

# Were Sarmatians the source of Arthurian legend?

BY C. SCOTT LITTLETON

In A.D. 175 the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius dispatched some 5,500 Sarmatian cavalry of the Iazyges tribe from the Danube region to northern Britain. After their terms of service were up, many of them settled in a *vicus*, or veterans' community, at Bremetennacum Veteranorum on the Ribble River in Lancashire, near what later became the village of Ribchester (Latin for "Ribble Camp"). Evidence of Sarmatians found there and nearby includes an inscription of ca. A.D. 238–244 mentioning a "troop of Sarmatian cavalrymen [stationed at] Bremetennacum"; a grave stela from Chester depicting a Sarmatian warrior; and an image, probably of a Sarmatian cavalryman, known as the "Naked Horseman" of Ribchester, first described by the English antiquarian Thomas Braithwaite in 1604 and now lost.

The Sarmatians' first commander in Britain was Lucius Artorius Castus, who, according to his grave stela, took his troops to Gaul to put down a rebellion in A.D. 184. Like the legendary King Arthur, he led mounted warriors into battle on the Continent. The first Sarmatian leader of the Ribchester contingent probably took on the title *artorius*, borrowing his commander's name. A subsequent leader may have been King Arthur, the "Artorius, *dux bellorum* [war leader]" who, according to legend, saved Britain by defeating the Saxons at Badon Hill ca. A.D. 510.

The Sarmatians spoke a Northeast Iranian dialect and shared many traits with other ancient Northeast Iranians,

including the Scythians and Alans. There are many parallels between Arthurian legend and the folklore of the modern Ossetians, descendants of the Alans who live in the Caucasus. A search for a magical cup or cauldron in Ossetic folklore, for example, parallels the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail, and the Alans, who invaded western Europe in the fifth century A.D., brought legends of a figure we know as Lancelot.

Ossetic folklore centers on the Narts, a band of heroes whose chief is named Batraz. On his deathbed, Batraz orders the Narts to consign his magical sword to the sea. They are, however, loath to do so and attempt to deceive Batraz into thinking his order has been carried out. In the end the sword is finally thrown into the sea; as the blade enters the water, the sea turns blood red and becomes extremely turbulent.

When this legend is juxtaposed with that of Arthur's death, the Sarmatian connection becomes clear. Dying, King Arthur asks Sir Bedivere to throw his sword, Excalibur, into a lake, but the knight does not want to and tries to trick Arthur into thinking his request has been honored. When Excalibur finally is thrown into the water, a parallel extraordinary event occurs: a hand rises from the lake, grasps the sword, and pulls it beneath the surface. ■

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