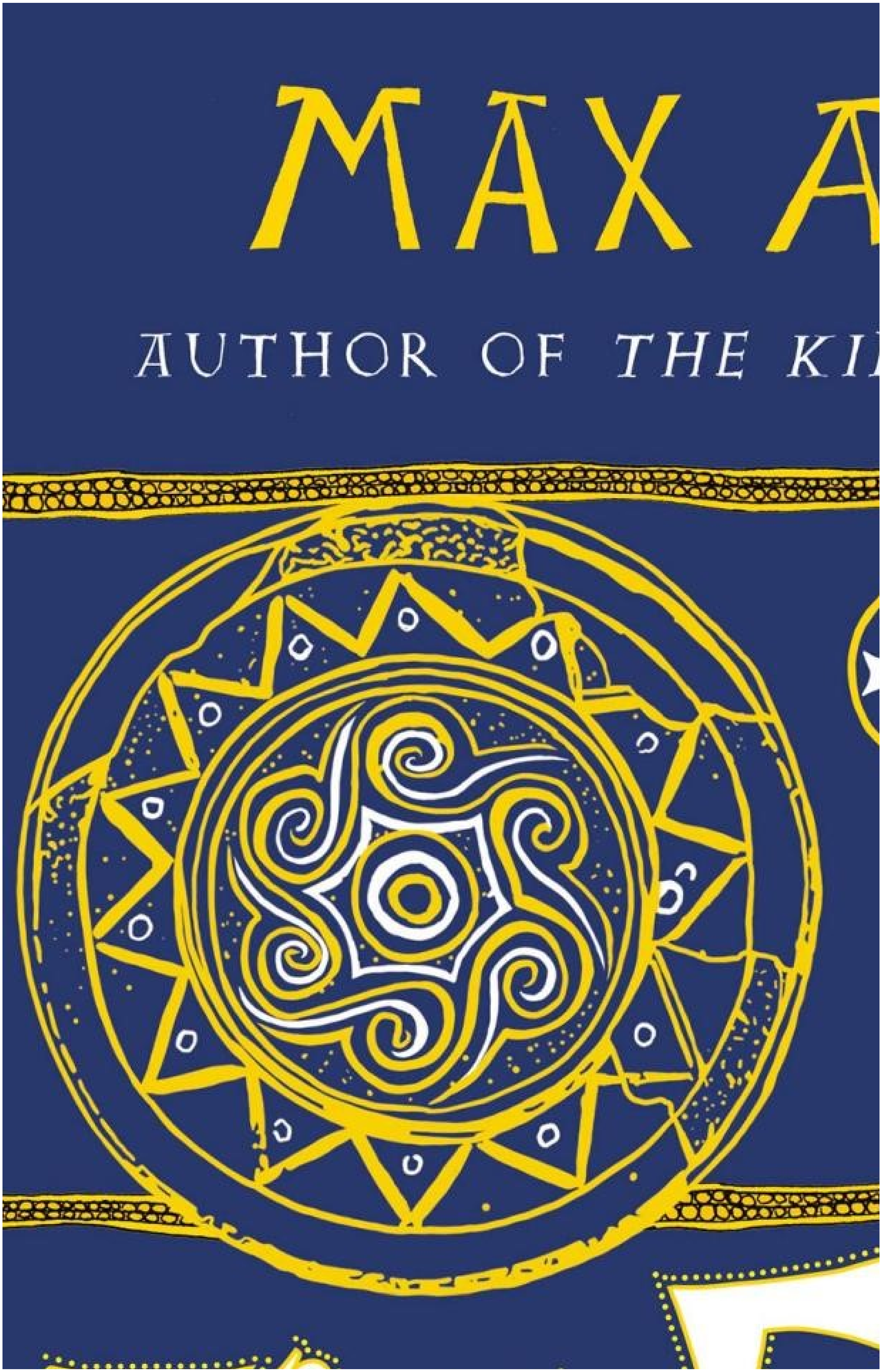
# The First Kingdom: Britain in the Age of Arthur by Max Adams review — life was grim without the Romans

*Gerard DeGroot*

Imagine, if you will, that famous scene from *Life of Brian*. "All right," asks Reg (played by John Cleese), "apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?" The answer became apparent when the Romans began leaving Britain around AD380. Britannia under the Romans "must have been . . . a secure land . . . essentially ordered and conspicuously productive", Max Adams argues. After they left, security, order and productivity sharply declined.

Or so it seems. In truth, the reality of life in post-Roman Britain is frustratingly elusive. We know more about the period before AD400 than about what followed, precisely because of that Roman capacity for order. They kept records. The two centuries after their departure can be reconstructed only from the detritus of scattered settlements — pottery sherds, discarded household goods, patterns of postholes, the occasional earthen fortification. "The fragments left for us to hold up to the light are tiny," Adams admits. "The truth of . . . how the first Christian kingdoms came into being cannot be verified." *The First Kingdom* is, by necessity, "a contemplative history".

Adams, whose previous books include *The King in the North* and *The Wisdom of Trees*, describes himself as an archaeologist, author and woodsman. "Archaeology's greatest challenge," he writes, "is one of imagination." How should the gaps between scattered pieces of evidence be filled? Techniques of extraction and analysis have improved over time, but there's still so much that can never be known. Archaeologists can never really "get to grips with empty space and time: the unknown months, weeks, years or centuries missing from the last fastidious scrubbing of a mosaic floor and the grassy field that now covers it".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Adams is a synthesiser, a noble pursuit often derided within academia, where praise is instead heaped on original research. He has read assiduously the arcane studies written for a specialist audience and condensed them into an accessible and illuminating book, studiously avoiding the temptation to fictionalise when facts are scarce. The period is susceptible to romantic reconstruction precisely because the narrative is otherwise so thin. The adventures of Beowulf are frankly so much more exhilarating than the story that po-faced archaeologists can tell.

Publishers, however, often see things differently from authors. The cover of this book brings to mind the misty medieval adventure stories my son loves to read; I suspect that deception is intentional. I'm also going to guess that the subtitle — *Britain in the Age of Arthur* — was chosen by the publicist, not the author. King Arthur does not figure prominently in this book, for the simple reason that he's almost certainly a figment of romantic imagination. "The most that can be said," Adams writes, "is that if there was no Arthur, there were probably Arthurs . . . mounted warriors deployed to protect towns and trade."

So what do we know about this murky interregnum between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of Augustine's Christian mission at the end of the 6th century? The population declined as the birth rate and life expectancy fell. By the year 500 there is little evidence of big towns, apart perhaps from Canterbury and Wroxeter. London was empty and derelict, at best a shanty town. The grand Roman villas scattered across the countryside fell quickly into ruin. Politics became a "dirty business", with conflict a symptom of scarcity. People fought not over treasure but over necessities — cattle and crops. "Power," Adams writes, "had devolved to the level of the fort, the town . . . or the estate."

The Romans ruled Britannia for nearly four centuries, imposing their will with characteristic efficiency. When they left, what happened to those left behind? That too is difficult to discern. Life was dominated by the practicalities of survival. Most people simply went about their business, "acting out parts ordained long ago by the necessities of the farming year and the ever-turning cycles of birth and death".

Archaeologists have found the banal evidence of mundane existence — a life largely devoid of frills. Artefacts recovered from a site at West Stow in Suffolk show that they herded sheep, ploughed well-drained soil and raised stock in sturdy pens. "They made pottery . . . spun yarn and wove textiles; fashioned pins and needles from bone; made buckets to carry water and milk; forged their own tools . . . They combed lice from their children's hair, plucked their eyebrows and trimmed their moustaches."

Archaeologists prefer to call these people Anglo-Saxons, but, Adams wonders, "who can say how they thought of themselves?" Political loyalty was a kaleidoscope — multilayered and inevitably confusing. "People belonged to the land where they were born," Adams argues. "They belonged to their household; to their lord; . . . to a broad group who recognized a shared kinship; to a tribe and, perhaps, to an ideology echoed in distinct burial practices."

The author dismisses the idea of an invasion from the Continent or of a non-native elite who stepped into the shoes of the Romans. Granted, immigrants and traders arrived from abroad, but no great conquerors. To concentrate on ethnicity is, Adams feels, "intellectually unhealthy and redolent of a late Victorian mindset, fixated on the origins of 'formative nations' and races". It was all, in truth, a muddle.

Kingship is an outgrowth of productivity. An agricultural surplus was essential to support an idle king pontificating from his throne. Likewise, earthworks and fortifications could be built only if a community had surplus labour. “In the crudest terms,” Adams writes, “royal households and their attendant warbands were greedy for calories. The larger the outfit, the more bread, ale, meat, honey, fuel, timber, weapons and finery they consumed.”

As time passed and productivity increased, so did the power of kings. The concept of a single kingdom was, nevertheless, slow in forming. It is, in any case, difficult to separate the real kings from their mythical counterparts woven into romantic tales of Arthur, Guinevere and Tintagel. There’s little possibility of discovering the remains of an identifiable historical figure from this period.

*The First Kingdom* is a worthy synthesis of what little we know, but some readers may find the relentless uncertainty frustrating. Adams, understandably, makes liberal use of qualifiers and conditional verbs. He resists romance. He accepts archaeology’s hard truth, namely that one new discovery can easily topple the edifice already constructed.

In trying to assemble this maddening puzzle, he remains patient and honest, humbly accepting the limits the era imposes. “The chances are that, however modern archaeologists and anthropologists reconstruct such obscure and distant times . . . any native of those days transported to the present would assure us that we had got it all wrong.”

***The First Kingdom: Britain in the Age of Arthur*** **by Max Adams, Head of Zeus, 480pp; £30**