

*The
Fragile Land*

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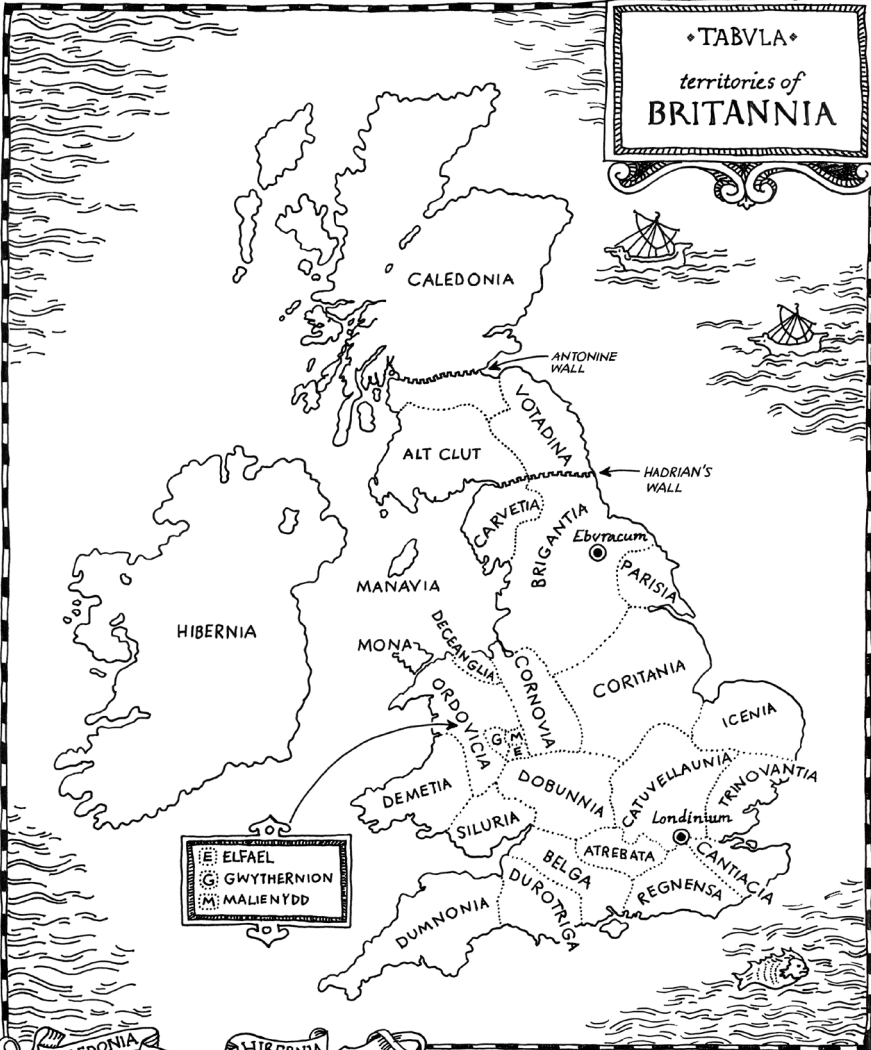
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Late Autumn AD 489–Summer 490	

•TABVLA•
territories of
BRITANNIA



CALEDONIA BRITANNIA HIBERNIA

THE FRAGILE LAND

A NOTE ABOUT NAMES

This story is set in late fifth-century Britain, at a time when the Romans were still remembered, but only by people over seventy. However, the cultural battle between Roman and indigenous language and lifestyles was not yet settled, especially between the emerging Church and temporal rulers. Both felt under threat, too, from the raids by Germanic and Nordic migrants. Deciding on names of people and places therefore causes problems. Saxon and mediaeval English names had not yet been invented. The indigenous names have, for the most part, been lost, though we have clues on old memorial stones. The Romans gave territories and towns names which have survived, and I have used them for kingdoms and settlements. I suspect that, only sixty or so years after the official departure of the legions, they would still have been widely used. I have settled on the spellings I feel most comfortable with from the many variations available.

Modern Welsh I have raided at times and, to make the point that this book is not in the post-fifteenth-century English or earlier French traditions of Arthurian romances, in many cases I have used a Welsh version – so Myrddin, not Merlin. Arthur is an anachronism, and I have treated it as such. I have also used the Welsh for the three old kingdoms that were combined to form Tudor Radnorshire: Elfael, Gwythernion and Malienydd. As far as we know, they had no precise Roman allocation or loyalties to any of the named indigenous peoples, being mountain kingdoms on the borders of the Silures, Cornovii and Ordovices. They are central to the story as I tell it, though.

Welsh is a modern variety of one of the main branches of the Celtic languages labelled today Brythonic, and I have used that name to characterise the vernacular of the time. I have also used Britannia instead of Britain and Britannian instead of British, the latter being a

hybrid English word coined by James VI of Scotland when he gained the English throne in 1603 and was trying to invent a joint identity, which has never quite worked. The Romans initially meant the whole island when they said Britannia, but in time they came to think of it as the territory south of the Antonine and then Hadrian's walls that they controlled. I have referred to all the peoples who were not from the old empire as Barbarians, as the Romano-Britannians would have done, with the exception of the Hibernians (Irish), who were always in a special category, along with those north of the Firth of Forth that we now label Picts.

The site of the battle of Mons Badonicus has been fought over by historians and Arthurian enthusiasts for many decades. I have placed it at the modern village of Baydon, on the Wiltshire–Berkshire border, which makes reasonable strategic as well as historical sense in terms of the story, without any pretence to archaeological accuracy. It is in a landscape so full of ancient resonance, from the Neolithic onwards, that anything is possible.

PLACES AND THEIR MODERN
EQUIVALENTS

Alabum	Llandovery
Aquae Sulis	Bath
Badonicus, Baydun	Baydon
Bremetennacum	Ribchester
Burdigala	Bordeaux
Calleva	Silchester
Calcaria	Tadcaster
Camulodunum	Colchester
Canovium	Caerhun
Cataractonium	Catterick
Cicutio	Brecon
Condate Riedonum	Rennes
Corinium	Cirencester
Cunetio	Mildenhall (Wiltshire)
Deva	Chester
Dubris	Dover
Dunedin	Edinburgh
Durobrivae	Rochester
Ebvracum	York
Glevum	Gloucester
Isca	Exeter
Isca Siluris	Caerleon
Isurium	Aldbrough (Yorkshire)
Lavobrinta	Forden Gaer (Shropshire)
Letocetum	Wall
Lindinis	Ilchester
Lindum	Lincoln
Londinium	London
Luentium	Dolaucothi/Pumsaint
Magnis	Kenchester

Mamucium	Manchester
Massilia	Marseille
Mediolanum	Whitchurch (Shropshire)
Moridunum	Carmarthen
Noviomagus	Chichester
Olicana	Ilkley
Pennocrucium	Penkridge
Petuaria	Brough
Ratae	Leicester
Sabrina, Savrina	River Severn
Segontium	Caernarfon
Tamara Ostia	Plymouth
Tamesis	River Thames
Treverorum	Trier
Vectis	Isle of Wight
Venta Belgarum	Winchester
Venta Siluris	Caerwent
Verlucio	Heddington Wick (Wiltshire)
Verulamium	St Albans
Viroconium	Wroxeter

THE TERRITORIES OF
BRITANNIA

Alt Clut	Dumnonia
Atrebata	Elfael
Belga	Gwythernion
Brigantia	Icenia
Cantiacia	Malienydd
Carvetia	Manavia
Catuvellaunia	Novantia
Coritania	Ordovicia
Cornovia	Parisia
Deceangelia	Siluria
Demetia	Trinovantia
Dobunnia	Votadina
Durotriga	

OTHER
TERRITORIES MENTIONED

Angeln
Aquitania
Armorica
Caledonia
Gall
Hibernia

CHARACTERS

Aelle, a Barbarian agent
Alban, a saint of Catuvellaunia
Ambrosius Aurelianus, Overlord of Britannia
Antonius, Bishop of Viroconium
Arcarix, Prince of Deceanglia
Arthur, Overlord, 'Tygern Fawr' of Britannia
Badoc, King of Siluria
Bedr, steward and student of Myrddin
Branwen, Princess of Elfael
Budig, Prince of Armorica
Caerwen, Queen of Cornovia
Caldoros, King of Dumnonia
Candidianos, King of Dobunnia
Caradoc, Prince of Elfael
Catacus, King of Atrebata
Ceretic, King of Alt Clut, father of Cynwyd
Clovis, King of the Franks
Corbalengus, King of Ordovicia
Cunegnus, King of Cornovia
Cunogeterix, ancient chieftain
Cunorix, King of Catuvellaunia
Cynwyd, King of Alt Clut
Doldavix, adviser to Cunegnus
Dubricius, Bishop of Isca Silures
Eldadus, King of Atrebata, father of Catacus
Evan, soldier of Arthur's guard
Flaminius, merchant of the Belgae
Geraint, Prince of Elfael (later, Arthur)
Glyn ap Erfil, messenger
Gorlois, King of Dumnonia
Gwain, steward and captain to Arthur
Gwenan, lover of Arthur

Gwidellius, Bishop of Londinium
Gwynafir, Princess of Burdigala
Heol, King of Armorica
Idriseg, King of Elfael
Maglicus, father of Myrddin
Mandubrac, King of Catuvellaunia
Medraut, son of Morganwy
Meg, wife of an innkeeper in Elfael
Megeterix, King of Deceangelia
Meurig, boy of Olicana
Modlen, scribe to Arthur
Morganwy, student and ward of Myrddin
Myrddin, adviser to Arthur
Olwen, Princess of Gwythernion
Padrig, Bishop of Hibernia
Peredoc, enforcer
Seona, servant and lover of Myrddin
Sioned, woman of Segontium
Slesvig, Barbarian warlord
Tegernacus, King of Coritania
Uther Pendraeg, Overlord of Britannia, Arthur's father
Vortebelos, King of Brigantia
Vortigern, Overlord of Britannia
Vorteporix, King of Demetia
Wermund, Barbarian warlord
Ygraen, Queen of Dumnonia, Arthur's mother

BOOK ONE

The Year of Discovery

AD 473

I

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE MORNINGS which is hardly a morning. The mist had rolled over the hill behind – but rolled seemed too active a word for it. Instead the moisture sat pointlessly around the trees and drenched the new wooden bridge across the brook, making it just as slippery as the stepping stones had always been. It wasn't raining, but it would be soon. The sheep, penned for lambing, looked mucky and indifferent – but then, they always did. There was no world to watch from any of the watching points. The patient cloud locked them into the head of the valley as securely as the bastion gate. Only the stream was full of noise. The boy picked his way through the mud and wrapped a cloak, quite new and thick-threaded, about him. Even though the early spring day was not particularly cold, the drizzle made it feel miserable enough. He carried nothing with him; he would need both hands for the journey back.

The road, such as it was, pitched sharply outside the last gate. It settled down after it had crossed the stream, to the side from where enough trees had been cleared to make meadows. But that was a while away, and the boy slithered on the uneven wet stones, cursing the lack of grip on the worn soles of his boots. By the time he had reached flatter ground he was below the cloud line, and the mist had concentrated into gentle rain. It dripped from the ends of the boy's hair, finding a way through the cloak and into the matted wool shirt. There was a mile or two to go before it was going to get any better. He was tempted to cut further into the shelter of the trees, but it was a longer path that way, and it didn't look much drier, anyway. He told himself and a couple of uninterested pigeons that he would rather have had the snow and crisp morning of the winter just ended than this stuff, but the truth was he would have preferred not to have had mornings at all.

After a mile the road veered away from the water and climbed a little, following now the side of a loose stone hillock that was dwarfed by the majestic slopes of the main valley but big enough to screen home from the rest of the hills. On a clear day, which this was not, you could get a good, close view of the surrounding country. There was a forward lookout near the summit, and a path to it which hid in the cover of the trees for as long as possible. This morning, though, there was nothing to see and no one to man the guard post. The boy had the road to himself. The woods thickened on one side; on the other they alternated with irregular fields – few and far between (there were only three houses to pass), but enough to make him feel that he was more out in the open and a little less safe. There had never been any trouble as long as he could remember, but nobody else seemed to think that was very long. So he kept alert as he walked, more for something to think about that wasn't wet than out of fear.

The road dipped again into the tree cover and meandered towards a ford over the big river that flowed out of the hills to the west. It was not a big river by the standards of the world, but it was as big as the boy had seen, and was too great to wade through alone at that time of year. An oak had been felled across it just upstream from the ford and a handrail of woven saplings joined along it to give some purchase on slippery days like this. The boy thought about taking the bridge at a run, but then thought better of it.

Halfway across he paused. He thought his eye had caught something in the water just below, lodged against the rocks where the current leapt and eddied at its fiercest. It had shone – strange on a morning without sun – but now that he looked closely there was nothing much to be seen: a stuck branch and a shred of cloth. A trick of the light and the water. He pressed on.

Beyond the scurrying river he had to climb again, this time higher and harder, and the road could not choose its own way, but had to work as best it could round boulders and through cliffs three times the height of a man. The noise of the river followed him for a while, sometimes close, sometimes far below and just keeping him company in the distance. Then it was lost and the road broke into the open above the trees. He was on a hill unlike the others, with their rolling slopes and long, high summits that formed a ring around him in all directions. This hill stood almost in the centre of the ring, and though it was

smaller, it was impressive in its isolation. On one side it broke away nearly sheer to the valley floor; on the other it tailed back sharply until it met the closest giant in the outer ring and formed a bar, with only a narrow coll wide enough for a road to pass between them. It was a perfect defensive gate provided by nature for the valley. But the boy was already inside the defences, as he had been for as long as he could remember and, he supposed, all the time before. He lumbered up the steep bank on the southern side, just a local path now, and approached the village that perched against the top of the hill, rock at its back, ramparts surrounding the rest. They were old, he knew, though they had been rebuilt within his lifetime. Exactly why he did not know.

At the main gate he waved to the man on duty. He should have identified himself and stopped for an inspection, but there was no real need. The gatekeeper was his father's cousin, and apart from the usual annoying comment about how much he had grown, so much that it was hard to recognise him – one day he'd get an arrow in his chest if he kept on like that – the boy was let through without too much of an inquisition. Sometimes he felt that the whole world must be made up of his father's cousins, and they all thought they were funny.

The village was up and working, but only just. In the forge there was the beginnings of a good fire, and the smell of baking lingered in the air. He was suddenly hungry, his stomach reminding him that he had just trudged four miles in the drizzle. The feeling worsened as he walked the length of the one significant street to the end, where the temple church stood on its mound. The boy turned right, still climbing a little. He should have turned right again, through the final palisade fence to the hall, but his stomach was driving his legs now, and he was carried past the gate, past three more houses to the inn. Outside it a man stood on a ladder painting red a wooden harp that hung from a hook above the door.

He didn't bother to look up as the boy approached, but spoke anyway. 'Morning, Geraint. Bit early for you to be up here, isn't it? Where's the rest, then?'

'I've come on my own. Father's sent me to fetch someone and take him back with me.'

'Who would that be, then?'

'Not sure, exactly. Someone I was to ask for at the hall. They'd know who I was after.'

‘Hall’s back there. What are you doing over here?’

‘Well, I thought...’

‘You thought you’d come and cadge some breakfast off me before you went asking,’ the man said, putting down his painting cloth and climbing down, wiping his hands on the skirt of his tunic. ‘Well, it’s an excuse for me too. Come on, lad, we might as well find out if Meg’s feeling generous.’ He stopped at the foot of the ladder and clapped the boy on the back. ‘Good God, you’ve grown. Bigger than your father now, aren’t you? Don’t look much like him, either, come to think of it, but then that’s an advantage in itself.’

He steered the boy inside and shouted through to where Meg was already preparing slabs of bread and meat and honey and pouring out mugs of weak breakfast ale. She was a young woman, and at nineteen was only five years older than the boy himself and at least ten years, probably fifteen, younger than the innkeeper. Her long straw hair was pulled back and braided, and she had her work clothes on, but she was still lovely, with mild grey-green eyes and the walk of a natural athlete. To the boy she was just older, though, and he barely noticed the perfection of her as she slapped plates and mugs down on the long trestle table that filled the centre of the room.

‘Geraint, you stop him shouting like that,’ she admonished, cuffing her husband as he sat. ‘I saw you coming up the lane before he even stopped pretending to work on that sign. Good to see you, boy. How’s Branwen?’

‘All right, I suppose.’

‘Full of the news, aren’t you? Tell her I asked, will you. Tell her to get herself over here a bit more, too. I could do with someone sensible to talk to – not just this old fish.’

‘Love you too,’ grinned the older man, ‘and you watch, young man. You’ll get better treatment than I do, just because she misses your sister.’

The boy muttered into his mug and wolfed down the food. ‘Can’t be long,’ he said, without enthusiasm. ‘I’d better find this man for Father. He told me he wanted us back by midday if we could make it.’

Meg stood behind him and put her arms round his neck. ‘You can wait long enough to dry off and finish this lot. I’ll take this and get the

water off it.’ She unfastened the brooch that held his cloak and hung it on a peg beside the fire.

Half an hour later the boy emerged from the inn feeling that the morning was better than he had thought. The cloud was clearing and the drizzle had eased so there was barely a spot hanging on the breeze. From the front of the inn he strolled over to look at the view from the top of the rampart which ran from the grounds of the temple church round the end of the village to his right. He clambered up the wooden steps to the platform that rested on the earth barrier, a battlement in the length of the log barricade. In the distance the ring of hills barred the view to the west. On the crest straight ahead twin burial mounds broke the skyline, great barrows of kings who had ruled a thousand years before the Romans came. He could see below him the wide clearing in the forest, a perfect oval, and at its centre the pair of massive stones which stood for their dead kings facing the setting sun. Closer, but still on the valley floor, he could pick out the road and see the square remnants of the fort the Romans had made for themselves – built in a day, the story went, though he didn’t believe it. There was still a decent building or two, but they held sheep now, not legionaries, and the brambles had taken over where the efficient imperial defenders had lodged hundreds of years before.

The boy was dreaming of the legions his grandfather still talked of proudly, as if he had served under the emperors. It was just possible, the boy thought, though he couldn’t quite see his grandfather in one of those toga things that he had seen in paintings in the old house that faced the fort on the other side of the road. And he certainly didn’t believe his grandfather when he pretended that he had reached as far as Rome itself before his emperor lost his campaign and the legion had broken up. It was unimaginable.

The boy felt a touch on his shoulder and heard a voice beside him. ‘Are you the one they call Geraint?’

‘Yes,’ he answered. He thought of turning to see who had spoken, but somehow the hand held him still.

‘Do you know those barrows?’

‘I often look at them when I come here – I don’t know why,’ he said.

The voice that replied was soft and deep, old enough to be fatherly but young enough, the boy felt, that he could laugh with him easily and often. ‘I do. You’re looking at your ancestors.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Just one of those things.’

The boy felt the pressure leave his shoulder and he turned at last. ‘Who are you?’ he asked.

‘I’m the man you’ve been sent here to fetch, and we’d better start back soon, before the weather changes its mind.’

Looking at the man was a disappointment after hearing his voice. He was middling in every way. Not short, not tall. Not dark, not fair. A bit rounder than a warrior would have been, but not enough to be like most of the farmers around. He had not shaved recently, but the beard did not look deliberate, and there seemed to be a bald patch underneath his chin which matched the small patch on the crown of his head. His cloak was hard to categorise. It wasn’t made from the coarse wool used for a soldier, nor the fine weave of a woman’s gown, but it was of superb material, light and full at the same time, almost plaid except that the greens and reds and browns of countless shades mingled in patterns that never quite allowed the eye to decide whether they were triangles or squares or stripes. At the shoulder a brooch was pinned, and it was unlike anything the boy had seen: a lion’s head in white stone so cleverly carved that the eyes could have been alive.

‘Do you like it?’ the man asked. He was smiling, and his eyes were somehow different from the rest of him. They had the same feel about them as the lion’s – warm and immensely strong, though they were grey-blue and had such kindness and depth that the boy felt immediately confident.

‘It’s extraordinary.’

‘It is indeed. I had it made for me. A friend modelled for it. I’ll tell you the story some time, when we know each other a bit better.’

The boy tried again, ‘what should I call you?’

‘We’ll come to that later, when we get home. Come on.’ He led off at a surprisingly brisk pace and the boy scuttled after him.

Once they were clear of the village and into the woods again, they relaxed to more of a stroll as the man asked his companion about himself – what life had been like as he grew up, what he remembered of his mother (which wasn’t much), how his studies were going: especially his studies. The boy realised as they came to the river that he had been talking all about himself for well over a mile without getting anything in return except an encouraging ‘well, well’ or another question, yet

he had an overwhelming sense that he had known the man all his life without ever remembering having met him. That, though, was true of a lot of Father's friends. They turned up out of the distant past, Father treated them as though they had never been away, then they disappeared again as quickly as they had appeared. None had taken the keen notice him that this man did, though, and the boy wondered if he was really interested or just passing the time on a long, damp walk. He also wondered why he had never called him Geraint since that first question in the village.

At the tree bridge Geraint stepped aside to let the older man go across first.

'No, after you. I'm sure you have a trick for not slipping off this thing which I should copy, if I've got any sense. I'm one of those people who'll trip over a blade of grass if you give me half a chance.'

Geraint laughed and stepped on to the log. Halfway across he stopped, just as he had on the way out, convinced again that something in the river had flashed. This time he was sure it wasn't just a trick of light, and he realised that it was unlikely to have been before either. It had been even wetter on the outward walk and the grim grey cloud had hidden the sun completely.

'What is it? Why have you stopped?' his companion called from the riverbank.

'I thought I saw something in the river. Twice.'

'And it's not a fish?'

'I don't think so. It seemed too still for that.'

'Well, let's have a look. But for heaven's sake, boy, don't jiggle that rope as I come across. I'm quite damp enough without a swim this morning.' He started to follow Geraint on to the bridge.

They stood together on the tree trunk, peering down into the water. In the pool below them, close in to the far bank, a light seemed to shine. It was impossible to say whether the light came from within or whether it was just a trick of the morning.

'You're right,' said the man, 'there is something down there. Let's take a look, shall we?'

They crossed the final length of wood and gingerly lowered themselves down the bank to the water's edge. A small ledge of rock reached out into the fast-running stream, and it was in the lee of this that they could see the light in the water.