



The Forum

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Arthur of Dalriada Revisited

by [Richard Lathe](#)

Edinburgh

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The case that the historical King Arthur might be the Dalriadic prince Artur, or Artuir, has been re-examined recently. Ziegler (1999) concluded that there is no compelling reason to believe that this individual was Arthur. However, I argue here that a more likely Dalriadic contender is to be found in the figure of King Comgall, the grand-uncle of Artur mac Aedan.

Early Individuals Known as Arthur

From the end of the 6th century a number of individuals were known as Artur or near variants. Barber (1972) highlighted the two most prominent - Artur of the Dalriadic Scots and Arthur of Dyfed, but did not substantiate the case for either. Ziegler (1999) examined the first, Artur of Dalriada, but presented convincing objections. The dates concur with her view: both these individuals lived at the very end of the sixth century, and are unlikely to be the historical Arthur.

Three sources provide the earliest references to Arthur. The Welsh or Cambrian Annals (*Annales Cambriae*) contain two explicit references: the victory of Arthur and the British against the Saxons at Badon in AD516, and his demise after the Camlann conflict in 537 (Morris 1980). *The Gododdin*, attributed to Aneurin, describes a catastrophic defeat by the Saxons of a contingent from Edinburgh at Catreath (Catterick) near Scotch Corner. The battle was in around 570 (Koch 1997); the wording suggests the warrior, Arthur, was of a previous generation, also fighting against the Saxons - the *Gododdin* Arthur could well be the same individual who fought at Camlann in 537. Last, an account of Arthur's many battles appears in the *Historia Brittonum* (Morris 1980). The battle list bears no dates, but the account also tells how Ohta, son of Hengist, was instructed to fight '*contra Scottos*' in the North by the Roman walls, noting '*Arthur fought against them at this time.*' The Irish version of the *Historia* states '*Ohta, the son of Hengist, assumed government over them. Arthur, however, and the Britons fought bravely against them*' (Van Hamel 1932). Hengist died in around 488, placing his son (or possibly grandson) Ohta at the beginning of the Arthurian period.

The story these three documents tell is consistent -- an Arthur fought, in the early sixth century, against the Saxons on the side of the early Britons, so ruling out the later Artur.

Locating Arthur's sphere of activity

This does not exclude the possibility that Arthur might be another member of the Dalriadic Scots. Indeed, the evidence placing Arthur in North Britain is strong. Skene (1876), Bromwich (1963), Goodrich (1986), and Glennie (1988) all looked to Arthur's

battles as listed by Nennius and concluded that these conflicts took place predominantly in the southern regions of present day Scotland, with some in what is now northern England. There are locations that cannot be identified readily, but four have received a large measure of support.

The first is near Loch Lomond. Nennius tells of battles on the River Dubglas in the region of Linnuis. This points to Lennox, north of Glasgow. *Dubglas* is 'blackwater', and a river Douglas flows into Loch Lomond. One battle was fought in the Celyddon (Caledon) Forest, overtly Scotland. Another was on the hill called Agned that twelfth century Geoffrey of Monmouth tells us is Edinburgh. Finally, Goodrich (1986) puts forward a strong argument that the Camlann site is at Camboglanna (Birdoswald), a fort on Hadrian's wall. Each identification may be open to challenge; together they provide a formidable case that Arthur fought in the North.

The Scottish theme crops up elsewhere. As discussed by Glennie (1988) and Goodrich (1986), the highest density of Arthurian placenames is in Scotland: exemplified by Ben Arthur, adjacent to Loch Lomond, and by Arthur's seat, Edinburgh. Other, later, legends suggest that Arthur's sister married the King of Lothian, the county of Edinburgh: Arthur's warring in Southern Scotland and the Borders may need to be taken seriously.

The *Annales Cambriae* provide a second line of evidence as to his identity. I suggest that, if the early scribes wrote of Arthur, they would write also of Arthur's kinfolk. The Annals name ten persons over an 80 year span centered on the Arthurian entries. One is connected with Wales - King Maelgwn. Excepting Arthur himself (and his legendary nephew Medraut) the remaining seven entries relate to Ireland. One, Gildas was a Clyde native who spent the last years of his life in Ireland and, according to Caradoc's *Vita Gildae* (Williams 1990), encountered Arthur in person. Three were prominent Irish Christians of the time. The last three are Irish Scots of the Dalriadic dynasty that settled the western coast of Scotland.

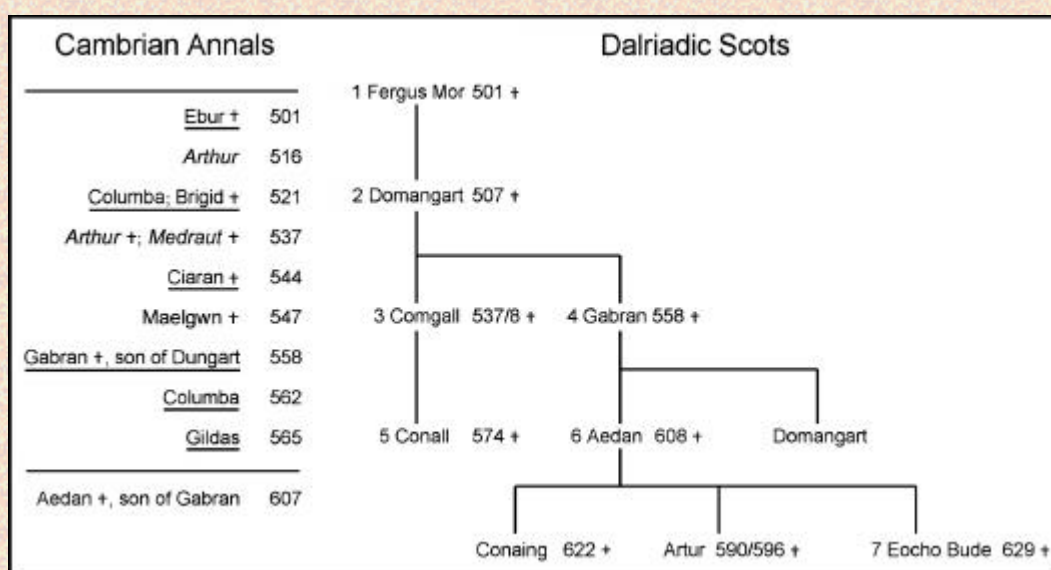


Figure 1. *Left*: Individuals named in the Cambrian Annals (*Annales Cambriae*) in an 80-year period (486 to 567) spanning the Arthurian entries: those associated with Ireland and the Irish Dalriadic Scots are underlined. *Right*: Pedigree of the Dalriadic Scots; prefixed numerals indicate the order of accession to the throne; obit dates are given as suffixes. [Click here to enlarge figure.](#)

Therefore, while the earliest records point to North Britain, the flanking entries in the Welsh Annals suggest a connection with Ireland and the Scots. A possible point of overlap is in the warring activities of the Dalriadic Scots in southern Scotland.

There is little doubt that the Dalriadic Scots were allied to the British. Gabran married the daughter of Brychan, the founder of the British kingdom of Brecheiniog (probably at Brechin, Forfarshire) in Scotland, while Aedan is reputed to have been a grandson of Dyfnwal Hen, the ruler of the British kingdom of AlClud (Dumbarton) by Glasgow, and is said to have been born on the Forth.

Scots were active across the South of Scotland, and supported the Britons in their conflict with the Saxons. Gabran lends his name to the region of Gowrie, while the descendents of Aedan were known as 'the men of Fife'. Aedan is recorded, by Bede and other reliable sources, fighting alongside the Britons of Edinburgh against the advancing Saxons. The *Scotichronicon* refers to a Scots king Comgall, son of Domangart, who fought against Saxon incursions in close alliance with the British ([Watt 1989](#)). Ziegler ([1999](#)) reviews further evidence for Dalriadic activities in the south of modern Scotland.

Arthur and the Kings of Dalriada

The records pertaining to the Scots contain no mention of an individual 'Arthur', with the exception of the later Artur. I propose an explanation. Dalriada is generally held to be a compound of *dal* (or *dail*, 'portion', 'meeting' or 'tribe') with *Riada* (*Riadda/Riata*), as [Bede](#) opined, but this latter may also be a compound of *ri-* (*rig*, *righ*, *rix*; 'king'), with *Adda/Ata*. Watson ([1926](#)) informed us that *Add*, as in the prominent Dalriadic stronghold at Dun Add (also Att), was pronounced, even until recently, *Athd* with a long A. Therefore, *ri-Adda* may have been pronounced *ri-Athda*. If so, the King of the Dalriadic Scots might have been heard, by British ears, as *Athda*, only a short way from *airth* (Welsh), 'the bear', and Arthur.

The Dalriadic *Senchus Fer n'Alban* (*History of the Men of Scotland*) and other sources collated by J. Bannerman in his *Studies* ([1974](#)) relate that the throne was held by Comgall. Comgall's rule (from 507) spans Arthur's exploits ([Figure 1](#)). The *Annales Cambriae*, a primary source for Arthurian legend, record the death of the historical Arthur in 537, while the obit of Comgall is at 537/538 in the *Annals of Ulster* and *Annals of Tigernach*. Thus, the dates of Comgall and Arthur accurately coincide.

Conversely, the *Annales Cambriae* make no mention of Comgall, an important leader, even though his brother, nephew and father are there in name. The omission could make sense if Comgall was Arthur. This could also explain the younger Artur born to the Dalriadic dynasty at about the time of Comgall's death, perhaps named in tribute to Comgall. Plausibly, the earliest historical records suggest an identity for Arthur. Comgall, like Arthur, fought against Saxon incursions in allegiance with the British.

Where the *Annales Cambriae* record the death of Arthur (AD 537), the Irish Annals record the obit of Comgall (AD 537/8).

Although the later Artur has been ruled out ([Ziegler 1999](#)), I suggest that the Dalriadic Scots might have provided, in the figure of Comgall, the model for King Arthur.

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Cambrian Annals

Ebur † 501
Arthur 516
Columba; Brigid † 521
Arthur †; *Medraut* † 537
Ciaran † 544
 Maelgwn † 547
Gabran †, son of Dungart 558
Columba 562
Gildas 565

 Aedan †, son of Gabran 607

Dalriadic Scots

