

Guy Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur. Facts and Fictions of the Dark Ages*, Oxford: University Press, 2014. 384 pp. (20 black and white halftones, 15 maps) ISBN 978-0-19-965817-6

The book presented with this occasion represents a very interesting essay focusing on the very delicate problem of demystifying history. We may very well begin this presentation by quoting the words of the former US Secretary of Defence, Mr Donald Rumsfeld, while giving an interview related to the military crisis in Iraq back in 2002: “[...] *there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don't know we don't know*”, when dealing with certain aspects of history or archaeology in general. In other words, we must be aware of the limitations and weaknesses that are typical to the methodologies of our own domain of study and never try to push the limits, or bend the rules of the interpretation beyond the real potential of the data that we are working with.

Having this in mind, we must welcome both the type of approach and the style, with which the *Anglo-Saxon* archaeological literature has already accustomed us, as well as stress out the fact that such a demystifying approach is almost entirely lacking from our archaeological or historical literature¹. Therefore we kindly encourage people to read this book and learn from this kind of archaeological literature that definitely serves one of the main purposes of scientific literature, that of bridging the gap between the large public and the work of historians or archaeologists.

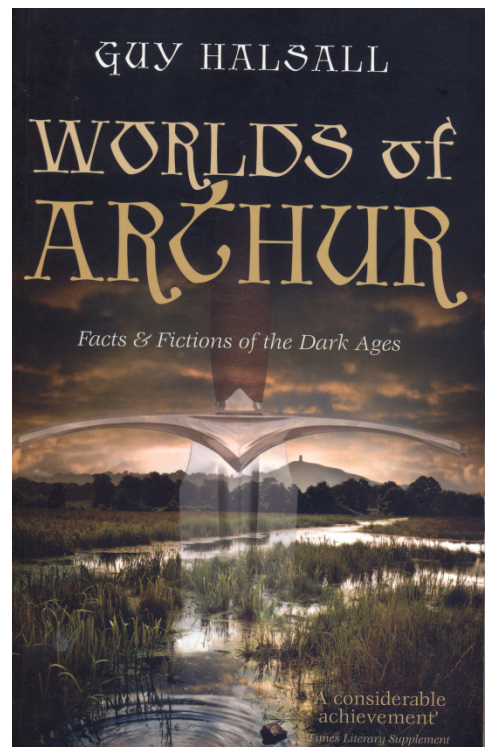
The book is composed of four main parts, the first three serving as a guide to *why* we do not possess any consistent information related to King Arthur as well as to *why* it is almost impossible to know whether this historical figure did indeed exist or not. At the same time it provides a ‘tool kit’ to help the interested reader better evaluate the claims made in the *pseudo-histories*, while the last part focuses upon the current hypotheses and academic interpretations that are employed by those who are dealing with this topic.

Part I: ‘*Old World*’ (p. 1-48) deals with what was traditionally thought to have happened after the Roman withdrawal from the province *Britannia*, being thus an introductory part. The chapter dedicated to the literary sources represents the backbone of this part. On this occasion we will find out the author’s position regarding how these sources must be regarded and dealt with, establishing thus their historical and factual relevance: ‘[...] medieval people did see no distinction between history and legend in general, the point of history was moral teaching not how things happened’ (p. 6). In this context, where we are advised to be very cautious while reading ancient or medieval literary sources, one should not seek for the right answers, but rather ask the right questions in order to set aside the ideological part of each writing and try to grasp whatever information would be useful in his/her search for the *historical truth*. After a thorough scrutiny of the literary evidence, most of

¹ Very few exceptions can be mentioned as for example the works of historians such as CONSTANTINIU 2011; BOIA 2012; BOIA 2012a; BOIA 2013 or archaeologists STROBEL 1998; STROBEL 1998a; STANCIU 2001; ANGHELINU 2003; NICULESCU 2004-2005; DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MĂRGHITU 2006; MĂGUREANU 2007; DANA 2008; BABEȘ 2008-2009; STANCIU 2011.

Vlad-Andrei Lăzărescu

Institute of Archaeology and History of Art
Cluj-Napoca
lazarescu_vlad@yahoo.com



which does not even mention King Arthur, the author concludes that this prominent figure must have lived during the 5th-6th century AD (p. 18-20) establishing, thus, the chronological framework of the story to be told later on. The next chapter entitled quite poetically 'Swords in the Stones: The Archaeology of Post-Imperial Britain' (p. 26-48) makes the reader aware of the archaeological context of the era in which the action is set to have taken part. After a quite complex analysis of the archaeological contexts dated to the time of King Arthur, the author highlights two main problems: the fact that the literary evidence and the archaeological reality does not entirely overlap. They create an interpretative gap, as well as the fact that mysticism and modern nationalism are problems of our time that are doing a great deal of bad to both archaeology and history².

Part II: 'Present Worlds' (p. 49-134) gives a more updated touch to the story by analysing how recent scholars have reassessed the written and archaeological evidence from 5th-6th century AD Britain and how present academic circles view this chronological period today. The author shows how unreliable are the written sources that speak about King Arthur while emphasising the importance of the knowing, as many details as possible regarding the authors of each document in order to better understand the context in which they were writing and, therefore, the real meaning of their work (p. 52). Especially since the first written trustworthy and well dated record mentioning a certain Arthur that may fit our profile is approximately 300 years later than the time in which our main actor is supposed to have lived (p. 63). When dealing with such a task of studying ancient or medieval written sources one must be aware of the fact that in situations that give no evident certainty regarding the outcome, scepticism is highly advised since in some cases history and politics are just two means to an end. Even though '[...] the analysis of the written sources for the 5th and 6th century Britain makes depressing reading' (p. 85), it is important to emphasise that the line between *history* and *pseudo-history* is so faint that almost any data can be manipulated, the only antidote to such mystifications being academic criticism. Another way of approaching the 'World of Arthur' would be to track the changes that have occurred in the settlement patterns, checking to see whether we can find evidence of a continuity from the time of the Roman province later on, since 'being Roman' meant different things according to each chronological stage (p. 87-89). It is in times like this that we must acknowledge the fact that the archaeological data clearly proves that Arthur (if indeed he had lived towards the end of the 5th century AD!), 'was certainly not struggling to preserve the Roman world of civilised villas and towns; that had long gone and its demise had had nothing to do with Saxon' (p. 98). In other words instead of a process of continuity as mentioned before, we can actually speak about 'an active de-Romanisation' (p. 100). The author also puts to the test some of the archaeological theories such as *migration* or *ethnic identity* and by doing this, he raises once again the problem of attaching different ethnical identities to certain artefacts, when in reality, the only constant of ethnicity seems to be a matter of belief and, therefore, ethnicity can be

changed³. Halsall points out that the recent DNA and Stable Isotope studies are bringing to the table new aspects of what *migration* and *ethnic identity* might have meant during the Early Middle Ages. He brilliantly concludes that 'trying to find an innate (or 'primordial') factor, to allow us to identify past people as members of an ethnic group, other than what they said they were (at particular times), is a quite pointless task' (p. 108).

Part III: 'Mad Worlds' (p. 135-154) deals exactly with the worst nightmare that an archaeologist or a historian might have: the *pseudo-historians*⁴. This part follows the ways in which people are misled by certain authors, claiming to possess the *absolute truth*, and out of their own generosity are trying to enlighten the rest of us and cure us from our 'holy' scholarly ignorance. This part rounds off a survey of the current state of the common arguments presented in the *pseudo-histories* in order to try and avoid the lessons of modern criticism, as well as a look at some misleading 'red herrings' about the 'historical Arthur'. We are advised to read modern works on this topic, being careful about aspects concerning the way in which the authors are using their original data and how they may manipulate it in order to state a certain point, which is not necessarily true. Regarding the *pseudo-historians*, we are told finally that: 'It is not how much they have read that matters but how well they use what they have read. Contrary to what is often said the difference between academic and amateur writers of history is not that the academics think they know it all; it is that they know they don't know it all' (p. 144).

Part IV: 'New Worlds?' (p. 155-308) represents the author's rather controversial essay, based on his own reading of the evidence concerning King Arthur and his 'Worlds'. By doing this, Halsall builds upon the scholarly consensus, while in certain respects he points out some shortcomings of the academic interpretations currently accepted. One of the main new ideas, that the author presents us with, is an alternative interpretation of Nenius's *Historia Brittonum*. He considers that was written as a whole, and that: 'It is incontestable that if there is an historical core (or cores) to the HB's list we can neither identify nor know what the author has done to it, not least in translating it (or them) into Latin' (p. 172). Another topic approached on this occasion is once again the problem of *migration* and *ethnic identity*. However, this time underlining the author's view that objects cannot change their place without people to transport them, still without these people changing their residence, while: 'The appearance of 'Anglo-Saxon' archaeology thus reveals the date at which people chose to demonstrate their Anglo-Saxon identity through their material culture. This, obviously, need not correspond to the date at which people with that identity arrived in that area' (p. 186) introduces the chronological context into this already complicated equation. In his attempt to determine the scale of the Anglo-Saxon mi-

3 CERULO 1997; JONES 1997; POHL/REIMITZ 1998; BRATHER 2004; CURTA 2007; CURTA 2013 GEARY 2014; NICULESCU 2014 to give only a few examples.

4 Since we are faced with similar types of *argumentation* nowadays regarding a certain trend of unveiling the long lost truths related to the 'almighty Dacians' (for example!) that were kept from the public by the academic milieu, I think that a serious public debate that would expose the wackiness of such assumptions would be more than welcomed by the general public.

2 See for example TRIGGER 1989; KOHL 2002, 184-208; GEARY 2007.

gration, Halsall points out the limitations of the new cutting-edge analysis, such as DNA, by stating that the 'employment of modern DNA to study the Anglo-Saxon migration is a deeply problematic and indeed - I would agree - dangerous line of argument' (p. 242) since all of us know that there is no such thing as pure DNA. What might be done, despite the limitations described above, would be a 'long-distance contact map' based on Stable Isotopes and DNA analysis performed on ancient individuals coming from well dated contexts, but the new question raised now would be: How expensive such an approach would be? Getting back to the Anglo-Saxon migration, we can fairly say that more important than its scale (that would never be determined 100%) are the social and political changes that occurred as a direct consequence. Christianity and Christian identity represented another high impact reality that occurred all-over Europe during the Early Middle Ages. In order to fully understand its impact upon the *World of Arthur*, we must understand that *identity* is now seen as being much more flexible and mutable, being essentially a state of mind⁵ which started to be massively propagated after the local kings were baptised, and this new religion became part of their *new identity* (p. 279-281). Concluding this kind of assertions, Halsall states that: 'Ethnic change was a complex, subtle process based on more widespread and significant factors than birth or geographical origins' (p. 298).

The book ends with a consistent Further Reading chapter (p. 309-320), an extensive Bibliography (p. 321-339) and the alphabetically organised Index (343-357).

Since history, as well as time move in cycles, it is also time for us, as we approach the end of this presentation, to return to Mr. Rumsfeld's words cited right at the beginning. What does an honest archaeological and historical approach of a certain episode, shrouded in the mists of time, such as the *Worlds of Arthur* teach us except for the fact that every time we question the historical data, we will have *known knowns*, *known unknowns* and *unknown unknowns*! It is therefore our duty, as scholars who possess both the background and the skills necessary to shed light on specific topics that are not as accessible to others, to carry with our investigation and afterwards to share the knowledge that we have gained with the great public. Such an action would not only give us the visibility necessary to carry on with our work, but would also help cultivate the public's spirit in such a way that it will reject manipulation and mystification of the known historical record. It is because of this honest research that took the form of the present book, that I believe Guy Halsall has managed to bridge the gap between academics and the great public. I am a firm believer in this manner of writing history, since history needs to be presented in such a way that it will be made accessible to everyone, because it is only in such a manner that in time, all *pseudo-histories* will be rejected by the already educated audience.

5 And just to point out some of the most important works related to this new perspective of understanding *identity* see for example BINFORD 1962; GEERTZ 1973; SHENNAN 1994; SÖKEFELD 1999; CHAPMAN 2003; SKIBO/SCHIFFER 2008.

References

- ANGHELINU 2003
Anghelinu, M., *Evoluția gândirii teoretice în România. Concepte și modele aplicate în preistorie* (Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun).
- BABEȘ 2008-2009
Babeș, M., Arheologie, societate și politică în România, înainte și după 1989, *Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie* 59-60, 6-73.
- BINFORD 1967
Binford, L.R., *Archaeology as Anthropology*, *American Antiquity* 28, 2, 1962, 217-225.
- BOIA 2012
Boia, L., *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească* (București: Humanitas).
- BOIA 2012a
Boia, L., *Două secole de mitologie națională* (București: Humanitas).
- BOIA 2013
Boia, L., *Jocul cu trecutul. Istoria între adevăr și ficțiune* (București: Humanitas).
- BRATHER 2004
Brather, S., *Ethnische Interpretationen in der frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie. Geschichte, Grundlagen und Alternativen* (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter).
- CERULO 1997
Cerulo, K.A., Identity construction: New issues, New directions, *Annual Review of Sociology* 23, 385-409.
- CHAPMAN 2003
Chapman, R., *Archaeologies of Complexity* (London-New York: Routledge).
- CONSTANTINIU 2011
Constantiniu, F., *O istorie sinceră a poporului român* (București: Univers enciclopedic).
- CURTA 2007
Curta, F., Some remarks on ethnicity in medieval archaeology, *Early Medieval Europe* 15, 159-185.
- CURTA 2013
Curta, F., The Elephant in the Room. A Reply to Sebastian Brather, *Ephemeris Napocensis* 23, 165-176.
- DANA 2008
Dana, D., *Zalmoxis de la Herodot la Mircea Eliade. Istorie de la spre un zeu al pretextului* (Iași: Polirom).
- DRAGOMAN/OANȚĂ-MĂRGHITU 2006
Dragoman, A./Oanță-Mărghitu, S., Archaeology in Communist and Post-Communist Romania, *Dacia NS* 50, 57-76.
- GEARY 2007
Geary, P.J., *Mitul națiunilor. Originile medievale ale Europei* (Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun).
- GEARY 2014
Geary, P.J., Power and Ethnicity History and Anthropology, *History and Anthropology* 26/1, 1-10.
- GEERTZ 1973
Geertz, C., *The interpretation of cultures* (New York: Basic Books).
- KOHL 2002
Kohl, P., Nation-Building and the archaeological record, *Nation and national ideology: past, present and prospects. Proceedings of the international symposium held at the New Europe College, Bucharest, April 6-7, 2001*, (Bucharest: New Europe College), 184-208.
- JONES 1997
Jones, S., *The Archaeology of Ethnicity. Constructing identities in the past and present* (London-New York: Routledge).
- MĂGUREANU 2007
Măgureanu, A., *Dezbateri privind etnogeneza românilor*

- în anii '50. De la manualul lui Roller la Tratatul de Istorie, *Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie* 58, 3-4, 2007.
- NICULESCU 2004-2005
Niculescu, G.A., Archaeology, nationalism and the „History of the Romanians”, *Dacia* NS 48-49, 99-124.
- NICULESCU 2014
Niculescu, G.A., The archaeological research on ethnic phenomena and the social sciences, *A Nyiregyházi Jósza András Múzeum Évkönyve* 55, 2014.
- POHL/REIMITZ 1998
Pohl, W./Reimitz, H. (eds.), *Strategies of Distinction. The Constitution of Ethnic Communities, 300-800* [The Transformation of the Roman World 2] (Leiden-Boston: Brill).
- SKIBO/SCHIFFER 2008
Skibo, J.M./Schiffer, M.B., *People and Things. A Behavioural Approach to Material Culture* (New York: Springer).
- STANCIU 2001
Stanciu, I., Slavii timpurii în cercetarea arheologică românească, *Ephemeris Napocensis* 11, 105-143.
- STANCIU 2011
Stanciu, I., *Locuirea teritoriului nord-vestic al României între antichitatea târzie și perioada de început a epocii medievale timpurii (mijlocul sec. V – sec. VII timpuriu)* (Cluj-Napoca: Mega).
- SHENNAN 1994
Shennan, S. (ed.), *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity* (London-New York: Routledge).
- SÖKEFELD 1999
Sökefeld, M., Debating Self, Identity and Culture in Anthropology, *Current Anthropology* 40/4, 417-447.
- STROBEL 1998
Strobel, K., Dacii. Despre complexitatea mărimilor etnice, politice și culturale ale istoriei spațiului Dunării de Jos I, *Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie* 49/1, 61-95.
- STROBEL 1998a
Strobel, K., Dacii. Despre complexitatea mărimilor etnice, politice și culturale ale istoriei spațiului Dunării de Jos II, *Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche și Arheologie* 49/2, 207-227.
- TRIGGER 1989
Trigger, B.G., *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: University Press).