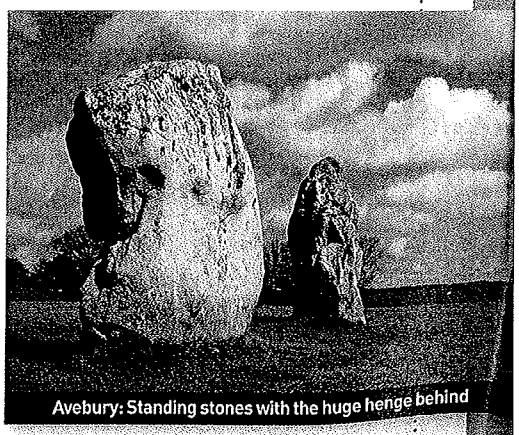
ONE OF THE largest, and most famous, henge and stone circles in Britain, Avebury has one major circle, with a horseshoe-shaped cove setting inside it, and two further circles as well. There is also likely evidence of a timber circle. It had two avenues of paired stones, one of which leads to another stone circle known as The Sanctuary. The dating is not good but the site was probably created around 2400 BC.

The henge is a very substantial earthwork and there's a great day to be had wandering around the place, being towered over by the great lumpen stones in their settings. It's an excellent place to consider just how much labour the creation of some of these sites would have consumed, and of course to ponder why they were built. The huge size of the henge earthworks here might get you thinking about one of Richard Bradley's theories:

"These earthworks of henges are great screens: they make a completely excluded space, you can't see in if you're not a participant and you can't see out if you are a participant. One of the things that's very odd with henges is the internal ditch. One argument is that it's a defence in reverse to stop something powerful escaping. Another is that in most societies, in social anthropology, rites of passage involve a phase of seclusion where the norms of normal existence are explicitly reversed, and I do wonder if we're talking about something like that."

The village of Avebury is not an inversion of reality – though it is partly encompassed by the stone circle – and there you'll find the Alexander Keiller Museum, which displays finds from excavations at this World Heritage Site.

☎ 01672 539250
▶ *www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-avebury*



Avebury: Standing stones with the huge henge behind

5 Arbor Low

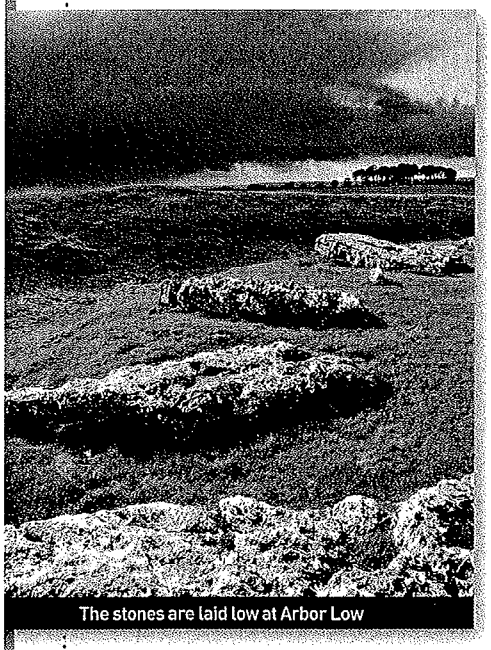
DERBYSHIRE

Where the prehistoric builders seem to be leading you on a journey

THIS IS A large henge monument boasting a substantial bank and ditch with two entrances, inside which is a circle of some 50 white limestone slabs, now lying on their sides, and a central horseshoe-shaped cove. The setting is in the high moorland of the Peak District, and Richard Bradley describes how Arbor Low might be designed with the power of the Peaks in mind: "It has one narrow entrance and one wide one. If you go in through the narrow entrance, you enter from a fairly undifferentiated landscape; then if you go across the monument you get to the wide entrance on the other side which affords you a spectacular view of a large part of the Peak District." Whether that's a journey the prehistoric builders wanted you to take, we cannot know, but it's interesting to speculate on the mental voyage that might have lain behind this apparently leading layout.

The henge is, in the view of Richard Bradley, later than the stone circle, and he suspects that the recumbent position of the stones is due to later Christian iconoclasm rather than incompetence on the part of the prehistoric builders in setting them originally.

▶ *www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/arbor-low-stone-circle-and-gib-hill-barrow/*



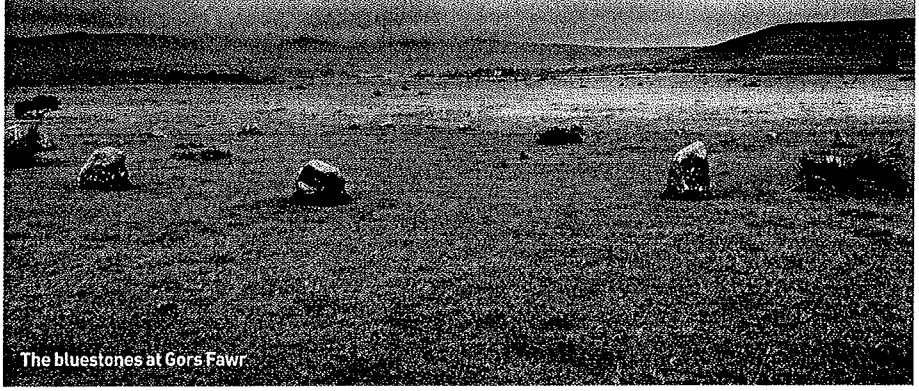
The stones are laid low at Arbor Low

6 Gors Fawr PEMBROKESHIRE

Where you can think about how stones were transported

THIS IS A very small stone circle, which is nevertheless impressive and handily just beside the road. Its location is interesting as it sits just below the Preseli Mountains, which is where the famous bluestones of Stonehenge come from. Gors Fawr is also made of bluestones and while you're looking at this site, you might well be drawn to dwelling on the much-discussed question of how the 80 or so stones were moved the 150 miles or so east, from this part of Pembrokeshire to Wiltshire. Henges and stone circles tend to be sited in places that were easily accessible, often in river valleys. Richard Bradley notes that this "may be metaphysical but it's probably more to do with access", as waterways would have served as useful transport arteries for people, and perhaps stones, in prehistory.

▶ *www.megalithic.co.uk/article.php?sid=326*



The bluestones at Gors Fawr

ALAMY

7 Castlerigg CUMBRIA

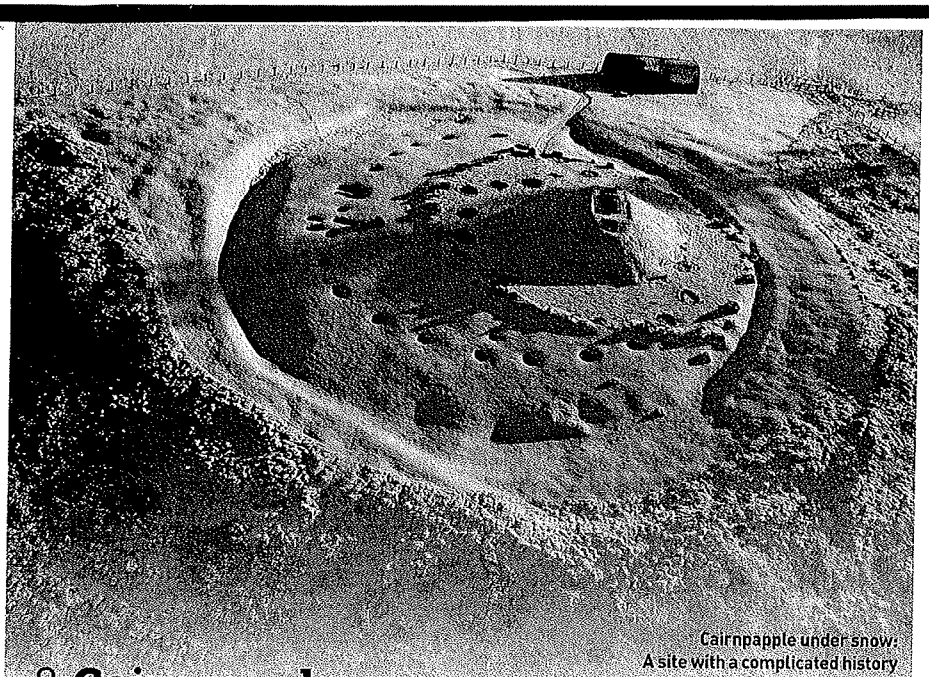
Where the circular landscape perhaps inspired the builders

THIS IS A very well-preserved stone circle, probably of an early date, with a peculiar inner enclosure that has never been convincingly explained, and no surrounding henge. It occupies a spectacular location, completely surrounded by a circular landscape of Lake District hills. Richard Bradley thinks this is significant: "Henges and early stone circles tend to be located in basins so that you have the optical illusion that you've got a circle which is built within a circle taken from nature."

Castlerigg stands at one of the entrances to the uplands of the Lake District and it's noteworthy this area was the biggest supplier of stone axes in Neolithic Britain, which, along with the circular landscape theory, might go some way to explaining the location of this stone circle. It certainly makes it one of the most photogenic of monuments to visit today.

▶ *www.english-heritage.org.uk/daysout/properties/castlerigg-stone-circle/*

The stones at Castlerigg sit in a natural basin



Cairnpapple under snow: A site with a complicated history

ALAMY/JIM KNOWLES (GROUP ARCHAEOLOGIST), WEST LOTHIAN ARCHAEOLOGY GROUP

8 Cairnpapple WEST LOTHIAN

Where you can track the changing purpose of a circular monument

THIS HENGE is similar to Arbor Low, in that it's on a hill and has a narrow and wide entrance, providing the same effect of a dramatic view from the wide entrance.

The place has a long history – there was some sort of stone setting before 3000 BC – and the interior is complicated. Along with the henge, it had either a stone or timber circle, and it also had a cove. What is interesting is that increasingly the interior was taken up by a burial cairn. It was begun in the early Bronze Age and, as time went by, it got bigger and bigger until it occupied quite a lot of the interior, changing it from an open area to something that's congested.

Richard Bradley sees that as an indication that here "people are taking over and appropriating a monument that was originally conceived as communal". This is something that seems to happen elsewhere too, perhaps in association with the arrival of metal technology. If you visit today, you can see the henge, and the burial chamber of the cairn (it has been removed), which is now displayed under a concrete dome (summer opening only). Guided tours are offered and you'll also get good views over central Scotland, assuming you've come on a day when the weather is kind.

☎ 01506 634622
▶ *www.historic-scotland.gov.uk*

9 Tomnaverie

ABERDEENSHIRE

Where a stone circle has been raised up once more

THIS IS A stone circle that Richard Bradley excavated, and it's one of the rare places where we have a good date. It's a rubble platform on a low hilltop, which was enclosed by a stone circle about 2300 BC. There is no henge and it's got a tremendous all-round view, with an illusion of an entrance on the south-west side. It's illusory as it is blocked by a huge stone. This false entrance is aligned exactly on a mountaintop some 20 miles away. The circle was reused in the late Bronze Age as a cremation site.

In the early part of the 20th century, the site was threatened by quarrying. Alexander Keiller, who went on to dig at Avebury, stopped its destruction, but not before the quarry workers had taken most of the stones out of their sockets and laid them flat. Following Richard Bradley's excavations, the stones were refitted back into their sockets. Apparently it was quite obvious which hole each stone should go in as they had a very snug fit.

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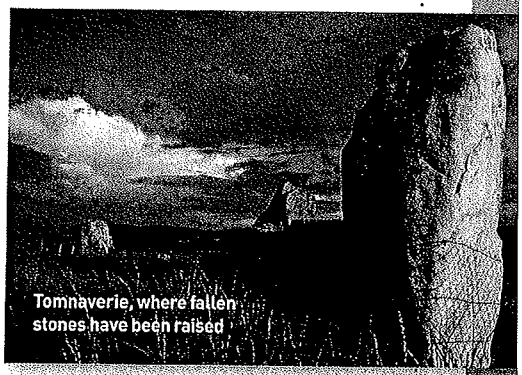


Tomnaverie, where fallen stones have been raised

JOURNEYS

TV

▶ **A History of Ancient Britain,** presented by Neil Oliver, is on BBC Two this month *(see page 75)*

Magazine

▶ For more on identifying and understanding our prehistoric landscapes, see the January issue of **Countryfile Magazine**, on sale until 11 January

On the podcast

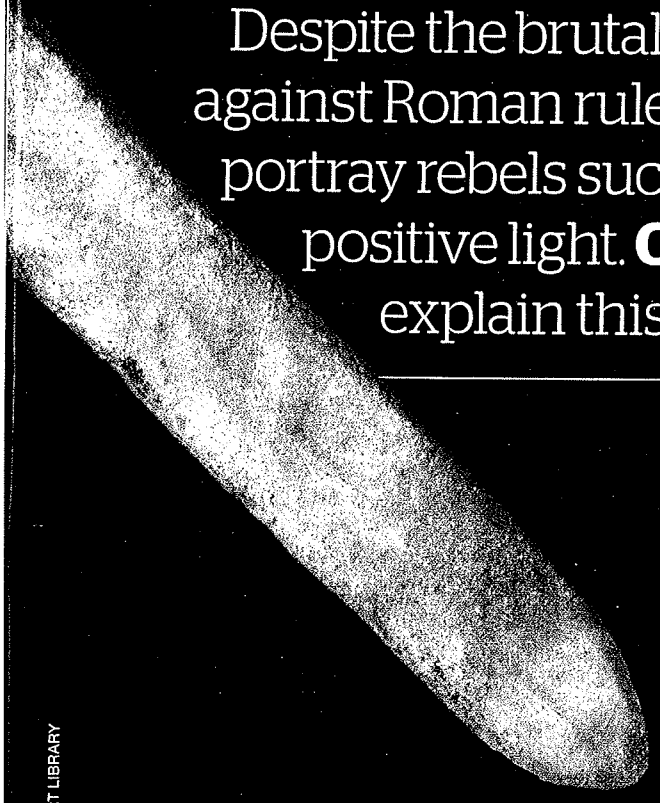
David Musgrove discovers Avebury's past in the January podcast (online from 7 Jan) ▶ **www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast-page**

To read more from our *Where History Happened* series go to ▶ www.bbchistorymagazine.com

"WE WILL FIGHT WELL BECAUSE WE ARE FREE"

CALGACUS
At the battle of Mons Graupius, AD 83 or 84

Despite the brutal suppression of British revolts against Roman rule, the empire's writers sought to portray rebels such as Boudica in a surprisingly positive light. **Charlotte Higgins** seeks to explain this curious turn of events



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LEFT: **A detail from a second-century AD relief depicting a barbarian fighting a Roman legionary. The historian Tacitus made a point of lionising British rebel commanders' exploits as a means of highlighting Rome's moral and political deficiencies**

BBC History, August 2013

A bronze head of Emperor Claudius, who was won over by Caratacus's chutzpah

"IF YOU SAVE ME, I SHALL BE AN EVERLASTING MEMORIAL TO YOUR MERCY"

CARATACUS
To Claudius in Rome, AD 50

Caratacus was the son of King Cunobelinus, a potentate in what is now south-east England. He is associated by Roman historians with aggressive expansionism in Britain that threatened to unsettle the status quo in northern Gaul and thus prompted the Roman invasion of AD 43. Defeated in battle by the invading forces, he eluded capture and fled to Wales and, at length, to the territory of the Brigantes in what is now Yorkshire. There, the queen of the Brigantes, Cartimandua, handed him over to the Romans. Caratacus was transported to Rome in AD 50, where, according to Tacit he had become a famous name. Paraded through the streets with the other captive he confronted the emperor, Claudius, who spared his life.

In AD 43, Aulus Plautius, general under the emperor Claudius, prepared to invade Britain. But, according to the second to third-century Roman historian, Cassius Dio, things nearly went badly wrong before they had even left the coast of Gaul. The troops virtually mutinied, refusing to venture "outside the known world", Dio wrote. Finally, Claudius's powerful henchman Narcissus, a freedman, harangued them. Coming from a civilian and a former slave, this was too much for the troops, who were shamed into action. The Romans made short work of south-east Britain. Two of the main leaders of the British, the brothers Togodumnus and Caratacus, were defeated in separate battles. Togodumnus perished; Caratacus went on the run. Meantime, Aulus Plautius summoned the emperor who arrived with, says Cassius Dio, a contingent of war elephants, to take the great British stronghold of Camulodunum, the site of modern Colchester. A triumphal arch in Rome records that Claudius received the surrender of 11 British kings.

And yet the subjection of Britain was far from as clean and decisive as Claudius's boast in Rome would have us believe. Although some of the peoples of Britain were friendly to the Romans and did not resist their advance, the slog of conquering and peacekeeping went on. It was not until nearly 40 years later that the Romans, under the governor Agricola, could claim to have defeated the whole island – in a great battle in north-east Scotland. But even then it was a hollow victory, since the Romans withdrew quickly and the Highlands of Scotland were never fully conquered. In fact, Britain has been called "Rome's Afghanistan" by classical historian Mary Beard. Conquest was patchy, the terrain difficult, and the Britons, with their guerrilla tactics and frustrating habit of melting into marshes, forests and mountains, hit the Roman legions, who were virtually unbeatable in pitched battle, at their weak spot.

So what became of Caratacus, the British military leader and son of the great king Cunobelinus (later transformed by Shakespeare into his Cymbeline)?

Thanks to the first to second-century AD Roman historian Tacitus, the main source on the invasion of Britain and the 40 years or so following, we next hear of him seven years later, leading the Britons in south and then north Wales. Here, no doubt, the hilly, inaccessible territory helped him and his men as they slipped from wood to cave to mountain. But Caratacus was finally brought to ground by the relentless Roman war machine, and defeated in battle at a hillfort, somewhere in the territory of the Ordovices tribe in no Wales. Caratacus himself escaped from the melee and sought protection in northern England with the Brigantes tribe – but thei queen, Cartimandua, handed him over to t Romans. As Tacitus has it, in the years that had elapsed since Claudius claimed Britain Camulodunum, Caratacus had become a famous name in Italy. And so the capture o this elusive guerrilla leader, "whose name w not without a certain glory", offered the opportunity for a spectacular public relatio exercise in Rome. "There was huge curiosit to see the man who for so many years had spurned our power," wrote Tacitus.

And so Claudius laid on a show, carefully stage-managed to make the capture reflect gloriously as possible on himself. A parade was organised, with Caratacus's splendid go torcs and war booty carried aloft, and his companions, wife and children forced to follow. Finally came Caratacus himself who according to Tacitus, was the only prisoner war who walked with his head held high. Approaching the tribunal on which Claudiu sat, he boldly addressed the emperor on equ terms, saying that under different circumstances he might have been welcomed to Rome as a friend, rather than dragged there a captive. He added: "I had horses, men, arn riches: is it any wonder that I should lose the

unwillingly? If you wish to rule the world, does it follow that everybody else should accept slavery? If I had been dragged before you having surrendered immediately, nobody would have heard of either my defeat or your victory: if you punish me everybody will forget this moment. But if you save me, I shall be an everlasting memorial to your mercy."

Besting the emperor

Claudius was convinced by this shrewd appeal to his reputation, and pardoned the Briton and his family. Nothing is heard of them again. Tacitus's description of these events is remarkable: the historian has the Briton employing the quintessentially Roman skill of rhetoric and using it to best the emperor himself. Not for the first or last time, a Roman writer was using the figure of a defeated enemy – one who is shown to possess true Roman virtues – in order to launch a bitter critique of the imperial project.

Caratacus is one of a trio of figures from the British resistance given surprising prominence by Tacitus – the others being Boudica and the now less well-known Caledonian general Calgacus, to whom we shall return. What is intriguing about them is the extent to which – alongside their qualities as savage, frightening and barbaric figures – they are also given voices and certain virtues by the historian. In turn, it is these noble qualities that have enabled the figures to be regarded in later British history and culture as early native heroes; indeed, they are the first named characters in British history who have more than just a name attached to them, and anything approaching a 'story'. In fact, it is only through characterisation by Tacitus and, later, Cassius Dio, that we know them at all. There is no direct archaeological evidence that they existed, beyond a few coins that have been found bearing the legend CARA, which may or may not refer to Caratacus.

Boudica is the most famous of the three, not least because of Thomas Thornycroft's magnificent sculpture of her in her war chariot, pounding along Westminster Bridge towards the houses of parliament in London. Under the rule of her husband, Prasutagus, the Iceni had been a Roman ally. But when Prasutagus died, leaving his kingdom and property equally divided between Claudius's successor – the emperor Nero – and his own daughters, things went badly wrong.

The Roman military, according to Tacitus, seized Iceni property, flogged the queen and raped her daughters. The flagrant abuses and grotesque humiliations were too much. With the brunt of the Roman forces far away, tackling a Druid stronghold on Anglesey, Boudica and the Iceni seized their chance. They rampaged through the south-east, and took on Camulodunum, where the behaviour of the Roman colonists – driving Britons from their land, treating them like slaves – had sparked outrage. Those who could, took refuge in the temple of the deified Claudius, which itself had become a hated symbol of foreign rule.

The Romans appealed to the newly established town of Londinium for help, but the procurator (or chief financial officer) sent only 200 ill-equipped troops. The town was otherwise undefended. The temple held out for two days before the town was captured and burnt, the inhabitants massacred. Finally, the 9th Legion arrived, but the rebels defeated it, slaughtering its entire infantry and forcing its commander, Petilius Cerealis, and the cavalry to ignominious flight. The procurator, too, fled to Gaul from his base in London.

Finally, the Roman general Suetonius Paulinus marched back to the south-east

NORFOLK MUSEUMS & ARCHAEOLOGY SERVICE

A coin of Boudica's husband, Prasutagus, whose death sparked bloody insurrection

"WE HAVE DESTROYED A ROMAN LEGION. WE WILL DO SO AGAIN"

BOUDICA

Before her last stand near London, AD 60 or 61

Boudica was the wife of King Prasutagus, ruler of the Iceni, in what is now East Anglia, a tribe friendly to Rome. On Prasutagus's death he made the emperor Nero co-heir to his kingdom with his daughters, but imperial officials maltreated his family. Boudica fomented an uprising in AD 60/61 while the governor, Suetonius Paulinus, was occupied in the west. Her forces took and burned Camulodunum (Colchester), Verulamium (St Albans) and Londinium (London), massacring the inhabitants. The returning Suetonius Paulinus, however, routed her troops in pitched battle somewhere near London. Defeated, Boudica took poison.

from Anglesey and, despite the appeals of the inhabitants, decided to sacrifice London for the sake of the province as a whole. Everyone from the city who could not follow in his baggage train – the old, the sick, children – were left to be slaughtered. Verulamium, the Roman town beside modern St Albans, met the same fate. In London, a layer of burnt material in the archaeological remains marks what is thought to be the sacking of the young city by Boudica.

Finally, Suetonius Paulinus engaged the rebels on a battlefield of his own choosing, somewhere near London. As with Caratacus, Tacitus puts into Boudica's mouth an extraordinary speech, delivered to her troops before the battle, though there is virtually no chance that Tacitus was drawing on knowledge of what, if anything, Boudica said to her troops. Nor would she, it hardly needs saying, have used Latin. She is not, she says, speaking as the scion of a great royal house, but as an ordinary woman avenging her lost freedom and her violated daughters. They had already destroyed a legion, and they could do it again – or die trying.

Suetonius Paulinus's own speech is not obviously given any stronger a claim to the reader's sympathy than the Briton's, except perhaps by way of an appeal to the military discipline of his army as against Boudica's rabble, more women in the ranks than men.

Whose side are we supposed to be on at this moment? Ultimately, for certain, the Romans'. But in the thick of the moment – as Boudica cries revenge for her raped girls and death or glory for her troops – it is hard to tell. At any rate, Suetonius Paulinus's victory was total. Fleeing Britons were trapped by their wagons, which ringed the battlefield. Women were not spared. Eighty thousand Britons (or so wrote Tacitus) were slaughtered. Boudica took poison and killed herself.

Perhaps the most revealing of the three encounters between British resistance leaders and Roman troops is the least well known today: that between the Caledonian leader Calgacus and the Roman governor of Britain, Agricola. For Tacitus, this encounter was close to the bone: Agricola was his father-in-law and the historian thus had direct access to first-hand accounts of the governor's career. And his project throughout his biography (known today as 'the Agricola') was to lionise his illustrious connection. But he also had a broader project: a critique of the times in which he was then living, following the reign of the repressive emperor Domitian, and a lament for a more glorious age of Roman history, when its great men were unblemished by the vices o luxury and greed.

According to Tacitus, after several s of difficult campaigns in Scotland, the Romans reached Mons Graupius (in A 84). Here, says Tacitus, over 30,000 me rallied to fight them. In Tacitus' accou Calgacus gives a great speech to his tro before the battle – one of the historian moving acts of rhetorical ventriloquis "Today will be the birth of liberty for I he declares. "We will fight well becaus free. Here in the remote north, far awa the grasp of tyranny, have been born th of men. The Romans are ['raptores orb pillagers of the world. Neither east nor has sated them. To theft, murder and r they give the false name of power. They a desert, and call it peace."

The speech is both a bitter critique o moral vacuum at the heart of the impe project, and an expression of a deep an about its potential for collapse. But per the idea of such disasters could be safel entertained precisely because they did come about. The battle was a rout. The Caledonians scattered to the forests, wh they were pursued by the relentless Ror Bodies and limbs lay on the blood-soak earth. The day after the battle, an unset

The rebels' stomping ground

The landmarks in the Britons' fight for freedom and what you can see of their exploits today

The "superb" museum believed to sit on the site of a Boudican massacre

Boudica, Caratacus and Calgacus are shadowy figures aside from their existence in Tacitus's writing, and it is often difficult to pinpoint precise locations for the events the historian describes. However, Tacitus recounts Boudica's sack of Camulodunum in vivid detail – and, as a result, the temple to the deified Claudius in which the Romans were slaughtered is generally believed to be what is now Colchester Castle, built by the Normans on Roman foundations. The castle serves as Colchester's museum – which is currently being refurbished and is due to reopen in 2014 – and has a superb collection of Roman artefacts.

Colchester was Britannia's first provincial capital, and in AD 49 a colony of veteran soldiers from the 20th Legion was established there.

Romans were probably put to the sword on a site now occupied by Colchester Castle (above). INSET: Coins of British leaders Tasciovanus (centre) and Cunobelinus (right)

Pecuniary clues to Caratacus's power base

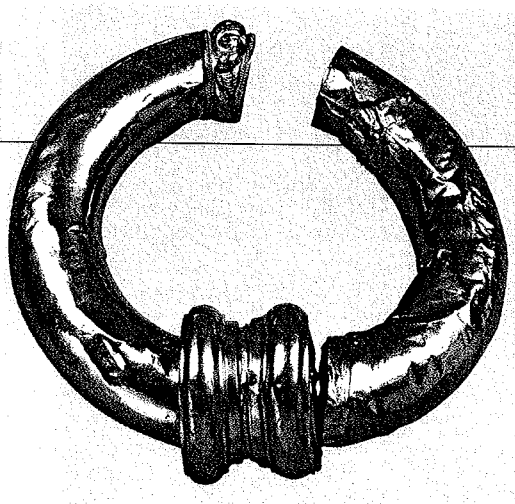
Like Boudica, Caratacus is strongly associated with Colchester. His father Cunobelinus, was a potentate of the south-east of Britain, minting coins the and in Verulamium, modern St Alban can see examples of Cunobelinus's co Colchester Castle Museum. You'll also pre-Roman coins minte Tasciovanus, proba Cunobelinus's fat at Verulamium Museum, St Al

Calgacus stands tall among the leading figures in Scottish history in a huge frieze at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery

"TO THEFT, MURDER AND RAPING THEY GIVE THE FALSE NAME OF POWER"

CALGACUS
At the battle of Mons Graupius, AD 83

Calgacus was a leader of the Caledonians, who were defeated by Julius Agricola in a great battle in AD 83 or 84. He figures in Tacitus's biography of Agricola, purely in order to deliver one of the historian's greatest set-piece speeches. Nothing else is known of him. However, as the first named character in Scottish history, Calgacus features in the great frieze that runs around the entrance hall of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Created by William Hole in the 1890s, this mural operates as a parade of great Scottish figures such as David Livingstone, James Watt, Robert Burns, Adam Smith, David Hume and Mary, Queen of Scots.



This tubular torc (neck ring) from Snettisham in Norfolk may have been worn by an Iron Age aristocrat

Is Boudica stationed at King's Cross? Probably not

A long tradition puts the site of Boudica's final battle with Suetonius Paulinus at King's Cross, formerly known as Battle Bridge. There is alas no evidence for this theory, nor for the enjoyable notion that Boudica is buried beneath platform eight in King's Cross station.

On the trail of the Iceni

Boudica's homeland is hard to pin down – though we know that the Iceni heartlands were in East Anglia. Archaeology at the Roman town identified as Venta Icenorum – at Caistor St Edmund just outside Norwich – has not yet yielded any sign of an Iron Age British predecessor. Nonetheless, it is an interesting and evocative site to visit. Nearby Norwich Castle Museum has a fine collection of Iceni and Roman artefacts, including magnificent gold torcs and other Iron Age artefacts from Snettisham.

Looking for Mons Graupius

The location of the battlefield of Mons Graupius has never been satisfactorily identified, though there are reasonable grounds for suggesting that it may have been Mount Bennachie, north-west of Aberdeen. It's not far from here that a large Roman marching camp was discovered in the 1970s.

silence hung in the air: the hills were deserted; torched buildings smoked in the distance.

What Tacitus does by vocalising the enemy so powerfully is to give Agricola a worthy enemy. Britain, by virtue of its distance from the corruption and decadence of Rome, provides his father-in-law a kind of stage set on which he can be a true Roman in the old style. But in the end, the important thing is that despite these enemies having powerful voices and a gift for Roman-style rhetoric, they are the losers. In the end, the Roman war machine conquers all. H

Charlotte Higgins is chief arts writer of *The Guardian*. Her latest book, *Under Another Sky: Journeys in Roman Britain*, has just been published by Jonathan Cape

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

▶ **Agricola and Germania** by Tacitus, trans by Harold Mattingly (Penguin, 2009)

▶ **Boudica: Iron Age Warrior Queen** by Richard Hingley and Christina Unwin (Hambledon Continuum, 2006)

RADIO

▶ To listen to Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss Boudica on the Radio 4 show **In Our Time**, go to *www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00r7lr9*

ROMAN BRITAIN:
THE KEY MOM

TO CELEBRATE THE CENTENARY OF THE ROMAN SOCIETY THIS YEAR AND THE 1,600TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF ROMAN BRITAIN,

HISTORIANS, ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND HISTORICAL NOVELISTS NOMINATE KEY MOMENTS IN THE STORY OF BRITANNIA

ON THE PODCAST THIS MONTH

CAESAR
COMES, SEES, AND GOES AWAY AGAIN
55 BC

Caesar: His invasion was an inspiration

JULIUS CAESAR invaded Britain twice, first in the summer of 55 BC, and then again a year later. Both were brief affairs, affecting only the very south-east corner of the island. They lasted between one and two months, and were among the least successful and poorly planned campaigns in Caesar's career. They had little impact on the relationship between Britain and Rome, which developed more significantly through trade in the following century.

Yet the incursions were of undoubted significance. This was because they brought Britain to the Roman people's attention. In the first century BC, Britain was thought to lie outside the known world, and to be peopled only by savages and druids. When news of Caesar's efforts reached Rome, therefore, the public response was rapturous. Military successes – even if they had been exaggerated – were always welcome. The period of thanksgiving voted by the Senate proved this. At 20 days, it was longer than that granted for the conquest of Gaul, a more noteworthy, and difficult, military campaign.

While Caesar never revisited Britain, it was not forgotten. Its alien, exotic lure remained. What had been achieved once could be repeated. Subsequently, no new Roman ruler could fail to ignore the far-off isle as a possible area of conquest. Augustus, Caesar's successor, considered invading it on at least two occasions.

For various reasons, Britain then fell out of focus for nearly 50 years. However, it did not go away entirely. The idea of vanquishing Britain – which Julius Caesar had failed to do – appealed immensely to the impulsive young emperor Gaius (Caligula). While his plans never came to fruition, the notion was also attractive to his successor, Claudius, a man who badly needed the prestige of military success, a man whose legions, in AD 43, successfully invaded Britain, changing its history forever.

"Britain was thought to lie outside the known world, and to be peopled only by savages and druids"

Ben Kane is a historical novelist. The last book in his *Forgotten Legion* trilogy, *The Road to Rome*, has just been published by Preface

BBC History, October 2010

ENTS

Statue of the emperor Claudius in a suitably victorious pose

THE EMPEROR CLAUDIUS MOUNTS A SUCCESSFUL INVASION

AD 43

OUR ONLY reliable source for the Claudian invasion of Britain in AD 43 is Dio Cassius, writing well over a century after the event. Dio's work is treated as a standard description of a military invasion, a D-Day in reverse, but it is possible to interpret his text in a variety of ways. The big problem with the account is that it is lacking in any kind of geographical information, so we have no idea where Roman troops initially landed.

An obvious choice – if, as seems likely, the emperor Claudius was supporting the recently deposed British king, Verica – would be to land close to Verica's homeland in West Sussex/Hampshire. If Rome was actively seeking an enemy to fight, they could have arrived in Essex, later the centre of resistance to Rome. If they had wanted the shortest crossing from France, they could have landed in Kent.

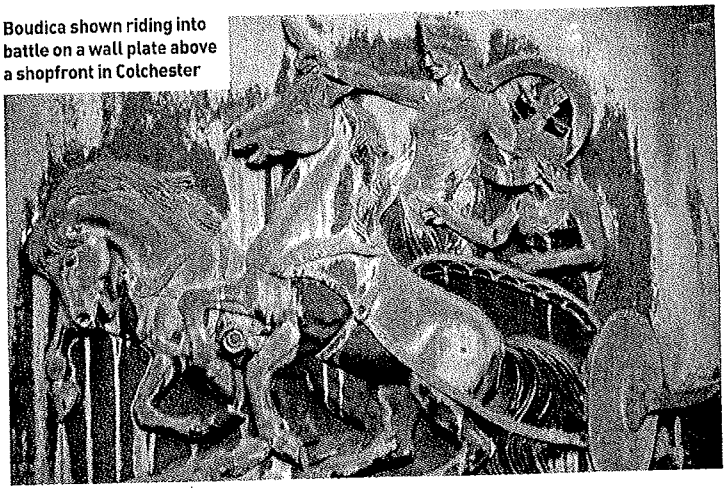
The popular view is that the invasion focused upon Kent, but there is no compelling evidence to say that this was so. Given the problems that Caesar had faced in 55 and 54 BC, the coastline here may not have looked that appetising. Hampshire, with its large natural harbours and more welcoming population, may have been altogether more appealing. Unfortunately, given the lack of any useful evidence, the invasion could have occurred anywhere from the Solent to the Thames estuary.

What most people tend to forget is that the 'invasion' of AD 43 actually comprised two separate and discrete landings. The first, led by Aulus Plautius, may simply have been designed to restore Verica to his throne. We have no idea how many soldiers were involved in this initial wave, although as Dio calls it simply "a force" it may have been small-scale. The second landing, led by Claudius himself, consisted, we are told, of substantial reinforcements, extensive equipment and a number of elephants (the emperor intended to arrive in style).

"What people forget is that the 'invasion' of AD 43 actually comprised two separate and discrete landings"

At this point we can talk of a full-scale 'invasion', Claudius's troops presumably taking the more direct route to Britain from France, landing somewhere in Kent, possibly Richborough, a site commemorated, some 40 years later, by the erection of an immense triumphal arch.

Miles Russell lectures at Bournemouth University. He is co-author of *UnRoman Britain* (The History Press, 2010)



Boudica shown riding into battle on a wall plate above a shopfront in Colchester

THE BRITISH REVOLT AGAINST THE ROMANS

AD 60/61

THE ROMAN colonisation of Britain was a slow process that didn't really take off until after the failure of the Boudican revolt. Following the Claudian invasion of AD 43, the Romans secured a toehold in the south-east and clung on through 20 years of vicious resistance. They were then faced with a major rebellion in AD 60/61, led by Boudica, war leader of the Eceni, a British tribe based in East Anglia.

> **"The warriors of Britain came tantalisingly close to throwing out the occupying army"**

Under Boudica, the warriors of Britain came tantalisingly close to throwing out the occupying army. They attacked the IXth legion and slaughtered all but a small company. They burned three major towns to the ground and besieged the IInd legion in the south-west. Meanwhile another tribe, the Silures – aided by their allies in Wales – cut apart the XIIth and the XIVth legions. The legions were so badly mauled that when the Roman governor, Suetonius Paulinus, marched them back, he was probably leading no more than 5,000 men.

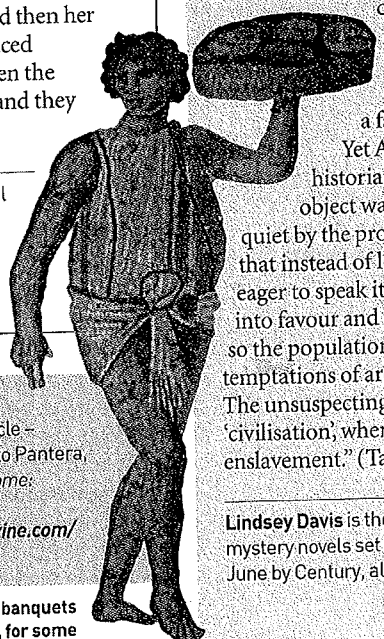
Boudica's guerrilla tactics were successful, but when she led her tribesmen into pitched battle against the Romans, the Britons were very soundly beaten. Boudica escaped but died soon after, and the rebellion was finished. Had Boudica's forces continued their strategy of attacking the legions while they marched between camps, the history not only of Britain, but of the world, would be different.

The Romans brought straight roads, central heating and baths. Yet they also brought the concept of marriage in which a woman was owned by her father and then her husband. They introduced slavery, a schism between the people and their land, and they imposed Christianity.

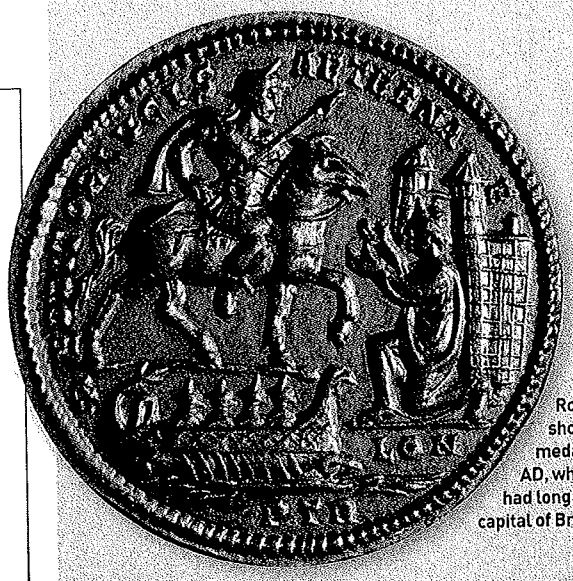
Manda Scott is a historical novelist. Her latest book *Rome: The Emperor's Spy* is published by Bantam

Manda Scott has written a special fictional short story based on the Boudican revolt, which you can read for free on the *BBC History Magazine* website. Manda says: "In writing a short story with the remit to imagine how it might have been different, I had the luxury of returning to the surviving characters of my *Boudica: Dreaming* cycle – and of introducing them to Pantera, hero of my latest book *Rome: The Emperor's Spy*."

▶ ***www.bbchistorymagazine.com/boudica***



A scene from a Roman mosaic: Togas and banquets became a feature of life in Britain, for some



Roman Londo shown in a medal from c29 AD, when the city had long been the capital of Britannia

THE ROMANS CONSOLIDATE THEIR POWER IN BRITANNIA

AD 70–80s

AFTER THE BOUDICAN revolt the Romans needed to consolidate or leave. So, under the governors Frontinus and Agricola in the 70s–80s, the Romans tightened their grip on Britannia. This permanently affected 'the British Isles' – not only geographically but in administration, law, language and domestic life. We live with the results today.

Frontinus pressed into Wales and moved north; Agricola continued the process. He thought Ireland could be conquered – though since troops were needed elsewhere, it didn't happen. Marching north, Agricola won a climactic battle at 'Mons Graupius', somewhere in the Scottish Highlands. With little to gain by expending money and manpower in the teeth of local hostility, he began the administrative separation that led to Hadrian's Wall. Londinium had been made the capital, fixing polarisation in the south-east – which still persists.

Now the Romans began to leave their mark on Britain's social fabric: Britons began to live in towns; retired soldiers settled here; London and other towns gained new civic buildings; large-scale industry appeared; imports and exports flourished. Education and law were directed by Javolenus Priscus, later a famous figure in Roman law.

Yet Agricola's son-in-law, the Roman historian Tacitus, derides what happened: "His object was to accustom them to a life of peace and quiet by the provision of amenities... The result was that instead of loathing the Latin language they became eager to speak it effectively... our national dress came into favour and the toga was everywhere to be seen. And so the population was gradually led into the demoralising temptations of arcades, baths, and sumptuous banquets. The unsuspecting Britons spoke of such novelties as 'civilisation', when in fact they were only a feature of their enslavement." (Taken from *Agricola* by Tacitus).

Lindsey Davis is the author of the *Falco* series of historical mystery novels set in ancient Rome. *Nemesis* was published in June by Century, along with *Falco: the Official Companion*

HADRIAN BUILDS HIS ENDURING WALL

AD 122

HADRIAN'S DECISION to have a wall constructed across the Tyne-Solway isthmus during his visit to Britain in AD 122 was of major significance not just for Britain but for Hadrian himself and for his vision of what the Roman empire should be: no mere conglomeration of conquered territories but a commonwealth of provinces. Although commonly viewed as a defensive barrier, his actual motive was religious, as pithily expressed in an inscription broken up for building stone in the construction of the famous Anglo-Saxon church at Jarrow and now in the Museum of the North at Newcastle. It tells us that "after the necessity to limit the size of the empire had been imposed on him by Divine Precept he built an 80-mile frontier line between both shores of ocean".

Doubtless the wall was useful both against marauding tribes and in keeping the troops occupied, but like the much-visited temple near Cadiz, which marked the western edge of the empire, the wall frontier – its temples as much as its forts – guarded against the forces of chaos, which threatened the gods as well as men. Indeed the now well-known enamelled vessels like the Rudge cup from Wiltshire (now in Alnwick Castle) and the more recently discovered Staffordshire Moorlands (Ilam) pan – both of which carry inscriptions listing the wall forts – are actually items used in cult. Visitors from the south went to the wall to see a sacred barrier and to worship.

"The wall guarded against the forces of chaos which threatened the gods as well as men"

In local terms, Britain was now a fully Roman province. It seems to me highly likely that Hadrian landed and departed at the great but long-demolished arch at Richborough, Kent – the gateway to Britain. He did so not as a conqueror but as the organiser of a fully functioning province, now and forever part of the *oikoumene*, the 'civilised world'. Hadrian's Wall and the Richborough Arch should be viewed among the most significant buildings of the reign, alongside the Pantheon in Rome, the Library in Athens and the emperor's own palatial residence at Tivoli.

Martin Henig writes about Roman religion and art and is a deacon in the Church of England

BRITANNIA TAKES CENTRE STAGE IN THE EMPIRE

AD 197

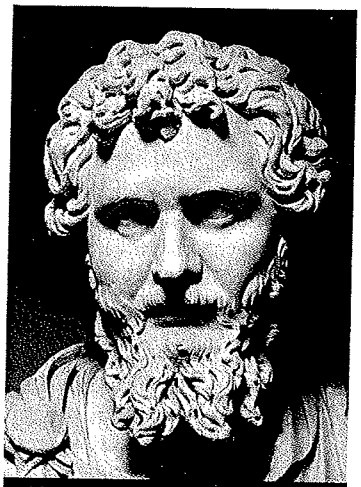
MY KEY MOMENT in the history of Roman Britain, the battle of Lugdunum in early AD 197, didn't actually happen in the province of Britannia, but in neighbouring Gaul. By late 196, the Roman general Septimius Severus was already established as emperor, having dealt with two other contenders for the throne. Seeking to cement his power in Rome, he influenced the senate to declare his fellow African and former ally, Clodius Albinus, governor of Britannia, an enemy of the state.

Goaded by this declaration of war, or possibly having waited for the power struggle to play out in the hope of confronting a single weakened rival, Albinus took an estimated 40,000 men – pretty much every legionary and auxiliary soldier in Britannia – and marched south with the aim of capturing Rome. Denied passage across the Alps, he pitched his legions against Severus's forces at Lugdunum, modern Lyons.

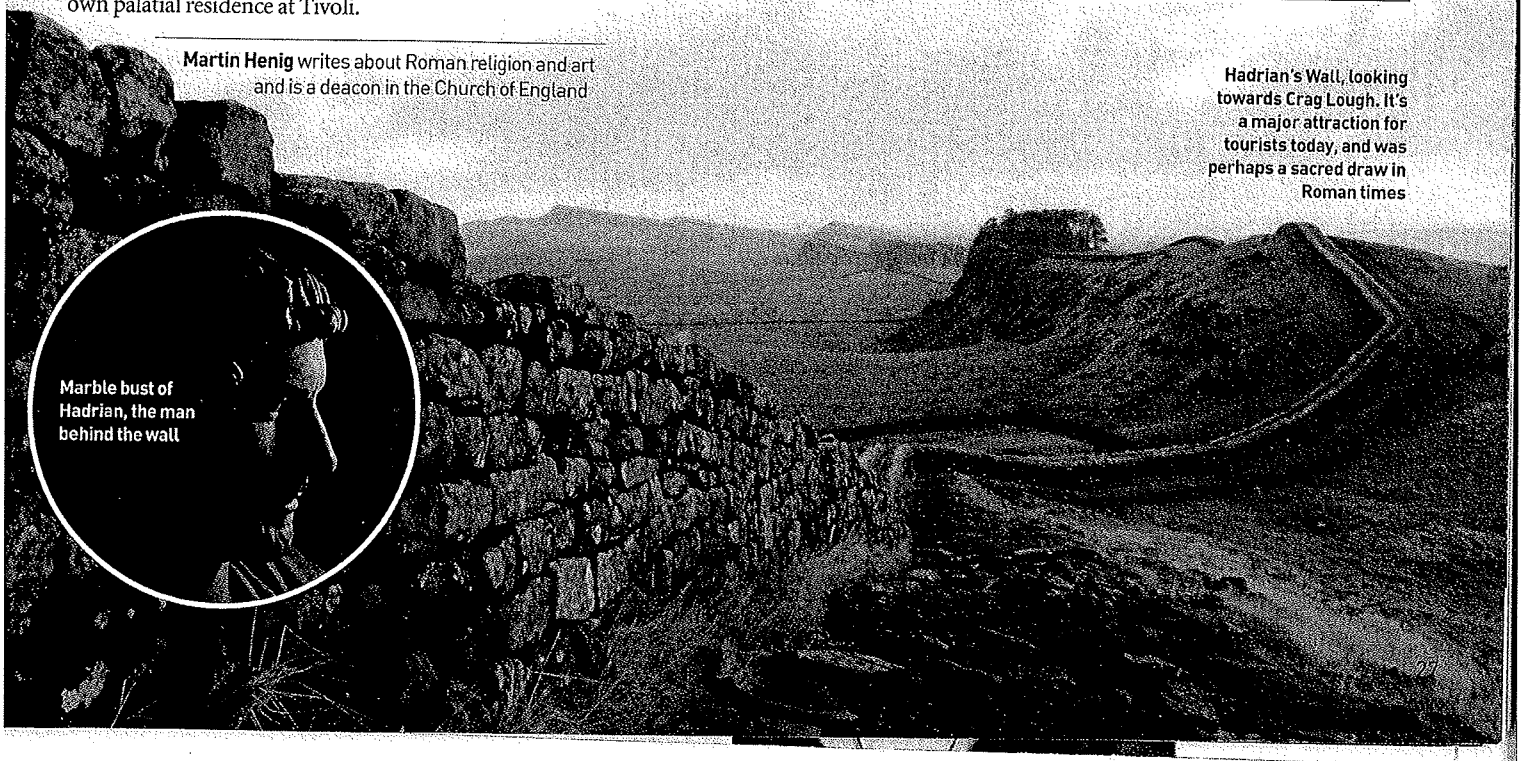
The battle that resulted was a titanic affair fought over two days, a rarity in an age when a few hours was usually enough to bring about either an outcome or an exhausted stalemate. At the battle's climax, with Clodius's legions apparently holding the whip hand and already chanting their victory hymn, Severus's superior cavalry took the day. By this hair's breadth victory the Severan dynasty's future was assured, and a fresh, if not ultimately fruitful chapter in the history of the Roman empire opened.

Lugdunum may have been fought in Gaul, but it should nevertheless be seen as a watershed in Britannia's history, since it had never before exerted such a pivotal influence in imperial affairs.

Anthony Riches is a historical novelist, whose books *Arrows of Fury* and *Wounds of Honour* are published by Hodder & Stoughton



A bust of Septimius Severus in c200 AD, when Britain exerted a pivotal influence



Hadrian's Wall, looking towards Crag Lough. It's a major attraction for tourists today, and was perhaps a sacred draw in Roman times

Marble bust of Hadrian, the man behind the wall

ROBERT HARDING/THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM/CORBIS

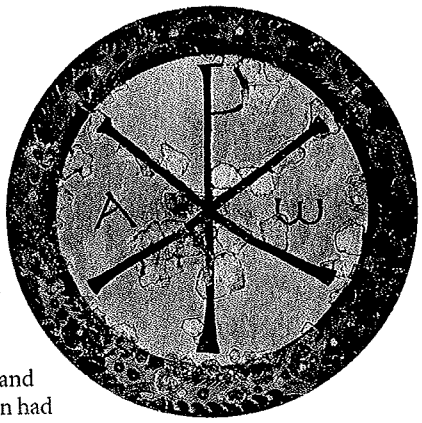
CONSTANTINE COMES TO POWER IN YORK

AD 306

COMING UP in a couple of years, in 2012, is an anniversary of huge significance for the world, because in AD 312 Constantine I defeated one of his rivals for power, Maxentius, at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in Rome and took the city. This was a crucial point on Constantine's path to taking control of the entire empire, a crucial point on Christianity's path to becoming the official religion of the Roman empire and, ultimately, a crucial point on the religion's ascent to becoming the global faith that it is today.

It was before the battle of the Milvian Bridge that Constantine ordered soldiers to put Christian symbols on their shields. Constantine's biographer Eusebius later claimed that, before the battle, the emperor had seen a vision of a cross with the words: "Through this, win". But Constantine's path to power really started right here in Britain. His father, the emperor Constantius I, had been campaigning in Britain when he fell ill and died at York on 25 July 306. Under the system of imperial government in force at that time, Constantine was not automatically due to inherit his father's position. However, Britain and the army in Britain had something of a record of 'independent thinking' when it came to imperial politics and this occasion was no exception. The army acclaimed Constantine as a replacement for his father, and the rest, as they say, is history. Others were to follow the example of Constantine's bid for imperial power from a British base. Magnus Maximus was acclaimed emperor here in 383 and Constantine III followed suit in 407.

"The army in Britain had a record of 'independent thinking' when it came to imperial politics"



A Christian monogram painted on a wall of the Roman villa at Lullingstone, Kent

Stuart Laycock is author of *Britannia: The Failed State* (The History Press, 2008) and co-author of *UnRoman Britain* (The History Press, 2010)

BRITAIN FEEDS THE ROMAN ARMY TO KEEP THE BARBARIANS AT BAY

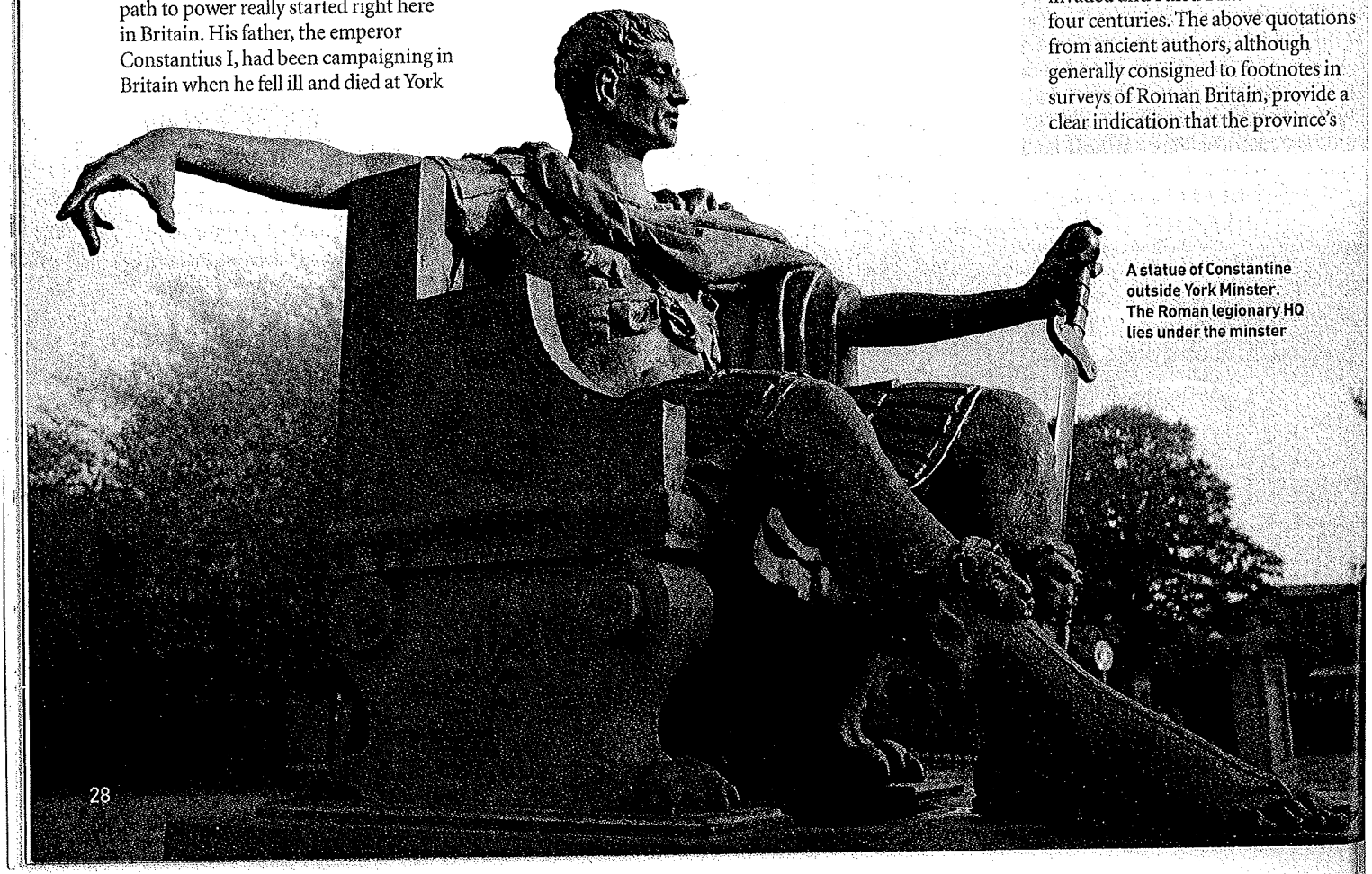
AD 350s

"...ALL THE BARBARIANS had been driven out of Gaul, most of the cities had been recovered and a complete fleet of many ships had arrived from Britain. I had got together a fleet of 600 ships, 400 of which had been built in less than ten months, bringing them all together into the Rhine." (The emperor Julian writing to the Senate of Athens in AD 358–9.)

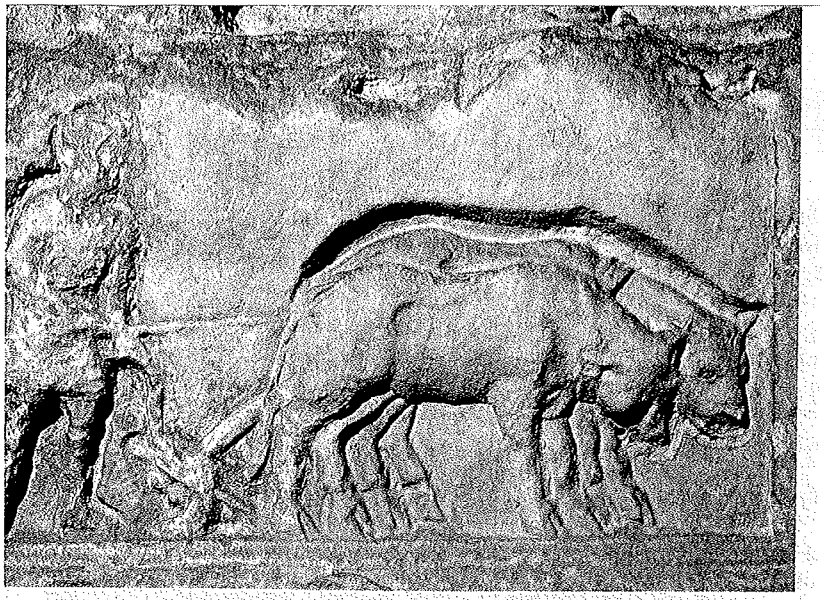
"[Julian] also replaced burnt out granaries with new ones, so that they could house the corn which was regularly shipped from Britain." (Ammianus Marcellinus in AD 359.)

"Julian built 800 vessels, larger than fast galleys, which he sent to Britain to bring back grain..." (Zosimus in AD 358.)

For over a hundred years historians and archaeologists have pondered over why the Romans invaded and ruled Britain for almost four centuries. The above quotations from ancient authors, although generally consigned to footnotes in surveys of Roman Britain, provide a clear indication that the province's



A statue of Constantine outside York Minster. The Roman legionary HQ lies under the minster



A Roman relief depicting a farmer ploughing with oxen. The fruits of British agriculture helped keep the empire alive in the face of barbarian attacks

agricultural wealth was of prime importance. Ammianus suggests that the export of grain from Britain was a regular occurrence, and indeed it probably started on an industrial scale in the late third century when barbarian invasions had despoiled vast tracts of land in Roman Germany and Gaul.

Such was the power of the fleet of naval escorts, two emperors, Carausius and Allectus, were able to rule a breakaway empire in Britain from 286 to 296 – it was ten years before the legitimate rulers were able to break the blockade of ships and retake Britain.

Britannia's agricultural importance is clearly stated in a speech by Eugenius, delivered to the emperor Constantius I, who regained Britain in 296: "Without doubt Britain was a land the state could ill afford to lose, so plentiful are its harvests, so numerous the pasture lands in which it rejoices."

In the late 350s there were similar barbarian invasions across the Rhine. Again, Britain's importance as a bread-basket became paramount. This time the emperor Julian was forced to build many extra ships to maintain the supply of grain from Britain to the German troops on the Rhine.

Recent research, mainly emanating from a study of Roman coin finds recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme, suggests that this grain was produced across two regions in Britain. The first stretched from East Yorkshire, through parts of Nottinghamshire, Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire, down to land around the Fens. Here we can envisage food being transported up the major rivers, such as the Trent and the Ouse, to the Humber and the Wash from where the convoys set sail for Germany.

The second region is centred on Wiltshire, taking in northern Somerset, Gloucestershire, parts of Oxfordshire and Hampshire. Here we can assume supplies were transported down the Thames to London, and down rivers to the south coast and the Solent for subsequent transport. It appears that the Roman authorities even built fortified centres, such as at Cunetio on the river Kennet in Wiltshire, to provide a secure base for the tax officials and their military support.

"The export of grain from Britain was a regular occurrence, and it probably started on an industrial scale in the late third century"

Given the turmoil in the western Roman empire in the late fourth century, it is no surprise that Rome tried to hang onto Britain. It is also probably no surprise that the Britons grew more rebellious as they were increasingly exploited by a regime only concerned with maintaining its power on the continent. What is clear is that we have to imagine large convoys of vessels plying the seas between Britain and the Rhine, providing the supplies that would enable Rome to hold out for well over a hundred years before the barbarians finally crossed the frozen Rhine en masse on New Year's Eve, AD 406.

Sam Moorhead is the author, with David Stuttard, of *AD 410 – The Year that Shook Rome* (British Museum Press, 2010)

AN ANTI-PAGAN EDICT BRINGS BRITONS AND SAXONS TOGETHER

AD 391

"PAGAN WORSHIP outlawed! Christians jubilant. Opponents warn of disaffection from the empire."

We can imagine the headlines from AD 391. Emperor Theodosius had just forbade pagan worship, making Christianity the only legal religion within the empire. Christianity was of course becoming popular, patronised by the imperial court. It was fashionable to be Christian, and could bring advancement in imperial service. But there were still many pagans in the aristocracy of the empire.

This was dangerous for Britain. In 391, no one could foresee the events of 410 whereby Britain would become independent of Rome. By the 420s, Britain had to hire Germanic soldiers to defend itself against Irish, Pictish and Saxon raiders, and also against Rome. There are enough hints in the sources to suggest pro- and anti-Roman factions in Britain. We can add to these the soldiers brought over from Germany who were of course heathens. The ruling class of Britain will have been youths in 391. Some will have been pagans at the time, and there is evidence that pagan practices continued in parts of southern England, either side of the Thames, well into the fifth century.

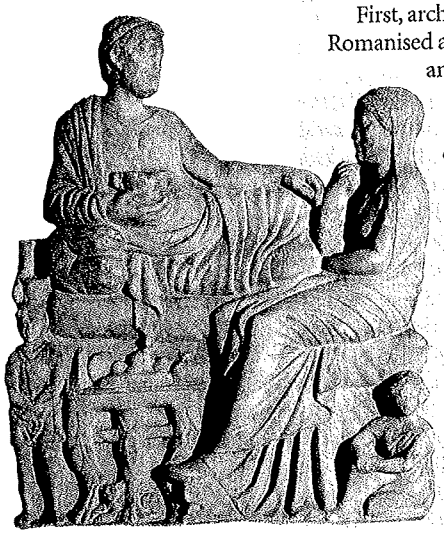
Religion is strongly linked with identity and political allegiance. Could some Britons have welcomed a heathen Saxon identity as counterbalance against intolerant Christianity? A fused British-Saxon identity is what we see in the material culture and early history of an area centred on the mid-Thames, where early Saxon settlement has long been hard to explain. This was the core of Anglo-Saxon Wessex, the kingdom that created England. An emperor's edict in 391 could have been the spark that would lead Britons and Saxons to merge and Britannia to be replaced ultimately by England.

Don Henson is the head of education for the Council for British Archaeology

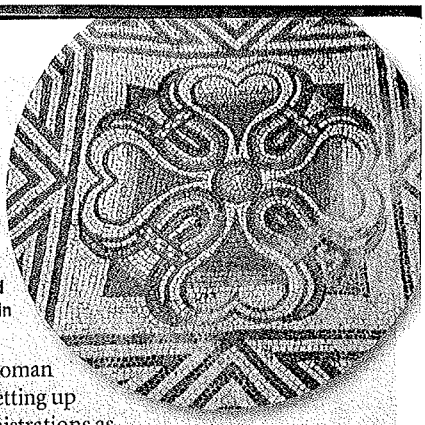
A Christian relief from Rome. Was England born of resistance to the religion?

THE FIRST PEASANTS' REVOLT?

AD 409



Was the Roman way of life, as pictured in this relief, ended by revolt?



Mosaic floors, like this one at Bignor, ceased to be made around AD 400 in Britain

DID ROMAN BRITAIN end with the First Peasants' Revolt? Three strands of evidence support this idea.

First, archaeology reveals an extraordinary collapse of Romanised aristocratic life. The towns and villas, the mosaic and fresco workshops, the mass-production potteries, the flood of luxury imports, everything that sustained Roman luxuria disappeared in a generation around AD 400. Who marched on the chateaux to bring them down?

Second, there is that famous extract from Zosimus, an early sixth-century Greek historian, who talks about "the inhabitants of Britain throwing off Roman rule and living independently without further submission to Roman laws". He goes on to say that Brittany and other parts of France "followed the British example and freed themselves in the same way, expelling their Roman governors and setting up their own administrations as best they could".

"Everything that sustained Roman luxuria disappeared"

Nothing like this had ever happened before. How to explain it? The vital clue is a reference in another ancient source that tells us that shortly afterwards Brittany was controlled by *bagaudae* – peasant social revolutionaries.

The third strand of evidence takes us back to Britain. It concerns the work of an early sixth-century British monk called Gildas. He was a veritable people's priest, penning in his *Ruin of Britain* a devastating critique of the corrupt class of warlords, retainers, and clerical toadies who ruled the emerging British kingdoms of his own day.

Why did he hate them so much? Gildas seems to belong to a radical Celtic church tradition inspired by a more egalitarian social order. His bitterness at social injustice stemmed from his sense that the world was changing for the worse. He was, perhaps, the red monk of the lost peasants' revolt.

Dr Neil Faulkner is a research fellow at Bristol University. He is author of *The Decline and Fall of Roman Britain* (NPI, 2004)

POST-ROMAN BRITAIN REAPPEARS

AD 1968

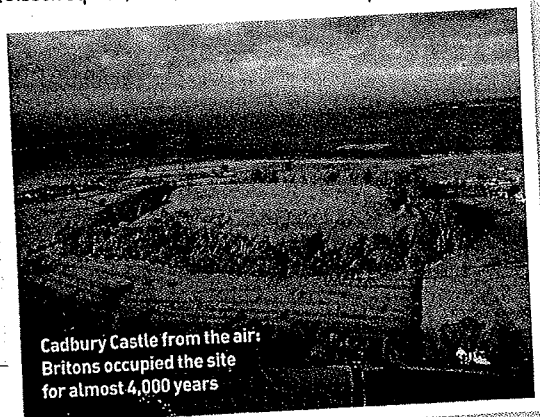
IN 1968 THE ARCHAEOLOGIST Leslie Alcock found traces of sixth-century timber in the earth at a hillfort at South Cadbury. This may seem a dull statement of fact. But here is actually the Howard Carter moment of British archaeology: the rainy island equivalent of the Egyptologist looking back out of the tomb of Tutankhamen and saying: "I see wonderful things." After the fall of Rome, we must remember, the lights go out in Britain. Not only our written sources but also our archaeological sources go down the plughole. What Alcock and his team had done was to reach back into the darkest of the Dark Ages. He had found evidence, albeit rotting timber evidence, of a palace built by the survivors of Rome on a Celtic hillfort – a palace with Roman features no less. Roman Britain had died, but the Romano-British were struggling on.

South Cadbury also reminds us of something else important about Roman Britain. Alcock found in his digs that this Iron Age hillfort – commonly called 'Cadbury Castle' – had been occupied for almost 4,000 years: the Roman occupation was just an interlude. At the beginning of the Roman period it was the site of a massacre, likely when the legionaries arrived with their *pax*.

Yet habitation nevertheless continued through the Roman centuries. In fact, in the west of Britain, here and elsewhere, tribal life survived the Roman occupation and lived on beside it. And so the 'Romano-Britons' that we referred to in the last paragraph were actually tribal Romano-Britons. In the first century, the Romans had humiliated them at Cadbury Castle and on a hundred other battlefields. But their 'primitive, savage' society proved more resilient than Rome's.

Put that in your pipe and smoke it Claudius!

Simon Young is a historian. His most recent book is *The Celtic Revolution* (Gibson Square, 2009)



Cadbury Castle from the air: Britons occupied the site for almost 4,000 years

The fee for this feature has gone to the Roman Society to help fund its new website that it's hoped will carry enthusiasm for Roman Britain to a new generation. ▶ *www.romansociety.org*

JOURNEYS

Fiction

▶ Read the short story by Manda Scott **The Last Roman in Britain**, based on the Boudican revolt, on our website *www.bbchistorymagazine.com/boudica*

Conference

▶ Over the weekend of 30–31 October a major conference to explore the **history and archaeology of western Britain from 350–500 AD** will be held at Cardiff University. Organised by the 410 committee. *www.410.org.uk/confs.htm*

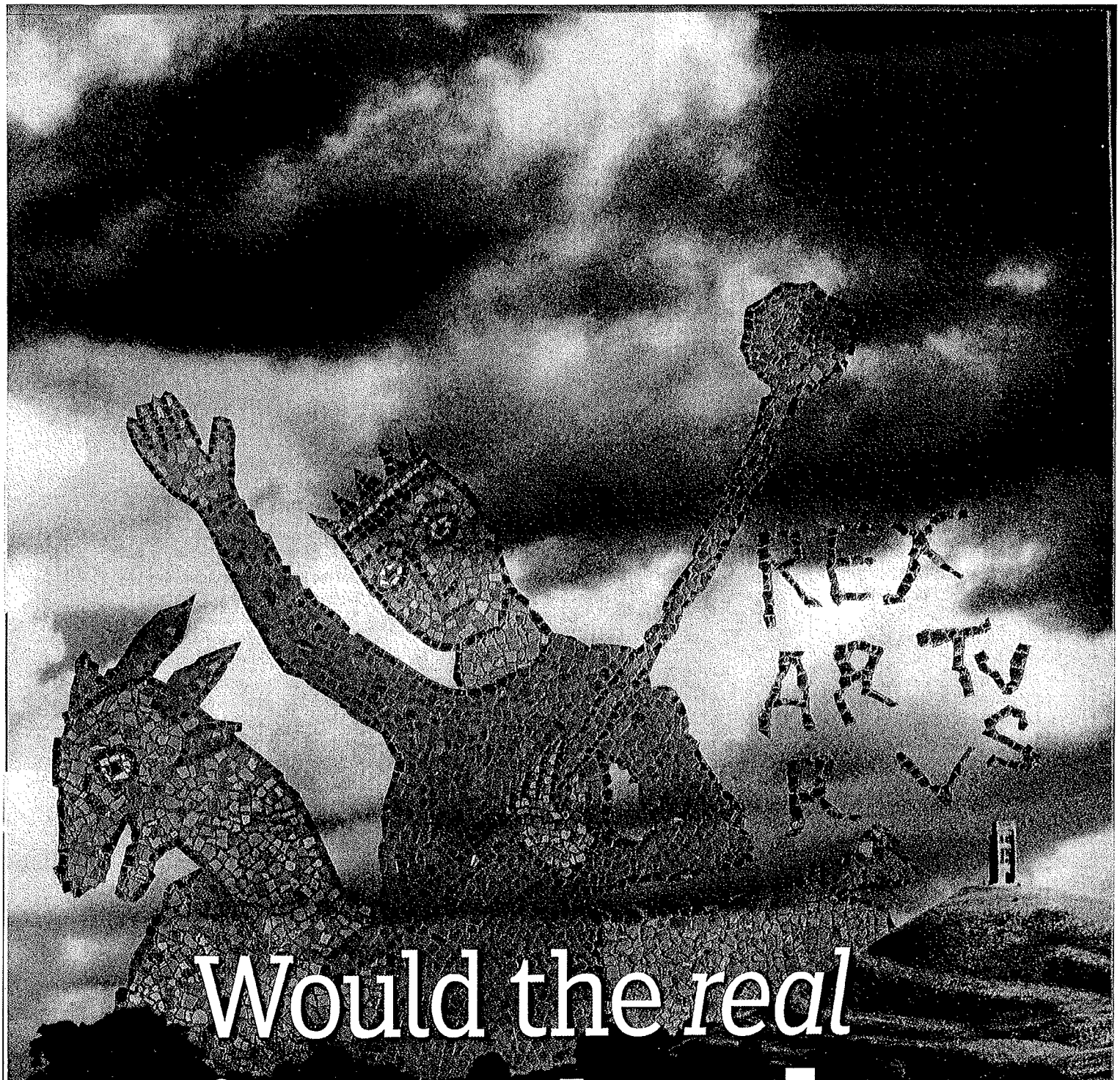
TV

Look out for a **BBC season on classical history** this autumn

BBC TWO

On the podcast

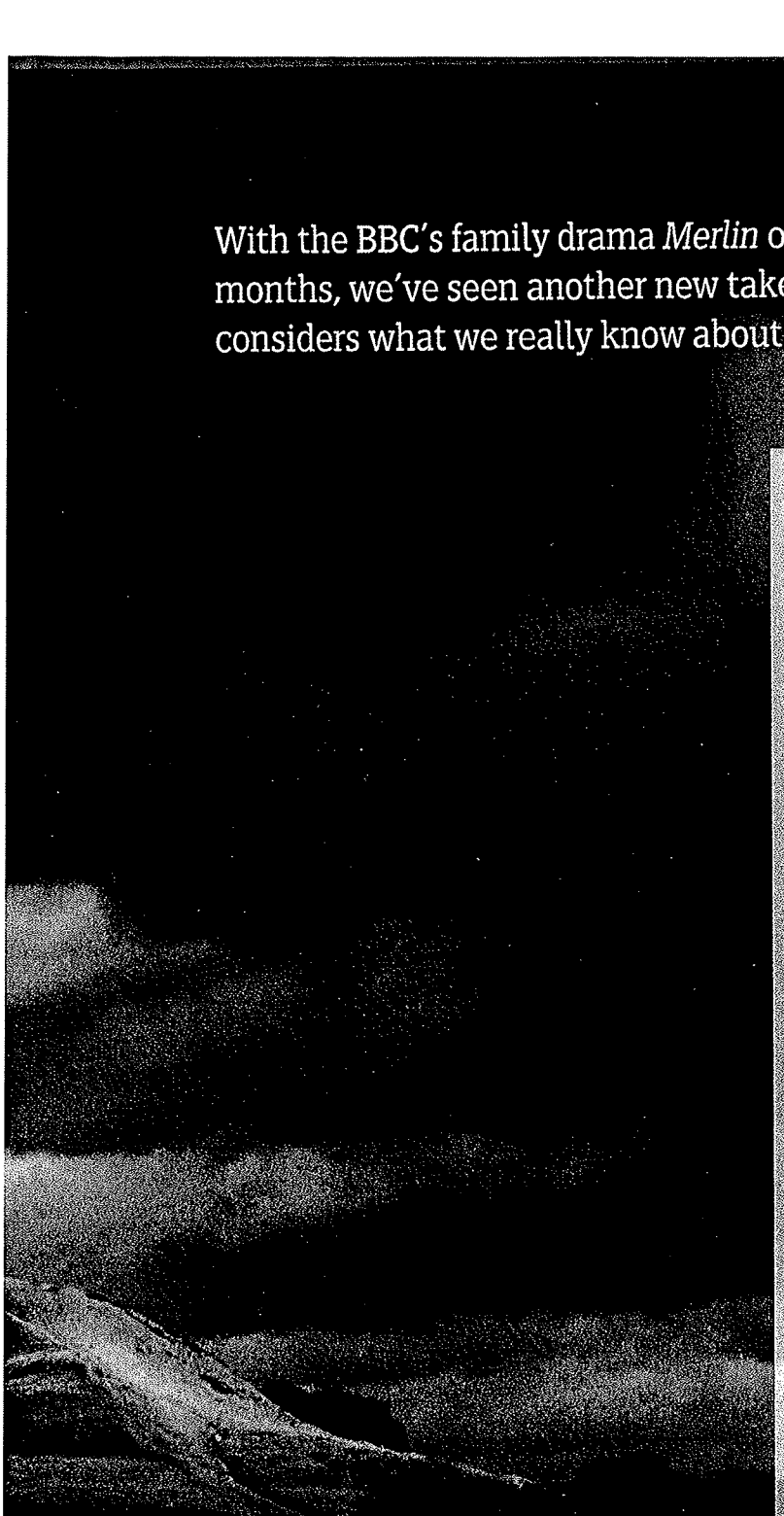
Miles Russell talks about the key milestones in the story of Roman Britain on this month's podcast (online from 24 Sept) ▶ **www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast-page**



Would the *real* King Arthur please stand up

BBC History, December 2008

With the BBC's family drama *Merlin* on our screens over the last few months, we've seen another new take on the Arthur story. **Simon Young** considers what we really know about the Arthur behind the legends



LEFT: A detail of a floor mosaic in Santa Maria Annunciata Cathedral, Apulia, Italy portraying Arthur on horseback. The legendary warrior king has been linked with sites across Europe, including Glastonbury (shown in the background photograph), where his grave was purportedly discovered in 1191

ERICH LESSING-AKG IMAGES/GREENHALF PHOTOGRAPHY-CORBIS

IN THE LAST 20 years the 'true' King Arthur has been spotted by avid fans in almost every corner of the world. Fragments of his gravestone were, for example, noticed in the wall of a church in Croatia. Enthusiasts dug up his sword in Connecticut thus proving that the 'once and future king' had beaten Columbus to the New World. There were rumours about a visit to a fairyland in the Pacific – it was recently 'proved' that the Celts had colonised New Zealand. A group of Slavic nationalists determined that Arthur was really a Russian Tsar and that all his subsequent history had been faked by the dastardly English.

Then there were, of course, domestic sightings. Two British historians who met in the library at Newcastle-upon-Tyne found Arthur's grave in Glamorgan. A chiropodist from Hull offered the princely sum of fifty thousand dollars to anyone who could prove that Arthur was not Irish – the challenge, to the best of our knowledge, still stands. Some archaeologists at Tintagel thought they'd found Arthur's name on an inscription, only to discover that the name was Arthuret – not even a close relation. Finally, there's the druid and eco-warrior, Arthur Pendragon, who, while contesting the seat for Winchester in recent General Elections, has offered a modern solution to the Arthurian problem: namely that he is the great man's reincarnation.

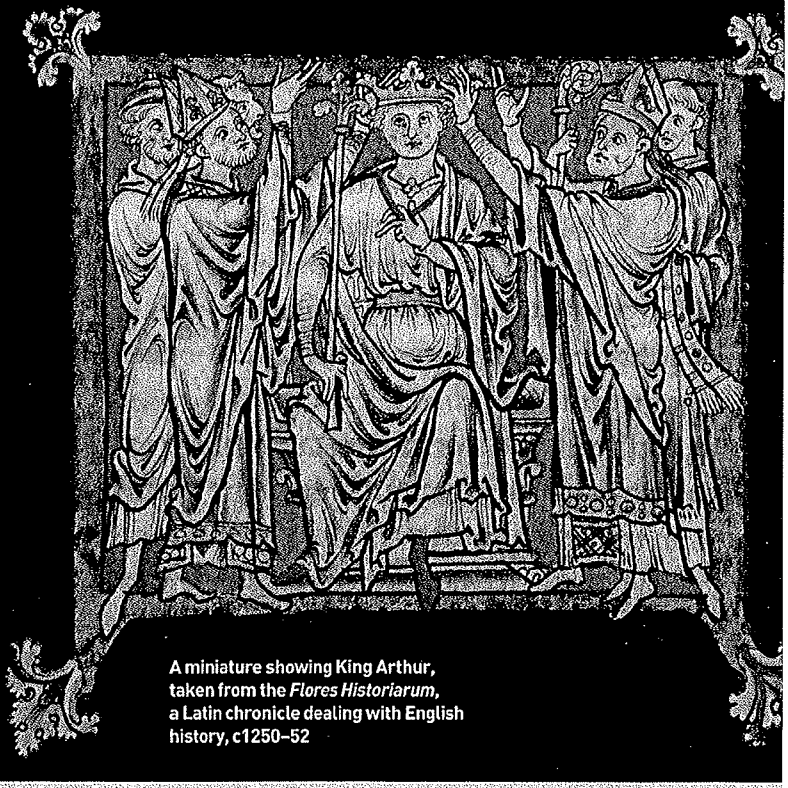
The candidates

To the present author these Arthurian 'solutions' to a problem that has defeated historians of every age have long proved not only a joy but a source of financial security. During a difficult period in his late-twenties he could start the year more or less certain that he would be able to pay his way for a couple of months by writing uncharitable articles about why the latest Arthurian theory was not worth the paper it was written on.

However, this collection of misunderstanding, base dishonesty, wishful thinking and exuberant neo-paganism cloaks (or perhaps complements) the progress that has been made into the origins of the Arthurian legend over the same period. If we today asked one hundred Dark Age historians, archaeologists and Celticists who the historical Arthur really was we would get a lot of mumbling and evasions – scholars of the Dark Ages are necessarily a cautious bunch. But if we held a hundred guns to the hundred heads of these Arthurian professionals and insisted that they give us their best guess it is likely that three solid and respectable candidates would race ahead of the more exotic Arthurs mentioned above. And these three might be reduced to simple monikers: Artur the Gael, Artorius the Roman, and Arthur the Warlord. ➢

Simon Young wrote his first book (with Jon Coe) while he was still at Cambridge in 1995: *The Celtic Sources of the Arthurian Legend* (Llanerch, 1996). He has since published numerous other works of fiction and fact (and some peculiar hybrids) including *AD 500: A Journey Round the Dark Isles of Britain and Ireland* (Phoenix, 2006)

King Arthur addresses his knights in a 12th-century Arthurian manuscript now held in Rennes, France



A miniature showing King Arthur, taken from the *Flores Historiarum*, a Latin chronicle dealing with English history, c1250–52

The most popular of these three, if not among our hundred scholars then certainly among the general public, is Arthur the Warlord – and his story is quickly told. In Britain c410 the Romans, (depending on which view you take of the end of Roman Britain), left/abandoned/lost the island. There followed the two darkest centuries in British history. But in those obscure years we know that the Anglo-Saxons arrived and made much of south and eastern Britain their own, pushing out/slaughtering/assimilating (again opinions differ) the native British-Celtic population. Arthur the Warlord emerged out of the darkness as the leader or a leader of the native British Celts fighting these Germanic invaders sometime between AD 450–550.

Supporters of Arthur the Warlord point out that later British-Celtic documents situate him in this period. And they also remind us that our ignorance about these hundred years is so vast that there is ample room for a great man to govern an island, win battles and woo the British-Celtic imagination while not being noticed in our very few contemporary documents – all Arthurian references come in later centuries. As to where this warlord lived, different partisans push for Wales, Cornwall, the Scottish Lowlands, the Pennines and almost every other part of what was, in the sixth century, British-Celtic Britain.

The Roman candidate

In the case of the second candidate, Artorius the Roman, we do not have to worry about disputed locations because we are speaking about a concrete, well-situated historical personality. Lucius Artorius Castus was a late second-century Roman commander. Based at Ribchester, Lancashire, he commanded a large contingent of Sarmatian cavalry, Iranian-speaking warriors who had been sucked into the Roman army as mercenaries. (Lest this sound overly exotic, we should remember that this was a time when 'Ethiopians' served on Hadrian's Wall.) We gather from contemporary accounts that Artorius was a well-regarded commander who led his warriors on several campaigns including one in Britain and one in Gaul. He later retired and was buried in Roman Dalmatia – the Croatian grave referred to in our opening paragraph belongs to him.

What Artorius has in his favour is his name. In fact, of the thousand odd names we know from Roman Britain, there is only one Artorius, and this is very probably the basis of the familiar British-Celtic 'Arthur'. Supporters of the Arthur as Artorius theory also claim that the Sarmatian cavalry were Arthur's knights. And there have even been attempts, in a book with the wonderful title *From Scythia To Camelot*, to find Sarmatian material in early Arthurian legend.

A sarcophagus relief showing a Roman commander and captured Sarmatians, c170 AD

The third candidate, Artur the Gael, also had the fortune of having the right name. In the sixth century there were a series of Gaelic or Irish settlements on the western coast of what is today Scotland, especially in the inner Hebrides and Argyll. And one of the sons of sixth-century Aidan Mac Gabrain, the most famous of all the early kings of the Gaelic settlements there, was a certain Artur. Supporters of the Gaelic Artur point out that this Hebridean prince is the only well-attested individual in Dark Age Britain with a name like Arthur's. And, as a Gaelic warlord, he may have fought in battles that earned him a place in later legend.

Arthur depicted as the legendary king of the Celtic Britons in an Anglo-Norman chronicle

BRITISH LIBRARY–AKG IMAGES

These same supporters are not worried by the fact that Artur is Gaelic rather than British-Celtic. Heroes from one culture are easily adopted into another, they argue, and there are also features of the Arthurian legend that could be said to be Gaelic in origin. That the same parts of the Arthurian legend are also said to be Sarmatian in origin is maybe a warning, though, about the unreliability of these kinds of deductions.

What is perhaps most striking about these three candidates is just how varied they are. In the late Sixties, in the wake of Leslie Alcock's inspiring digs at the hill-fort of South Cadbury (which was, according to early modern legend, Camelot) the Warlord Arthur was very much in the ascendant. Alcock's excavations allowed us, for the first time, to peer into the years 450–550 at a British-Celtic stronghold such as one that a Warlord Arthur might have used. But in 2008 we have two contenders who lived as many as two hundred years before or after the Warlord (respectively Artorius and Artur). Given this, it is reasonable to ask whether we have made any progress at all. By admitting three so very different figures to the canon of Arthurian possibilities, aren't we confessing our total and embarrassing ignorance of Arthur's true identity?

Knowing what we don't know

In fact, we know more about Arthur today than ever. The trouble is, that knowledge – and this is admittedly paradoxical – is about how very little we know.

The single greatest step in Arthurian studies, a step that has opened the way to these three so very different candidates, is the understanding of how unreliable our earliest Arthurian sources are. In the 1960s, it was believed that the earliest references to Arthur appeared in certain British-Celtic poems that dated to c600, chiefly the *Gododdin*. It is now accepted though that while these poems might be early, they might equally be from 700, 800, 900 or perhaps even later. That means that our earliest certain source is the *Historia Brittonum*, written in 829 or 830 in northern Wales. This source used to be the jewel in the crown of Arthuriana, the gold under the mountain. But as recent studies have shown, the Arthur found there is, above all, a folklore figure, a Celtic Hercules who fought in 12 battles, in the last charging and killing 126 of the enemy. According to this source, he was a western-dwelling Puck (a mythological spirit) who is associated with giant-sized objects in the wilderness including a shape-shifting tomb.

We understand better now than a generation ago that the *Historia Brittonum* does not transmit history but legend, or, at best, history churned through the sausage machine of British-Celtic legend. Take, for instance, the fate in the *Historia* of a fifth-century, probably southern British-Celtic warlord, named Ambrosius Aurelianus. We know about Ambrosius from a five-star reliable, near-contemporary source, which states that he was related to an emperor and was "the last of the Romans" in Britain. Yet, by the time Ambrosius appears in the *Historia Brittonum*, he has become the son of a demon who is taken to a mountain lake to be sacrificed by magicians, but who manages to avoid being killed by digging up two dragons, dragons that proceed to fight each other on a piece of cloth.

Scholars' newfound freedom

In other words, if the *Historia Brittonum* is gold, then it is fool's gold. And the dating offered by the *Historia* and the associated Welsh Annals for Arthur have all the characteristics of an attempt to situate a legendary figure in history: something that can be paralleled elsewhere in early medieval Irish and British-Celtic writing. For example, the all-too legendary Irish divine hero Fionn is wheeled out by medieval Irish storytellers to fight the all-too historical Vikings.

The reason then that we can pick three so divergent Arthurs is that whereas in the 1960s we appeared to have firm historical evidence about the original Arthur, that evidence has now passed into the realms of folklore and legend. What's more, Arthur is no longer anchored to the years 450–550. This has freed interested parties to look further afield for the historical Arthur and, in plucking Gaels and Romans out of our meagre records, scholars are enjoying their newfound freedom.

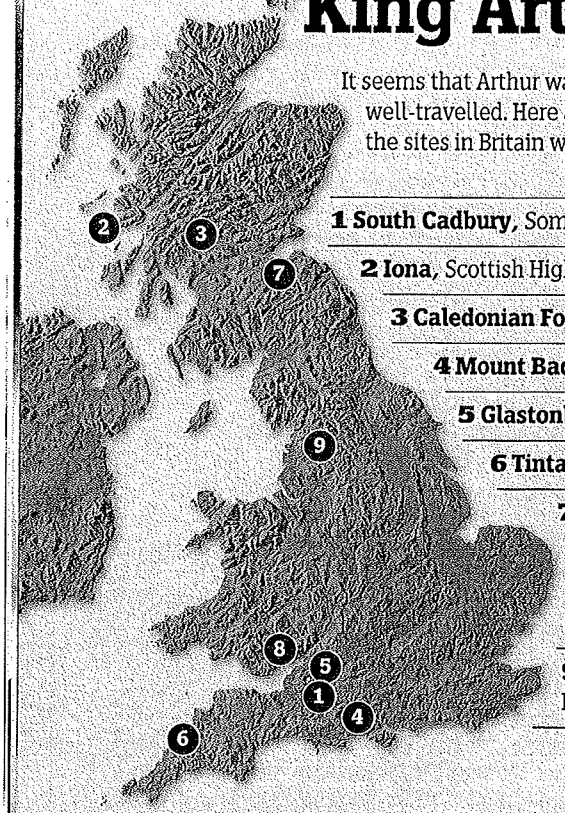
But the truth is that even these three candidates are limiting. We have written so far as if the search for the historical Arthur approximates to a Christie murder mystery. There is a body in the library and we have to choose which of three members of a dinner party 'did it'. But early medieval history is not a murder mystery with a limited number of suspects, where the butler conveniently locked the doors before the killing.

In the Sixties we appeared to have firm historical evidence about the original Arthur. This has now passed into the realms of folklore

If we had access to a digest of what had happened in every year in the Roman centuries and the Dark Ages we would find that there would be up to two hundred credible candidates. It is a product of our execrably poor records that we can name only two individuals and a generality (a warlord from c450–550). Take occurrences of 'Artorius', likely the name from which the British-Celtic 'Arthur' derives. Artorius is not a particularly rare Latin name. It is found in most provinces of the Empire. If the population of Roman Britain was, say, a million strong: in any generation there were probably a thousand British-based Artoriuses. And in each of those thousand Artoriuses we would doubtless find details that could be construed as being 'Arthurian'. So if Artorius the Roman is ➢

On the trail of King Arthur

It seems that Arthur was nothing if not well-travelled. Here are just some of the sites in Britain with links to him



1 South Cadbury, Somerset

2 Iona, Scottish Highlands

3 Caledonian Forest, Scotland

4 Mount Badon, Dorset

5 Glastonbury, Somerset

6 Tintagel, Cornwall

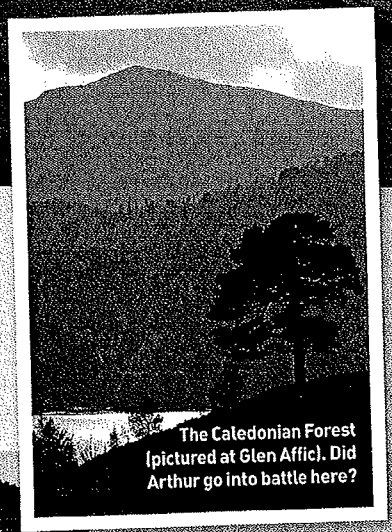
7 Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh

8 Caerleon, Gwent

9 Ribchester, Lancashire

2 Iona, the Scottish Hebrides

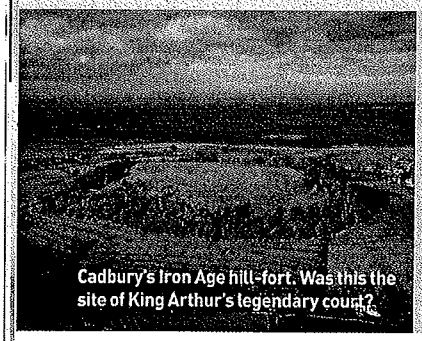
Iona was the home of the monastery of Colm Cille, a sixth-century Irish saint who came to Britain to lead a life of religious exile. It has been argued that Artur son of Aidan, the best Gaelic candidate for Arthur, was buried there.



The Caledonian Forest (pictured at Glen Affric). Did Arthur go into battle here?

3 Caledonian Forest

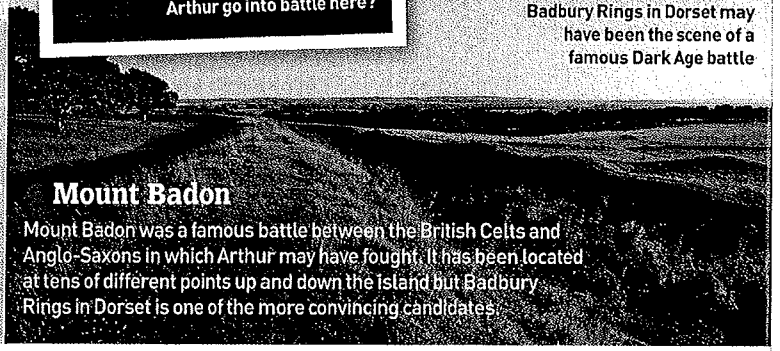
The Battle of the Caledonian Forest is one of the many clashes in which Arthur is supposed to have led British forces. The name suggests that it was fought in Scotland, perhaps in the Highlands. If the battle is anything more than legend it will have involved British Celts and Picts.



Cadbury's Iron Age hill-fort. Was this the site of King Arthur's legendary court?

1 South Cadbury

This south Somerset village is the location of an impressive prehistoric hill-fort that was reused by the Britons after the fall of Roman Britain. Local legend has claimed that Cadbury was also the site of King Arthur's legendary court, Camelot.



Badbury Rings in Dorset may have been the scene of a famous Dark Age battle

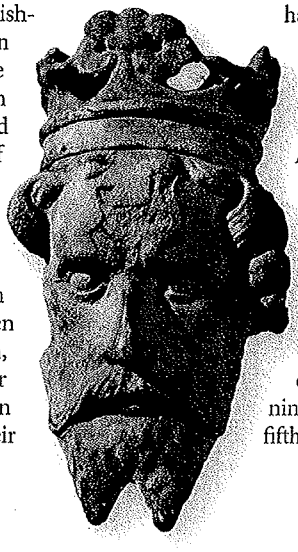
Mount Badon

Mount Badon was a famous battle between the British Celts and Anglo-Saxons in which Arthur may have fought. It has been located at tens of different points up and down the island but Badbury Rings in Dorset is one of the more convincing candidates.

reckoned to be Arthur because his Sarmatian cavalry were 'knights', what is to stop us saying, when archaeologists tomorrow dig up the gravestone of a Cornish Artorius who happened to have a wife with the British-Celtic name Gwenhwyfar (Guinevere), that he was not the true Arthur?

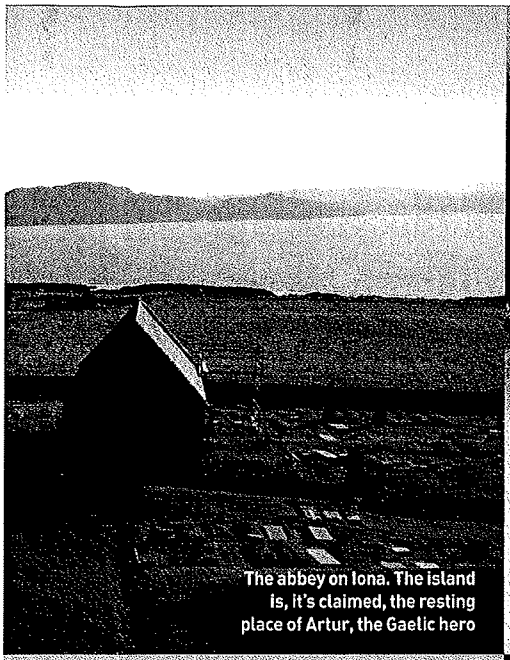
The 'sensible' answer would be that the Arthur of British-Celtic legend, and later of European legend, was such an enormous figure that he must have been a great man, he must have done something that was outstanding. But in legend – and I am tempted to write especially in Irish and British-Celtic legend – historical figures take on a life of their own independent of their original deeds. An individual is remembered and is then celebrated on the basis of how important his children became or how important the tribe or monastery he is associated with make themselves in later generations. So, to give an ecclesiastical example, saints in Ireland and Britain are often spoken of not because they were particularly well-known, but because their foundations became famous after their deaths and history was changed to take this into account. In fact, a good rule for the Irish and the British-Celts is that their antiquarianism in the early Middle Ages tells the present not the past. It embodies contemporary realities; it is not the study of years gone by.

This portrait of Arthur was sculpted in Nuremberg, Germany in the 14th century

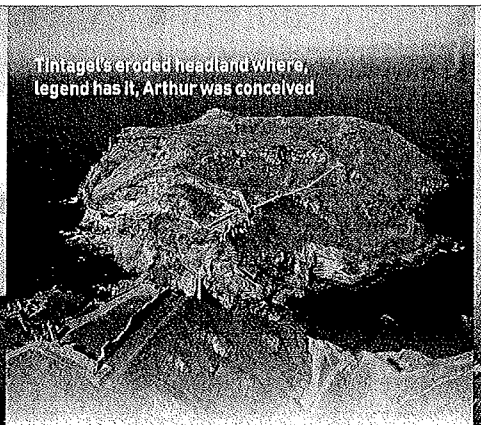


Reality and legend in British-Celtic culture often then have nothing to do with each other. And so Arthur could indeed have been a mighty fifth-century warlord who turned the tide in the battles for Britain. Yet he could equally have been, say, a third-century cross-dressing gladiator who scandalised a provincial British town, but who was then elevated from memory ("do you remember when Arthur...") to myth ("once upon a time, Arthur...") because his sons and grandchildren became important magnates in the region.

Wouldn't we though then have details about gladiatorial fights in his legend? Wouldn't something of his life survive? Parallel examples suggest otherwise. We have already seen how general Ambrosius Aurelianus from southern Britain became a demon's bastard and a dragon hunter in Wales. If we had only the legendary ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* to recreate his historical fifth-century acts our search for the truth would fail miserably.



The abbey on Iona. The island is, it's claimed, the resting place of Artur, the Gaelic hero



Tintagel's eroded headland where, legend has it, Arthur was conceived

6 Tintagel, Cornwall

Tintagel is another location in southwest England associated with Arthur: legend says that he was conceived there. This dramatic cliff stronghold was certainly inhabited in the Dark Ages and it is possible that it was once the seat of the kings of Cornwall in their battles against the English.

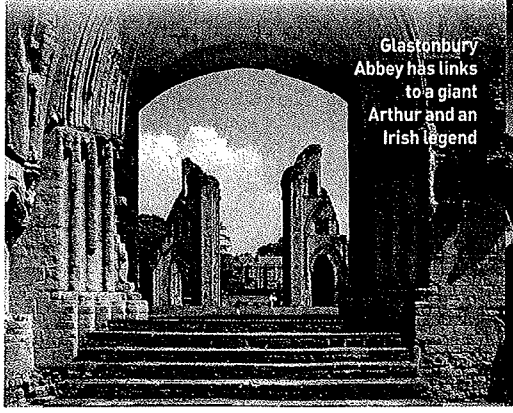
8 Caerleon, South Wales

Caerleon was a southern Welsh Roman settlement that may have been defended into early medieval times by the native British Celts of the region. In the 12th century Geoffrey of Monmouth claims that it was here that Arthur held his court: a Welsh Camelot.

A Roman amphitheatre in Caerleon, Gwent, which has been mooted as a Welsh Camelot

5 Glastonbury, Somerset

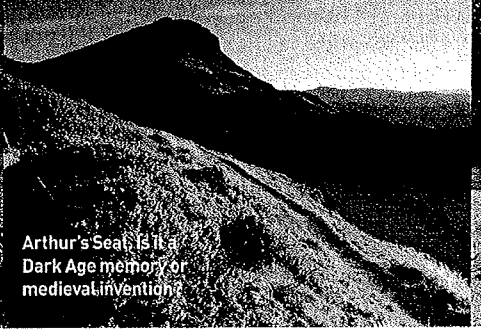
Legend says that Arthur was buried in Glastonbury and that his grave was discovered by 12th-century English 'archaeologists' (monks with spades). Glastonbury's Arthur was said to be a giant, while recent research suggests that the story of his discovery in the Somerset town contains memories of an ancient Irish legend.



Glastonbury Abbey has links to a giant Arthur and an Irish legend

Arthur's Seat, Edinburgh

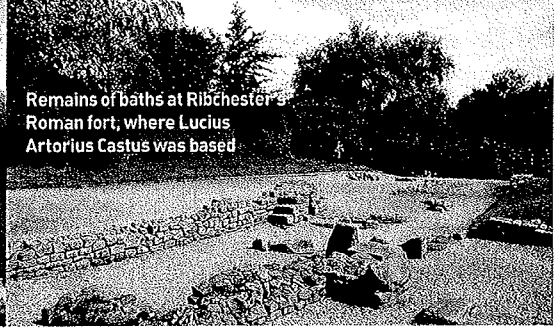
Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh clearly recalls the great British leader. Whether this is a Dark Age memory or a medieval invention no one knows: some cynics suggest that the name was originally 'Archers Seat'. Arthur's Seat is only the most dramatic of several sites in Lowland Scotland that recall the 'once and future king'.



Arthur's Seat. Is it a Dark Age memory or medieval invention?

9 Ribchester, Lancashire

Ribchester (or *Bremetennacum*, as it was known in Roman times) was a fort where the Roman candidate for Arthur, Lucius Artorius Castus, dwelt with several thousand Asian Steppe cavalry who had been conscripted into the Roman army. Attempts have been made to explain some references in Arthurian geography to sites around Ribchester and more generally in the north where Artorius campaigned.



Remains of baths at Ribchester's Roman fort, where Lucius Artorius Castus was based

SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY/ALAMY

Given this extraordinary lack of good historical material for Arthur it is not surprising that a fourth candidate has emerged in recent years, pushing Artur, Artorius and the Warlord to the side: a mythological Arthur, an Arthur that never existed outside of the British-Celtic imagination. Proponents of the Mythic Arthur point out that everything that our hero does in British-Celtic writings can be paralleled in the works and lives of other mythological heroes from the British-Celtic and closely-related Irish pantheons. Arthur like the Irish Fionn and Dagda or the British-Celtic Bran and Gwynn ap Nudd is, Mythic Arthurians insist, a figure passed down from the Celtic Iron Age, when he and his supernatural colleagues stood as the guardians and gods of their people.

This though is almost certainly going too far. True, Arthur might as well not have existed. There is no reason at all for thinking that his personality or achievements have survived in the accounts we have, and good reasons for thinking that they do not. But nor is there any need to submit Arthur to the final indignity of non-existence, ripping off the last fig leaf of history. For there is one suggestive proof that he did once walk and breathe. And that proof is his name – a name that, as we have seen, very likely derives from the Latin 'Artorius'. If 'Arthur' derives from that Latin word then something hard and real must be shining at the bottom of the well because the British Celts would not have created a hero or a god from a Latin name without a historical original.

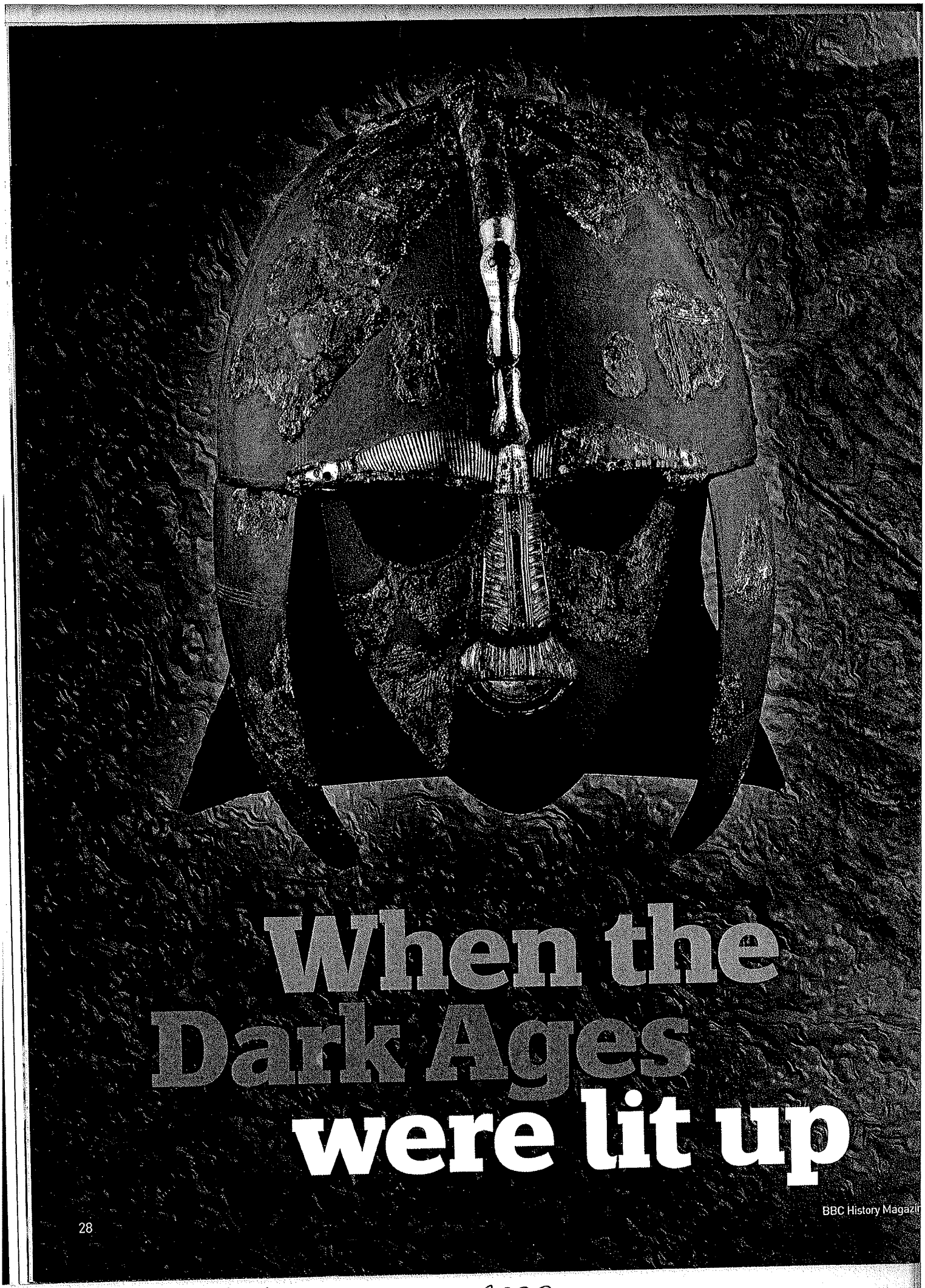
Arthur could have been a third-century cross-dressing gladiator who scandalised a provincial British town

The legendary Arthur must then have grown out of someone who lived in Britain between the Roman conquest in AD 43, when Latin arrived, and the time of better historical records c700. The harsh reality, however, is that save a miracle – a tomb, a forgotten Byzantine manuscript, or an engraving – we will never know the whos or hows or whens of this Arthur's life. H

JOURNEYS

BOOKS

Concepts of Arthur by Tom Green *(Tempus, 2008)*; **Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature** by Oliver Padel *(University Wales Press, 2000)*; **From Scythia to Camelot** by C Scott Littleton and Linda A Malcor *(Routledge, 2000)*; **Arthur's Britain** by Leslie Alcock *(Penguin, 2001)*; "The nature of Arthur" from **Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies (27)** by Oliver Padel (1994)



When the Dark Ages were lit up

BBC History, May 2009

Alex Burghart looks back 70 years to the discovery of the fabulous Anglo-Saxon burial at Sutton Hoo, and ponders how far we've come in our knowledge of the period since 1939. On page 34 **Michael Wood** chooses his key Turning Point in the Anglo-Saxon period

1939 saw a rare a ray of light shine into the Dark Ages, and made people realise that the Anglo-Saxon period did not deserve that gloomy moniker. In 1938, Edith Pretty, owner of Sutton Hoo House in Suffolk, had commissioned a local archaeologist, Basil Brown, to investigate the huge tumulus on her land. Brown did not do as he was asked. On examining it he saw that a trench had been dug into its centre, assumed it to have been robbed and moved on to the smaller surrounding tumuli. Having found next to nothing, in the following year he returned his attention to his original subject. He quickly unearthed rivets in rows, and as the outline of a boat slowly emerged it became apparent that the earlier grave robbers had ceased their digging just inches short of a burial hoard of unexampled beauty.

While the wood of the ship and the flesh of the man had dissolved in the acidic Suffolk soil, the gold, silver and iron of his wealth remained. For the first time, indeed for the only time, historians had a chance to see the sort of objects that a great man of the seventh century had in his hall. From a range of ornate war gear – a sword, an axe-hammer, a huge circular shield decorated with wild animals, a coat of mail, a collection of spears – to auspicious displays of wealth – a silver dish three-quarters of a metre in diameter, a complex buckle wrought from pure gold, fine shoulder clasps – to feasting equipment – a cauldron, drinking horns, a lyre – the man had all he needed to live in eternity as he had on earth. His boat was pointing west and in his purse were 40 gold pieces, one for each of the ghostly oarsmen who would row him to the other place.

The work of Scandinavians

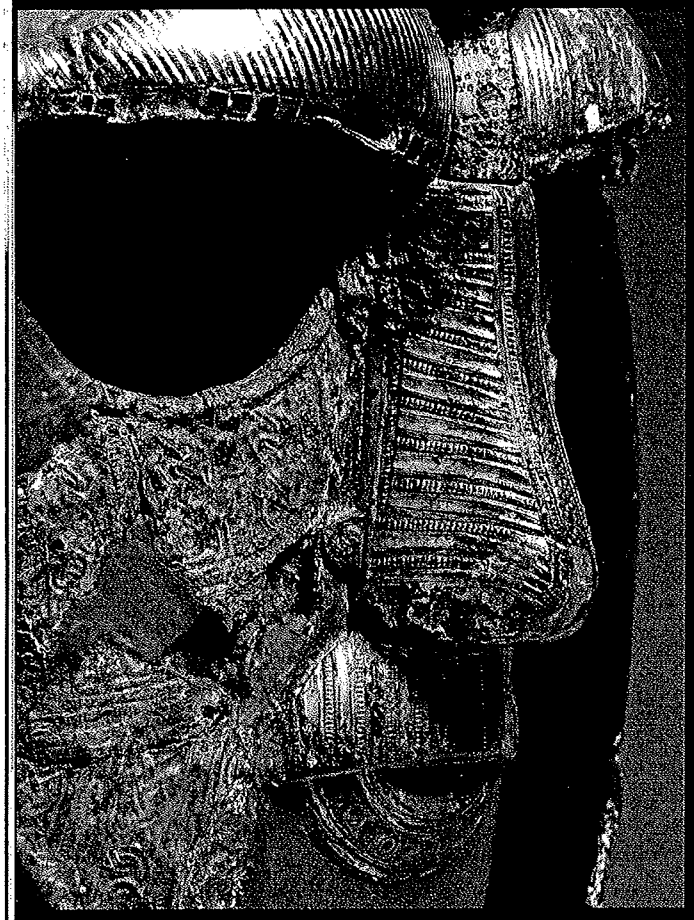
The burial shows us that this corner of Suffolk was extraordinarily well connected to the world around it. Much of the craftsmanship, particularly the helmet and buckle, was clearly influenced or accomplished by Scandinavian work. The silver dish was made in Byzantium c500. The gold coins, which allow us to date the burial to the 620s or soon after, are Frankish. One of the bowls appears to be from Egypt. After looking at Sutton Hoo it is impossible to think of early Anglo-Saxon society as being cut off from the rest of the world, impossible to think of their leaders as little Englanders, but rather we are forced to consider them as self-consciously part of a wider European society stretching from the Mediterranean to the North Sea. ➤

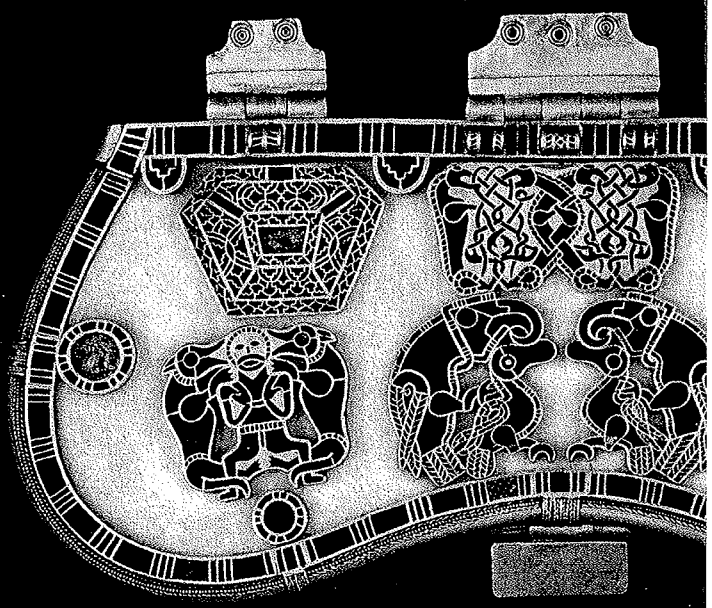
ON THE PODCAST THIS MONTH

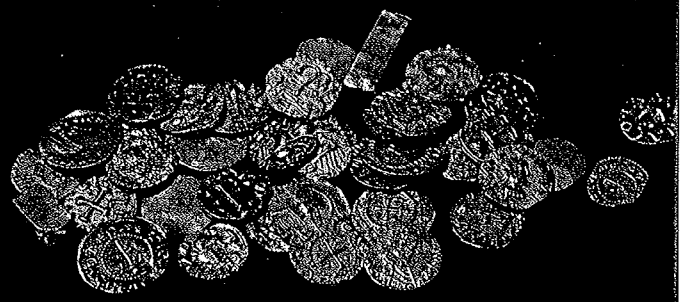
The iron helmet (above left) is the jewel in the crown of the Anglo-Saxon burial hoard discovered at Sutton Hoo in 1939. The background image shows the dead warrior's ship, pointing to the west, soon after its excavation

Sutton Hoo in pictures

Here are just some of the artefacts responsible for transforming our understanding of Anglo-Saxon England







◀ The helmet

Based on late Roman and Swedish models, the Sutton Hoo helmet is littered with imagery. A long snake perhaps representing Jörmungandr, the serpent who circled the Earth, reaches down to touch the beak of a bird whose wings form the eyebrows and whose tail depicts the moustache of the warrior's face. Hidden among the rust are images of horned-helmeted and mounted warriors.

▲ Coins

It's thanks to these 40 coins and two small ingots that we are able to date the treasures of Sutton Hoo so accurately. The latest coin dates to c625 AD, so the burial probably took place only a few years later. Minted by the Merovingian Franks, the coins were possibly left in the burial to pay the men who would row the dead dignitary's ship to the 'otherworld'.

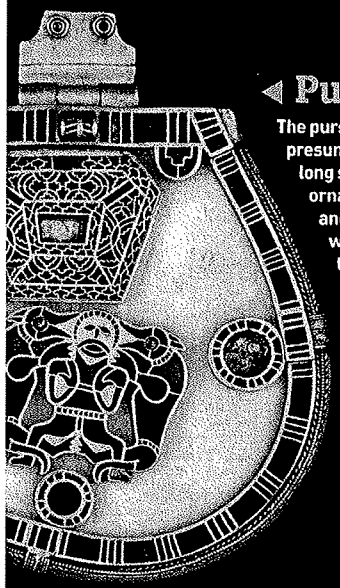
Seeing the funerary magnificence of Sutton Hoo not only revealed to historians the exotic tastes of early medieval bigwigs, it also served as a reminder of how they should observe the period. To assume that seventh-century Anglo-Saxons were 'primitive' is to assume that an absence of evidence is evidence of absence.

Thinking in these terms raises great questions about the grave. The assumption has long been that the inhabitant of the mound was a king of East Anglia, probably Redwald, who converted to Christianity before lapsing into paganism. Who else but a king would be buried with such finery?

But as Professor James Campbell of Oxford has argued, to assume we have a royal burial is to ignore the fact that the tomb is almost entirely without context. It is something of a minor miracle that the spoils of Sutton Hoo remained undisturbed until the 1930s. The largest burial mounds must always have been the most alluring for entrepreneurial grave robbers and, consequently, we should expect that these obvious, unguarded burials were interfered with at some point in the intervening centuries. The Anglo-Saxons themselves were not innocent of the crime – in *Beowulf*, the dragon who kills the eponymous hero is disturbed from his tumulus by a thief. This is to say that we cannot know exactly how prevalent burials like Sutton Hoo once were. It may be that there was a time when they were not that unusual.

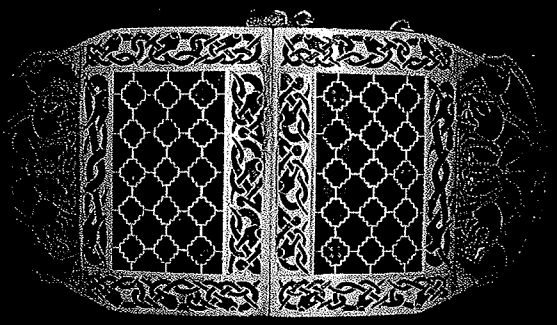
We do not know, and have no way of knowing, how much treasure there was in seventh-century England. There may have been a great many men who had become rich from conquest and protection racketeering. There may even have been many who had access to examples of such craftsmanship (whoever made the exquisite shoulder-clasps and belt was evidently not doing it for the first time). And so Sutton Hoo also acts as a reminder of how much we do not know about Anglo-Saxon history, about how we must think before we make even the shallowest assumptive leap.

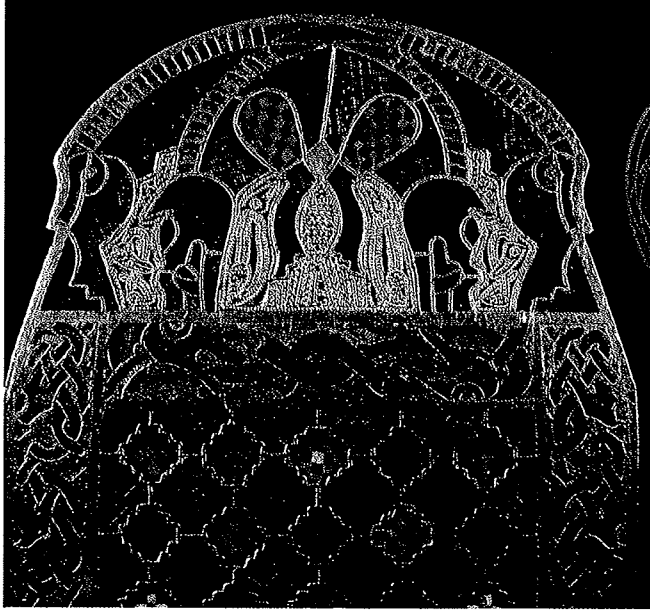
If the grave's precise status is in doubt, its uniqueness is not, and the treasure is a much needed feast for the eyes in a period starved of visual aids. While the Anglo-Saxons have left us some manuscripts, some coins, the occasional church that survived the great Norman renovations, a post-Conquest



◀ Purse lid

The purse that contained the coins was presumably made of leather, which has long since rotted away. Its remarkably ornate lid remains – composed of gold and cellwork plaques – and bears what appears to be images relating to lost legend.





◀ Shoulder clasps ▲

So beautifully preserved that visitors to the British Museum often assume them to be reproductions, these shoulder clasps are one of the most stunning dress items to have survived from Anglo-Saxon England. Note the intricately interwoven boars at each end.

tapestry, and the clutter of archaeology, compared to all subsequent eras, there is not much to see. Consequently, the splendour of Sutton Hoo was immediately destined for iconic status and publishers have been consistently keen (as we have here) to use the helmet as a cover illustration.

This one relic from Anglo-Saxon England has, in some ways, come to define the whole period. As a reminder of the centrality of militarism to the age this is fitting but it has, perhaps, also done something to harden in the public imagination the idea that the Anglo-Saxons were nothing more than noble warriors. This is unfortunate because we now understand a great deal about the complexities and sophistication of late Anglo-Saxon government and know that, by the eighth century at the very latest, they were much more than barbarian champions of military households. We know this largely because of the work of archaeologists. Over the past 50 years our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon economy has accelerated beyond all expectation and, as it has, we have become vastly more aware of the government machinery which exploited and regulated it. Huge numbers of coins have been exhumed by metal detectorists showing how standardised royal coinage was circulating in Britain by the late eighth century, and how, by the mid-tenth century, there was a currency of perhaps several million coins, regularly recalled and recoined – presumably to tax, and assure quality.

The treasure is a much needed feast for the eyes in a period starved of visual aids

This was very much a national system. During the reign of King Edgar (ruled 959 to 975) it seems few parts of England were further than 15 miles from a royal mint. Such clues show us how capable these kings were of centralised government, how good they were at imposing uniform standards over wide areas, and why we might describe their kingdom as a 'state'. Thus archaeologists have unearthed a society's progression from a world of plunder and tribute, to one of toll and tax.

But despite such rich academic discoveries, popular appreciation of the Anglo-Saxons since the Second World War ➢

has, if anything, been on the wane. The Victorians were fascinated by the origins of England and its government and so had a fondness and fascination for the state-building of Alfred the Great and his heirs. But there has been little room for the Anglo-Saxons in the modern British mindset. Whereas 19th-century scholars revelled in their Teutonic past, by the mid-

Whereas 19th-century scholars revelled in their Teutonic past, by the mid-20th century, England's German heritage evinced little pride

20th century, England's German heritage evinced little pride, and the very concept of volk had been sullied by history's most monstrous crimes. This intellectual backdrop meant that as Britain became a modern nation of many peoples, so Anglo-Saxon history came to be seen as insular, primitive, misogynistic and irrelevant to the point where the word 'medieval' has become a term of abuse deployed by those who know nothing of the medieval world.

Indeed, in recent times, our pre-Conquest predecessors have been co-opted by the far right (along with the cross of St George), and turned into symbols of a 'pure England'. This manipulation is wrong, for the Anglo-Saxons were no more 'ethnically pure' than the English of today. Recognising this reveals just how dangerous and unhelpful the rejection of parts of our history can be: dangerous because, discarded, they can be poached by the ignorant; and unhelpful because the internationalism of their time actually mirrors ours.

Because Anglo-Saxon culture lurks behind our laws and rights, behind our system of government, behind our towns and behind the words that one in five people on Earth can understand, it is neither nationalistic nor insular to say that we should take an interest in it.

There ought to be no room for nationalistic pride in the study and appreciation of history. We did not do these things; we were not yet born. For many of us, these were not even the deeds of our ancestors. But they are, nonetheless, a large part of our cultural inheritance and, to a certain extent, that of the world. To ignore Anglo-Saxon culture is to needlessly rebury our treasure in the mound and leave it to the mercy of robbers. H

Alex Burghart is one of the authors of the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England *(www.pase.ac.uk)*, a database of known people from the period – at King's College London. He is writing a history of Mercia

JOURNEYS

Books

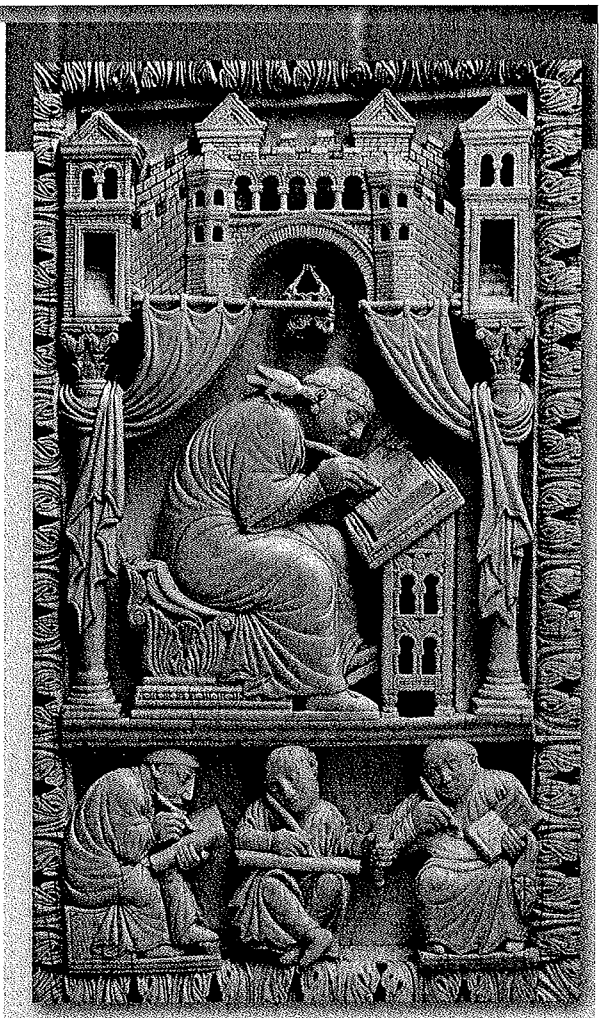
▶ **Ecclesiastical History of the English People** by Bede *(Penguin, 2003)*
▶ **The Anglo-Saxon Age: a Very Short Introduction** by J Blair *(Oxford, 2000)*
▶ **The Anglo-Saxons** by J Campbell (ed.) *(Penguin, 1991)*
▶ **The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England** by M Lapidge et al *(Wiley Blackwell, 1999)*
▶ "The impact of the Sutton Hoo discovery on the study of Anglo-Saxon history" by J Campbell, in his **The Anglo-Saxon State** *(Hambledon Continuum, 1999)*

Places to visit

▶ **Sutton Hoo, Woodbridge, Suffolk** *www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-suttonhoo*
▶ **Exhibition on Anglo-Saxon feasting** at Sutton Hoo (14 March to 1 November). Features artefacts loaned from the British Museum
▶ **The British Museum** in London displays most of the finds from Sutton Hoo, *www.britishmuseum.org*

On the podcast

Listen to National Trust archaeologist **Angus Wainwright** talk more about Sutton Hoo on May Pod 1 (online from 30 April)
▶ **www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast.asp**



An ivory plate (dated 990) showing Pope Gregory I with three scribes. Gregory promoted the conversion of Anglo-Saxons to Christianity

Portrait of King Alfred the Great within an illuminated capital letter, from a 14th-century copy of his laws

THE ANGLO-SAXONS

A CONDENSED HISTORY

THE FIRST CENTURIES of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain are so obscure that very little can be said about them with any certainty (not that this has prevented some tireless academics from saying much). After the withdrawal of the **Roman army** from Britain in AD 410, peoples from Germany and Scandinavia are known to have settled here. Marked by an almost complete lack of evidence, by 597 an area which under the Romans had been **urbanised, monetarised, and Christianised**, had become rustic, had no real currency and was largely pagan.

In 596, inspired by some Anglian slaves he had seen in the marketplace in Rome, **Pope Gregory** despatched a group of missionaries to Britain to convert the Anglo-Saxons. Over the following 90 years gradually the different kingdoms accepted the new faith but not without occasional resistance – the huge pagan-style burial at **Sutton Hoo** appears to hail from a time when Christianity was in the land but not quite in everybody's hearts.

Politically, the general (though by no means consistent) pattern of the period 600–900 was that a large number of small polities gradually conquered or merged with each other. Some, like **Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex,** also continued to expand their interests at their 'Celtic' neighbours' expense. This was not an easy task: the Northumbrians were pushed back by the **Picts at Nechtansmere in 685**, and the Mercians would resort to buildings **Offa's Dyke** against the Welsh.

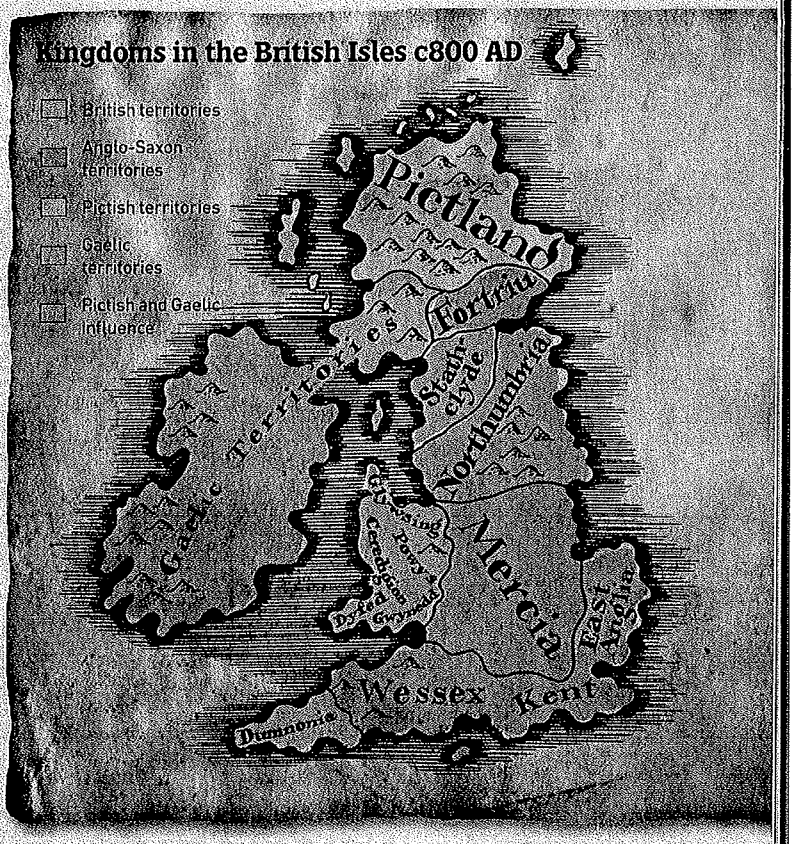
By the death of Offa of Mercia (796), only five kingdoms remained: Wessex, Essex, Mercia, East Anglia and Northumbria. Offa had conquered Kent, Sussex and East Anglia, and his successors inherited these gains. But in the 820s **Wessex invaded the southern domains** and an insurrection in East Anglia drove the Mercians out. There the status quo remained until 865 when it was violently disturbed by **Danish armies**, commonly known as Vikings. Their forces swiftly conquered East Anglia, Northumbria, part of Mercia and very nearly Wessex until the organisational prowess (and good fortune) of **Alfred the Great** of Wessex (who ruled from 871 to 899) halted their advance.

A much ignored moment in English history occurred in c879 when, after centuries of rivalry, Mercia accepted Alfred's lordship and a **'kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons'** was born. This union, forged in the face of threats from Danish armies, was then inherited, albeit shakily, by Alfred's son, Edward (ruled 899 to 924). Edward set about the conquest of the Danelaw, extending his power into the Midlands and East Anglia.

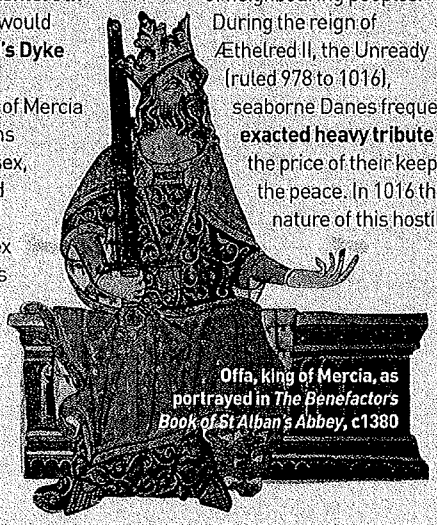
In turn Edward's son, **Athelstan** (ruled 924 to 939) 'completed' the task begun in earnest by his father and, in 927, conquered Northumbria. With fewer proximal rivals, the unified kingdom of England flourished. During the mid- and late tenth century it developed a **highly organised and centralised coinage**, established royal patronage over episcopal and abbatial appointments and extended the West Saxon system of shires to the newly acquired parts of the kingdom.

Such administrative and economic success once again attracted the envious eyes of neighbouring peoples. During the reign of Æthelred II, the Unready (ruled 978 to 1016), seaborne Danes frequently **exacted heavy tribute** as the price of their keeping the peace. In 1016 the nature of this hostility shifted. King Cnut of Denmark (ruled 1016–1035) defeated Æthelred's son Edmund at the Battle of Assandun, receiving half of England for his victory and succeeding to the rest on Edmund's death a few weeks later. **Cnut's North Sea Empire** was inherited by his son, Harthacnut, who ruled until 1042, at which time the kingdom reverted to Æthelred's son, **Edward the Confessor** (ruled 1042 to 1066).

Along with 1966, 1066 is perhaps one of the most recognisable dates in English history. It is also one of the **cleanest period breaks in the whole of world history.** The future of the English language, the make-up of the English aristocracy, and the direction of English political culture were altered in a few hours at Hastings on 14 October 1066 when William of Normandy defeated and killed King Harold. William sealed his victory with a coronation in London on Christmas Day that same year (aping **Charlemagne's imperial crowning** in Rome, 266 years before), thus beginning the age of the Anglo-Normans.

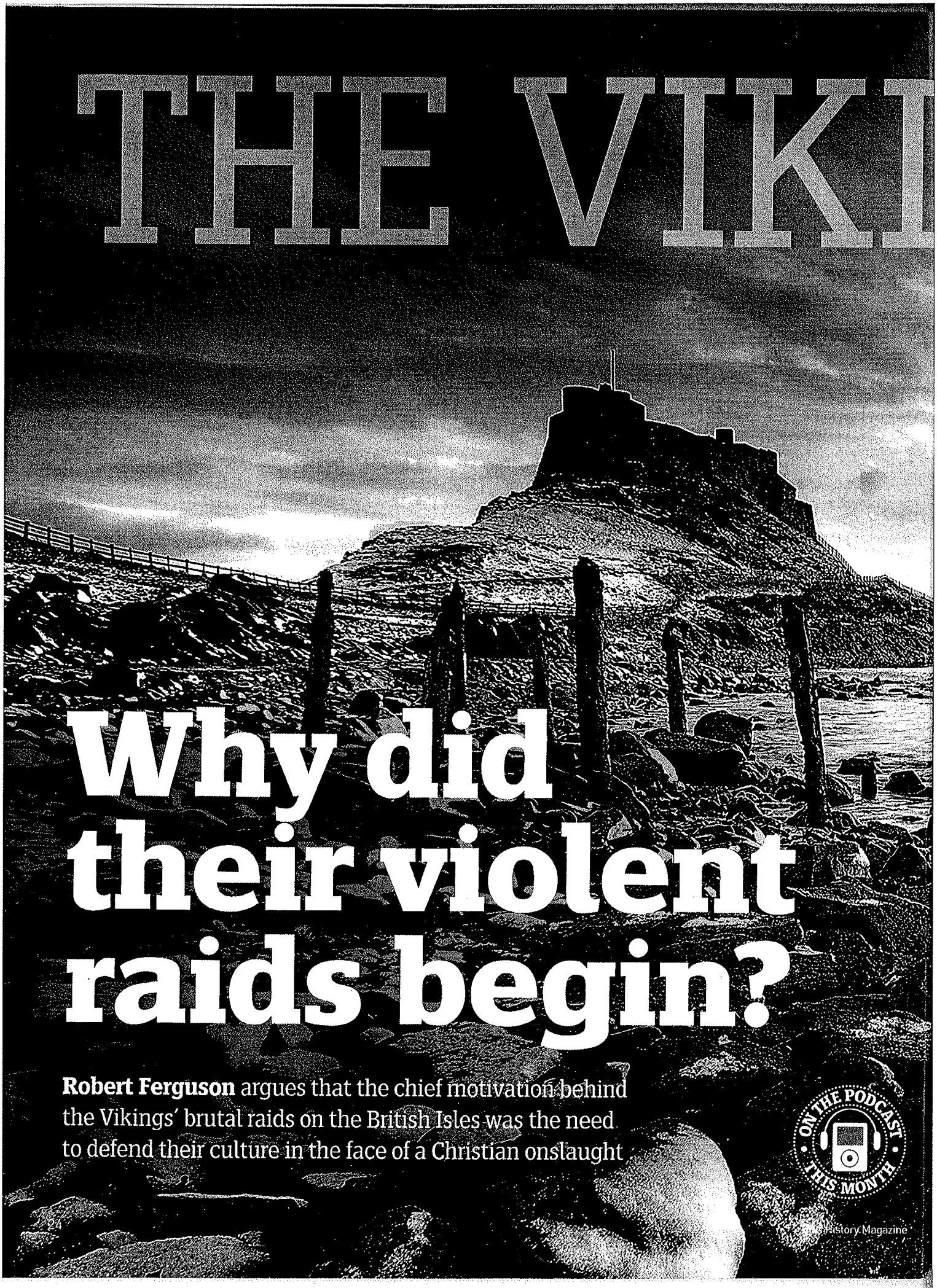


A silver penny showing Cnut, c1035, who ruled a veritable North Sea Empire, including England



Offa, king of Mercia, as portrayed in *The Benefactors Book of St Alban's Abbey*, c1380

Edward the Confessor (centre) at a banquet



BBC History, December 2009

NGS

ON A CLEAR DAY a Viking longship at sea could be seen some 18 nautical miles away. With a favourable wind that distance could be covered in about an hour, and that is perhaps all the time the monks at Lindisfarne had to prepare themselves for the attack that signalled the start of the violence associated with the onset of the Viking age:

"We and our fathers have now lived in this fair land for nearly 350 years, and never before has such an atrocity been seen in Britain as we have now suffered at the hands of a pagan people. Such a voyage was not thought possible. The church of St Cuthbert is spattered with the blood of the priests of God, stripped of all its furnishings, exposed to the plundering of pagans – a place more sacred than any in Britain."

The extract is from a letter, written in the wake of the attack, to King Ethelred of Northumbria by Alcuin. Alcuin had been a monk in York before accepting an invitation in 781 to join Charlemagne at his court in Aachen, where he became the Frankish king's leading spiritual advisor.

Historians have been inclined to take Alcuin's astonishment at the raid at face value, and supposed the Vikings to be a wholly unknown quantity. Yet in the same letter Alcuin rebuked Ethelred and his courtiers for aping the fashions of the heathens: "Consider the luxurious dress, hair and behaviour of leaders and people," he urged the king. "See how you have wanted to copy the pagan way of cutting hair and beards. Are not these the people whose terror threatens us, yet you want to copy their hair?"

The obvious conclusion is that, at the time of the raid, the Northumbrians were already familiar with their Norwegian visitors. What was new was the violence. ➤

The 'holy island' of Lindisfarne just off the coast of Northumberland. A savage raid on the island's monastery in 793 heralded the start of England's Viking era

STEVE BOOTH

Lindisfarne turned out to be the start of a wave of similar attacks on monasteries in northern Britain. Alcuin, with his local knowledge, warned the religious communities at nearby Wearmouth and Jarrow to be on their guard: "You live by the sea from whence this plague first came".

In 794, Vikings "ravaged in Northumbria, and plundered Ecgfrith's monastery at Donemuthan". The 12th-century historian Symeon of Durham identified this as the monastery at Jarrow, and reported that its protector, St Cuthbert, had not let the heathens go unpunished, "for their chief was killed by the English... And these things befell them rightly, for they had gravely injured those who had not injured them."

Shetland and Orkney were probably overrun during this first wave of violence and the indigenous population of Picts wiped out so swiftly that local place names and the names of natural phenomena such as rivers and mountains vanished, to be replaced by Scandinavian names.

Ireland and the Western Isles of Scotland suffered too. *The Annals of Ulster* report the burning in 795 of the monastery at Rechru, and the Isle of Skye "overwhelmed and laid waste". Iona was attacked for a first time in 795 and again in 802. In a third raid in 806 the monastery was torched and the community of 68 wiped out. Work started the following year on a safe refuge for the revived community at Kells in Ireland.

A 14th-century manuscript showing Abd ar-Rahman I, who helped make Islam a force to be reckoned with in Europe in the eighth century

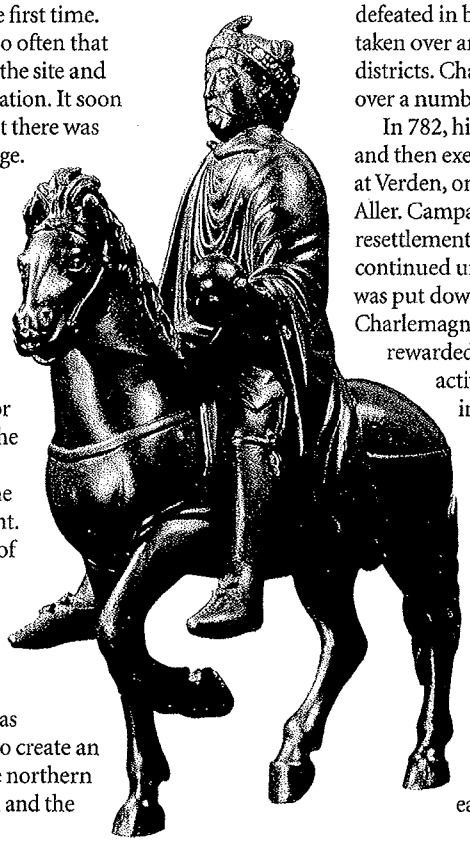
In 799 the island monastery of Noirmoutier off the north-west coast of France was attacked for the first time. By 836 it had been raided so often that its monks also abandoned the site and sought refuge in a safer location. It soon become clear, however, that there was no such thing as a safe refuge.

In 782, Charlemagne's army forcibly baptised and then executed 4,500 Saxons

Why such hatred, and why 793, rather than 743, or 843? We need to examine the political situation in northern Europe at the time to look for a triggering event.

At the commencement of the Viking age, the major political powers in the world were Byzantium in the east; the Muslims, whose expansion had taken them eastward as far as Turkistan and Asia Minor to create an Islamic barrier between the northern and southern hemispheres; and the Franks, who had become the dominant tribe among the successor states after the fall of the Roman empire in the west.

A c ninth to tenth-century bronze of Charlemagne



Charlemagne became sole ruler of the Franks in 771. He took seriously the missionary obligations imposed on him by his position as the most powerful ruler in western Christendom and expended a huge amount of energy on the subjugation of the heathen Saxons on his north-east border. In 772, his forces crossed into Saxon territory and destroyed Irminsul, the sacred tree that was their most holy totem. In 779, Widukind, the Saxon leader, was defeated in battle at Bocholt and Saxony taken over and divided into missionary districts. Charlemagne himself presided over a number of mass baptisms.

In 782, his armies forcibly baptised and then executed 4,500 Saxon captives at Verden, on the banks of the river Aller. Campaigns of enforced resettlement followed, but resistance continued until a final insurrection was put down in 804. By this time Charlemagne had already been rewarded for his missionary activities by Pope Leo III who in 800 crowned him imperator in Rome, emperor not of a geographical area nor even of a collection of peoples but of the abstract conception of Christendom as a single community.

With their physical subjugation complete, the cultural subjugation of the Saxons followed: Death was the penalty for eating meat during Lent; ➢

AKG IMAGES/ART ARCHIVE/ENGLISH HERITAGE

Timeline: England and the Viking empire

782

Charlemagne's Christian armies forcibly **baptise and then behead 4,500 heathen Saxon prisoners** at Verden on the banks of the river Aller.

A 14th-century illumination depicts Charlemagne at war with the Saxons

793

The raid on Lindisfarne is the first in a series of terrorist attacks on 'soft' Christian targets in the north of Britain.

The Vikings attack Lindisfarne on a picture stone (c800)

851

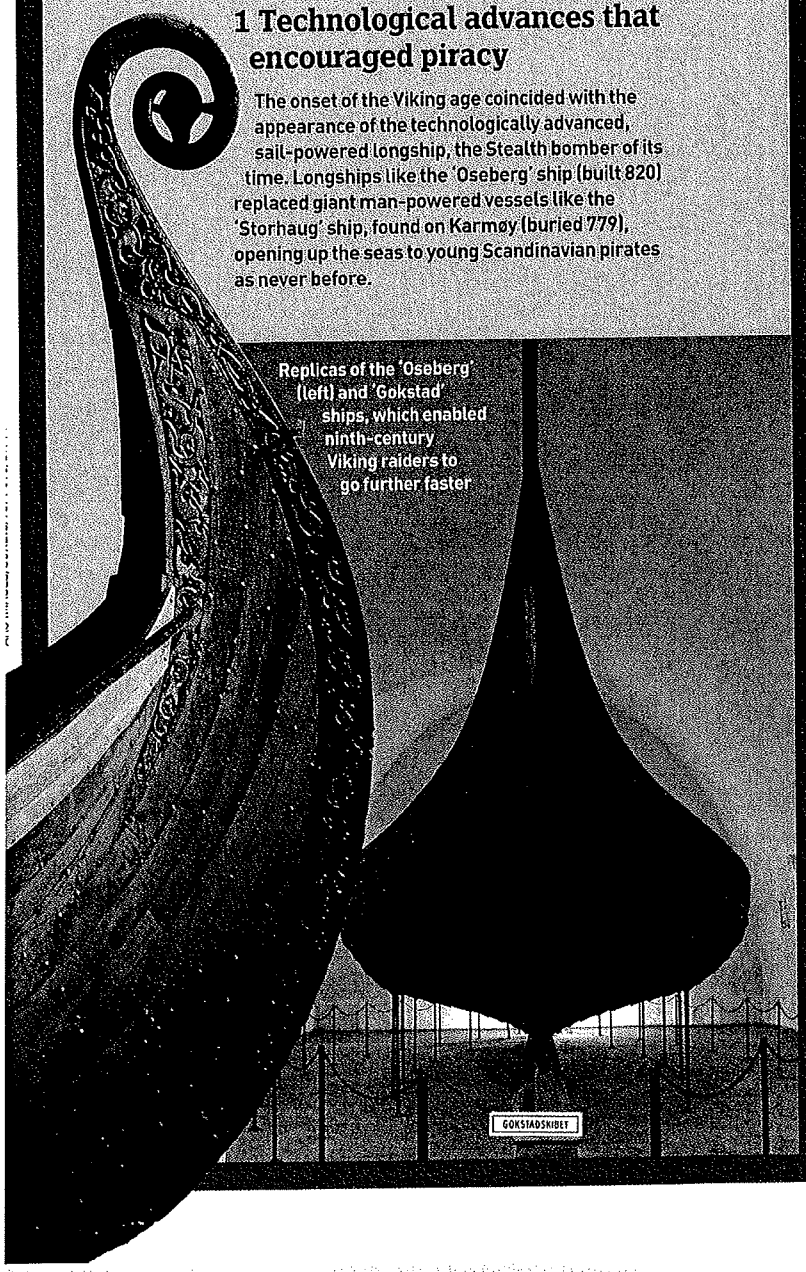
For the first time since raiding began on mainland England, **a Viking army doesn't return home** after the summer but spends the winter camped at Thanet.

Three other explanations for Viking violence

Faster ships, internal strife and new trade links may also have helped trigger the raids

1 Technological advances that encouraged piracy

The onset of the Viking age coincided with the appearance of the technologically advanced, sail-powered longship, the Stealth bomber of its time. Longships like the 'Oseberg' ship (built 820) replaced giant man-powered vessels like the 'Storhaug' ship, found on Karmøy (buried 779), opening up the seas to young Scandinavian pirates as never before.



Replicas of the 'Oseberg' (left) and 'Gokstad' ships, which enabled ninth-century Viking raiders to go further faster

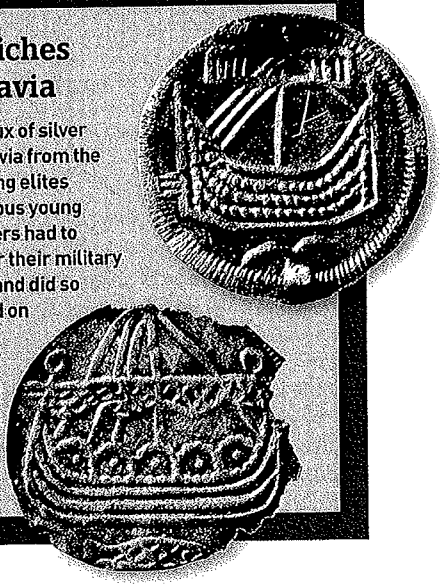
A detail from the Oseberg burial mound showing Vikings fighting

2 Poverty and overpopulation

In his history *On the Manners and Deeds of the First Norman Dukes* (995–1015), Dudo of St Quentin wrote that, in former times in the Scandinavian homelands, quarrels over land and property were resolved by "the drawing of lots". Losers were condemned to a life abroad where "by fighting they can gain themselves countries".

3 A flood of riches into Scandinavia

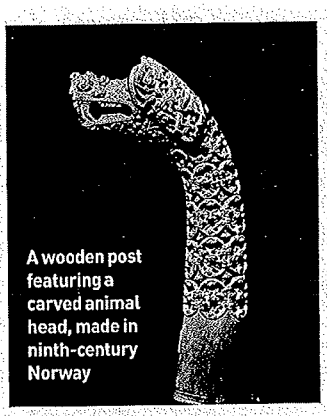
Trading led to an influx of silver bullion into Scandinavia from the Islamic world, creating elites around which ambitious young men gathered. Leaders had to reward these men for their military support and loyalty, and did so by plundering abroad on the grand scale.



These two silver coins were minted in Hedeby, Sweden in 825

865

The 'Great Heathen Army' lands in England. Within 15 years, much of eastern England is under the rule of its leaders. Scandinavian political organisation and law-codes are introduced.



A wooden post featuring a carved animal head, made in ninth-century Norway

878

The Wessex king Alfred formally recognises **the Viking chieftain Guthrum as king of East Anglia**. Guthrum agrees to baptism, taking and using the Christian and Anglo-Saxon name Athelstan.

A c1390 vellum shows Harald I Fairhair greeting Guthrum