The following account is Dr Kip Wheeler's summary of arguments concerning the historic reality of King Arthur. It was first written in May of 1999, and more recent scholarship may render it obsolete. My thanks to Professor Bayless of the University of Oregon for her suggestions.

Arthurianna: Summary of the Welsh Tradition

I. Arguments concerning Arthur as a magical or supernatural being:

Some of the earliest discussions of Arthur as a magical and supernatural being originate in Victorian scholarship. First Matthew Arnold and later John Rhys treated Arthur as a purely mythological figure, the latter scholar in particular subscribing to the ideas of solar mythology developed by Max Müller and his school. Arthur's deeds do hint at superhuman ability. He is one who can harrow Hell and/or enter the realm of Annwyfn. In *Culhwch and Olwen*, Arthur descends into Hell to fight the Witch of the North with the purpose of obtaining her blood (Sims-Williams 42). He also fights with the *cinbin*, dog-headed monsters probably related to *conchinn*, the Irish equivalent of Cynocephali (42). Likewise, his raid on the Underworld in *Preiddeu Annwyfn* clearly takes place in the world of myth rather than history, and it includes the magic cauldrons so common to the Celtic mythos of Ireland (Jones 14).

Additional supernatural evidence may be that ordinary mortals do not fare well against Arthur in combat. The *Historia Brittonum* in the early 9th century indicates that Arthur kills 960 men in a single rush at the Battle of Badon (quoted in Jackson 1). Furthermore, the *Historia Brittonum* also includes two *Mirabilia*--two miraculous tales of Arthur probably added to the text during the 10th century (Jackson 2): the first deals with the marvelous, magical tomb of Arthur's son Amr; the second, an onomastic legend about a cairn in Breconshire bearing indentations from the footprints of Arthur's dog (1). Arthur clearly attracted folk-tale motifs and onomastic legends to himself as early as the 10th century.

Like the examples of the marvelous tomb and the dog that can leave footprints in rock, much of the evidence for a supernatural comes from context, setting, and his associations in the story rather than Arthur's abilities *per se*. One argument in favor of seeing Arthur as a magical figure is the fact that he associates on equal terms with individuals who appear to be euhemerized deities or who have magical powers. Such companionship links Arthur with the realm of the supernatural rather than that of a merely heroic figure from Celtic history. In a section in the *Black Book of Carmarthen* known as the "*Pa gur*?" Arthur lists his companions to a cranky porter by the name of Glewlwyd Gafaelfawr. One companion Arthur lists in the "*Pa gur?*" is Manawyd--an attested variant of Manawydan McLir, the Irish and Manx sea-god (Sims-Williams 42). His companion Cai is also a giant, and place-names in Wales indicate where the giant Cai could stretch his arms between mountains (51). Lludd Llaw Ereint is a

member of Arthur's court in *Culhwch and Olwen*, and his name appears to originate in the silver-handed Celtic god of blacksmiths. Even many of the names of Arthur's companions and enemies in the later French tradition of Arthur appear to originate in Celtic myth rather than history, especially those names from the Breton tradition on the continent from the twelfth-century onwards: Morgain < Morgen or Morrigan; Yder fiz Nut < Edyrn fab Nudd, and Mabonagrain < Mabon. All these names ultimately hint at the names of Celtic deities if we trace the etymology back far enough, which Bromwich sees as indirect evidence for the continuing influence of Celtic mythology in the later texts (218).

Just before the time of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (the year 1138), there is evidence that local Welshmen considered Arthur to be immortal. The *Englynion y Beddau*, early poems about the graves of heroes, clearly link many gravesites to the Arthur's companions, though none to Arthur himself, as the text explicitly states. One extrapolation from this lack is that Arthur remains alive, unburied, and ready to return. The first textual evidence of this belief is from an account in 1113. In that year, a company of canons journeyed to Bodmin and encountered accounts of this legend. William of Malmesbury (c. 1125) later reasserts that this belief existed in the area, and he also describes how the canons found the grave of Arthur's nephew, but could not find Arthur's. William confidently asserts that Arthur will return at some later date. Likewise, the two *englynion* in the *Black Book of Carmarthen* indicate that Arthur has attracted to himself the folk-motif of the Vanished Undying Hero, much as Owen Glyndwr later would (18-19).

Roberts suggests there are traces of other folk motifs, including the *tynged* (a Welsh taboo perhaps comparable to the Irish *geasa*) and onomastic/folkloric elements in *Culhwch and Olwen*, which account for the origins of place-names (92). The Triads, like the *Black Book of Carmarthen* above, also show the process in which Arthur becomes linked with the folkloric and fantastic. In the Triads, there are references to Arthur in conjunction with groups of three. The tripartite unit apparently functions as a mnemonic device for oral performance. Arthur appears in disparate categories, as the following Triads suggest:

the Three Well-Endowed Men of the Isle of Britain (quoted in Jones 18)

the Three Frivolous Bards (quoted in Jones 18-19)

the Three Red Ravagers (*ruduoawc*)

a pig-thief who failed in his attempt to steal from the Three Mighty Swineherds

(*tri gwrdveichyat*) (the latter two examples above quoted in Bromwich 48).

These Triads hint at Arthur's early personality as a folkloric figure; they associate him with mythic trickery, frivolity, and sexuality, rather than the high-minded idealism typical in later depictions of Arthur. In any case, the trend of linking Arthur with folkloric figures and magical items will continue and expand after the later writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth, as evidenced by magic items such as the cloaks of invisibility in *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, and all the marvels in the French tradition of Arthurian legend as the tales take a firmer hold on the continental imagination in later centuries.

II. *Arguments concerning Arthur as a real historic figure:*

Arthur may have been primarily a heroic figure who attracted legends of the supernatural at a later date. The strongest evidence that Arthur may be a historical hero comes from etymology. The name Arthur, unlike Rhiannon or many other Celtic names in Welsh literature, does not appear to originate in the remnants of a divinity. Nitze was among the first to argue convincingly for a link between the etymology of the name "Arthur" with the Latin name Artorius (585-96), as opposed to the Welsh/Irish cognate *Arth* ("bear") as suggested in Bromwich's introduction to *The Arthur of the Welsh* (5). Artorius was a common Roman name from the *gens Artoria*, one of the founding families of Rome. We know of one Artorius, Lucius Artorius Castus, apparently a Dalmatian, who led the Sixth Legion on an expedition to occupy Armorica (Britain) in the middle of the second century. Though he is too early to be *the* Arthur, one of his descendents easily could be, or anybody named after him. As Jackson suggests, *the* Arthur may have been a Celtic military genius in the late 5th century with the Roman name of Arthur. If he existed, he probably fought enemies such as the Anglo-Saxons, though the vague text leaves open the possibility that Arthur fought northern Picts or traitorous British chieftains. The general consensus among Arthurian scholarship is that the period of his campaigns seems to have been around the years 490-500, with his demise about 20 years later. This consensus is largely the result of historical probabilities rather than textual certainties.

There are records of four or perhaps five people in the late sixth and early seventh century named "Arthur" who hailed from Celtic areas of the British Isles during the period of Celtic resistance to the Anglo-Saxon invaders. These individuals include the son of a Scottish warlord (the warlord himself led a movement in 570 to drive the Anglo-Saxons out of Northumbria). Some instances of the name Arthur also appear in Irish genealogies as late the 700s. Though all too late to be *the* Arthur, the sudden appearance of these names may be a reflection of the original Arthur's fame and glory (Jackson 7). As far as historians can tell by its appearance in surviving records, the name "Arthur" was not popular before the sixth century and rare after the seventh, which Jackson sees as evidence of

Arthur's historicity (3). Jackson asserts the possibility that Arthur appeared and fought successfully for a time, which led to the popularization of the name. The populace still vividly remembered Arthur toward end of 6th century, when boys were named after him and heroes compared to him (10-11). Another possibility is that Arthur is a composite figure made of several Celtic leaders who fought against the English.

One point in favor of a historical Arthur in the earliest accounts is that these accounts do not tend to depict Arthur as necessarily fighting cosmological battles, shapeshifting, or displaying supernatural powers. He most frequently fights the human, historical enemies of the Celts, wielding sword and armor rather than divine powers like lightning or fire. As mentioned earlier, the *Historia Brittonum* (early 9th century) depicts Arthur single-handedly slaying 960 men in a single onrush at the Battle of Badon. Though the hyperbole of the number may seem excessive, it is noteworthy that Arthur appears to perform this massacre in a heroic rather than godlike manner, as the surrounding material does not hint at any magical intervention or extra-human abilities worth comment. If readers are to attribute the victory to the supernatural, the source is not Arthur himself, but God, given that in the eighth battle he wears the Virgin Mary's image on his shoulders (Charles-Edwards 25).

The twelve battles listed in the *Historia Brittonum* also hint at historical events, rather than purely mythic ones. Of the twelve battles credited to Arthur, Jones asserts that only two sites can be identified with any confidence: Caerlleon is Chester, and Coed Celyddon must be somewhere in South Scotland. The widespread geography of the battles suggests that the historical Arthur could hardly have fought in all of them. He may, however, have fought in a few, but historians cannot determine which ones (Jones 8). An additional complication is that creating "battle-lists" is a common convention of *encomium* for military leaders at the time, rather than an attempt to record history accurately. It is also possible that the compiler of the twelve battles knew the number, but not the individual names of the battles, and thus inserted names of later battles, or any obscure battles of which he had heard (Jackson 8). Jackson argues that accounts of Arthur with obscure place-names are more likely to be accurate rather than forgeries. A forger, like Geoffrey of Monmouth, would pick well-known place-names in order to concoct some veracity to the account. The military geography in early Welsh authors is obscure to modern readers, since ten of the battles are in sites scholars cannot identify with absolute certainty.[1] In the works formerly attributed to Nennius, it is clear that Arthur fights the Saxons, but no mention appears of the battle of Camlan, or of Arthur's death. It is unclear

[1] Sims-Williams argues that the obscurity is a result of familiarity. Arthurian poems probably relied on pre-existing knowledge about the identity of Arthur and his band, and thus what appear as mysterious allusions or obscure references to modern readers may not have been obscure for the original audience.

why the author omits this battle. Gildas, who may have written about the year 540[2] in the west midlands or in Wales, tells how the Britons defeated the Saxons in a siege. He claims the siege occurred in the year of his own birth, after which there was peace. This statement suggests that the battle took place perhaps forty to fifty years earlier, if we assume his age matches up with known history of the Anglo-Saxon penetration into the southeast. As Jackson points out, assuming such a birthdate for Gildas results in a time-line that "suits remarkably the known history of southern England, from which it appears that the Anglo-Saxon penetration of the south-eats during the first half-century of the invasion was stopped about 500, when it had reached the borders of Salisbury Plain in Berkshire and Hampshire" (3). Possible sites for the battle include Badbury near Swindon, Badbury Hill near Faringdon, or Badbury Rings near Blandford. By the time of "Nennius," regional lore credited Arthur with decisive victory against the Anglo-Saxons. However, Gildas does not mention Artorius, but rather Ambrosius Aurelianus, a figure frequently confused with Arthur, which may be a serious objection to linking Arthur to the era in question. Jackson counters this point by demonstrating that Gildas was writing a polemic, not a history, and therefore the author may not have desired historical thoroughness (3). An additional problem is that the Welsh language as it appears in the ninth century did not exist in Arthur's day, or at least existed only as a Celtic precursor. Thus, no records could have survived *verbatim*. This fact throws doubt on any "contemporary" account in Welsh, and leads scholarship naturally to explore Latin sources.

Another argument in favor of viewing Arthur as a historical figure is that many of the earliest Latin accounts appear in an annalistic style, with short entries given for each year as part of a historical record. The *Annales Cambriae* date to the middle of the tenth century, but the original sources for it may date back to the early ninth. The *Annales* include a list of events going back to about the year 516 or 518. The list offers short, sober accounts in annalistic style, including the famous reference to Arthur carrying a cross on his back into battle. Jones suggests the unusual image may originate in a Latin author's confusion of two Old Welsh words--*scuit*, meaning "shield," and *scuid* meaning "shoulder" (5). In the *Annales*, we find historical reference to Arthur at the battle of Camlan (circa 537-539). This battle could be Camboglanna (a fort on Hadrian's Wall), but it is hard to tell (5). Here, Arthur dies with Medred (Mordred) in the battle of Camlan, and the connection made to the battle of Mount Badon is tenuous at best (Jones 5). Interestingly, the reference to Medred lacks any suggestion of treachery found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittaniae.*

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[2] The date of Gildas' life and composition is uncertain. It is known that he wrote before the death of Maelgwyn Gwynedd, who died in the year 549, and that death provides a terminus for Gildas' writing.

The annals, however, are not absolute evidence. Dr. Kathleen Hughes argues in "The A-text of the *Annales Cambriae*" that Geoffrey of Monmouth built the *Historia Brittonum* on the framework of the *Chronicles of Ireland* up to 613, and after 613, it drew upon a North British source that continued up to the late eighth century (777) and then switched to the St. David's annals from 796 onwards. The unknown North British source may not even have been in annalistic format. Kenneth Jackson, though he thinks there may be a kernel of historicity behind the figure of *Dux* Arthur, notes that some other "historical" documents, such as early legendary texts written in Latin, gain a spurious air of historicity due to annalistic format (1).

Another intriguing early text, the Welsh *Gododdin*, is attributed to the late sixth-century poet Aneirin; it may be another bit of potential evidence. In lines 1241-42 of the poem, the poet writes of a certain Gwawrddur. In one version of the *Gododdin*, the poet asserts that he was a great fighter, feeding corpses to ravens, "*ceni bi ef arthur*."[3] The latter phrase translates "Although he [Gwawrddur] was not Arthur." The gist of the passage seems to be that Gwawrddur was a great fighter, but not comparable to King Arthur, according to Jackson. The allusion hints that by the time of the line's composition, Arthur functioned as a generic yardstick for courage, and the context appears to be in terms of human heroism rather than divine intervention. The difficulty with this evidence is the date of the *Gododdin*. The origins of the *Gododdin* may date back to 600, but there is no way to prove this section is not an insertion from a later date. Only when a passage appears in both the A version and the B version of the text can we be assured of its antiquity. The earliest version (circa 829-830) appears to include material that may date back a further 200 years. The later version originates around the year 950 and it has spurious additions from as late as 1250 when it was recopied--including many stanzas that cannot possibly be part of the original (Bromwich 176). If the line about Arthur dates back to the 600s, Jackson points out that Aneirin might easily have known personally old men who had met Arthur. That dating, however, is by no means certain.

Conclusions

Aside from Dr. Dumville's complete skepticism, there seems to be a general consensus that there *could* have been an historic Arthur in the late fifth or early sixth century (Charles-Edwards 35). A partially dubious text

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[3] There is a contradiction in secondary sources regarding whether the pertinent line appears in only the A version or the B version of the text. In "Concepts of Arthur," Rachel Bromwich writes the following: "Though only present in the A text these lines [*gochore brein du ar uur / cear ceni bei ef arthur*] occur in a stanza whose orthography indicates that it could have belonged to the earliest written ninth-century redaction of the poem" (176). Contrast this statement with that made by Thomas Charles-Edwards in "The Arthur of History," where he writes: "The

does not mean an entirely dubious text, or so the reasoning goes. However, the current prospects at the moment are poor for extracting useful history out of the text. As Charles-Edwards phrases it, "There may well have been an historical Arthur [but] . . . the historian can as yet say nothing of value about him" (29). The more useful summary comes from Jones, who writes that there may have been an historical Arthur in the late fifth or early sixth century, but he grew into a figure of superheroism and the supernatural, a trend that reached its zenith of development before Geoffrey's *Historia* in Welsh texts like *Culhwch and Olwen*. For whatever unknown reason, if a historical Arthur existed, he attracted into his orbit a variety of folklore, mythology, and legends that ultimately superseded the historical account. Thick layers of folkloric accretion surround and obscure whatever information exists about Arthur. Only circumstantial evidence suggests a historical Arthur, but nothing beyond that can be ascertained as factual information rather than mythology in the surviving texts. In such a case, it is more useful to treat Arthur as a folkloric figure rather than a historical figure.

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reference in the *Gododdin* to the heroism of a certain Gwawrddur 'although he was not Arthur' (*ceni bei ef arthur*) is only in the B Version; its antiquity is therefore uncertain" (15, underlining mine).

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