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ARTHURIAN TOPONYMICS: FOLK TRADITION OR ANTIQUARIAN INVENTION?

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The article reviews Scott Lloyd's survey of Arthurian place names in Wales, and the background to this material in the literature and scholarship of the modern and medieval periods. The reviewer presents an overview of Lloyd's scope and methodology, situating it within the context of current trends in the wider field of Celtic studies. Lloyd's survey shows that Arthurian toponymics is a modern as much as a medieval problem. The mutual influence between the map-makers on one hand, and the scholars and story-tellers on the other, is best regarded as a dynamic work-in-progress, rather than a passive snapshot of timeless folk tradition. Lloyd's most significant discovery is the relative fluidity of Arthurian toponymics, with many of the place names in question first appearing on the cartographic or literary record no earlier than the 19th century. The case of the common Welsh place name *Arthur's Quoits* or *Coetan Arthur* is considered, and Lloyd's implication of a 17th century origin for this form is critically discussed. Attention is drawn to the alternating currents of scepticism and reconstructionism that have defined Arthurian scholarship and literature from the Tudor period onwards. The author then offers some concluding thoughts on Arthur's "ontological ambiguity," and the powerful stimulus this seems to have exerted on topographical and historiographical speculation, both modern and medieval.

Keywords: Celtic languages, Welsh place names, historical toponymics, Arthurian historiography, ethnotponymy, topographic legend.

Over a hundred and fifty number of place names referring to — or associated with — the legendary figure of King Arthur can be found on modern maps of Wales. To this, dozens more could be added which have subsequently fallen from use, whose existence we can infer from earlier documentary records. The complex diachronic synergy between landscape and the human imagination that underlies this toponymic phenomenon presents a familiar set of problems for students of geographical onomastics. But what is unusual in this particular case is the depth and volume of the evidence-base involved. Not only do we have references to Arthurian place names extending over nine hundred years or more, we also have an unusually well-documented literary record of the evolving Arthurian tradition: a core-sample, as it were, of the narrative culture that inspired these interpretations of the landscape of Wales.

Surveying what amounts to a millennium of Arthurian literature and toponymics would represent a formidable undertaking by any estimation. That this has been accomplished clearly and comprehensively in less than two hundred and fifty pages makes this forensic study by Scott Lloyd an unusually valuable resource for Arthurian scholars and place name historians alike. Beginning with the earliest medieval source material (the textual tradition known as *Historia Brittonum*); taking in the renaissance chronicles of Ellis Gruffydd and Humphrey Llwyd, via the various critics and defenders of the Galfredian British History, to the romantic antiquarianism of Iolo Morgannwg: Lloyd's work leads us eventually up to the short-lived heyday of modern Arthurian scholarship, as pioneered by Professor John Rhŷs at the beginning of the 20th century, and subsequently bought to a wider readership by writers such as Geoffrey Ashe and Leslie Alcock. Following this, a brief but informative history of Welsh cartography is presented: beginning with the fieldwork of the 17th-century historian John Speed (1609), and concluding with the great Ordnance Survey project, which represents a more or less continuous series of maps of Wales (hand-drawn and printed) extending from the mid-19th century up to the present day.

As Lloyd's survey makes clear, Arthurian toponymics is a modern as much as a medieval problem. The mutual influence between the map-makers on one hand, and the scholars and story-tellers on the other, is best regarded as a dynamic work-in-progress, rather than a passive snapshot of timeless folk tradition. One of Lloyd's most revealing discoveries is that "the nineteenth century provides more attestations of Arthurian place names than any preceding century" (p. 125). This is an arresting fact, which is amply borne out by the gazetteer on pp. 167–207, in which a comprehensive index of Arthurian place names appearing on modern maps of Wales is listed: with the earliest documented occurrence of each form being noted, along with the relevant community and OS grid references.

The unstable boundaries of this toponymic dataset is neatly illustrated by Lloyd's first entry in the gazetteer: *Arthur's Quoit* in Anglesey (Llanyfyrog SH 4368575). The landmark in question, a distinctive glacial erratic, appears to have been traditionally known as *Maen Chwyf*, the Rocking Stone, and this was the name that it was given

in the first series of inch-to-a-mile OS maps of the area, published in 1840. However, in a travel guide published in 1861, an alternative name, *Arthur's Quoit*, is also mentioned, and this is the name that continued to be used for the landscape feature in subsequent Ordnance Survey maps of the area.

Does this mean that the name owes its origin to the romantic imagination of a late Victorian travel writer? The answer is probably no. As the gazetteer makes clear, landscape features bearing this name (or more commonly, the Welsh equivalent *Coetan Arthur*) can be found in almost every part of Wales. Visualising megaliths and other distinctive formations to be the playthings of a giant Arthur seems to have been a well-established reflex in Welsh ethnotoponymics (if we might be permitted to talk in such terms). Nonetheless, Lloyd suggests at various points that the historical roots of this cultural conception need not have been especially deep. *Coetan Arthur* is first noted as a place name in the 17th century, and it is only from the 1830s onwards that complete accounts specifically describing Arthur throwing rocks from mountain tops first begin to emerge in gentlemen's travel guides and magazines such as *The Cambrian Quarterly*. However, one would hesitate to offer unqualified agreement with Lloyd's assertion that there is a "complete absence of folk tradition" connecting Arthur with topographical phenomena of this kind before the 17th century (p. 111). We would need, at the very least, to consider the evidence of the episode in the medieval *Vita Cadocii* (written around 1100 AD) in which Arthur is represented as playing dice with his companions on a mountaintop. This text is discussed by Lloyd in his survey of the earliest Arthurian sources (p. 20), but the possible connection to the quoit-throwing motif of later topographic legend is not established. Other medieval accounts including *Culhwch ac Olwen* (c. 1175), Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1137) and the 14th-century *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* also represent Arthur and his companions wrestling with giants on mountain tops or exhibiting giant-like characteristics of their own. While these possible medieval antecedents cannot be taken regarded as conclusive proof of a pre-modern background for all the *Coetan Arthur* place names, they certainly would not preclude the possibility that an oversized Arthur might have been throwing rocks from mountains in the Welsh topographic imagination for some time before Edward Lhwyd first began recording this form in his additions to Camden's *Britanniae* published in 1695.

This raises the problematic question which implicitly runs throughout this study. To what extent can we assume an identity between the first *recorded* instance of a place name (or narrative tradition) and the actual *origin* of these forms? This in turn points back to the unquantifiable problem of the popular-oral tradition — very much the "dark matter" of pre-modern cultural history — the possible influence of which (for a number of complex reasons) the Celtic Studies academy has tended to downplay in recent decades. Lloyd, quite correctly, avoids any single answer to the question, but his assumptions are nonetheless informed by this fashion for positivist scepticism. For example, in line with the general consensus of modern scholarship (*pace* David Dumville [1977]), Lloyd confidently ascribes the "origin" of the legend of Arthur "to a work produced

in North Wales in the ninth century,” i.e. the *Historia Brittonum* (p. 157). The idea that we can trace *all* the medieval and modern expressions of the Arthurian complex back to this one text is in fact considerably more questionable than Lloyd’s assertion would tend to acknowledge. Likewise, the suggestion that there was *no* knowledge of Arthur in pre-Galfredian Wales beyond “a very small literary circle” (p. 79) is hardly uncontentious. Anglo-Norman writers such as William of Malmesbury and Gerald of Wales seem to have been uncomfortably aware of excitable talk of Arthur among the native populations of Wales and the wider Brythonic world, which — during the 12th century in particular — seems to have developed into a scenario of millenarian deliverance, tapping into the nationalistic discontent occasioned by the Anglo-Norman appropriation of territory and geopolitical control. What Gerald of Wales dismissed as “this foolish talk of Arthur” would of course subsequently establish itself as part of the ethnic stereotype of the Welshman in English and Continental discourse (as Lloyd correctly points out on p. 97), but this fact can hardly be cited as evidence that such talk did not take place at all, or indeed that it reflects anything other than lively popular interest in the legendary king in medieval Wales — at least among certain sections of society.

But as the earliest toponymic evidence tends to confirm (mapped by Lloyd on p. 97), interest in Arthur was not universal throughout Wales. Arthurian place names are fairly evenly distributed across the border region, and also throughout the upland areas of South and Mid Wales. The Northwest, however, seems to have been remained curiously indifferent to the Once and Future King: a preference that can be seen in the literature as well as in the toponymic record.

Indeed, such social and geographic ambivalence seems to have been a well-established feature of this legendary complex. There are strong indications that earliest Arthur occupied a similar cultural niche to the supernatural Gaelic hero, Finn Mac Cumhail — a view that was first put forward by Anton Van Hamel [1934] and which remains broadly supported by the contemporary academic consensus. Heroes such as Finn belong to the popular rather than aristocratic milieu, and in early medieval Wales it is clear that Arthur also hovered on the fringes of respectability. His absence from the 10th-century Harleian genealogies is one of the strongest indicators we have that he was not considered a credible ancestor figure within the elite court communities of North and West Wales — in contrast, for example, to Urien Rheged or Magnus Maximus, both of whom are inserted (however spuriously) into these royal lineages. However, it was perhaps this very marginality that gave Arthur his utility as a kind of historiographic infill. As Thomas Charles-Edwards plausibly suggested over twenty years ago, the structural purpose of the Arthurian battle list in Chapter 56 of the *Historia Brittonum* appears to have been to bridge the gap between the sub-Roman milieu of Germanus and Vortigern on one hand, and the records of the early medieval North (of which “the books of Bede” would have been a stimulating new addition) on the other [Charles-Edwards, 1991, 21 *ff.*]. It was no accident that Arthur was placed alongside the preternaturally long-lived St Patrick, as a British Joshua to Patrick’s Moses. And it

was in this capacity that the legendary warlord was able to elbow aside the historical Ambrosius as the victor at Badon, thereby confirming his reputation as a champion of the British against the Saxon invader and — perhaps for the first time — establishing a presence in South East Wales.

Nonetheless, despite this sprinkling of historical respectability, Arthur never quite seems to have been taken entirely seriously in the elite bardic culture of the Central Middle Ages, or by its royal patrons in the court communities of Northwest Wales. This was a sentiment that seems to have lingered into the later Middle Ages. As Lloyd points out (pp. 89–90), with the revival of the *darogan* tradition of political prophesy that followed the disasters of the early 15th century, the returning hero of these millenarian fantasies was never Arthur himself (as might have been expected) but rather a series of localised but more obviously historic figures from the early and central Middle Ages: individuals such as Cadwaladr ap Cadfan or Owain Lawgoch. It may have been the case, as Lloyd comes close to suggesting (e.g. p. 78), that the Arthurian ‘brand’ had been tainted by the extent of Anglo-Norman and Continental interest. For whatever reason, in times of profound national crisis, it was these more specifically Welsh heroes who tended to be invoked by the bardic prophesiers. The Once and Future King, whose bones Henry II claimed to have exhumed at Glastonbury Abbey, appears to have lacked the depth or resonance of these local royal ancestors.

The Tudor period saw a revival of Arthurian interest at the English court, with the first printed edition of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* published in 1508. It is in this context that we find what might be considered earliest salvos of modern Arthurian scholarly debate. Polydore Vergil (1470–1555), an Italian scholar based at the court of Henry VII, was perhaps the first to consider the so-called British History from a critical humanist perspective. His modest but decisive rejection of the myth of Trojan origins and the historicity of Arthur in turn provoked a passionate defence of Geoffrey’s work by English and Welsh scholars such as John Leland and Sir John Prise.

In this dialectic, we can find the earliest exemplars of the two predominant attitudes that have continued to define Arthurian studies to this day: that of critical scepticism on one hand; and a more conservative and accomodating attitude towards received tradition on the other. The latter school of thought, in defence of its positions, has often sought to extract significance from data types that would not usually be admitted as valid by more sceptically-minded scholars: frequently arguing on the basis of the “combined weight” of evidence from sources such as medieval hagiography or topographic legend. This reconstructivist tendency has at times led to some genuinely new and useful perspectives on the evidence involved, but no less frequently such approaches have led off the narrow road of academic critical study into what might be most neutrally described as a mythogenic role: some fine examples of which are cited in this study (e.g. pp. 142–143).

Some of the most engaging passages in Lloyd’s book are to be found in this disclosure of the evolution (or “genealogy,” in the Nietzschean sense) of our modern

response to the history and the landscape of Wales. The geographic, linguistic and folkloristic surveys of Edward Lhwyd provided a rich sediment of toponymic material which referenced in the gazetteer. They are also of considerable interest in themselves (as Lloyd shows on pp. 107–111); as is the travel-writing of Thomas Pennant (1726–1798). Pennant's *Tour of Wales* would continue to define the standard itinerary for much of the 19th century (pp. 126–127). In many respects, it is through his eyes that we still see the landscape of Wales. Rather less is said here about the Romantic antiquarian Iolo Morganwg, in whose highly idiosyncratic interpretation of the medieval Welsh literary tradition Arthur had a surprisingly limited presence (pp. 132–133). Nonetheless, the inclusion of a short summary of Iolo and his works is useful reminder of the creative energy of reconstructive scholarship that has persistently surrounded the legendary king. This is an important point to which we will return.

Lloyd reveals with particular clarity how the Arthurian meme has waxed and waned over these medieval and early modern centuries — and how each of these successive phases has left its residue on the toponymy of Wales. A significant peak of Arthurian enthusiasm followed in the wake of the republication of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (1817) and Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* (1832), Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion* (1849) and Joseph Ritson's *Life of King Arthur* (1825) — the latter being one of the first modern attempts to analyse the origins of the Arthurian legend. But interest in Arthur — and medieval Celtic culture in general — was sustained throughout the Victorian period, finally culminating in the scholarship of Sir John Rhŷs [1901].

As Lloyd correctly notes, the serious academic consideration of the historical Arthur came to an abrupt and rather brutal end with the publication of David Dumville's article *Sub-Roman Britain: History and Legend* in 1977. Dumville's analysis was clinical but aggressively polemic, and founded on a formidable body of research which included his own doctoral thesis on the *Historia Brittonum* [Dumville, 1975]. Now the latter has become available online (courtesy of University of Edinburgh), it has been possible to examine Dumville's workings in rather more detail. It may soon be the case that the rather uncritical acceptance of his central hypothesis, i.e. that the form of the *Historia Brittonum* (as well as much of its content) owes its origin to a single act of compilation that took place in Gwynedd in 829/831 AD, may itself be subject to a degree of re-evaluation, with a corresponding shift in the view of the provenance and significance of the Arthurian sections of that textual tradition. But until that time, we must accept the state of affairs as described by Lloyd, i.e. that any discussion of possible Arthurian historicity (or any pre-9th century Arthurian tradition) remains firmly off the academic agenda.

At this point Lloyd makes the following interesting observation itself: “the gap left by the professional historians was soon filled by amateur historians arguing for various ‘real’ Arthurs” (p. 142). Lloyd quotes Higham's rather patronising conclusion that most of these projects amount to an effort to establish “local identity and validation in the present” [Higham, 2002, 34] before offering an overview of a selection of these

projects for the reader to judge for themselves. This amateur scholarship is indeed defined by a lurid profusion of extraordinary hypotheses, and characterised (in many cases) by an astonishing readiness to join the dots between some of the most unpromising sources of evidence. While it is easy to sneer at such efforts, the compulsive energy that propels these armchair antiquarians and keyboard warriors is in itself a remarkable phenomenon, which perhaps has something to tell us about the appeal of the figure of Arthur at an unconscious level: positioned as he is at one of the leakier points on the boundary between historical fact and mythical fantasy. Something of the same licence to dream opened up by Arthur's ontological ambiguity may also explain why it was so often Arthur — rather than, say, Cadwaladr or Owain — whom the Welsh countryman (in the middle ages or the early modern period) could so readily imagine throwing boulders from the mountain-top, or chasing wild boar up a glacial valley. Lloyd's book offers a comprehensive and workable overview across this complex phenomenon, the insights from which may have some light to shed on comparable situations involving the diachronic interaction of folk narrative, speculative scholarship and ethnotoponymics.

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**АРТУРОВСКАЯ ТОПОНИМИЯ:
ФОЛЬКЛОРНАЯ ТРАДИЦИЯ ИЛИ ВЫМЫСЕЛ ИСТОРИКОВ?**

Рец. на кн.: *Lloyd S. The Arthurian Place Names of Wales / S. Lloyd. — Cardiff : Univ. of Wales Press, 2017. — xii, 242 p.*

В статье анализируется книга Скотта Ллойда, посвященная артуровской топонимии Уэльса, а также источники рассматриваемого в ней топонимического материала, который извлечен из литературы и научных трудов современного и средневекового периодов. Рецензент предлагает обзор данных, представленных в рецензируемой книге, и используемой в ней методологии, помещая их в широкий контекст современных кельтологических исследований. Как показывает рецензируемая работа, «артуровские» мотивы в современной топонимии так же явственны, как и в Средневековье. При этом очевиден вклад в их формирование картографов, исследователей и разного рода рассказчиков, и это непрерывный, творимый, динамический процесс, а не устоявшийся, заданный «слепок» фольклорной традиции. Наиболее значительным открытием С. Ллойда рецензент считает обнаруженную им неоднородность артуровских топонимов, значительная часть которых возникает на картах и в литературных источниках не ранее XIX века. В рецензии отдельно рассматривается общеваллийский топоним *Arthur's Quoits*, или *Coetan Arthur*, а также дается критический анализ предложенной С. Ллойдом гипотезы о возникновении этого топонима в XVII веке. Рецензент обращает внимание на чередование скептических и «реконструкционистских» настроений в исследованиях и литературе разных периодов, посвященных фигуре короля Артура (начиная с эпохи Тюдоров). В заключении рецензент размышляет об «онтологической неопределенности» этого персонажа и о том, как сильно такая «неопределенность» повлияла на размышления средневековых и современных историков и топографов.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: кельтские языки, топонимия Уэльса, историческая топономастика, артуровская историография, этнотопонимия, топографические предания.

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