

***Porius* and the So-Called “Dark Ages”**

THIS ESSAY (inevitably tentative and speculative in view of its pioneering nature) is a spin-off from work on *A Glastonbury Romance* that has been engaging me for almost two years. There I had been examining the historical and legendary accounts of the Somerset town in order to find out how JCP’s work has stood up to the explosion of knowledge and speculation about such subjects as Joseph of Arimathea and the Grail, King Arthur, and the fortunes of Glastonbury Abbey over the ages, subjects that have been debated and rethought quite radically over the last eighty years. It occurred to me that, on a smaller scale, the same process might be applied to the historical setting of *Porius*.

In the ‘Historic Background to the Year of Grace A.D. 499’, which appears as a sort of prologue to his novel/romance, JCP writes of the “absolute blank, so far as documentary evidence goes, with regard to the history of Britain” between the mid-fifth and mid-sixth centuries (17 [xvii])¹ And in the unfinished “Preface” or anything you like to *Porius*² he glosses this comment by observing that it is “for my private enjoyment as a story-teller nothing but a beautiful, a heavenly, *blank*”³ since it allows him to give free rein to his creative imagination. Moreover, the acknowledged scholarly authority on the subject at that time, Sir Frank Stenton, made much the same point in his *Anglo-Saxon England* first published in 1943: “Between the end of Roman government in Britain [in 410] and the emergence of the earliest English kingdoms [at the beginning of the seventh century] there stretches a long period in which the history cannot be written.”⁴ Indeed, it can be argued that, up until recently, historians of the period knew even less than they thought, since the first documentary accounts that were relied upon, Gildas’s *The Ruin of Britain* and the well-known *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, are now believed to be far less reliable, because both selective and partisan, than had previously been recognized.

The revolution, as it deserves to be called, in our current attitudes to “Anglo-Saxon” England arises out of the widely differing viewpoints of historians and archaeologists. Traditional historians like Stenton, accustomed to a reliance on documents, placed little emphasis on anything other than written evidence, while archaeologists, experienced in investigating pre-literate societies, have become skilled in interpreting the often fragmentary evidence provided by excavation. Furthermore, since the Second World War, British archaeologists have tended to focus not so much on the culture of kings, warriors, and the aristocratic classes, as on the everyday lives of the people. As they uncover more and more “Anglo-Saxon” sites, they find that the implications of their discoveries diverge radically from the views held by historians and the accounts reproduced in textbooks.

In the older view, the Romans in A.D. 43 conquered a backward prehistoric

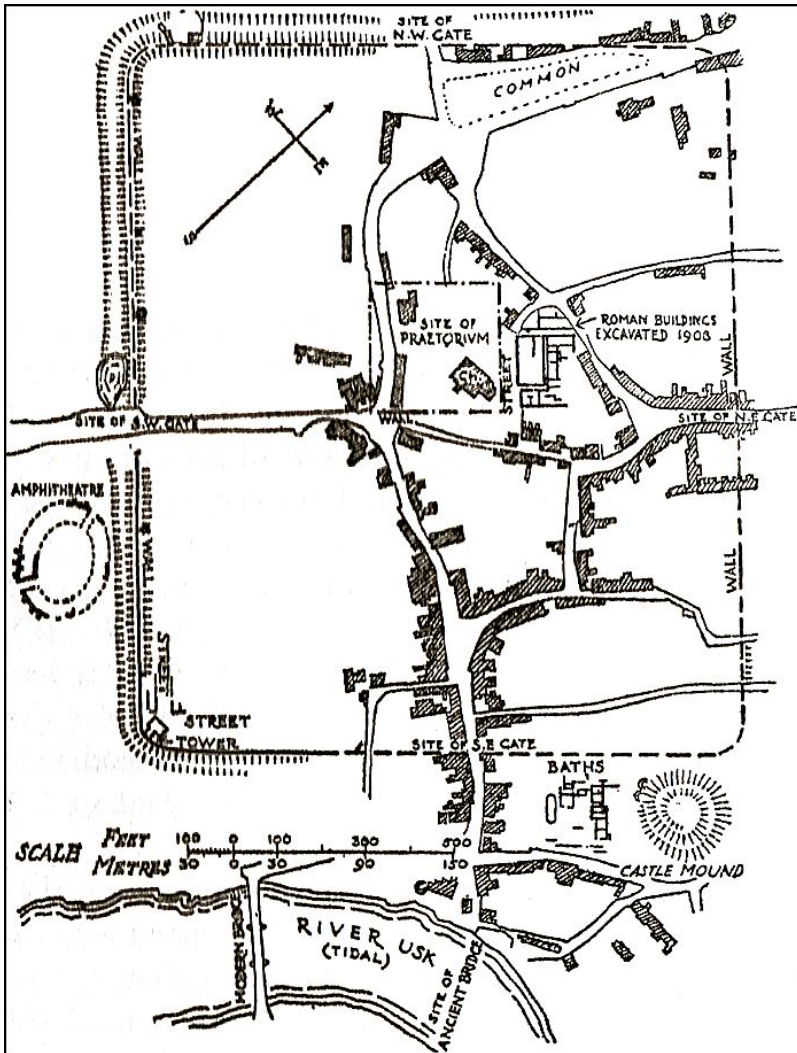
¹ Page-references in the text are from the 2007 edition, edited by Judith Bond and Morine Krisdottir (New York and London: Overlook Duckworth), with their equivalents in the 1994 edition (Hamilton NY: Colgate University Press) following in square brackets.

² An unpublished manuscript from the Colgate University Powys Collection. Cf *The Powys Newsletter* 4 (Colgate University) 1974-5, p.7

³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁴ Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1943, p.1.

people and transformed them into tamed, subservient members of the Roman Empire, which they remained for almost four centuries. But when the Roman forces withdrew in 410, the native peoples quickly relapsed into barbarism and were soon overwhelmed by invasions from a series of aggressive tribes—the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, etc., and subsequently the Vikings—who, following an orgy of plunder and destruction, pushed back the “ancient Britons” further and further west to become what are now the “Celtic” inhabitants of Wales and Cornwall.



The Roman fortress at Caerleon
built c.78 AD⁶

Archaeologists can find abundant material traces for the Roman and Viking invasions (though there is some evidence that the coming of the Romans may have been by invitation rather than by conquest), but have uncovered no unequivocal evidence for the “Anglo-Saxon” invasions in between. Many now believe⁵ that, in the fifth and sixth centuries, the general population of what is now the United Kingdom consisted of an amalgam of peoples of mixed race, many of them descendants of Bronze-Age and even Stone-Age peoples. In addition, these had gradually assimilated numbers of individual immigrant settlers from the Continent (including Germanic settlers) in the ensuing centuries. They combined to become an intelligent, resourceful people who absorbed much of

Roman culture, and as the “Romano-British” represent a continuity of native

⁵ This is necessarily a highly simplified account of a very complex issue that is still being debated vigorously. For the new view, see Pryor, and also Ken Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (Stroud: Tempus, 2000). A succinct and useful “middle-of-the-road” summary may be found in Alan Lane’s “The End of Roman Britain and the Coming of the Saxons: An Archaeological Context for Arthur?” in Helen Fulton, ed., *A Companion to Arthurian Studies* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 15-29. While sympathetic to the new findings, and acknowledging the force of many of the arguments, Lane believes that these “may, however, be a step too far,” and maintains that “for much of the fifth century the picture of the ‘Dark Ages’ is truly dark” (19, 20).

⁶ A. Weigall *Wanderings in Roman Britain*, London: Thornton Butterworth 1926, p.275.

peoples over centuries and even millennia. In the words of the archaeologist Francis Pryor, it is “probably fair to say that serious scholars who believe in large-scale Anglo-Saxon mass migrations are now in the minority,” the consensus agreeing that “the changes attributed to the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons were usually caused by people changing their minds, rather than their places of residence.”⁷

Perhaps the most unexpected change was in language, from a form of Celtic to “Old English”. This is still hotly controversial, but linguists are now detecting significant traces of Celtic syntax and word-order affecting the development of what was to become the English language. All in all, we need to acknowledge the very real possibility that it was “a change in political allegiance that changed Britons into Anglo-Saxons” and that battles in this period were more probably “between two sets of Britons, one of which had adopted Continental customs and political systems for their own ends.”⁸

How does all this affect our appreciation and understanding of *Porius*? First, we must acknowledge that JCP creates a fantasy world which ventures far beyond the realms of the historical in such details as the survival of the last of the Cewri, Myrddin’s magic, etc. Still, part of the fascination of the book lies in the fact these exist within a vivid array of human characters inhabiting a decidedly real world. *Porius* qualifies as a historical romance if not as a historical novel. In “Historic Background” JCP takes over the standard assumptions of his day, hence references to “migratory movements of semi-barbarous races pushing one another westward,” “migratory hordes,” “the fierce central European races,” and so on (17 [xvii-xviii]), and alludes in his text to once-accepted figures like Hengist and Horsa who are now generally consigned to a mythic stratum. JCP’s Arthur, though presented as a Welsh *Amherawdr*⁹, is clearly derived from the Roman-style cavalry leader of Collingwood and Myres’ *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (1936), now customarily regarded as outdated. The historical and the imaginative continually interweave.

However, there are other aspects of JCP’s “A.D. 499” that seem curiously inconsistent with the traditional concept of the “Dark Ages.” We hear, for example, of exotic luxury items that adorn the Arthurian tent to which Porius and Rhun are escorted in the fourth chapter. These include the Cretan screen “presented to the emperor’s counsellor by a merchant from Constantinople” (83 [74]), the “heap of Arabian rugs and cushions” where the two are installed (85 [79]), “Syrian perfumes and Arabian oils,” and above all the “crystallized fruit” in a “silver casket” from which the Henog takes “a sugary greengage ... that only a year ago had been warmed into ripeness by the North African sun” (92 [85]). Despite the official spectre of chaos and social breakdown after the Roman departure, this remote district of North Wales is all too clearly enjoying the

⁷ Francis Pryor, *Britain A.D.* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), 128.

⁸ Pryor, 240, 243.

⁹ *Amherawdr* is the Welsh word for Emperor. Note that W.J. Keith has provided on the Internet a *Reader’s Companion* for *Porius* which provides background information that will enrich a reading of Powys’s novel/romance. It glosses Welsh, classical, biblical, and other allusions, identifies quotations, explains geographical and historical references, and offers any commentary that may throw light on the more complex aspects of the text. See: <http://www.powys-lannion.net/Powys/Keith/PoriusAids.htm>.

benefits of Mediterranean trade, a phenomenon vouched for by archaeological excavation.

Similarly, Brochvael is presented as exchanging letters with the historical Sidonius Apollinaris who indeed, according to Ken Dark, “had long-standing connections with eminent fifth-century Britons.”¹⁰ Brochvael’s library of manuscripts of classic authors (Aristophanes, Ovid) is impressive, and he demonstrates his connoisseurship when tasting the “Greek wine” outside the same tent (219 [238]). His earlier adventures in search of rare volumes in Italy are shown to have been dangerous and physically painful (154 [159]), but are none the less evidence that JCP did not consider Britain isolated from the rest of Europe. Dion Dionides, the sea-captain from Athens, has left his vessel in London and travelled many miles in officially violence-torn Britain carrying valuable merchandise. Trade between Byzantine and British locations including Tintagel and Wroxeter¹¹ is archaeologically accepted, and Charles Thomas, the authority on Tintagel¹², might be describing him when he refers to “merchant-captains who sailed their ships around the Mediterranean, collecting what they knew would sell in Britain.”¹³

The description of Edeyrnion¹⁴ in the opening pages of *Porius*, with its record of successive waves of inhabitants from the aboriginal Cewri to the Gwyddylaid (Goidelic Celtic speakers), the Ffichti (Picts), JCP’s “forest-people,” the Brythons (another group of Celts speaking another language), and at last the Romans, offers a Welsh microcosm of the similar situation in “Dark-Age” Britain. Moreover, JCP confronts us with frequent intermarriages between the various races. It is as if he were instinctively anticipating later findings. Prince Einion’s attempts to keep the peace between the multi-racial population presuppose a rather different picture from the tribal conflicts traditionally assumed. To be sure, JCP chooses in his more romantic moments to present the Welsh as racially pure descendants of his independent “forest-people,” yet when *Porius* is read in the twenty-first century the set-up may be recognized as a curious mixing of the old and new interpretations of fifth-century historical realities.

In the same way, JCP presents a scene of religious diversity (as well as rivalry). We encounter adherents of Christianity (both orthodox and Pelagian), Mithraism, and druidic Paganism. JCP was well aware of the presence, influence, and achievements of the Celtic Church. We should remember that *Porius* is set a century *before* the arrival of St. Augustine to convert the “Anglo-Saxons” in 597. But who were these “Anglo-Saxons”? Archaeological evidence of early Christian sites in Britain in the Roman period is considerable, and we know that the Celtic Church (which Pryor insists was “a direct descendant of the Christian Church of Roman Britain,”¹⁵ and so might better be designated the “British Church”) was producing monks, scholars, and missionaries by the fifth century. *Porius*’s education at “the Bishop’s School” is indirect but probably accurate testimony to

¹⁰ Dark, 25.

¹¹ Between Telford and Shrewsbury, Shropshire.

¹² Charles Thomas, archaeologist, Emeritus Professor of the Univ. of Exeter. Founded the Institute of Cornish studies. See the English Heritage *Book of Tintagel: Arthur and Archaeology*, 1993.

¹³ Reported in Pryor, 183

¹⁴ Eydernion: name given still today to the North part of Wales.

¹⁵ Pryor, 149

the Church's educational contribution. The whole religious situation as presented in JCP's novel/romance may be intricate to the point of puzzlement, but it compares favourably with the simplistic version of Anglo-Saxon conquest taught in schools in JCP's generation, and much later.

In *Porius*, then, JCP assumes that, while aspects of Roman organization doubtless declined after the withdrawal of the Legions, the Roman system did not immediately collapse. Porius Manlius, significantly identified on his epitaph as "Homo Christianus" (576 [661]) and still maintaining his Roman life-style, is based on this assumption, while Nineue's chatter to Porius about Caergwynt with its "romantic old-world villas in that region which even in their ruin and dilapidation retained a certain Roman magnificence and in some cases were actually inhabited by the descendants of the old patrician settlers" (86 [78]) is one of several oblique references that reveal JCP's own views on the subject. On the other hand, of course, he portrays scenes of primitive ferocity and a world in which sudden death is an ever-present possibility. However, this combination of extreme contrasts, though an offence against our sense of tidiness, may well be an accurate representation of an uncertain but fascinating age.

I recognize, of course, an element of absurdity in the sober analysis of a twentieth-century romance in terms of its accurate presentation of fifth-century Britain. But JCP was imposing his imaginative flights on what his readers knew—or thought they knew—about the historical situation. However, twenty-first-century readers will read *Porius* in the light of increasingly revisionist versions of this same historical situation, and this will result in inevitable changes in the interpretation of JCP's work. What I hope to have expressed here is my conviction that future readers, though they will read *Porius* differently, will still find as much to enjoy—and to ponder—as we do.

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