

The Name and Battle of Arfderydd, near Carlisle

Andrew Breeze

University of Navarre, Pamplona

THE BATTLE OF ARFDERYDD, fought near Carlisle in 573 (or perhaps 575), appears in many accounts of North Britain. Yet more can perhaps be said on its location and the meaning of its name. This paper thus has two functions: it reviews what has been written on the conflict between 1860 to 2009, and then sets out a new etymology for *Arfderydd*, with implications for where the action took place.

Annales Cambriae records the encounter under the year 573. The best manuscript here is London, British Library, MS Harley 3859 (copied in about 1100), which has merely *Bellum Armerid*. But London, National Archives, MS E.164/1 (of the thirteenth century) adds to this, saying the encounter was “between the sons of Eliffer and Gwenddolau son of Ceidio, in which battle Gwenddolau fell. Merlin went mad” (Williams ab Ithel, 5). The mention of Merlin (*Merlinus*, a form deriving from Geoffrey of Monmouth) shows the way a historical event has gained the trappings of legend.

A step forward was made by W. F. Skene in his *Four Ancient Books of Wales* (Edinburgh, 1868) and elsewhere, where he identified Arfderydd as Arthuret, south of the Esk in what is now Cumbria. Sir John Lloyd, who agreed with Skene on the site, regarded the encounter as “a triumph won by Rhydderch [of Strathclyde] over Gwenddoleu ap Ceidio.” Yet he rejected the notion (which Skene thought implied by later hagiography) that it was also a victory of Christianity over semi-paganism (Lloyd, 166-7). The fame of the battle was discussed by the Chadwicks, whose concern was story rather than history. They referred to the “Dialogue of Myrddin [= Merlin] and Taliesin”, a short but obscure poem in the thirteenth-century Black Book of Carmarthen (=Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 1). It bewails the slaughter of heroes and mentions Maelgwn Gwynedd (d. 547), the sons of Eliffer, and Arfderydd. The Black Book also has Merlin’s monologue *Afallenau* “Apple-Trees”, where the prophet refers to Gwenddolau as his generous lord, to Arfderydd, where he wore a torque of gold, and to his present misery as an exile in the woods. Another poem placed in the mouth of Merlin, in the Red Book of Hergest (=Oxford, Jesus College, MS Welsh 1), is called *Cyfoesi* “Conversation”. It tells of the great but doomed power of Rhydderch, and mentions the city of the bards by the Clyde, Gwenddolau’s death at Arfderydd, and Merlin’s madness. The Chadwicks referred as well to the Welsh triads, which mention Gwenddolau’s loyal retinue, who “continued the battle for six weeks after their lord was slain.” The battle likewise figures in a fragment of the “Herbertian” life of St Kentigern, written in 1147 x 1164 (when Herbert was bishop of Glasgow). This is known only from London, British Library, MS Titus A xix. The fragment tells of a prophet Lailoken, who went mad while fighting in a battle between Liddel Water and *Carwannok* after a voice from heaven cursed him for bringing the slaughter about. (Walter Bower’s *Scotichronicon*, of the fifteenth century, gives a version of this story with the form *Carwanolow*). *Carwannok* is usually taken as Carwinley, a farm (NY 4072) in Arthuret parish. Neither toponym appears in the more conventional life of Kentigern written by Jocelyn of Furness in 1175 x 1199, and surviving in London, British Library, MS Vitellius C viii (Chadwick and Chadwick, 105-14). Jocelyn clearly had little interest in Celtic legends.

As for the meaning of *Arfderydd*, an advance was made by Sir Ifor Williams, who took the second element as *terydd* “ardent, passionate, fierce” (Williams 1935, 161). We shall return to this point. Rachel Bromwich spoke of Myrddin or Merlin as a Northern hero who was present at Arfderydd, but who was later associated by Geoffrey of Monmouth and others with Carmarthen (Bromwich 1954). Yet few will now agree with her that Myrddin’s name is not derived from *Caerfyrddin* (=Carmarthen). Further information on the saga of Arfderydd was given by Jackson. He referred to Welsh accounts of the death there of Gwenddolau son of Ceidio, who was fighting his cousins Gwrgi and Peredur. He quoted the Latin fragment associated with Kentigern for the field of conflict as being on the English side of Liddel Water, near the Roman fort called “*Castra Exploratorum*”. He added that Welsh sources state that Gwrgi and Peredur, deserted by their troops, were killed in 580 at *Caer Greu* (of unknown location) by Eda of the Big Knees (of unknown identity). Although nothing is known of the lands they ruled, Jackson thought that, if Carwinley is called after Gwenddolau, then Arthuret was within his domains (Jackson 1955).

A brief account of Arfderydd was given by Sir Thomas Parry, who spoke of it as Rhydderch ap Tudwal’s victory over Gwenddolau, and of Myrddin’s going mad in it, after which he lived in the wood of Caledonia for fifty years with the wild beasts, mourning Gwenddolau’s death. Parry noted that Myrddin must have had a reputation as a prophet by the tenth century, since he figures as such in the Welsh political poem *Armes Prydein* “The Prophecy of Britain”, composed in late 940, after English capitulation to the Vikings at Leicester, which it mentions (Parry, 27).

The account of the local Roman roads provided long ago by Margary remains valuable, particularly as his conclusions are ignored by some historical maps. They show the road from Carlisle to Birrens and beyond as running directly via the Roman fort of “*Castra Exploratorum*” at Netherby. This is incorrect. Margary said as follows. The road ran north from Carlisle along the present A7. He thought it then turned west at a point three miles south of Netherby, crossing the Esk at a ford called the Roost, near a farm called the Fauld. Its course west of the river is shown by an *agger* marked by a footpath (National Grid Reference NY 3467) in Millhill Wood, east of Greta. As for the fort at Netherby, that was approached by a subsidiary road that left the main one north of the River Lyne (NY 3965), passed Longtown, and then after Netherby ran northwards through Eskdale along the east bank of the river, where its route is marked by a Roman fort at Broomholm (NY 3781). It eventually reached the fort at Raeburnfoot (NY 2599), there linking up in wild moorland country with another military road running east-west (Margary, II, 186, 191). We shall see how these details are significant for the locating of Arfderydd. Jackson mentioned Arfderydd briefly in a later study, dating it to 574 (Jackson 1958).

A new phase in our knowledge begins with work by Jarman. He translated Myrddin’s lines of lamentation in *Afallenau*, which he dated to 850 x 1050, including the following:

Mirth delights me not, no woman visits me;
And in the battle of Arfderydd my torque was of gold
Though today I am not treasured by one the colour of swans.

Jarman noted how Myrddin elsewhere in the Black Book of Carmarthen is made to refer to Gwenddolau as once “a glorious prince / Gathering booty from every border”, but “beneath the brown earth now he is silent”. Meanwhile, Rhydderch knows little of Myrddin’s misery, with “Snow up to my hips among the forest wolves, / Icicles in my hair.” The contrast of Gwenddolau, a shadowy figure, and Rhydderch, the sixth-century ruler of Strathclyde known

from Adhamhnán's life of Columba, *Historia Brittonum*, and Jocelyn's life of Kentigern, is evident. Jarman at this time believed that Rhydderch was the victor at Arfderydd, though no early source states this (Jarman 1959). If so, saga would shed a little light on history.

Jarman made other important comments on Arfderydd in his Cardiff inaugural lecture. He described Myrddin as purely legendary. There is no reason to take him as a contemporary of the North British bards Aneirin and Taliesin; his name derives from *Caerfyrddin* (=Carmarthen), misunderstood as "Myrddin's stronghold", though the correct meaning is "stronghold of the sea-fortress", with no allusion to any person. Jarman here thus disagreed with Rachel Bromwich. He again said that Welsh saga implies Arfderydd was a victory for Rhydderch (Jarman 1960, 17-23). The Caledonian Forest where Merlin froze in misery is identified by Count Tolstoy. He quoted Hector Boece, who (as translated by Bellenden) said "The watter of Clyde ... risis out of the samin montane within the wood of Calidone, fra quhilk risis Annand" (Tolstoy 1961-3). So it was the area around Beattock Summit (NS 9915), where modern road and railway cross the 1000-foot contour. Glaswegians will even now be aware of the region's winter hardships, shown by the graves of travellers who there perished in the snow. Hence the legend of Merlin, Scotland's own man of the mountain.

The genealogies of Gwenddolau and his supposed antagonist Rhydderch are conveniently set out (Bartrum, 73, 89). Arfderydd is marked, west of the Esk, on the Ordnance Survey map for the period (Anon. 1966). In his revised edition of a Black Book poem, Jarman made no fundamental changes to his views of Arfderydd (Jarman 1967, 11-17). Jackson noted how the tales of Arfderydd are amongst much other material to enter Welsh tradition from the Old North (Jackson 1969, 63). Alcock (following Skene) gave the battle's name as "Arderydd", even though Lloyd showed sixty years previous that this is incorrect (Alcock, 83). In her edition of Sir Ifor Williams's papers, Rachel Bromwich noted Skene's identification of Arfderydd as Arthuret, and H. M. Chadwick's suggestion that Gwenddoleu's stronghold was the nearby Roman fortress of "Castra Exploratorum" or Netherby. While Williams at one point dated Arfderydd to 573, he elsewhere gave 575, following Lloyd and the Chadwicks (Williams 1972, 86, 123). This later dating has not had the attention it deserves, but may be right.

Clarke's edition of Geoffrey of Monmouth's life of Merlin has a long note on Arfderydd. The editor explains that a tradition in the Welsh triads, on how it was fought for a lark's nest, may be far from trivial, perhaps referring to Caerlaverock ("lark fort") at the mouth of the Nith. [Though this might appear dubious, Jackson still came to regard the location as possible.] He discounts Skene's identification of the fort of *Carwannok* as being Liddel Strength (NY 4074), as this is too late, being a motte and bailey with added keep. The Roman fort of "Castra Exploratum" at Netherby seems more likely. Clarke describes the battlefield as unlocated, but rules out the shallow earthwork of the Knowes of Arthuret as of the thirteenth century. He prefers a site on high ground near Arthuret's isolated parish church, south of Longtown. Yet a site by the fords of Esk, which may have shifted in fourteen centuries, is also possible (Clarke, 160-2). Although the present paper closes by arguing for a site four miles north-north-east of Arthuret church, Clarke's account is still useful for discussing questions neglected by others.

On the subject of the forces involved, Morris was categorical. "It was a battle between different branches of the Coel dynasty [usually located in Kyle, Ayrshire]. The kings of York combined with Dunaut of the Pennines to destroy their cousin Gwendoleu, who ruled in the Carlisle region" (Morris, 218). In contrast to this assurance is one respected history of Scotland, which mentions Rhydderch of Strathclyde as attacking Bernicia in 579 x

586, but makes no reference to Arfderydd (Duncan, 60). Molly Miller attempted to recreate the political situation leading up to the struggle (Miller, 96-118). Jackson moved from earlier scepticism on the question of the “lark’s nest” as *casus belli* to regarding it as the name of an early fort (Jackson 1977, 45-50).

Rachel Bromwich said much on Arfderydd. It was a conflict between British factions; the English had no part in it. The surviving allusions unfortunately leave unclear why and by whom it was fought. If, as the triads and other late evidence state, Gwenddolau was there killed by Gwrgi and Peredur, then it was between first cousins, as the genealogies reveal. No early testimony shows that Rhydderch of Strathclyde was there, despite Skene’s confident assertions, followed by Lloyd. She also sets out statements by Robert Vaughan (d. 1667), antiquary and collector of manuscripts, on the struggle as coming about for a “lark’s nest”, which she thinks may reflect early tradition (Bromwich 1978, 208-10, 540). Jarman pointed out how Lloyd considered “573” as an error for “575”. He stressed that this part of *Annales Cambriae* is considered reliable and most scholars agree that the forces met at Arthuret. After that come difficulties. We cannot be sure that Rhydderch was there. Jarman thought plausible the arguments of Molly Miller, that Rhydderch was not concerned in it; that the struggle was a family feud amongst descendants of Coel (thus not involving Rhydderch); and that Gwrgi and Peredur came from the Lancashire/Yorkshire region and were allies with Dunawd of Cumbria, while from Strathclyde came Cynfelyn Drwsgl. During a lull in the fighting, Dinogad son of Cynan Garwyn made his escape, to his eternal shame. But Jarman admitted that almost all the tradition is legendary in character and hardly a basis for firm historical conclusions (Jarman 1978). Jenny Rowland underlines the partisan elements in the recorded traditions, with strong sympathy for Gwenddolau (the defeated hero) and lack of it for the victors (Rowland, 98, 112). Clare Stancliffe, citing David Dumville, describes the annals of 573 onwards as “drawn from entries of contemporary events written into the margins of Easter tables, apparently in north Britain” (Stancliffe, 84-96). Richard Coates explains *Arfderydd*, after a suggestion of Sir Ifor Williams in the English Place-Name Society volume for Cumberland, as perhaps “strong place, swift place” (Coates and Breeze, 281). Despite the confidence of Jarman and Stancliffe, Oliver Padel thinks some early entries in *Annales Cambriae* are “legendary”, including that on the deaths of Gwrgi and Peredur (the victors of Arfderydd) in 580 (Padel, 12). David Dumville’s distrust is yet more drastic. He excludes them completely from his edition, though he has useful notes on the Public Record Office text as perhaps copied at Neath, Glamorgan (Dumville, viii). Nick Higham is also wary, taking the sixth-century entries for North Britain as mere reconstructions by a Strathclyde cleric in the late eighth century (Higham, 198-9).

In his final paper on Merlin, Jarman criticized Molly Miller for neglecting traditions on Lailoken in Latin texts from Scotland. But he took seriously Jackson’s contention that the “lark’s nest” of tradition comes from a very real struggle for the stronghold of Caerlaverock (Jarman 2003). In a wide-ranging survey, Mlle. Daniel states that Merlin went mad “pendant la bataille d’Arfderyd [*sic*] avant de se retirer dans la forêt de Célidon” (Daniel, 7). Koch’s new atlas accepts Margary in its plotting of Roman roads, but follows the Ordnance Survey in placing the battlefield west of the Esk, towards Millhill Wood (Koch, map 21.3). The Welsh Academy encyclopedia, in a summary account of Merlin, dates Arfderydd to 573 (Anon. 2008, 549-50). Most recently, volume one of the *New Edinburgh History of Scotland* speaks of the battle in a passage brief enough to quote entire.

The tenth-century Cambro-Latin chronicle *Annales Cambriae* consists for this period of excerpts from a lost eighth-century chronicle from the North British zone. It

records a battle of *Armterid* in 573, probably Arthuret on the river Esk, some seven kilometres north [*recte*, five kilometres north-north-east] of Longtown in Liddesdale. Medieval Welsh literature claimed a great deal about this battle, associating it with fictional and historical characters (including Áedán and Merlin), but provides little useful evidence. The brothers who apparently won the battle of Arthuret were cousins of Urbgen's father Cinmarch, their deaths recorded in 580. It may, therefore, be that Urbgen [= Urien in Welsh tradition] succeeded one or both of them as king [of Rheged], and flourished into the 590s, as *Historia Brittonum* envisions (Fraser, 127-8).

After such extensive discussion, can we say anything new on this famous but ill-recorded event? It seems we can, since place-name analysis has here been neglected. Citing Sir Ifor Williams, Richard Coates has proposed a sense "swift place". This needs revision. Another approach appears more cogent. There are three points to make. First, in Celtic river-names, allusions to heat or fire are common. The Teinntidh near Callander is the "fiery one" (cf. Gaelic *teine* "fire"), from its "rapid boiling course"; the Evelix (with English plural) near Dornoch is the "ember" (Gaelic *eibhleag*); Aberlosk, in the hills east of Moffat, is the confluence of the "burning stream"; cf. Welsh *llosgi* "to burn" (Watson, 443, 460). Second, other Celtic hydronyms allude to tools or weapons. Abergele in North Wales is "mouth of (the stream called) 'blade'"; Aberdaugleddyf (=Milford Haven) is "mouth of two (rivers called) 'sword'"; a tributary of the Eastern Cleddau "sword", near Haverfordwest, is the Cyllell "knife" (=Cartlett Brook); the Rhymni near Cardiff is "borer, auger"; and so on (Thomas, 100; Richards, 36, 135-6, 160-1). Third is the translation "strong, swift" for *terydd*. This is a dubious guess of lexicographers. The original sense is "ardent, passionate, fierce" (as pointed out by Ifor Williams in 1935), according with possible derivation of *terydd* from Latin *torridus* "burning, fiery, scorching" (Anon. *Geiriadur*, 3487). That helps as regards Arfderydd. A first element here meaning "place", as Ifor Williams proposed, is doubtful. In contrast are Welsh *arf* and Cornish *arv*, meaning "weapon, arm" and derived from Latin *arma* "arms". Welsh *terydd* is translated as "ardent, fierce; flaming, blazing". This allows translation of *Armterid* or *Arfderydd* as "ardent weapon, burning weapon", and suggests strongly that it was, in origin, the name of a stream or river. There would be nothing surprising in this. Many rivers, red with the blood of combatants, have given their names to battles: the *Uinued* or Went in 655; Bannockburn, 1314; Boyne, 1690; Marne, 1914; Somme, 1916; Ebro, 1938; Imjin, 1951; and so on.

What, then, does this imply for the site of battle? It must be taken with the statement in the fragmentary life of Kentigern, repeated by Walter Bower (d. 1449), that the forces met in an open space between Liddel Water and *Carwannok* or *Carvanolon*, normally regarded as Carwinley (NY 4072). This would accord with arguments cited above. Margary pointed to the existence of a route north from Netherby that led up the east side of Eskdale. Troops taking it southwards would naturally pass Carwinley; to get there they may have crossed the ford (NY 4175) on Liddel Water two miles north of it. As for *Arfderydd*, this may be interpreted as the old name of Carwinley Burn, which runs westwards through a wooded dell to enter the Esk, and still forms the northern boundary of the parish of Arthuret. It may also explain a peculiarity of Arthuret as a parish with no ancient village or centre. If its name was initially a hydronym, applying to no settlement, that will make sense. Arthuret would thus resemble Tain, Nairn, Banff, Leith, Irvine, Ayr, and Annan in Scotland, or Douglas in the Isle of Man, as a place named after a river.

This argument seems cogent. It brings together what we can gather of early lines of communication, place-names, and the statements of medieval Scottish writers. If it is objected that Carwinley Burn already has a British name, being called after Gwenddolau who fell in the combat, we may reply that it must have been called something before him. Perhaps it gained its new name because he fought on its banks during that tragic day, possibly at Carwinley itself. The first element *Car-* need indicate no city or other stronghold. Jackson observed long ago that in Cumbric this element often meant “simply a hamlet or manor-house and farm, originally protected by some kind of defensive stockade” (Jackson 1963, 60-84). So the isolated farm of Carwinley may, apparently, pay its own tribute to that battle long ago.

If this reasoning on the meaning of *Arfderydd* is correct, we can locate precisely an early battlefield of North Britain. It lay on the road from Eskdale to Netherby, south of Liddel Water and close to Carwinley Burn. This was at the time known as *Arfderydd* “burning weapon”, a form resembling other Celtic hydronyms, where rivers are compared to fire or are called “spear”, “blade”, “lance”, “sword”, and even “needle” because “their waters flash brightly” (Owen and Morgan, 7, 456). To this day Arthuret’s parish boundary runs along this stream. How far that casts light on the political and military events leading up to the encounter may be left to others. Yet we may point out that it should interest archaeologists as well as historians. Since the battle was considered decisive and was fought on a large scale, archaeologists may discover traces of sixth-century armour, weapons, horse-trappings and the like in its vicinity. If they do they will bring us closer to the events of that day, neither the first nor last of battles between North British kinsmen, but having permanent and international effects in bringing the legend of Merlin to birth.

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