

Slack Thinking

Dave Weldrake reviews recent Arthurian speculation concerning a minor Roman site in Yorkshire

"On second thoughts, let's not go to Camelot. 'Tis a silly place"

Monty Python and the Holy Grail

Causing a stir

The Roman fort at Slack (near Huddersfield, W Yorks) seems to have attracted a lot of attention in recent months. Two separate researchers have (independently of one another, I believe) identified it as the site of King Arthur's Camelot. The first was Simon Keegan in *Pennine Dragon*;¹ the second Prof Peter Field in a public lecture given at Bangor University. In this article I will attempt to show why this identification is questionable to say the least.

A place for an historical Arthur

Authors who argue for a 'real' King Arthur often adopt the line of reasoning that, even after Magnus Maximus removed the Roman legions from Britain in 383, there would still be a Romanized elite who would organize military resistance to the invading Saxons. This seems to be what is indicated by the story of Vortigern and Ambrosius in the 9th-century *Historia Brittonum*.²

Two places with the same name

This view leads not unnaturally to an interest in Roman place-names. Both Field and Keegan have noticed the similarity between the Roman place name *Camulodunum* and that of Arthur's capital *Camelot*. The trouble is that there are two places in Roman Britain with the name *Camulodunum*. One is a settlement somewhere (probably) in what is now W Yorkshire. The other is the Roman town of Colchester. When looking at the same issue in the 1980s, John Morris came to the conclusion that Colchester was the real Camelot.³ For their own purposes, Field and Keegan would prefer a Yorkshire location. The University of Bangor is quite clear about this; on their website they state that that Slack is what Professor Field "believes to be the only place in Britain that has a suitable name and is in the right area".⁴ However, it does tend to make one wonder why the name of an obscure Roman settlement in N England would be remembered by a medieval author and the name of a much bigger town forgotten.

The problem of identifying Camulodunum

Even if Field and Keegan are right in looking for a Northern Arthur, the identification of Slack as Camelot is by no means a certainty. The problem lies with a Roman travel document usually referred to as *The Antonine Itinerary*. This is a collection of routes between various towns in the Roman Empire. The date of its original composition is a matter of some dispute, but it is clear that sections of the existing versions have been miscopied. This is the case with the section of Itinerary II as it crosses through modern W Yorkshire. The distances for the journey from York to Manchester do not work out correctly and there is the inclusion of another Roman settlement called *Camboduno*. The latter has not been positively identified, though the W Yorkshire Archaeology Advisory Service would equate it with Leeds.⁵ This is

why Rivet and Smith⁶ will not commit themselves to equating the two. They merely state that Camulodunum is "*probably* the Roman fort at Slack" (my emphasis).

An archaeological obstacle

Even if the identification could be made sound by (for example) finding an inscription giving the place-name of the site, it still would not make Slack Camelot. Recent work by the Huddersfield and District Archaeological Society suggests that Slack was only occupied up to the late 3rd century.⁷ To make a credible candidate for a historical Camelot, it would be necessary to prove occupation on the site into the late 5th or early 6th centuries. There is little archaeological evidence for this period in W Yorkshire as a whole, and none at all for Slack.

In the end

And after all this debate and uncertainty, can we actually say that Camulodunum (wherever it might have been) was actually Camelot? I doubt it. Camelot is a fictional place which first appears in a medieval French romance.⁸ It is no more real than the events of that other Arthurian-derived epic, *The Da Vinci Code*. Just as Dan Brown's fans are unlikely to find the Holy Grail buried in the vaults of Rosslyn Chapel, supporters of Keegan and Field are unlikely to find Camelot on the fringes of the Yorkshire Pennines.

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Notes

1. Simon Keegan. *Pennine Dragon*. New Haven 2016
2. Nennius (Ed. and trans. John Morris). *The British History*. Phillimore 1980
3. John Morris. *The Age of Arthur: Roman Britain and the Empire of Arthur*. Phillimore 1977
4. [Arthur's Camelot – possible location is revealed](#) acc'd 20-1-17
5. M.L. Faull and S.A. Moorhouse (Eds). *West Yorkshire: An archaeological survey to AD 1500*. WYMCC 1981
6. A.L.F. Rivet and C. Smith. *The Place Names of Roman Britain*. Batsford 1979
7. G. Brown and B. Hobson . *Notes on New Dating Evidence for the Roman Settlement at Slack, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire*. [Notes on New Dating Evidence for the Roman Settlement at Slack, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire](#), acc'd 25-1-17
8. Chrétien de Troyes (Ed. W.W. Comfort). 'Lancelot' (from *Arthurian Romances*). Everyman 1955