

Helbert, Daniel G. 2026. *Arthur Between England and Wales: The Borderland, the Marches, and the Medieval Matter of Britain*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. Pp. x + 262. ISBN 9781836245148.

Reviewed by Andrew Breeze 
University of Navarre
abreeze@unav.es

A study of Arthurian texts from England *and* Wales is to be welcomed. It juxtaposes what Celticists say about Celtic tradition and what Anglicists say about English tradition, with results here set out in introduction, five chapters, and afterword.

After preliminaries on the Welsh borderlands and their linguistic history, we reach the first chapter, focusing on the ninth-century Welsh-Latin *Historia Brittonum* sometimes attributed to Nennius. Chapter two brings us to Laȝamon's *Brut*, composed at some date about 1200; chapter three, to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, of the 1130s; and thereafter the thirteenth-century *Fouke le fitz Wareyn* and Welsh *Dream of Rhonabwy* (together with other *Mabinogion* tales, ranging from the 1090s to the 1250s or so). Chapter five is more adventurous, because Dr Helbert here contrasts bardic poems by Iolo Goch (d. 1398?), the Latin chronicle of Adam Usk (d. 1430), and the fourteenth-century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the Afterword we have a summing-up on how an Anglo-Welsh-French-Latin culture found from Chester to Monmouth and the Bristol Channel was "pivotal" (227) for Wales and England alike.

Frontiers are intriguing places. Dr Helbert makes the Welsh one even more so. He displays courage by taking on texts in Welsh as well as in English, French, or Latin; and by declaring that understanding the Anglo-Welsh border is "hindered rather than helped" (229) by use of modish postcolonial theories (where he at this point refers specifically to Said, Bhabha, or Spivak). His *Arthur Between England and Wales* is thus stimulating, a book to prompt enquiry, and suggesting that the author will soon have more to tell us, thanks to current progress on Arthurian Studies and beyond.

So, we end this endorsement of *Arthur Between England and Wales* with indications for reassessment of Dr Helbert's conclusions.

- (1) To matters of interaction between Celt and Saxon, which include both an Old English riddle on cattle and Bishop Asser of St Davids (32–36), may

be added the Cornish translator of the Alfredian *Orosius*, who added references (in its second book) to the Celtic “Other World” and (in book three) to Cornish bards as mendacious propagandists; he may be the man who added a Cornish gloss (that language’s oldest known text) to a copy of Boethius from King Alfred’s circle (Redgate 2016, 38).

- (2) For the dates of the “5th–6th” century (53) Latin polemicist Gildas, we can be more precise, because his writing in 536 CE is proved by his reference to that year’s “volcanic cloud” (Mees 2025, 93).
- (3) On the victory of Badon Hill regularly “attributed to Arthur” (62), we say that the form resembles nothing in British Celtic and must be corrupt. Welsh toponyms in *Brad-* therefore allow emendation to *Bradon-* (Thomas 1938, 3–4).
- (4) Emended *Bradon-* will thus be Braydon, north-west of Swindon, Wiltshire, with the siege at nearby Ringsbury Camp (Ekwall 1936, 58–59).
- (5) On North British champions mourned in Aneirin’s *Gododdin* of “the sixth or seventh centuries” (62n103), we can now date that poem to 603 CE, a British attack on the English at *Catraeth* (= Catterick, Yorkshire) surely being part of a two-pronged attack on Northumbria that year, with the other at Degsastan or *Dequistan* “Dewi’s stone” or Dawick (“Dewi’s homestead”), Peeblesshire/Borders (Nicolaisen 1976, 102). If Aneirin’s elegies date from 603 CE, their mention of Arthur confirms that hero’s existence as a Northern hero of the 530s.
- (6) On Arthur’s “legendary” (64) battles in *Historia Brittonum*, all except “Badon” were in North Britain (Higham 2018, 287–88). They are therefore not “legendary” but historical, establishing Arthur as a Northern commander active in 536–37 CE, who had no part in the British triumph of 493 CE at “Badon” in south Britain.
- (7) The map of Arthur’s battles (67) needs revision. The “Caledonian Forest” lay not in the Highlands but between Glasgow and Carlisle; engagements on the River Douglas were in North Lanarkshire, in territory of the (Old Welsh) *Clutuis* “Strathclyders” (their name corrupted by scribes of *Historia Brittonum* to “Linnuis” or Lindsey, Lincolnshire, which yet has no river called Douglas); while “Urbs Legionis” is hardly Caerleon, Wales. It will reflect misunderstanding of (obsolete) *Karig Lion*, West Lothian, scribes having confused Old Welsh *carrec* “rock” with Old Welsh *cair* “fortress” (Haycock 2013, 74; Liebhard 2016, 116–17).
- (8) The ferocious anti-English diatribe *Armes Prydein* (“The Prophecy of Britain”) is not of “about 930” (83) but of late 940, being composed immediately after West Saxon capitulation that year to Vikings at Leicester (Lewis and Williams 2019, 214).

- (9) Arthur's death at *Camlan* in 537 will not be "legendary" (132n67) but factual, the place being Castlesteads on Hadrian's Wall (Rivet and Smith 1979, 294).
- (10) In the *Mabinogi* tale of Manawydan there is evidence for "anti-colonialism" stronger than the hero's move to England (167). It is his stepson Pryderi's rendering of homage at Oxford to Caswallon, a conqueror representing Henry I (1100–35), who in the 1120s regularly held court at Woodstock, north of Oxford (Swanton 1996, 251).
- (11) For *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a romance "written in the north-western Midlands in the late fourteenth century" (211), read "written in late 1387 to be read aloud at Christmas celebrations that year in Chester Castle." The date is supplied thanks to the poet's sly allusions in lines 678 and 866 to Robert de Vere, Duke of Ireland, whose career reached its zenith in the summer of 1387, which he spent (with his Central European paramour) at Chester (Astell 1999, 124, 126).
- (12) As for the *Gawain* Poet's "contact with Welsh people" (211), this will be emphatically true if the author of the Green Knight poem (and *Pearl* in 1390) was Sir John Stanley (d. 1414), right-hand man to Richard II and Henry IV for the government of Cheshire and Flintshire (Ross 2024, 235–36).

Arthur Between England and Wales is, therefore, amongst those rare books which repay careful reading, once we relate it to research not available to its author. If we do that, Dr Helbert will provide huge benefits for understanding of Britain's early literature, whether English, Welsh, Latin, or French.

References

- Astell, Ann W. 1999. *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Ekwall, Eilert, 1936. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Haycock, Marged. 2013. *Prophecies from the Book of Taliesin*. Aberystwyth: CMCS.
- Higham, Nicholas J. 2018. *King Arthur: The Making of the Legend*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lewis, Gwyneth, and Rowan Williams. 2019. *The Book of Taliesin*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Liebhart, Kurt. 2016. *Suche nach dem historischen Arthur*. Weissenthurm: Cardamina Verlag.

-
- Mees, Bernard. 2025. *King Arthur and the Languages of Britain*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Nicolaisen, W. F. H. 1979. *Scottish Place-Names*. London: Batsford.
- Redgate, A. E. 2016. *Religion, Politics and Society in Britain, 800–1066*. London: Routledge.
- Rivet, A. L. F., and Colin Smith. 1979. *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ross, James. 2024. *Robert de Vere*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.
- Swanton, Michael. 1996. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. London: J. M. Dent.
- Thomas, R. J. 1938. *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru*. Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru.

(Received 08/03/2026)