

KING ARTHUR OF THE ROMANS: LUCIUS ARTORIUS CASTUS AND THE SARMATIANS IN BRITAIN

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U radu se iznose moguće veze između života rimskog vojnika iz 2. st., Lucija Artorija Kasta, i kasnijih, srednjovjekovnih legendi oko polumitskog kralja Artura. Autor pretpostavlja da se zahvaljujući natpisu otkrivenom u blizini Splita (Podstrana), može izgraditi čvrsta teza da je Kast bio najstariji povijesni lik za koji se može dokazati da je utjecao na razvitak kasnijih legendi u Britaniji. Sačuvane su priče o sarmatskim ratnicima koji su u Britaniju došli kao dio rimskih legija, a kojima je zapovijedao sam Kast; naime sarmatske i keltske priče stapaju se međusobno u razdoblju nakon Kastovog života.

The earliest documents that record the deeds of the British hero Arthur show that he was not perceived as a king but as a soldier, bearing the Latin title *dux* (duke); a charismatic leader who fought ‘alongside the leaders of the British’. Just such a man is a career-officer of the legions named Lucius Artorius Castus, who lived and fought in Britain in the 2nd century AD – almost 300 years earlier than the more usually accepted dates for Arthur.

‘Arthur’ is the generally accepted form today, but in reality this name has a far longer history and a variety of spellings. It can be proven with reasonable certainty that ‘Artorius’ either derives from the British name Arthur or is the Latin original of that name. Not only is Artorius Castus the only documented person with such a name to serve in the legions during the Roman occupation of Britain, he is *the only known person in Britain* who bears the name Arthur between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD. This itself is a striking fact; but once we look closely into the life of Artorius Castus we quickly discover there are some startling parallels between his career and that of the great British hero.



Podstrana, fragments from the inscription mentioning L. Artorius Castus (CIL III, 1919=8513=12813) set as spolia into the wall around the church of St. Martin

The Arthurian scholar Heinrich Zimmer proposed Artorius as a correct reading of the hero's name as long ago as 1890.¹ The American J. D. Bruce agreed with this, stating that »a strong confirmation of his historical character seems offered by the fact that his name is, in its origin, not Celtic, but Roman, being derived from the name Artorius, which occurs in Tacitus and Juvenal and which is, indeed, the name of a Roman Gens. (Family)«²

Investigating these claims in 1925, the American scholar Kemp Malone wrote an article entitled simply 'Artorius'.³ Having shown that the name Arthur can indeed be derived etymologically from a Roman source, Malone then went on to ask a simple question: where there any instances of the name Artorius recorded in Britain? The answer was Lucius Artorius Castus, who is known to have been stationed in Britain in the 2nd century AD. While acknowledging that this was a long time before the more usual dating for Arthur, Malone was intrigued, and set out to discover more. He found two inscriptions relating to the life of Artorius Castus. The first was discovered at Podstrana, in the region of ancient Epetium (modern Stobreč) near Split in Dalmatia (modern Croatia); the other near a chapel dedicated to St Martin of Podstrana, on the road from Split to Omiš.

The first inscription gives us a detailed summary of Lucius Artorius Castus' career.

¹ H. Zimmer, *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen*, 1890. p. 818. n.1

² J. D. Bruce, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance*, Peter Smith, 1958. vol. I, p. 3

³ *Modern Philology*, Vol. 25, pp 367–374



Podstrana, church of St. Martin, passages from the inscription mentioning L. Artorius Castus (CIL III, 1919=8513=12813)

To the spirits of the departed: L. Artorius Castus, Centurion of the III Legion Gallica; also centurion of the VI Legion Ferrata, also centurion of the II Legion II Adiutrix; also centurion of the V legion Macedonica; also primus pilus of the same legion; praepositus of the classis Misenatium; Praefectus of the VI Legion Victrix; dux of the cohorts of cavalry from Britain against the Armoricans; procurator Centenarius of the province of Liburnia with the power to issue sentences of death. In his lifetime, for himself and his family, he made this...⁴

The inscription is slightly damaged and at times difficult to read, but is quite clear in its essentials. It appears to end with the words *H(ic) s(itu) est*, 'lies buried here', suggesting that the inscription was originally part of a *stela* intended to be attached to a mausoleum. As was the custom of the time among wealthy Roman families, Castus himself probably had this constructed. Ruins of a villa in the immediate vicinity, perhaps occupied by Artorius when he was Procurator of the area, suggest that the inscription was intended as a memorial *stela* attached to the outer walls of the villa, rather than as part of an actual tomb. It was, to all intents and purposes, an address label stating the name of the villa's occupant and outlining his history. For the moment we should notice in passing the reference to the post of *dux* on the inscription, and to Artorius' leadership of a cavalry unit from Britain.

The second inscription adds little to the first. It is probably a memorial plaque, and reads simply:

⁴ No. 1919 in the monumental collection of Latin inscriptions, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, ed by Th. Mommsen: Berlin, Reimer, 1873



Podstrana, passage from the inscription on the sarcophagus of L. Artorius Castus (CIL III, 14224=12791), Arheološki muzej Split

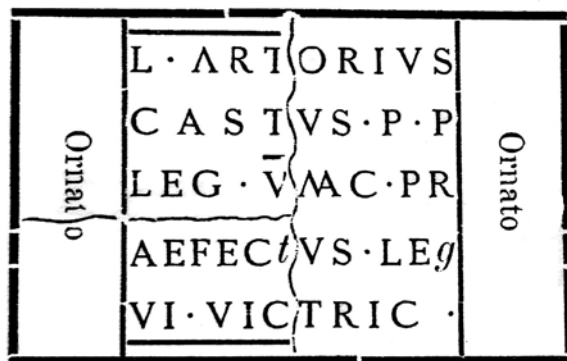
Artorius Castus,
primus pilus, V legion Macedonica;
*praefectus, VI Legion Victrix.*⁵

These inscriptions clearly record the lifetime achievements of a career soldier, who served in at least five legions, in each of which he received further promotion, and that he ended up with the rank of Procurator of a province. If we knew nothing more than this we could be forgiven for supposing that this was a man of courage and note, whose career stretched over some 40/50 years. From their design, the dating of the two inscriptions can be made to the 2nd century AD, certainly no later than 200, by which time we may assume Artorius was dead.

This is almost all we currently possess by way of actual recorded evidence for the life and deeds of Lucius Artorius Castus. Yet it is both more and less than we have for other Arthurs; more in that it definitely establishes that a person named Artorius actually lived; less in that it gives us almost nothing by way of dates or settings for this remarkable military career. However, it is possible to infer a great deal from the inscriptions. By consulting historical records relating to the movements and dispositions of the various legions listed in what is effectively Artorius' service record, we can arrive at a surprisingly detailed account of his life – though all dates are currently speculative – augmented by the contemporary accounts of two Roman historians: Dio Cassius and Herodian. When these details are placed side by side a portrait of an extraordinary soldier begins to appear.

Kemp Malone himself, after prolonged study of the inscriptions, arrived at a brief biography for Artorius. From this he was able to suggest that since Arthur

⁵ No 12790 in Mommsen



Podstrana, inscription on the sarcophagus of L. Artorius Castus (CIL III, 14224=12791), reconstruction according to F. Bulić, 1899: 210

and Artorius were the only people with this name in the historical record, at least up until the time shortly after the supposed existence of the 6th century hero, when the name became suddenly popular, that it was worth exploring parallels between the two. He concentrated on the expedition led by Artorius to Armorica (Brittany), referred to in the longer inscription, which bore a marked resemblance to an expedition ascribed to Arthur in several later texts. Malone's conclusion was that »the only historical character with whom Arthur can with any plausibility be connected is the second century Lucius Artorius Castus.«

Malone's article did not provoke any immediate or significant response. Perhaps it was too shocking to those already convinced of the existence of a 5th-6th century Arthur. However, the theory did not die. Helmut Nickel, the curator of Arms and Armour at the New York Metropolitan Museum, took up the idea and advanced it significantly. In a series of articles published between 1973 and 1975⁶ he drew attention to the fact that Artorius Castus, during his service in Britain, had commanded squadrons of cavalry made up of warriors from a group of Indo-European tribes. These Steppeland warriors, the Sarmatians, suffered defeat at the hands of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in 175, and were subsequently drafted into the legions and posted as far from their homeland as possible. In this instance 5500 Sarmatian warriors were sent to Britain and stationed at the Roman Fort of Bremetanacum (modern Ribchester, Lancashire). Nickel suggested that traditions held by these people bore striking resemblances to later Arthurian legends.

Around the same time C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas published an article entitled »The Sarmatian connection: New light on the Arthurian and Holy Grail legends«.⁷ They pointed out more parallels between the later Arthurian

⁶ H. Nickel, 1975 and »The Last Days of Britain and the Origins of the Arthurian Legends« in Cambi, N. & Matthews, J. (eds) *Lucius Artorius Castus and the King Arthur Legend*, Eds. N. Cambi & J. Matthews, Književni krug Split/Ogranak Matice Hrvatske Podstrana, 2014.

⁷ C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas, »The Sarmatian connection: New light on the Arthurian and Holy Grail legends«, *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol X, 1978, pp 513 - 527

mythos and the history and traditions of Sarmatian, Iazyge and Ossete tribes, who came from an area between the Black Sea in the west, the Caspian Sea in the east. A few years later a book by Littleton and Malcor⁸ brought forward a huge range of materials that helped establish a number of connections between Sarmatian and Arthurian legends.

Artorius of Rome

Who then, exactly, was L. Artorius Castus? Since Kemp Malone wrote his seminal article in 1925, a great deal of new evidence has been discovered (and is still turning up). We are now able to put forward a far more detailed biography of the man whose career provides enough material for any number of legendary tales.⁹

As Malone noted, the Artorii, to whose *gens* or family Artorius belonged, were part of the high-ranking equestrian class, the second tier of Roman nobility, who were either landholders or worked for the state. The history of this particular branch of the family can be traced back to at least as early as 80 BC. They appear to have come originally from somewhere in Greece, from where there were forced to flee by one of several Celtic incursions. They settled in the area of Italy known as Campania, apparently bringing with them a religious devotion to the goddess Flora, worship of whom appears suddenly in this area at the same time.¹⁰

We can date Artorius Castus' probable birth by counting back from his attainment of the rank of *dux* (duke) listed on the inscription, apparently as a result of his actions in an offensive against the Armoricans (Bretons) which seems to have taken place in 185/6. If Artorius had indeed served five or six tours of duty by this time, as listed on the inscription, each lasting approximately five to six years, this takes us back to approximately 158, during the reign of the Emperor Antoninus Pius (186-161). Since it was usual for men to enlist at the age of 18, this gives us a birth date for Artorius of approximately 140 AD.

As a member of the equestrian class, Artorius would have been destined either for a career in the army, with the rank of centurion, or in the civil service. Since an equestrian was required to maintain an income of 400,000 sesterces, it is possible that Artorius was a younger son, with a smaller income, and that his inability to raise the necessary funds forced him into the army, which offered a means of attaining a higher military rank than his social status allowed. The applicant first joined the equestrian *cursus*, a designated path upward through the ranks to the position of *primus pilus*. On attaining this rank, the officer's former social status was restored, and if he had saved enough money he could maintain this permanently. However, to enter the legion as a centurion, specifically *decimus hastus posterior*, meant surrendering an already existing social position, and this is what Artorius would have been forced to do.

⁸ C. Scott Littleton, and Linda Malcor. *From Scythia to Camelot*, New York, Garland, 2000

⁹ We currently await the publication of the study of the life of Artorius Castus by Dr Malcor

¹⁰ L. Malcor, »The Campanians of the Round Table: The Artorii, Flora and the Holy Grail« in *King Arthur: Storia e Legenda*. Ed. Mario de Matteis and Antonia Trinchese. Oberhausen, Germany: Athena, 2004

A long road lay before him. To reach the position of *primus pilus* he would have to survive a minimum of four tours of duty and rise through 58 ranks or grades.

Artorius' first tour, lasting from c158 to c162 would have taken him to Syria, where the III Legion Gallica was stationed at this time. The duty of the military there was to maintain peace and keep a watchful eye on the activities of Jews and Christians within the province. He must have experienced at first hand the delicate matter of keeping peace in an always combustible area.

In 162 the Parthians invaded the Roman province of Armenia and the III Gallica, along with IV Scythia and the XV Flavia Firma, were sent to combat this. However, Artorius did not go with them. Having completed his first tour of duty he transferred to the IV Ferrata in Judea around 162, with a probable promotion. Once again his duties seem to have been primarily concerned with peacekeeping in the villages of Judea, with occasional guard duties in Jerusalem. He seems to have spent the next four years in the Middle East, at the end of which time he once again transferred - this time to the II Adiutrix Legion, then stationed on the Danube.

This was to be an important move for Artorius. The II Adiutrix was one of two new legions lead by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who had come to power in 161 at the age of 40. His first challenge was the war with the Parthians over possession of Armenia, which acted as a buffer zone between the Empire and the Steppelands. But in 169 he was called to defend the Northern frontier of the Empire when the Marcomanni and Quasi tribes cut their way deep into Italy.

Artorius Castus was now approximately 22 years of age. Already a veteran of numerous skirmishes and encounters with the natives of the Middle East, he now entered a whole new arena of war, facing savage German tribes in a period of intense strife. It was at this time that he seems to have come in contact with a people who were to play an important part in his life. These were the Sarmatians, a group of Indo-European tribes whose home lay between the Black Sea in the west and the Caspian Sea in the east, extending as far as the Urals in the north-east. They belonged to an Iranian speaking (Ossetic) community and were called *Sauromatae* by Herodotus, and *Sarmatii* by most other Classical writers. The former name has been interpreted as meaning 'Lizard People', and may equally derive from a Greek misunderstanding of the name, from their use of scale-like body armor, or from their use in battle of a windsock style standard in the shape of a dragon – a device that holds great significance to their connection with the later figure of Arthur.

Classical sources list over a hundred distinct tribes in the Sarmatian group, including the Roxolani, Iazyges, Alani, Saboci and Nasci. They were also closely related to the Scythians, whose lands were adjacent to theirs in the 2nd century AD and who shared a number of their beliefs and traditions. The poet Ovid, in a collection of poems written in exile, painted a less than enamored picture of the Sarmatians in the 1st century:

»One sees them scamper about,
bareback, quivers and bows at their backs, their arrows dipped

in venom, their faces covered over with hair,
and the hair in their heads so shaggy they look rather like human
bushes. They all carry knives at their belts
and you never know whether they're going to greet you or stab you.
cut out your liver, and eat it...«¹¹

Despite their unprepossessing appearance (at least to Roman sensibilities) their fighting skills were legendary and left a deep impression on their enemies. They were skilled horsemen, able to shoot with deadly accuracy with short recurved bows, using arrowhead dipped in venom, as well as fighting with long lances. They had developed scaled body armor, made of overlapping plates of bone, as early as the 1st century AD, which made them formidable opponents, and it is here that we may see the alternative origin of their name as 'the covered people' – those who wear armor.

A third interpretation, suggested by Dr Ilya Yakubovich¹² suggests *Sywa-arma-tya*, or 'black arms' a possible reference to the heavy tattooing common among the related Pazyrk people, perhaps similar to the *Picti* or 'Painted People' of Northern Britain. Curiously, the Saxon historian Bede, writing some 500 years later, described the Picts as originating in Scythia. If this were true – though there is no real evidence to support it – it would have made the two forces confronting each other neighbors from adjacent parts of the Empire.

The Roman historian Strabo, who writes extensively about both communities, suggests the existence of a strong Celtic presence among these people, even referring to one group as *Keltoskythai* 'Celtic Scythians'. If this linguistic or cultural link really existed (and it remains unclear) then it would certainly explain the overlap between Sarmatian and Celtic traditions in Britain during and after the lifetime of Artorius.¹³

Artorius Castus' new legion, the II Adiutrix, was stationed at the time in Lower Pannonia, at Aquincum (modern Budapest). They were on constant state of alert against attacks by the Sarmatians and Iazyges, as well as the Quadi and Marcomanni - all of whom Marcus Aurelius declared his intention of eliminating.

After a prolonged period of fighting, diplomatic emissaries from these tribes approached Marcus Aurelius with a view to arriving at a peaceful settlement. It is likely that Artorius Castus first encountered the Sarmatians at this time - a contact that was to bear fruit several years later. At the time, diplomacy failed, and in either 173/4 or 174/5 war broke out again. It was then that a battle took place in which Artorius Castus apparently took a leading part and which was to bring him to the notice of his superiors.¹⁴

¹¹ *Ovid's Poetry of Exile* trans by David R. Slavitt. Baltimore & London, John Hopkins University Press, 1990

¹² Private communication from A. Hunt

¹³ I. A. Richmond, »The Samatae, Bremetennacum Veteranorum and the Regio Bremetennacensis« in *The Journal of Roman Studies* 35(1945), pp 15-29

¹⁴ There is also a suggestion, made by Linda Malcor (personal communication) that the Artorii had long-term dealings with the Sarmatians and were in fact 'specialists' who had fought against this particular ethnic group before.

At around 170 Artorius' third tour of duty was completed, but though he had achieved some promotion he was still some way off reaching the rank of *primus pilus* and thus restoring his equestrian status. He therefore transferred to yet another Legion, the V Macedonian, stationed at this time in Potanisa, Dacia (modern Turda in Transylvania). Here, around 172/3 Artorius finally achieved the long desired rank of *primus pilus*.

In 175 the V Macedonian was engaged in a series of battles with the Iazyges, whom they pursued as far as the river Ister, which happened to be frozen at the time. The Iazyges lead their pursuers to this spot in expectation of easily overcoming them on the slippery ice. However they reckoned without the foresight of a particular Roman officer, who had prepared his men for just such an encounter. According to Dio Cassius:

»The Iazyges, perceiving that they were being pursued, awaited their opponents onset, expecting to overcome them easily, as the others were not accustomed to the ice. Accordingly, some of the barbarians dashed straight at them, while others rode round to attack their flanks, as their horses had been trained to run safely even over a surface of this kind. The Romans upon observing this were not alarmed, but formed into a compact body, facing all their foes at once, and most of them laid down their shields and rested one foot upon them, so that they might not slip so much; and thus they received the enemy's charge. Some seized the bridles, others the shields and spearshafts of their assailants, and drew the men toward them; and thus becoming involved in close conflict, they knocked down both men and horses, since the barbarians by reason of their momentum could no longer keep from slipping. The Romans, to be sure, also slipped; but in case one of them fell on his back, he would drag his adversary down on top of him and then with his feet would hurl him backwards, as in a wrestling match, and so would get on top of him... The barbarians, being unused to combat of this sort, and having lighter equipment, were unable to resist, so that few escaped...«¹⁵

These were far from normal military tactics, but sound instead like the inspired reaction of one of a quick-thinking legionary commander. Malcor¹⁶ believes the man responsible for leading his troops to victory here was Artorius Castus, suggesting that the reason why Dio does not mention him by name is because there was some kind of rivalry between Artorius and Dio's father, who were both stationed in Liburnia at the same time and may have known each other. Such rivalry was not unusual in a situation where several officers were jostling for promotion. Since it was at this time that Artorius finally obtained the rank of *primus pilus*, it is therefore not unreasonable to surmise that his actions at the battle on the river Ister ensured this promotion. Malcor also points out that the Romans were using a technique familiar to the tribes of the Steppelands to capture horses – suggesting that the unnamed officer was familiar with Sarmatian horse wrangling and therefore with the Sarmatians themselves.¹⁷

¹⁵ Dio Cassius: *Roman History*, Book 71 Trans Earnest Carty. Cambridge Mass. Harvard University press, 2001

¹⁶ L. Malcor, »Lucius Artorius Castus: An Officer & and Equestrian« in *The Heroic Age* 1 (Spring/Summer, 1999) www.heroicage.org/issues/1/halac.htm

¹⁷ Personal communication.

As *primus pilus* Artorius could have left active service and opted for a quiet life in the Civil Service, but apparently he preferred the life of the soldier, because he now opted to follow the remainder of the equestrian *curcus*, a route which required him to serve four years each as a *praefectus*, either a *tribune militum* or *legionis* and finally as a *praefectus alae*. He seems at this point to have re-enlisted in the V Macedonica. Since most of the men joining the Legion at this point had little or no military experience, Artorius' service record would have made him an unusually valuable officer who would very likely be singled out for special duties.

Around 178/9, the year of his death, Marcus Aurelius beat the Sarmatian tribes into submission until a rebellion in Syria forced him to make hasty terms with them. These included a promise to keep clear of the Roman frontier, and to supply 8000 horsemen to form cavalry wings for the legions. 5,500 of these warriors were sent to Britain. The task of transporting this huge force, along with at least two horses each, all their equipment, wagons, weapons, armor and (we may assume) families was no small task. It appears that it fell to Artorius.

If we are correct in our assumption that Artorius re-enlisted around 175, he would either have held the rank of *praefectus* of either *auxilia* - allied non-Roman troops without citizenship, or *numeri* - foreign conscripts without citizenship. At this time the only known movement of a large group of conscripted warriors was that of the Sarmatians, more than half of who went to Britannia and the rest into another part of the empire. Given that Artorius was later to become their commander, it is more than likely he who led them across the Empire to the far distant shores of Britain.

Once they arrived in the country and were assigned to the VI Victrix, then under the command of Julius Verus, they would have required time to settle in, to be trained and taught sufficient Latin to enable them to follow commands. Artorius may have been appointed this task also, and could have remained with them for over a year. However, he was not at this juncture their official commander, nor was he to remain in Britain for long. According to the inscription, in 176/7 he returned Rome and took up the much sought-after post of *Praepositus*, overseeing the disposition of the Roman fleet stationed at Naples.

This was a hugely important post, considered something of a sinecure since it involved no active service in the front line. Rather it involved the overseeing of supplies to the Emperor on his long and wearisome campaigns in the north and east. It was a position only likely to be granted to someone who had distinguished himself in some way. The assumption is that Artorius was given the job because he had successfully carried out a task for the emperor – the escorting of the Sarmatians to Britain – and that this was his reward. Since the post was also close to Campania, where several members of the Artorii family lived, it must have been a moment of supreme personal satisfaction.

Fighting between Rome and the tribes along the German borders of the Empire continued sporadically into 178. On the death of Marcus Aurelius, his son, Commodus, became Emperor and required that the treaty agreed between his father and the Iazyges be implemented. Artorius, meanwhile, remained in his comfortable post in Naples for almost four years until, in 181, he was posted back

to Britain, to join the VI Victrix with the rank of *praefectus*. Now aged around 40 or 41 Artorius found himself commander of the Fort at Bremetannacum - the permanent home of the Sarmatian troops he had conveyed there five or six years previously.

The likelihood for this rests on a number of suppositions; however, when Artorius took up the post of *praefectus* in the VI Victrix, it seems more than reasonable to believe that he would have been given command of the unit of *numeri* with whom he was already familiar. And since the principle base for the Sarmatia *alae* was at Bremetannacum, it makes sense that Artorius would not only be their commander but also commander of the fort. In the light of subsequent events this seems the most viable scenario.

The Fortress of Veterans

Bremetannacum (modern Ribchester, Lancashire) was one of the most important strategic centers in Northern Britain. Here one Roman road crossed the river Ribble from South to North, while a second went East to the great legionary fortress at York (*Eboracum*) and a third North West to the area known as the Fylde, a flat plain ideally suited to cavalry maneuvers.

Archeological evidence shows that throughout the period of the Roman occupation cavalry regularly used Bremetannacum - at least from the beginning of the 2nd century. A 3rd century inscription found in the ruins of the fort names the unit *numerus equitum Sarmatarum Bremetennacensium*, while another, dating from the 4th century calls it the *cuneus* (wedge) *Samatarum*. This testifies to the longevity of Sarmatian presence at Bremetenacum, and suggests that this fort became a permanent base for the conscripted horsemen. The fort itself could only hold around 500 men at a time, so that others of the original 55000 would have been posted elsewhere. Fragments of horse armor found at Chesters fort on the River Tyne and at several sites along Hadrian's Wall tell us where they went. The presence of Sarmatian cavalry on the Wall will be shown to play an important part in the association of Artorius Castus with the later Arthur.

The *Ravenna Cosmography*, which lists Roman forts in Britain in the 2nd Century, gives a further definition to Bremetannacum, calling it *Bremetannacum Veteranorum* (Fort of the Veterans). This means there was a settlement of some kind, probably formed from Legionary veterans and the Sarmatian cavalry stationed at the fort. Archaeological evidence in the form of horse armor and weapons, cloak pins and pieces of jewelry make it clear that the Sarmatian presence was a strong and well established one over a lengthy period.

In addition there is more concrete evidence in the form of personal inscriptions and dedications found in the area. It was common for both *auxiliaries* and *numeri* who had served out their time to become Roman citizens (legionaries were already citizens). At retirement they usually took the name of the Emperor responsible for subduing them, along with an additional name of their own choosing. The area around Richborough provides several inscriptions, mostly dating from the beginning of the 3rd century, several of which portray warriors in the garb

of the Steppelands or bear the cognomen Marcus Aurelius. Interestingly, there are a number who bear the name Lucius - further attesting to the probability that Artorius was the fort commander at this time, and that the auxiliaries chose their names in his honour.

It seems clear that the Sarmatians created a distinct cultural enclave around Bremetannacum, and may well have made use of the flat grazing lands of the Fylde to breed and train their horses – thus keeping up the supply of mounts for their military service. What is beyond question is that they continued to live in the area and seem to have retained a far more distinct sense of cultural identity, as well as religious independence, than other racial groups in the legions.

This makes it even more probable that the beliefs, traditions, and stories of the Sarmatians were preserved in Britain, and that they would in all probability have been heard by the native bards and storytellers who regularly travelled the country. If, as we will show, certain of the stories closely resemble those later applied to the life and deeds of Arthur, it may well be that these were the origin (in part at least) of these later tales. That their revered commander happened to bear the Latin form of the name Arthur makes this even more telling.

The veteran settlement probably began around 200, about the time when the normal period of service for men conscripted in 175 would have ended. If, as has been suggested, the Sarmatians were *dedicati* (men selected to serve for as long as possible), they would have been discouraged from returning home. The likelihood is that they founded a settlement outside the walls of the fort, and that this became their home for several generations afterwards. Here their lives and traditions would have continued, amalgamated perhaps with native British ones, introduced by intermarriage between the two cultural groups, and including, in all likelihood, stories about their most distinguished commander – Artorius Castus.

I. A. Richmond, in an important essay,¹⁸ notes that the Sarmatians (however independent) would have been subject to Romanisation, and that among the influences to which they would also have been subjected were British (Celtic) traditions, and of course the multi-racial stew of the legions which, from the time of the Emperor Severus, were allowed greater independence of belief and cultural identity.

The Caledonian Revolt

When Lucius Artorius Castus arrived back in Britain in 181 he would have found himself in the middle of a crisis. Caledonian tribes had breached Hadrian's Wall and were ravaging much of the eastern side of Britain as far as York (Eboracum). Dio Cassius, writing of this, gives us a very Roman view of the wild tribespeople from the North.

»There are two principal races of the [Northern] Britons, the Caledonians and the Maeatae ... The Maeatae live next to the cross-wall which cuts the island in half, and the Caledonians are beyond them... They dwell in tents, naked and

¹⁸ I. A. Richmond, *op. cit.* (13), 16-29

unshod, possess their women in common, and in common rear all the offspring. Their form of rule is democratic for the most part, and they are very fond of plundering; consequently they choose their boldest men as rulers. They go into battle in chariots, and have small, swift horses; there are also foot-soldiers, very swift in running and very firm in standing their ground. For arms they have a shield and a short spear, with a bronze apple attached to the end of the spear-shaft, so that when it is shaken it may clash and terrify the enemy; and they also have daggers.«¹⁹

It was to protect the South from these fearsome tribes that the Emperor Hadrian initially commanded the building of the Wall that bears his name to this day. Begun in 122, it took 10,000 men a total of 8 years to complete and underwent many rebuildings, repairs and extensions during the Roman occupation until it finally extended for 120 km, running East–West from Maia (Bowness) on the Solway Firth (with a later spur running down to Maryport in Cumbria) to Segedunum (Wallsend) on the river Tyne. At the time of its completion it measured 10 feet in diameter and varied in height between 15 and 30 feet. There were 28 forts along its length with a dozen or more fortified watchtowers set between them.

Though the purpose of the Wall was primarily defensive, it also had gates leading from south to north, indicating that it also acted as a border check-point and customs station for civilian and mercantile movements. Effectively it marked the border of the Empire in the West and the strong military presence based there never declined until the legions began to withdraw. The strategic roads leading to it and garrison forts that supplied it were to be of later assistance to the defenders of Britain in the 5th - 6th centuries, and there are still ‘Arthurian’ associations with several of the forts upon the Wall which may well stem from the presence of Artorius Castus and the Sarmatians stationed there.

In 181 the Wall failed to keep the Caledonii out. Now, as they moved south, they encountered at least one large force, and according to Dio, slew their commander, a legate of the VI Victrix – indicating that it was part of this legion they met in battle. They then progressed to York, where they killed the acting governor of the province (probably Marcus Antius Crescens Clapurnianus). The Victrix were so shocked by this, and perhaps by the battle with the Caledoni, that they began to fall apart. According to Dio, they attempted to raise up one of their own, a prefect named Priscus, to the status of Emperor (one of several such revolts which took place at this time across the Empire). However Priscus declined, declaring: »I am no more an emperor than you are soldiers!«

When the Emperor Commodus received word of the unrest in Britain he dispatched Marcellus Ulpius, a stern and unpopular general, to restore order. But during the period between the start of the uprising and the arrival of Ulpius (almost 2 years from the start of the attacks) something happened that turned the tide in favor of Rome. The one stable area during this time was around Bremetanacum - the fort and region almost certainly commanded by Artorius. *Someone* organized a campaign against the Caledonians before the arrival of the new com-

¹⁹ Dio Cassius, Roman History, Book 71

mander, so that by the time Ulpius reached Britain, fighting had moved back beyond Hadrian's Wall to the area below the Antonine Wall (more or less abandoned at this time).

Two lines of research suggest that this someone was Artorius. Firstly, that it is possible to match several possible battle locations in which he fought with a list of later Arthurian battle sites, and secondly that within a short space of time Artorius was given the rank of *dux* (duke) with the task of putting down a far more serious revolt in Armorica (Brittany). Recent suggestions have been put forward that the fragmentary word on the stele is actually Armenians rather than Amoricans. However a careful examination of the inscription shows that this would almost certainly not have fitted the space.

One of the few surviving pieces of documentary evidence for the existence of a later Dark Age Arthur, and the first place where he is referred to by the title *dux*, also contains a list of battles. This book, the *Historia Brittonum*, (History of Britain), is attributed to a 9th century monk named Nennius, who tells us that in the face of a Saxon invasion in the late 5th century, Arthur, the British *Dux Bellorum* (Duke of Battle), fought 12 encounters with the enemy. The first of these battles takes place 'at the mouth of the River Glein'; the second to fifth are 'on the river Dubglass in the region of Linnus'; the sixth is 'on the river called Bassas'; the seventh is 'in the forest of Calydon, or Cat Coit Caledon'; the eighth is 'at the fort of Guinnion'; the ninth is 'at the City of Legions'; the tenth is 'on the banks of the river Trebruit'; the eleventh is 'on a mountain called Agned or Cat Breguion'; the twelfth is 'at the Mount (or Hill) of Badon'.

If we examine the historical evidence for these battles, as fought by an Arthur who lived in 5th/6th centuries, the possibility arises that Nennius' list may have derived, in part or wholly, from an lost account of Lucius Artorius Castus' campaign against the Caledonians.

In fact we have no means of knowing whether any of these battles actually took place at all, either in the sequence given by Nennius, or with someone called Arthur as a protagonist. They may also not all have been full-scale battles, but rather skirmishes. Nor can we say with any degree of certainty where they took place, despite numerous attempts to place them at specific points on the map of post Roman Britain, since place names have mutated so much over the centuries. There is ample evidence that a later Arthur fought a campaign in the Northern half of Britain, and if we then take the timing of these battles back three hundred years, to the 2nd rather than the 5th century, a pattern does emerge – suggesting that it could have been *Artorius*' exploits that furnished the original battle list, rather than the later Arthur. By applying the battle list from the *Historia Brittonum* to the situation in Britain around 181 we arrive at a scenario that seems to echo uncannily the campaign of Artorius Castus.²⁰

One of the most important battles in Nennius' list – the 11th – takes place at the Hill or Rock of Agned, also called Breguion. The latter could derive from an earlier version of the name Bremetenacum, which was initially a native British

²⁰ L. Malcor, »Lucius Artorius Castus: The Battles in Britain« in *The Heroic Age 2* (Winter, 1999) www.heroicage.org/issues/2/ha2lac.htm

name (*Bremetanna* or possibly *Bremetenraco* – the Stronghold of the Breme), rather than Roman. An alternative site would be the fort at *Bremenium* (High Rochester, Northumberland), which would still be close to the path of the advancing Caledonians and within the area controlled by *Bremetanacum*. If, once they had sacked *Eboracum*, the tribes pushed further west, following the Roman roads across the Pennines, it is likely that they met *Artorius* and his Sarmatian cavalry for the first time and fought a battle which they lost.

At this point the assumption is that if *Artorius* was the victor of this first encounter, he drove the Caledoni west along the River Ribble towards the tidal estuary where two more rivers, the Douglas and the Dow, add their flow to the waters. This area, which would have made a good ‘killing field’, may possibly have born the name *Trebruit* in *Nennius*’ time, and here he places another of *Arthur*’s battles. Local tradition makes *Cai* or *Kai* the leader of this encounter, and it is possible that *Artorius* might have had an officer named *Caius* on his staff in Britain who could have led a separate cohort of Sarmatian cavalry against the Caledoni at this site. This is, of course, only a speculation.²¹

Nennius describes the next four of *Arthur*’s battles happening along the *Dubglass*, which has been identified with the river Douglas in Lancashire.²² Assuming that the Caledoni fled south, away from the high escarpments of the Pennines in an attempt to shake the fast moving Sarmatian cavalry off their tails, they could have followed the course of the River Douglas. If they indeed fought four more battles here, they would all have taken place within the region of *Bremetanacum*.

These battles seem to have halted the headlong rush of the Caledoni, after which they turned back across the high ground towards *York* – which was also known as a *City of the Legions* – the site of *Arthur*’s ninth battle in *Nennius* list. This would have taken them back into the area controlled by the *VI Victrix*, to which legion some at least of the Sarmatian cavalry were attached, and this may have encouraged *Artorius* to follow up his initial success. Since that legion was still in a state of disarray the commander of *Bremetanacum* seems to have decided to continue chasing the Caledoni – now definitely in flight - back above *Hadrian*’s Wall.

Their inevitable direction would have been along *Deer Street*, towards the fort at *Vinovium* (*Binchester*, *Durham*). Here, it seems, the Roman force caught up with them and were once again victorious in another skirmish. *Nennius* names *Arthur*’s eighth battle as having been fought at *Castle Guinnion* – a name that can be shown to derive from *Vinovium*.²³ From here the beaten Caledoni had only one place to go – through *Hadrian*’s Wall, across the no man’s land between there and the abandoned *Antonine Wall*, back to their own lands. Along the way they passed the *River Glen*, northwest of *Wooler* in *Northumberland*. *Nennius* sites another of *Arthur*’s battles on the *River Glen*, again etymologically shown to derive from *Glein*.²⁴

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² K. H. Jackson, »Once Again *Arthur*’s Battles« in *Modern Philology* 43, 1945-46, pp 44-57

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ K. H. Jackson, *ibid*; L. Malcor, *ibid*

From here the tribesmen fled further north, but if we are correct in our reading of the landscape and the places, Artorius continued his pursuit, possibly now under orders from the newly arrived Ulpus Marcellus to exterminate the invaders completely. The next battle seemed to have taken place at Cat Coit Caledon, the Caledonian Forest, located in the Scottish Lowlands and again close to the Roman road of Dere Street, where the now demoralised Caledoni were beaten yet again.

Nennius lists this encounter as the seventh of Arthur's battles; but we must remember that he may well have jumbled the original order – possibly because he was working from a source which rhymed, so that an earlier poet may have reorganised or even reinvented battles, to make his poem sing.

On the final leg of their flight to their homelands the Caledoni seem to have turned at bay again. If so, as it is the only unidentified site from Nennius' list, this battle probably took place at the river he calls Bassus.

The 12th and final encounter took place at the Mount, Hill, or Rock of Badon, which some researchers have identified as Dumbarton Rock in Strathclyde, or possibly Buxton in Derbyshire, where a Roman road known as Bathamgate passes through the hills of the Peak District.²⁵ Curiously the 12th century *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth, describes Dumbarton as a place where Arthur fought against the Scots (the Irish) and Picts (the descendants of the Caledoni) and killed them in enormous numbers, treating them with unparalleled severity and sparing none that fell into his hands. This adds fuel to the suggestion that the campaign was a success, as does the fact that in 184, just after these events, the Emperor Commodus assumed the title of *Britannicus* – a usual indication of a victory against specific enemy of the Empire.²⁶

If we follow this line of reasoning, which fits the known facts, we can see that all twelve battles, as listed by Nennius and applied to those of the later Arthur, also parallel those of Artorius Castus' campaign some 300 years earlier. If Artorius did indeed lead the campaign against the Caledoni then the story of his deeds would have lasted; they would have been the stuff of bardic song throughout Britain and would have passed down through generations of storytellers. In addition to the named battles against the Caledoni, there would have been others – skirmishes along the Wall itself, where archaeological record places units of the Sarmatian cavalry.

The Armorican Campaign

The next event in Artorius Castus' life also echoes that of the later Arthur. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannia*, an important Arthurian text that we shall explore in Chapter 5, we are told that after a campaign in which he defeated the Scots, Arthur returned to York, and almost immediately set sail for the Continent, to attack Rome itself. Artorius Castus, having completed his battles against the Caledonians, also returned to York (Eboracum) and almost im-

²⁵ A. Hunt, *A Shadow in the Mist*, Kirkby Stephen, Hayloft, 2006

²⁶ Trans. Lewis Thorpe. Folio Society, 1996

mediately was posted to the continent (Armorica, Brittany), commanding a troop of Sarmatian cavalry, to put down a rebellion led by disaffected Roman soldiers.

When those responsible for the attempt to make Priscus Emperor were executed or banished, one officer of the VI Victrix, rather than receive punishment, was given an important task, commanding two legions: probably drawn from the still shattered VI and the XX Valerio Victrix. The inscription from Artorius' tomb at this point describes him as 'dux of the cohorts of cavalry from Britain against the Armoricans', and it was with this title (possibly a temporary one) that he undertook the repression of an uprising among legions based there in 185/6.

Both Dio Cassius, and another Roman historian, Herodian (born 178), describe how trouble flared up in Armorica. Under the leadership of a disaffected ex-legionary named Maternus, a group of deserters formed themselves into a formidable force and began ravaging through Gaul and into Spain, attacking cities and setting free any prisoners they discovered until their numbers grew to dangerous proportions. When news of this reached Commodus he sent letters to the governors of the threatened regions, which included Pescennius Niger in Aquitania, Clodius Albinus in Belgica and Septimus Severus in Lugdunensis, accusing them of failing to keep control of their provinces.

Exactly what happened next is difficult to say. Dio and Herodian give conflicting accounts and other sources are scanty. We know from Artorius Castus' inscription that it was at this point that he led 'the cavalry from Britain against the Armoricans'. We may assume that either one of the accused governors or the Emperor himself ordered the crack unit of Sarmatian cavalry from Britain to put down the rebellion. Both accounts tell us that Maternus' ambitions had grown to the point that he considered taking the empire and assassinating Commodus. However a warning reached the emperor – according to Dio via 1500 'javelin men' who came from Britain into Italy to warn Commodus. This term is unusually specific, since, as Malcor points out, it would have been more normal to call them simply 'legionaries' or 'soldiers'. 'Javelin-man', *iaculator* in Latin, refers to the light lance or *iaculor* used by most Roman cavalry. This ties in precisely with the Artorius inscription. It is possible that the newly appointed *dux*, as the leader or coordinator of the military response to Maternus, learned of the plot against Commodus and sent a force to Rome to warn the emperor and help in his defence.²⁷

An alternative scenario, based on Dio's *Roman History* (Book 73) describes the plot against Commodus as led by Perennius, the commander of the Praetorian Guard, who grew tired of running the empire while Commodus enjoyed himself with chariot racing and orgies. Dio says that 'the lieutenants of Britain' sent 1500 men to Italy to warn Commodus that Perennius was plotting against him, showing him coins struck by the would-be emperor with his own name (or that of his son) inscribed upon them. Perennius was duly captured and executed, together with the rest of his family.

The two accounts seem to have become muddled. A more likely reconstruction of events would be that *Dux* Artorius lead some of the 1500 Sarmatian caval-

²⁷ L. Malcor, *op. cit.* (20)

ry from Britain against Maternus and defeated him somewhere in Gaul or Armorica, receiving as a reward the governorship of Liburnia. It seems unlikely that he would have known about the plot conceived by Perennius, which seems to be a separate incident unconnected to the Armorican uprising.

In any case we hear no more of the 1500 javelin men, but given that Artorius next post was as *procurator centenarius* of the province of Liburnia (in Dalmatia), we may assume that this high office was granted as a reward by the grateful emperor. This post was certainly an important one, carrying with it a salary of 100,000 sesterces a year – enough for Artorius to maintain his equestrian standing and to purchase a villa and build the mausoleum for himself and his family from which the inscription comes. That he also had ‘the power to issue death sentences’ suggests that he was a magistrate.

A last Adventure

When most men might have been expected to retire after 25-26 years in the army, Artorius still had one final adventure ahead of him. He seems to have lived comfortably in Liburnia for nearly a decade, and inscriptions found in the area suggest that other members of his family had settled there.²⁸ Possibly his own children had homes in the area, or shared the villa at Podstrana.

Commodus was assassinated in 193 and Pertinax, whom Artorius may have known from the period when they served together in Pannonia and Britain, became Emperor. His reign lasted only eighty-seven days however, and Didius Julianus replaced him for an even briefer period of sixty-six days. At this point the powerful and wily Septimus Severus succeeded to the imperial throne. Dio Cassius records that he held a state funeral for his old comrade Pertinax, and that important members of the equestrian order were commanded to attend. Artorius would almost certainly have been present, and may have renewed his earlier acquaintance with the new emperor.

Then, around 196, when Artorius would have been in his 54th year, the prefect Albinus, who had also played a part in the Armorican uprising and who was now governor of Britain, was declared Emperor by his legions and invaded Gaul. Severus led a counter-attack, marching north through Pannonia, Noricum, Raetia, and through Upper Germania into the threatened province. Though we have no means of knowing this for certain, he may well have called upon Artorius to aid him in the campaign. Certainly he passed through the area of Liburnia, where the now ageing commander still lived, and he would almost certainly have remembered the leader of the Sarmatian cavalry from a decade earlier when he (Severus) was still governor of Lugdunensis, and had become involved in the Armorican revolt. In addition Artorius would have been familiar with some of the forces commanded by Albinus, which may have included Sarmatian cavalry from Brebetanacum.²⁹

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ *Ibid*

Two battles were fought against Albinus. The first was at *Tinurtium* (modern Tournus) in c 197 and another at *Lugdunum* (Lyon) later in the same year. Dio, who gives the best account of this, mentions heavy losses to the *British* cavalry unit and is also clear in stating that Severus himself was not present at the first battle. The implication is that whoever was leading the Roman forces had sufficient knowledge of the Sarmatian cavalry to enable them to be beaten. This could have been Artorius or, if not, he may have advised the actual commander. If so he would have been fighting against his own old unit.

Albinus withdrew south with Severus in pursuit. The second battle at Lugdunum was a bloody affair, and once again it was the cavalry – this time Severus' men, lead by one Laetus – who turned the tide. Albinus fled the field and having been surrounded at a nearby villa took his own life. Dio describes the battlefield as »covered with the bodies of men and horses«.

It is possible that Artorius also took part in this battle and that he fell here, since there is no further mention of him in the historical record. If so his body would have been taken back to Liburnia and buried in the mausoleum he had already prepared. The second plaque found in the area, and which honoured his deeds, may have been erected at this time or soon after.

Thus ended the astonishing career of Lucius Artorius Castus, whose exploits would have been remembered long after his passing and may, with the traditions handed down in Britain by the Sarmatian warriors he had commanded, have influenced the growing number of tales of a British cavalry leader who bore the title of *dux* and fought over the same area of Britain against a similar enemy to the later Saxon invaders of the 5th/6th century. Curiously, the 16th century antiquarian John Leyland mentioned an ancient wax seal preserved at Westminster which listed the later Arthur's conquests as: *Patricus Arturus Britanniae Galliae Germaniae Daciae Imperator* (The Noble Arthur, Emperor of Britain, Gaul, Germany and Dacia). All the places listed are areas where Artorius Castus fought.³⁰

Echoes from the Steppe

The parallels between the life of Artorius and that of the later Arthur are distinctive enough to give us pause. The picture jumps into focus even more sharply when we examine other details from the lives and beliefs of the Sarmatians.

An image that is constant in the later historical accounts of Arthur is his use of armoured cavalry. In each instance his men fight from horseback wearing armour and carrying long lances as well as swords and shields. The Sarmatians also were noted for their use of scale armour; they too fought from horseback, carried shields and defended themselves with long lances. Like the medieval Knights of the Round Table, whose favourite weapon was also the lance, they believed themselves all to be of equal status.

³⁰ D. Kennedy, *King Arthur: A Casebook*, New York, Garland, 1996

The story of Arthur's success against the Saxons, 300 years after the events described above, lies exactly in the mobility and shock-tactics of his mounted troops and accounts for the wide area over which he is said to have fought his battles. By the early 5th century, even the Roman legions were discovering that they needed mounted divisions to counter the barbarian hordes that had begun to threaten Rome. They learned the use of the stirrup, which gave stability to the mounted warrior and enabled him to stand in the saddle to thrust with sword and spear against infantry, from the very people they were fighting. The Sarmatians were well versed in this form of warfare and may well have passed it on to their Roman masters.

But there is a still more significant detail connecting the Sarmatians to the later Arthurian knights. In battle they fought under a bronze dragonhead with a windsock style banner attached. This may have originated as a directional aid for archers in battle, but by the 2nd century it was an important symbol of Sarmatian strength. This standard, known as a *Draco*, which was said to roar as the wind blew through it when the warriors rode into battle, may account for the later cognomen *Pendragon* ('Head' or 'Chief' Dragon) applied to Arthur and his father Uther. A 14th century image from the *L'Histoire de Merlin* of Robert De Borron shows Arthur riding into battle under just such a banner. Although the Roman legions had their own standards (notably the Eagles) they adopted the *Draco* after the arrival of the Sarmatian auxiliaries. It became a permanent feature during the Dacian Wars of c101-106 during the rule of the Emperor Trajan. At this time the equipment carried by the legions was generally revised to enable them to withstand the attacks of barbarian horsemen, and it was at this time that the heavily armed cavalry wings (*alae cataphractorium*) became an important part of the army. The office of *draconius* (standard bearer) also appears at this time, almost certainly as a direct result of the incorporation of Steppe units into the legions.³¹

The *Draco* standard would certainly have been seen along Hadrian's Wall, where one or more contingents of the Sarmatian cavalry (attached to Artorius' old legion, the VI Victrix, who built several of the forts along this stretch of the wall) were stationed at various times.

Arthurian associations with this same area are well attested. Discussion still continues over the identification of the fort known as Camboglanna. Some authorities maintain that it should be identified with modern Birdoswald, others with the adjacent fort at Castlesteads. Both have possible Arthurian connections, and have been cited as the place where Arthur fought his final battle at Camlan.

Archaeological evidence confirms that the fort at Birdoswald was re-occupied and a large timber hall built there during the period of the Dark Age Arthur, probably at the behest of an important local chieftain or military commander who could have been Arthur himself. Memories of the presence of Artorius and the Sarmatian cavalry at this site may have influenced local traditions that claim this as a centre of Arthur's military activities in Cumbria and in the ancient Caledonian forest. A mere 20 miles further down the Wall from the fort at Camboglanna,

³¹ L. Malcor – personal communication

a name which has been put forward as a possible site of the battle of Camlan, a second fort, named Avalanna (Burgh-by-Sands), once stood. Though nothing of this now remains, it was pointed out some years ago that this is almost exactly the distance that the body of a wounded man could have been carried from the field of battle - to be buried in Avalon!³²

It is when we look at the traditions of the Sarmatians who served under Artorius Castus that we find remarkable echoes of the legends of Arthur and his knights.³³ One particular tribe, called the Narts, numbered among their possessions an extraordinary object known as the Nartamonga. This was a type of Cauldron that would only feed heroes of significant stature, and in one tale, centring on the hero Batradz, we can see more than one echo of later Arthurian legends. The story can be summarised as follows:

»The Narts were quarrelling among themselves over who should keep the Nartamonga, the sacred cup that would only serve the most perfect hero, and for which they had sought for a long time. First Urzymag said that without him they would not have succeeded in their quest for the cup, so he should have it. Then Soslan and Sozyryko, who were also famous warriors, claimed to be the greatest hero. In each case Batradz, who was the leader of the Narts, refuted their claims, instancing times when they had failed to live up to the highest standards of heroism where he had not. Finally Batradz challenged any man there to find one time when he personally had failed them. No one could do so and he therefore kept the Nartamonga.«³⁴

This is interesting for a number of reasons. The nature of the Nartamonga, its ability to enhance heroic abilities and bring inspiration to the one who owns it, suggests similarities with a number of Celtic cauldrons of inspiration and life, which possess similar qualities and which are also associated with Arthur. This leaves little room for doubt that the Nart Sagas represent an important link in the chain of chronology that leads in time to the Grail Quest of later Arthurian legend.³⁵

Batradz himself has a number of parallels with Arthur – one of the most startling being the story of his death. As he lies wounded on the field of battle he asks his lieutenant to throw his magical sword into a nearby lake. The lieutenant tries to do this three times, finally carrying out his master's wishes after two failed attempts. This is so remarkably like the later stories in which Bedivere, Arthur's lieutenant, is asked by the wounded king to do exactly the same with Excalibur, that one has to consider these stories as either following each other or both drawing upon the same or similar sources. In addition it should be noted that

³² H. Nickel, »The Last Days of Britain and the Origins of the Arthurian Legends« in *Lucius Artorius Castus and the King Arthur Legend*, Eds. N. Cambi & J. Matthews, Književni krug Split/Ogranak Matice Hrvatske Podstrana, 2014

³³ R. Castleden, *King Arthur: The Truth Behind the Legend*, London, Routledge 2000

³⁴ G. Dumézil, *Legends sur les Narts*. Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honore Champion, 1930; C. Scott Littleton, 1979

³⁵ J. Matthews, *The Barddas of Iolo Morganwg*, New York Beach, Maine: Weiser Books, 2004

the battle which ends in Batradz' death is also an internecine one, as was Arthur's battle against his son/nephew Mordred, and that at the time of his birth Batradz is described as 'tempered like steel in a forge', which makes him invulnerable. Arthur, in a poem dated to the 6th or 7th centuries, is described as born of the cavalry wing's steel. Later, as long as he carries the magical Excalibur and the sheath in which it is held, he also cannot be hurt.³⁶

These parallels are striking and suggest a long-standing connection between the two cultures. Nor is it necessary to believe that the Sarmatians posted to Britain in the 2nd century were the only means by which these stories could have cross-fertilised each other and thus influenced the later Arthurian saga. T. Sulimirsky, the great expert on Sarmatian history, points out that there were a number of opportunities for contact between the Sarmatians and the Celts during the 6th to 1st centuries BC. During this period the Celts migrated across Europe an Asia Minor into the area of the Danube and across the plains of Central Europe, to what is still today Southern Russia. Sulimirsky adds that by the 1st century AD the Iazyges occupied the plains of Northern Hungary and had »...partly displaced, but mostly subdued, the Celto-Dacian occupants«, of this area.³⁷ Even earlier evidence for a Celtic influence on the Sarmatians is evidenced by the discovery of Celtic style helmets and weapons found at Sarmatian sites in the Ukraine and Crimea. There was, in effect, sufficient contact between the two cultures for a particular type of Sarmatian brooch to have evolved from a Celtic original, making it more than likely that a transmission of stories and traditions could also have flowed between the two peoples at this early date. The Sarmatians who found themselves in Britain in the 2nd century may well have recognised elements of story and myth among the natives with whom they were suddenly associated.

Given that another tradition among the Sarmatians was the worship of a sword stuck point down in the earth we may be forgiven for suggesting that his practice, carried by the Sarmatians to Britain, influenced the later Arthurian legends. In these Arthur draws a sword from a stone to prove his right to the kingship of Britain. The 4th century writer Ammianus Marcellinus says of the Alans (a sub-tribe of the Sarmatians) that their only idea of religion was »to plunge a naked sword into the earth with barbaric ceremonies, and they worship that with great respect, as Mars, the presiding deity of the regions over which they wander«.³⁸ Elsewhere, the 5th Century Greek historian Herodotus gives a lengthy description of Scythian practices in which a kind of wooden pyramid was constructed, flat on top, into which an ancient iron sword was stuck to represent the war-god Ares. Sacrifices, both animal and human, were made to this god. The Scythians were cousins to the Alans, Iazyges and other Sarmatian tribes and it is more than likely that they shared such ceremonies.³⁹

³⁶ R. Wadge, »King Arthur, A British or Sarmatian Tradition« in *Folklore* 98 no 2 1987, 204-15

³⁷ T. Sulimirsky, *The Sarmatians*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1970, p. 171

³⁸ *Ammenius Marcellinus*. Ed. & Trans. J.C. Rolfe, Harvard University Press, 1939.

³⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories* Ed & trans by Aubrey de Selincourt, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1954

Even the name of Arthur's magical weapon, most often given as Excalibur, may derive from a Sarmatian source. An older name for the sword is Caliburnus, (White-steel) from *chalybus* (steel) and *eburnus* (white). A tribe of Sarmatian smiths from the area of the Caucasus were known as the Kalybes - suggesting that the very name of Arthur's sword may have originated with the warriors from across the seas.⁴⁰

This may seem a long way in time and space from the more usual setting for the Arthurian period in the late 5th to early 6th centuries. However, oral memory can extend over much greater lengths of time and old stories have a way of re-surfacing, as well as affecting those that come after. As we have noted above there was a good deal of contact between the Celts and the Sarmatians. Later, the Crusaders added elements to the Arthurian legends from contact with Eastern traditions. It is by no means impossible that Sarmatian/Osetic stories could have been circulating in the Crusader Kingdoms at this time (the 13th century onwards) and that, for example, the tale of Batradz' magical sword and its return to the water could have been brought back to the West, where it reappeared in the French text *La Mort du Roi Artu* (c 1230-40).⁴¹

Other writers have speculated that the Sarmatian contingent of the legion settled in Britain (this much is clear from archaeological evidence alone) and that actual descendants of Artorius Castus (easily possible if Artorius had a liaison with a British woman) or descendants of the original warriors may still have been around in the 5th or 6th centuries. Certainly a *Cuneus Sarmatarum* is still listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a list of Legions compiled at the end of the 4th century – barely a hundred years before the time when Arthur is believed to have flourished. Another theory suggests that, as expert horse breeders, the Steppe warriors may have continued to supply mounts to a native militia gathered together under the dragon standard some 300 years after the time of Artorius.⁴² Archaeological evidence of an equestrian centre producing horse leather and decorative harness at *Trimontium* (between the Antonine and Hadrianic walls) suggests the continuing importance of horse training in Britain. It is more than likely that the Sarmatians could have established a strong presence as horse breeders, and that their increasing interaction with local tribespeople and the Roman-British enclave would have made them familiar and socially acceptable figures. This would have enabled the sharing of memories as well as stories and traditions among the native British. The story of Lucius Artorius Castus may well have lived on, embroidered and altered and finally merging with older British mythic heroes and perhaps with a new rising star – Arthur, Duke of Battles.

⁴⁰ H. Nickel, »Wer Waren König Artus Ritter?«, *Zeitschrift der historischen Waffen- und Kostumkunde* 1, 1975, pp 1-18

⁴¹ R. Wadge, *op. cit.* (38)

⁴² A. Moffat, *Arthur and the Lost Kingdoms*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1999.

RIMSKI KRALJ ARTUR:
LUCIJE ARTORIJE KAST I SARMAČANI U BRITANIJU

John Matthews

U radu se iznose moguće veze između života rimskog vojnika iz 2. st., Lucija Artorija Kasta, i kasnijih, srednjovjekovnih legendi oko polumitskog kralja Artura. Autor pretpostavlja da se zahvaljujući natpisu otkrivenom u blizini Splita u Hrvatskoj (Podstrana), može izgraditi čvrsta teza da je Kast bio najstariji povijesni lik za koji se može dokazati da je utjecao na razvitak kasnijih legendi u Britaniji. Sačuvane su priče o sarmatskim ratnicima koji su u Britaniju došli kao dio rimskih legija, a kojima je zapovijedao sam Kast; naime sarmatske i keltske priče stapaju se međusobno u razdoblju nakon Kastovog života. Najstariji zapisi pokazuju da se potonji nije doživljavao kao kralj nego da je nosio naslov *dux* (zapovjednik) i da je bio karizmatični lider, a jedina osoba koja je nosila ime Artur bio je Lucije Artorije Kast.

Ako je ispravna teorija o Artoriju kao pravom Arturu, to ne isključuje i druge moguće čimbenike u stvaranju mita. On pouzdano nije onaj Artur iz 5./6. st. koji se borio protiv Saksonaca i pomogao da se u Britaniji održi rimska civilizacija. Ipak, borba protiv Kaledonaca u tom ranom razdoblju mogla je ostaviti, svjesno ili nesvjesno, nasljeđe koje je pretvorilo život velikog britanskog (ili rimskog) vojskovođe u mit i legendu.