

ARTHUR'S NAME

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Of the many theories that have come in and out of fashion on the origin or etymology of the name Arthur, borne by the defender of Britain in the sixth century, the most popular and widespread notion is that his name is derived from that of an ancient Celtic god. In spite of its popularity and its mention in encyclopedias (*AAE* 1993; compare also Rhys 1891:25-48), this notion is untenable for two reasons. Firstly, Arthur would have been a Christian – or at the very least he would have needed Christian support – and would not have used a pagan name, especially in his struggle against pagans. Secondly, the name itself is nowhere to be found until after his death. We are in fact not dealing with a name established before Arthur's time, but with a title or epithet first used as an appellation by Arthur himself and imitated after him out of reverence for his memory.

Among scholars perhaps the most widely accepted (or least questioned) etymology derives the name from Latin *artorius* 'plowman', apparently independently of the Celtic god hypothesis (compare Bromwich 1978:274; also Stephens 1986:16). To call Arthur a plowman, however, is less than transparently descriptive (even in its astrological aspect – see below), and an obvious meaning would have been necessary given Arthur's position. Indeed, an obvious meaning would have been the name's very *raison d'être* – a rallying cry for the Britons and Romano-Britons in their resistance to the Anglo-Saxon migration (using the term pointedly as something between an invasion and infiltration – Chadwick 1963).

Whatever it meant, the epithet must have been recognizable both to Britons and to Romano-Britons. Let us begin then with the word *Arthur* and see where the form of the word itself leads us in Latin and in British. To accomplish this, we must start not with preconceived notions of what the name could have meant, but rather with the more mundane art of historical linguistics: Given the phonological shape of the name, what could have preceded it?

In approaching the problem in this more pedestrian manner, we will not arrive at anything that has not (at least in isolation) been suggested before and cited at least secondarily. By proceeding methodically from known linguistic fact in both Latin and British together, however, we might achieve a more credible conclusion.

*The Latin Etymology*

Let us begin, then, with the form Arthur as it is first attested in the *Gododdin*, a series of elegies in *Canu Aneirin* (The Song of Aneirin – see Williams 1938; facsimile reproduction in Huws 1989) for warriors killed at the Battle of Catraeth around A.D. 600 – a manuscript bearing marks of Late British, pre-Welsh composition (compare Koch 1985/86). The attested form Arthur is unacceptable for Latin. For one thing, the *-ur* ending is not a Latin termination for a masculine noun, particularly one adapted as the name of an individual. The normal ending *-us* (second declension masculine nominative singular) would have been necessary and was indeed

often added to non-Latin names to give them a Latin appearance. This would lead us to *\*Arthurus*.

Our next problem is with the *-th-*, which is not Latin at all. In fact, it would not even have been acceptable in the British contemporary with Arthur's early sixth century (a point to which we return in the next section). In between the time of Arthur and the composition of the *Gododdin*, however, the *-th-* representing the fricative [þ] developed from one of two sources: (1) the geminate *-tt-* as in British *\*cattos* 'cat' and resulting in the fricative *-th-* as in Welsh *cath* 'cat'; and (2) the combination *-rt-* as in the Latin root *part-* 'part' and resulting in the combination *-rth-* as in Welsh *parth* 'part'. We can thus extend *\*Arthurus* back to *\*Artturus* or far more likely back to *Arturus*.

In fact, the form *Arturus* is what is found in the earliest Latin reference of Nennius (1980:76) and Geoffrey of Monmouth (1844;157). With either form though, we already have a word that would have been recognized by any of Arthur's Latin-speaking contemporaries in beleaguered Britain. Of course, this was not the Classical Latin of Cicero (both had been dead for centuries), but the Late Latin of the sixth century. For at least a hundred years, the pertinent changes had already been attested in writing. On the one hand, the usual source for an innovative *-tt-* (one not present in Ciceronian Latin) was the *-ct-* [kt] cluster; and on the other hand, a *-c-* [k] in the middle of a three-member cluster was dropped (on both, compare Carlton 1973:146). Either way we choose to proceed takes us inexorably to the Classical Latin *Arcturus* – a form which, of course, Arthur and his contemporaries would not have heard, but which is needed to reveal the meaning of *Arturus* to us.

With *Arturus* < *Arcturus* we have not only a word with the appropriate second declension masculine nominative ending, but we have a name with significant meaning, as in the following:

**Arcturus** (...). Astr. Also <sup>4</sup> **arthurus, arturis; arture, ariture, arctour**. [L. *arctūrus* a Gr. ..., f. ... the Bear + ... guardian, ward (from its situation at the tail of the Bear); the forms *arture*, etc. were from Fr.] The brightest star in the constellation Bootes; formerly, also, the whole constellation, and sometimes the Great Bear itself. (*OED* 1971:436)

As we see in the variant forms given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* the same sound changes took place in English – at least until English speakers relatinized the word as they fitfully attempted to latinize the language.

If *Arthur* could be derived from *artorius* 'the plowman' with reference to the Great Bear (rather than through the Celtic god hypothesis), then he would be connected with the plowman of the Wain and his name would inexorably be tied together with the star Arcturus, the Late Latin Arturus. While such references are indeed found in the literature (compare *OED* 1971:3668), they point not to the Latin word for the plowman, but to the name of the prominent star in the constellation Bootes.

As will be shown below, it is significant that Arcturus is the brightest star in a constellation closely connected with the Great Bear and that this star is regarded as the leader (the teamster or wagoner) of the rest. It will also prove significant that the name Arcturus means the 'guardian of the bear'.

At this point though, we cannot overemphasize the fact that the oldest attested Latin form of the name is *Arturus*. Had any Romano-Briton of the period been asked *Quid est Arturus?* 'What is Arturus?' before there was the personal name, he would have answered "The bright star in Bootes, beyond the tail of the Great Bear." Moreover, given the widespread knowledge of

astrology at the time, he would probably have been able to identify it as the guardian of the bear and would gladly have so informed anyone who did not know. Arturus would have been as obvious to the Romano-Briton as Polaris and the Big Dipper are to us.

Thus, deriving this meaning from this word is not a matter of stretching etymology. It is nothing more than supplying the well-known meaning for a well-known word. If a general today were to take on the name *Taurus*, we would know the word, the meaning of 'the Bull', the fact that it is a constellation and sign of the zodiac, and the attributes the general was claiming. The military leader in sixth-century Britain took on the name Arturus precisely for its clarity – its obvious meaning to all.

Such a straightforward word-meaning relationship would have been an essential element of the British strategy of defense. People do not rally behind names of obscure etymology.

### *British Etymology*

Before becoming embroiled in the semantic significance of the word, let us remember that not everyone in non-Anglo-Saxon controlled Britain spoke Latin. In order to gain as much support as possible, the leader would have to have had a name that would rally the rest of the British throughout the island.

Given the form Arthur as it first appears in the British/Welsh *Gododdin*, we are faced with the same problem we found in Latin: The ending *-ur* does not occur elsewhere, in spite of Rhys's argument from the speculated name of a god *\*Artor* (Rhys 1891:48). Nor can we simply add a British ending and solve the problem.

The solution comes from the fact that *-ur* is not an ending. If not an ending, then it must be a word in a compound. As in the derivation of *Arturus* from *\*Arthurus* in the Latin, there are two possibilities by which we may account for this word; and both bring us inexorably to the same form. On the one hand, the form *-ur* could be a rather straightforward representation of the Brythonic word for 'man', reconstructed for Late Brythonic as *\*ur* (Jackson 1953:337; compare Morris Jones 1913:89).

On the other hand, it is more likely that the [u<glide>] had already become [gw], which would have yielded *\*gwur* or *\*gu<glide>ur* had the glide not disappeared before a rounded vowel (Lewis and Pedersen 1974:11). The word for 'man', then would have been *gur*, realized in later Welsh spelling as *gwr*. In fact, the word *gur* itself does occur in the more conservative stanzas (the B text) in the *Gododdin* (as in line 443 – Williams 1938:18). The realization of *gur* as *-ur* is quite normal and predictable. By the time the British leader had taken the epithet *Arturus*, a number of changes collectively termed "mutations" had affected the language (compare Jackson 1953:543-60). Among the mutations in place by around A.D. 500 was a change from initial *g-* (perhaps through an intermediate fricative [ɣ]) to null. This mutation would have occurred in the second element of a compound. Thus, the compounded element *-ur* would have meant 'man'.

From precisely the same source comes the Middle and Modern Welsh agglutinative (compounding) form *-wr* (see Watkins 1961:94). This form means 'one who does, one connected with' and can be found in numerous words such as *ffermwr* 'farmer' (literally 'one connected with a farm'). Since such words refer to a man connected with the previous element in the compound, the meaning is transparent – as indeed it would have been in the Brythonic use of *-ur*.

So what was it that the man Arthur would have been connected with? The first part of the compound is *arth*, for which the following entry is found in *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*:

**arth** [H.Grn. *ors*, Gwydd. *art*: < Clt. \**artos* < IE \**rkpos*, Llad. *ursus*, Gr. ...] *eg.b. ll. eirth, arthod, eirthod ... bear, often fig. of a rough, unmannerly or fierce person.* (GPC 1967:212)

In Arthur's British, the form would have been *art-* (as shown above in connection with the Latin etymology), possibly with an ending *-os* (masculine nominative singular) that would have dropped out in a compound. *Art + ur* would thus have meant 'one connected with (the) bear'. This could have referred to a bear or to a human with bear-like attributes. In addition, for those versed in the Roman interpretation of constellations, the word could also have referred to the constellation the Great Bear; although this reference would not have been necessary from the British perspective.

The compound word *Artur(-)* thus takes on a significant meaning. To the British ear, this word would have referred to the 'man of the bear'. And in the parlance of the budding feudalism of the day, the 'man of the bear' would have been the 'soldier or guardian of the bear'.

Here again, we must bear in mind the fact that this derivation of the name is no more a case of stretching etymology than is the Latin *Arturus*. Any Briton hearing the word *Artur* (or possibly *Arturos* with a nominative masculine ending) would have heard someone saying the equivalent of English *Bear-man*. If we were told that we must rally for defense around the famous *Bear-man*, we would immediately assume that this is a person with bear-like attributes that make him particularly effective as a leader in our defense. Indeed, if there had been no Arthur and the Welsh today were rallying behind a leader they called in Modern Welsh the *Arthwr*, they would hear it in exactly this way. And this is just how they did hear it in the early sixth century.

Once again, people do not rally behind names of obscure etymology. This straightforward word-meaning relationship would have been just as essential to the British strategy of defense in British as it was in Latin.

### *The Latin/British Arthur*

By using the epithet *Arturus* or *Artur(-)*, the British military leader would thus have had a rallying cry that could have been heard and immediately understood both by those who spoke Latin and by those who spoke only British. Not only would the word have sounded alike in both languages (especially if the Latin *-us* and the Brythonic *-os* endings were realized as the unstressed, centralized [ə]), but it would have meant the same thing: 'the guardian of the bear'.

This title or epithet would have held great significance in the context of the early sixth century. Arthur was *dux bellorum*, the military commander-in-chief, as our earliest Latin reference calls him (Nennius, 1980:76), to whom both Briton and Romano-Briton rallied in defense against the Germanic migration. The overriding attribute he had to show was a fierce tenacity – the quality of holding one's ground. This fierce tenacity is the basic image of the bear in the ancient world, as attested in the Book of Daniel (7:4-6), in which the image is used for Persia (compare also Revelation 13:2). More pointedly for the defense of Britain, this fierce tenacity is traditionally seen in the context of protecting one's ward, as in 2 Samuel 17:8, Proverbs 17:12, and Hosea 13:8, in which the bear is portrayed as a fierce defender of her cubs. Not only would the image have been firmly established by time, but its Biblical references would have been highly appropriate for use by Christians fighting pagans.

Returning to the star Arcturus, which would have been heard by the Romano-British as *Arturus* and would have been associated in the Brythonic tongue with *Artur(-)* both in sound and

in meaning, we find a rather transparent significance. As the *dux bellorum*, commander-in-chief of all leaders, Arthur would have been visualized as the most prominent star in a pair of constellations and the guardian of them all. The fact that the constellations were both northern (for Britain) and included a bear (for fierce tenacity) would have solidified the image needed for the rallying cry of British resistance.

Moreover, the frequent appearance of the bright and easily recognized star crossing the night sky would certainly have served as a reminder of Arthur faithfully riding across the island. Indeed, it is through just such an image that symbol becomes legend and legend becomes myth.

Why was there no Arthur before Arthur? Obviously, the name of the star bore no particular significance for anyone before one leader among Britons and Romano-Britons was needed to draw together the other leaders in tenacious defense. There have been many other images that could be used for a leader in times of beleaguerment, but none that would combine the linguistic elements so that one epithet could be understood in the languages of these two peoples.

Why were there many Arthurs after Arthur? Just as obviously, the epithet of the valiant leader would have become a name in precisely the same tradition in which Augustus had become a name. One need not even know that the name refers to the 'guardian of the bear' to respect what that one guardian accomplished and to name one's son after him in the hope that the son might turn out to have the attributes of Arthur. The fact that the name does appear in the very next generation in connection with four prominent British leaders (compare Bromwich 1978:274) demonstrates the immediacy of this effect and the fact that it had not been a name either of a person or of a god before.

So what was Arthur's given name? This we are not to know. With the British speakers in the country and the Latin speakers in the city each probably doubtful of the other, Arthur's given name would best have been kept secret. After all, the epithet would have appealed to both groups, but a given name would have to have been one or the other; and such a choice would have been politically dangerous. Perhaps this fortunate (but quite deliberate) bilingualism also helps to account for the popularity of the new name among the command caste just one generation later.

Nor are we to know where he came from (later traditions of Tintagel, Glastonbury, etc. notwithstanding). As commander-in-chief of both the Britons and the Romano-Britons, he could not have afforded an association with one area or another. He must indeed have been, then, a military imperator in the oldest Roman tradition – not the king of a specific realm (compare Nennius' subsequent reference to him as miles 'soldier' – 1980:83). In all things, Arthur could be neither Briton nor Romano-Briton; rather, he and his name had ever to be both.

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