

ARTHUR

AND THE ANGLO-SAXON WARS



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ILLUSTRATED BY
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FRONT COVER: Sutton Hoo Helmet © The British
Museum

Dedication

For the 'Ahl al Yarmouk



1: Roman cavalry officer, c.AD 400
2: Roman cavalryman, c.AD 400
3: Sailors, Saxon Shore Fleet, 4th C
4: Junior officer, Roman infantry, early 5th C

- 1: Anglian king, early 7th C
2: Mercian warrior, 7th C
3, 4: Anglo-Saxon warriors, 7th C



- 1: Romano-British militiaman, 6th C
- 2: North British cavalryman, 6th C
- 3: Welsh tribal warrior, 5th-6th C





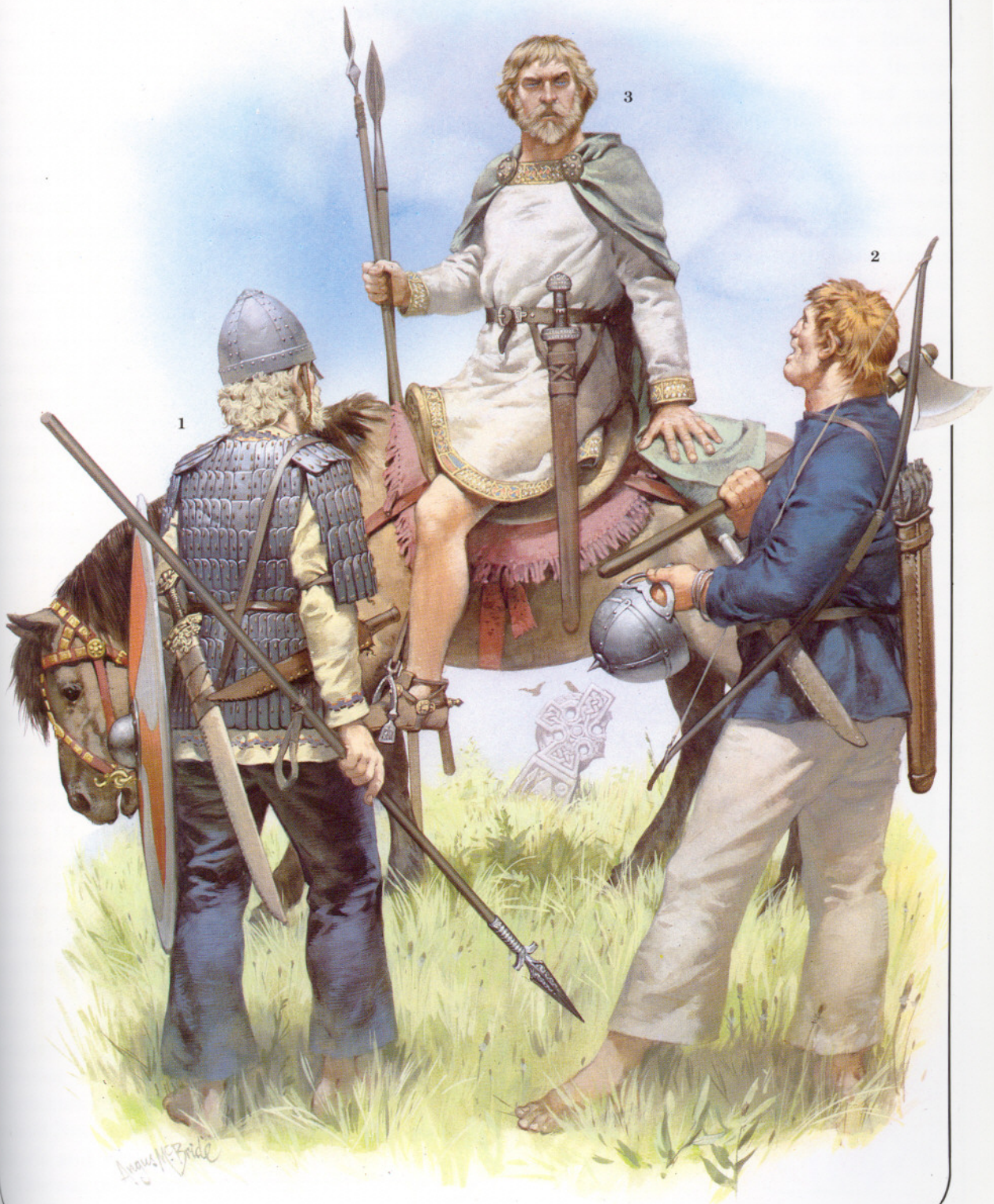
1: Pictish nobleman, 8th-9th C
2: Pictish or north British hunter, 8th C
3: North Pictish chieftain, 7th-9th C



- 1: English king, 9th C
2: Benedictine monk, 9th C
3: Northumbrian thegn, 8th-9th C

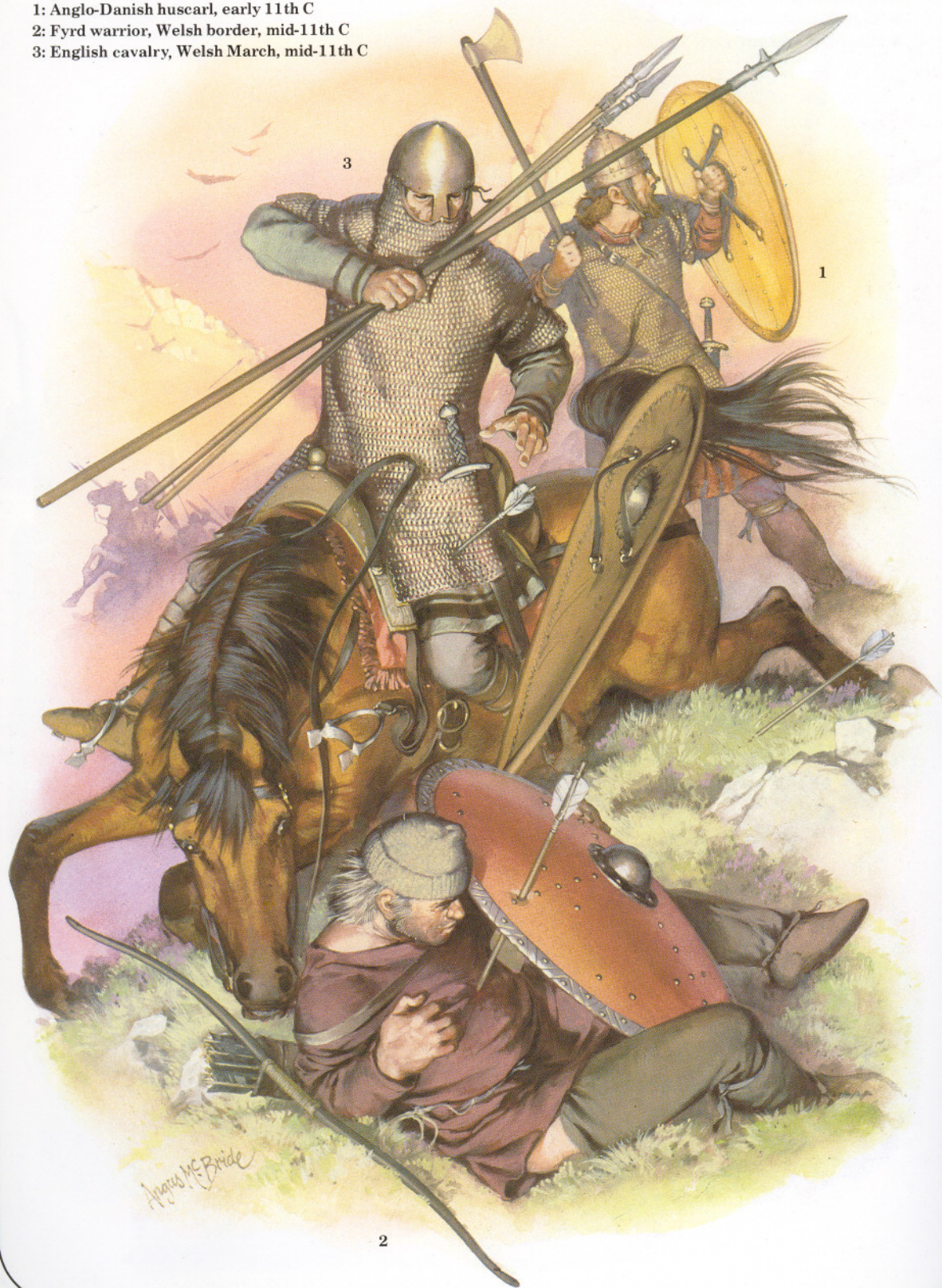


- 1: Scandinavian mercenary, 10th C
- 2: Anglo-Danish warrior, 9th-10th C
- 3: Hiberno-Norse jarl, early 11th C



Innes & Braid

- 1: Anglo-Danish huscarl, early 11th C
2: Fyrd warrior, Welsh border, mid-11th C
3: English cavalry, Welsh March, mid-11th C



Arthur and the Anglo-Saxon Wars

Introduction

The Arthurian Age—the Celtic Twilight—the Dark Ages—the Birth of England: these are the powerfully romantic names often given to one of the most confused yet vital periods in British history. It is an era upon which rival Celtic and English nationalisms frequently focus. How far, for example, were the Romano-Celtic culture and population of Britannia obliterated by invading Angle, Saxon and Jutish barbarians? Or are the British Isles still essentially Celtic, even though the larger part of their population now speaks a Germanic tongue?

Such questions will probably exercise historians and archaeologists for generations. But one thing is clear: it was an era of settlement, and of the sword. Since title to the land was both won and maintained by force of arms, the military or socio-military history of the early medieval period is of fundamental importance. Paradoxically it is an aspect which has received relatively little attention, with too many historians dismissing Anglo-Saxon and Celtic warfare as little more than a disorganised but bloody brawl.

This view now seems grossly oversimplified, yet great problems remain. Lack of evidence is one, and the difficulties posed by what little survives is another. Written sources tend to be unreliable. The late Roman *Notitia Dignitatum* military list was probably out of date for Britain. Histories range from the almost unintelligible, such as Gildas, to those written long after the event, such as Bede, Nennius, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the Pictish List of Kings. Military terminology can be equally misleading, since these sources often use anachronistic classical terms or fanciful poetic imagery. Pictorial representations, apart from their general crudity, pose exactly the same problems and often reflect Roman or Byzantine originals. Certainly the

craftsmen and artists who made them rarely worked 'from life'. Despite these difficulties, however, it now seems that warfare and weaponry in the so-called Dark Ages were more sophisticated than was once thought, as were the societies involved.

Chronology

(Anglo-Saxon victories in *italics*, Celtic victories in **bold type**, Norse victories underlined.)

AD

- 300 Capital of Roman Empire transferred to Constantinople (Istanbul).
- c.360–432 Egyptian-style monastic community established at Candida Casa on Solway Firth.
- 383 Many Roman troops withdrawn to Continent by Magnus Maximus.
- 407 Last Roman regular troops withdrawn from Britain.
- 410 Roman Emperor tells Britons to look to own defence.
- c.429 **Britons under St Germanus of Auxerre defeat Anglo-Saxon and Pictish pagan raiders in 'Alleluia' battle.**
- c.432 St Patrick's mission to Ireland.
- c.442–456 *Rebellion by Anglo-Saxon troops in south-east Britain.*
- c.446 'Groans of the Britons', appeal for help to General Aetius in Gaul. Plague ravages Britain.
- 449 Traditional 'arrival of Hengest and Horsa' in Kent.
- c.456 *Anglo-Saxons (and Jutes) of Kent defeat Britons at 'Crecaanford', Britons retreat to London.*

- c.464 Saxon king Adovacrius ruling area near Loire estuary in Gaul.
- c.468 British king Riothamus (Ambrosius Aurelianus?) fights Visigoths in Gaul.
- 476 Deposition of last Western Roman Emperor.
- 477 Traditional 'arrival of Aelle' in Sussex.
- c.500 Aelle of Sussex recognised as Bretwalda (senior Anglo-Saxon king).
- c.516 **Britons under Arthur defeat Anglo-Saxons (of Sussex?) at Mount Badon.**
- 520 Foundation of monastery at Clonard in Ireland.
- 520–550 Childebert, king of the Franks, attempts to dominate Anglo-Saxon kings?
- c.537 Traditional 'death of Arthur' at battle of Camlann.
- c.542 Bubonic plague ravages Europe.
- c.550 *Angles occupy Bamburgh, creation of kingdom of Bernicia.*
- 563 St Columba establishes monastery at Iona, start of Irish mission to Anglo-Saxons.
- c.577 *Wessex defeats Britons at 'Dyrham' and captures Bath, Gloucester and Cirencester.*
- 596–597 Foundation of Benedictine monastery at Canterbury and start of St Augustine's mission to Kent.
- c.600 *Northumbria defeats Strathclyde-Gododdin at Catterick.*
- c.615 *Northumbria defeats Britons near Chester.*
- 627–634 Northumbria converted to Christianity.
- c.628 Anglo-Saxon Hwicce (Gloucester) annexed by Mercia.
- 634 *Northumbria defeats Gwynned at Hexham.*
- 635 Bernicia, Deira and Celtic Elmet formally united as the kingdom of Northumbria.
- 653 Essex converted to Christianity.
- 655 Pagan Mercia defeated by Northumbria and converted to Christianity.
- 658 *Most of Somerset conquered by Wessex.*
- 664 Synod of Whitby.
- 679 Northumbria defeated by Mercia at Trent.
- 681–686 Sussex converted to Christianity.
- 685 **Northern Picts defeat Northumbrians at Dunnichen.**
- 686 Isle of Wight annexed by Wessex, conversion of this last Anglo-Saxon realm to Christianity.
- c.690–720 *Devon absorbed by Wessex.*
- 700–710 Lindsey absorbed by Mercia.
- c.730 Chiltern-Saeten (Chiltern Hills) annexed by Mercia.
- 741 King Oengus of the Picts defeats Scots of Dal Riata.
- 793 Lindisfarne monastery raided; first dated Norse attack.
- c.800 **Northumbria loses Dumfries to Strathclyde.**
- 814 *South Welsh Dumnonia (Cornwall) conquered by Wessex.*
- 816 *Welsh kingdom of Rhufuniog conquered by Mercia.*
- 841 *Norse found city of Dublin.*
- c.843 'Treachery of Scone', Southern Pictish

A relief from the Antonine Wall, c.AD 143, erected by Rome's Second Legion. The Picts are shown carrying square shields of possible Roman inspiration, but their nakedness is probably an artistic convention. (Nat.Mus. of Antiquities, Edinburgh)

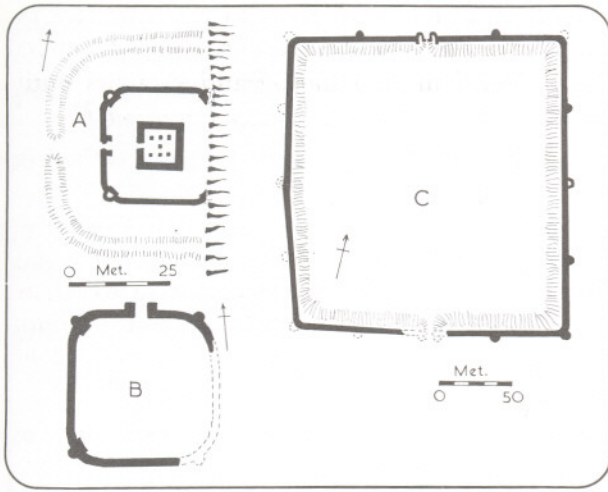


The British Isles
5th to 8th centuries

- Roman forts & signal stations
- Major Roman roads
- ~~~~ Major defensive dykes
- uuu Germanic burials c.420AD
- Approx. frontier c.796 AD
- KENT Kingdoms
- (FIB) Provinces or previous kingdoms
- ▨ Anglo-Saxon conquest to c.500AD
- ▩ Anglo-Saxon conquest to c.600AD
- ▧ Anglo-Saxon conquest to c.660AD



Note that the eastern coasts of Britain were more indented and marshy during the early Middle Ages

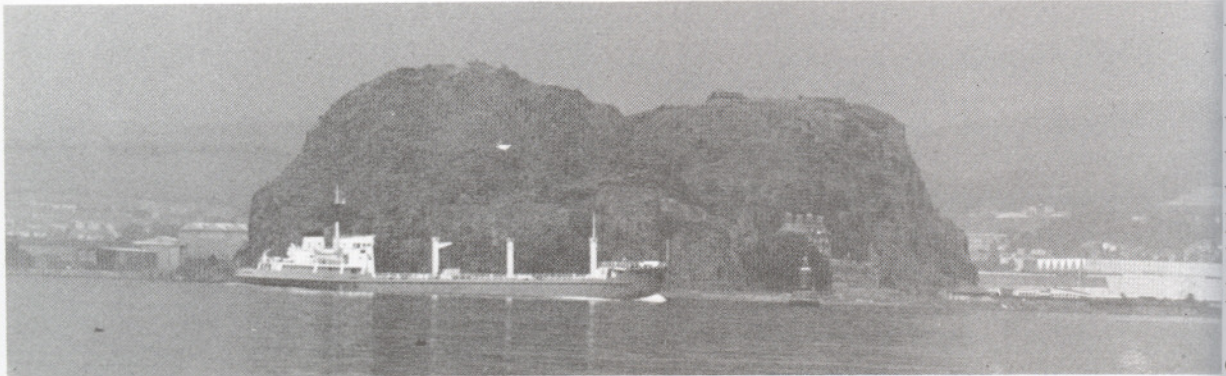


4th-century Roman fortifications: (A) Signal station at Scarborough; (B) Signal station without central tower, on Alderney; (C) Fort at Cardiff. (After Johnson)

- leaders murdered by Scots of Dal Riata. Picts put under Scottish king, formation of united kingdom of Alban.
- 865-867 Norse 'Great Army' raids across England, captures York.
- 870 Norse capture Dumbarton, Strathclyde capital.
- 871 *Alfred of Wessex halts Norse advance at battle of Ashdown.*
- 875-900 Norse settle in Galloway.
- 876 Norse begin to settle in England.
- 876-879 Norse force Alfred of Wessex to retreat to Athelney.
- 879 *Wessex defeats Norse of East Anglia.*
- c.910-920 **Northumbria loses Carlisle and northern Cumbria to Strathclyde.**
- 911 London and Home Counties north of Thames annexed by Wessex.
- 912-917 *Norse East Anglia conquered by Wessex.*

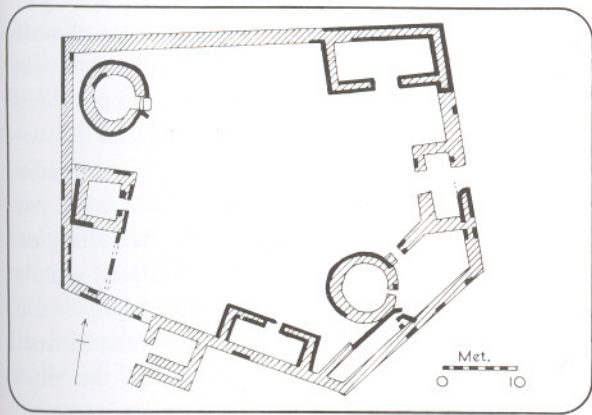
- 917-918 'Danish' (Norse) Mercia conquered by Wessex.
- 919 'English' Mercia annexed by Wessex.
- 919-927 Norse kingdom of York conquered by Wessex
- 920 Edward of Wessex recognised as senior king in Britain.
- 937 *Wessex defeats Celtic-Norse 'Grand Alliance' at Brunaburgh.*
- 956 Strathclyde loses Menteith and Lennox to Alban.
- 959 Unification of England under king Edgar of Wessex.
- 962 **Northumbria loses Edinburgh and Midlothian to Alban.**
- 973 **Northumbria cedes suzerainty of Lothian and 'Borders' to Alban.**
- 1006 *Alban defeated by Northumbria.*
- 1014 **Celtic-Irish defeat Norse and Norse-Irish at battle of Clontarf.**
- 1015 Strathclyde temporarily annexed by Alban.
- 1016 Knut the Great joins England to his 'empire' of Denmark and Norway.
- 1018 **Alban defeats Northumbria at Carham, annexes Lothian and 'Borders'.**
- 1034 Strathclyde finally annexed by Alban.
- 1038 Galloway annexed by Alban (effective creation of united kingdom of Scotland)
- 1062-1063 *Earl Harold of Wessex defeats Gruffydd, high king of Wales.*
- 1066 *Anglo-Saxons defeat Norse at Stamford Bridge. Normans defeat Anglo-Saxons at Hastings, conquer England.*

Dumbarton Rock is a volcanic plug overlooking the Clyde. Here the British kingdom of Strathclyde had its capital.



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Gruffydd, high
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its capital.

- 1068-1069 Unsuccessful Anglo-Saxon rising against Normans north of the Thames.
1081 Anglo-Saxon exiles in Byzantine service (Varangians) defeated by Normans of southern Italy at Dyrrhachium.
1098 Frontier of Norse Kingdom of the Isles agreed by treaty with Scotland.



4th-century defended hut group at Din Lligwy, Anglesey. Two of the rectangular buildings were iron-smelting workshops. (After Houlder)

The Arthurian Age

The End of Britannia

The last years of Roman rule saw Britain divided into four Provinces, with a belt of allied British tribes acting as a buffer between Hadrian's Wall and the Picts of the northern Highlands. These Roman provinces were defended by three military commands: the *Dux Britanniarum*, who commanded north Britannia and the Wall from his HQ at York; the *Comes litoris Saxonici* (Count of the Saxon Shore), who was responsible for the defences of the south-eastern coasts; and the more recently created *Comes Britanniarum* who led a mobile frontier force.

By the late 4th and early 5th centuries Hadrian's Wall had ceased to be a clearly defined frontier. It was now a ramshackle structure between forts which were more like armed and densely populated villages. The Wall itself, its turrets and mile-castles had been abandoned, and the forts were inhabited by the families of second-grade, and probably hereditary, frontier auxiliaries.

The most effective Roman troops were now cavalry. They generally fought in an Iranian style,

with lance rather than bow, as the influence of Turkish or Hunnish horse-archery would not be fully reflected in Romano-Byzantine tactics until the 5th century. The heavily armoured *cataphractii* were no longer seen only in the east of the Empire. Stirrups were not necessary for such 'shock-troopers', as their rôle remained that of breaking the foe's infantry or light cavalry rather than facing other heavy cavalry. Shields were rarely carried, as lances were often wielded with both hands. Spurs were, however, used. So were javelins, particularly by horsemen of Alan or Sarmatian descent.

Foot soldiers remained important. Light infantry carrying small shields fought as skirmishers with javelins, bows or slings. Armoured infantry fought in ranks carrying large shields, but were otherwise equipped much like the *cataphractii*. Archery seems to have been as important in Britannia as elsewhere in the Empire. The late Roman bow was descended from the so-called Scythian type, being of composite construction, about hip-high, double curved and with bone 'ears'. Many archers would have been of Arab, Syrian or Parthian ancestry, but it is also possible that the descendants of East African or Sudanese Blemys were stationed in Britain. The *sagittarii Gallicani* of Gaul may have had such African origins, for the *Notitia Dignitatum* shows two confronted Moorish heads as their shield emblem. There is little doubt that the Romans also had crossbows, but were such weapons for war or only for the hunt? A device for shooting short heavy arrows was used by some infantry, while Vegetius, writing around AD 385, mentioned *manubalistae* and *arcubalistae* as weapons for light troops. Two centuries later Byzantine troops were using the simple *solenarion* crossbow, and the weapon possibly survived north of Hadrian's Wall. Fragments of a crossbow were also found in a late Roman burial at Burbage, Wiltshire, in 1893.

Other late Roman weapons pose fewer problems. Relatively light *lanceae* javelins were thrown by ranks of infantry drawn up behind a shield wall, five normally being carried according to Vegetius. Axes are seen rarely as weapons in late Roman carvings, and the sword retained pride of place as a close-combat weapon. The short *semispatha* would generally have been used by the infantry while the longer Iranian-style *spatha* was more suitable for cavalry.



KEY LOCATIONS FEATURED IN THIS BOOK

In the minds of many the name 'King Arthur' conjures up images of a mystical monarch surrounded by his loyal knights. It is more likely that the real Arthur, if he truly existed, was a Romano-British warlord in the dark days that followed the collapse of Roman rule in Britain.

This book looks at the reality behind the myth of Arthur against the backdrop of invasion, as a nation was forged on the bloody anvil of war.

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