On second thoughts, let’s not go to Camelot: situating the ‘historical Arthur’ through casting in *King Arthur* and *The Last Legion*  

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**Abstract.** Hollywood produced two major Arthurian movies in the mid-2000s, *King Arthur* (Antoine Fuqua, 2004) and *The Last Legion* (Doug Lefler, 2007), even though the latter only introduces Arthur in the final scene. Both choose to place their narratives within the ‘historical Arthur’ genre, rejecting the quasi-medieval setting used by *Excalibur* (John Boorman, 1981), and later the TV series *Merlin* (UK, 2008–present), and instead placing the story in the context of the end of Roman Britain and the collapse of Roman rule in the west. They thus come within the interests of this conference.

This paper is concerned with the ways in which the two movies characterise post-Roman Britain, and in particular, how they use the casting of their lead actor to underline their respective characterizations.

*King Arthur* presents a soldier’s-eye view of the world, and is largely anti-authority (in the shape of the Pope’s representative Germanus). Arthur is a man whose first loyalty is to his men; to this end, the movie casts Clive Owen, known for working class roles in the TV series *Chancer* (UK, 1990–1991), *Croupier* (Mike Hodges, 1998) and * Gosford Park* (Robert Altman, 2001), as Arthur, though supporting him with more upper class figures such as Ioan Gruffudd and Joel Edgerton as Lancelot and Galahad. *The Last Legion*’s hero, Aurelius, is, in contrast, a man whose first loyalty is to his emperor. In that role is cast Colin Firth, famous for aristocratic landowners such as Mr Darcy in a television adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (UK, 1995) and Lord Wessex in *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998). This paper will further examine the

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*Presented at *Cinema and Antiquity: 2000-2011*, University of Liverpool, 12–14 July 2011.*
working out of the casting in these films, including the interesting issue of the casting of Ray Stevenson in

*King Arthur* and Kevin McKidd in *The Last Legion.*

In the mid-2000s, in one of those ‘coincidences’ that seem to occur quite regularly within Hollywood, two Arthurian movies appeared, both, like *300,* emerging, I believe, largely from a post-*Lord of the Rings* boom in epic fantasy rather than a post-*Gladiator* boom in ancient epic (though that’s a debate for another time, and it is true that one project was originated by the screenwriter of *Gladiator,* and the other had been kicking around in development hell for several years). They are *King Arthur,* directed by Antoine Fuqua, and released in 2004; and *The Last Legion,* directed by Doug Lefler, and released in 2007. Ingo has kindly given you the plot of *The Last Legion,* so I don’t have to. In *King Arthur* everyone shouts a lot and Keira Knightley wears an uncomfortable leather bikini. That’s all you need to know.

It is true that in the *The Last Legion* Arthur only appears in the final scene, and the producers initially went out of their way in the movie’s publicity to disguise the fact that it was Arthuriana. They presumably felt, with some reason, that revealing that the ‘last’ western emperor Romulus Augustulus grows up to be Uther Pendragon, father of Arthur, would constitute a spoiler. Subsequently, they changed their minds, and later publicity eventually embraced the Arthurian
connection. Presumably the magic name of Arthur was felt necessary to draw audiences in, who might otherwise stay away from a sword-and-sandal epic. In an edition of BBC Radio 4's arts magazine show, *Front Row*, Sir Ben Kingsley, who plays the Merlin character in *The Last Legion*, gave an interview about the movie in which no mention was made of Arthur, Merlin or Excalibur, whilst making clear to any listener with the slightest knowledge of the Matter of Britain, the Arthurian cycle, that this is what the movie is about.

What further links these two movies is the setting they choose to place their Arthurian retelling in. They avoid the timeless quasi-mediaeval setting used by John Boorman’s 1981 movie *Excalibur*, and later the BBC TV series *Merlin* (UK, 2008–present). Neither do they take up the setting seen in the most recent example of Arthuriana, the ‘blood-and-boobies’ television series *Camelot* (USA, 2011), which takes place in an indeterminate period of the Dark Ages, where the Roman empire has passed into legend, but still casts a long shadow over the present.

Instead, both movies set themselves in the context of the end of Roman rule in Britain, and in the wider context of the ‘collapse’ of the western empire (though only *The Last Legion* actually has scenes set outside northern Britain). Valerio
Massimo Manfredi, author of the novel on which *The Last Legion* is based, thinks that the coincidence of setting may be because David Franzoni, screenwriter of *King Arthur*, read *The Last Legion* and lifted a number of ideas from it. Whatever the truth of that, in adopting these settings, both movies place themselves within the ‘historical Arthur’ genre. This is relatively unusual in retellings of the Matter of Britain, especially cinematic ones, but it is by no means unique – it can, for instance, be argued that this is what Geoffrey of Monmouth does in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the *History of the Kings of Britain*; more recently, it be seen in Rosemary Sutcliff’s 1963 novel *Sword at Sunset*, or the television series *Arthur of the Britons* (1972–1973). Entries in this genre typically reject the magic and fantasy elements of the legend, as this is true of both these movies – though Merlin is rumoured to be a magician in *King Arthur*, and performs parlour tricks in *The Last Legion*, there is no ‘real’ magic in either movie.

Nor, of course, is there much in the way of history. *King Arthur* opens with a caption asserting dubiously ‘Historians agree that the classical 15th century tale of King Arthur and his Knights rose from a real hero who lived a thousand years earlier in a period often called the Dark Ages’. It then proceeds to drive a Sarmatian cavalry charge through what little is actually known about Britain in the fifth century AD. As for *The Last Legion*, though publicity claimed ‘The story
follows the historically accurate fortunes of the 12-year-old Romulus Augustus’, an opening caption dates the movie to AD 460, fifteen years before the real Romulus Augustulus came to the throne, and the depiction of the emperor Tiberius as a great heroic figure and his palace on Capri as a stronghold of justice makes my mind, at least, boggle.

I should state, in the interest of positioning myself, that, historical nonsense aside, I would not describe either of these movies as ‘good’. King Arthur is an absurd piece of work; one of the greatest romantic triangles in Western literature, that of Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot, is reduced to Lancelot sneaking a look at Guinevere when she’s washing, and many of the performances are poor, worst of all being the usually reliable Ken Stott, using an Italian accent not seen this side of a Cornetto advert. The Last Legion is better (though RottenTomatoes suggests that I am in a minority in that view), but it is very predictable – when rewatching I was certain that John Hannah’s Senator Nestor would turn out to be a traitor, but I wasn’t sure if this was because I remembered it from the first time I saw the movie, or because this is simply because I’d seen so many movies like this that it was obvious that he must be a traitor. The movie’s release was delayed by over a year, and it was released in the US without a press screening – so the studios also knew it wasn’t any good.
There are, however, things that one can say about these movies. They have since been joined by Neil Marshall’s 2010 *Centurion* and Kevin McDonald’s *The Eagle* in 2011, to form a further sub-genre of Hadrian’s Wall movies. About those, the obvious question to ask is, why do they all want to be Westerns, some of them, such as *King Arthur*, very badly indeed? That’s a question I shall be addressing in another venue. Here I want to look at the casting of the two Arthurian movies, in particular the lead roles, and what that says about the picture of post-Roman Britain each movie wants to project.

Both movies cast largely from a pool of British actors (with, in the case of *King Arthur*, a smattering of Scandinavians such as Mads Mikkelsen and Stellan Skarsgård, and in *The Last Legion*, Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai). Despite the involvement of American producers – Jerry Bruckheimer on *King Arthur* and Dino De Laurentiis on *The Last Legion*, neither imports a major American star, instead relying on British actors with the recognition factor in the US, Keira Knightley in *King Arthur* and Colin Firth in *The Last Legion*.

Both movies cast capable actors in their lead roles. The lead role of *King Arthur* is, of course, Arthur (though at no point does he actually become king). In this role, the movie casts Clive Owen. The following may be incomprehensible to the
Americans in the audience, for whom class is not as important as it is for the British. Owen is generally perceived as a working-class actor. His stepfather worked for British Railways, Owen went to a comprehensive school, and has made his name in working-class roles, such as the con-man Stephen Crane in the TV series *Chancer* (UK, 1990–1991), Jack Manfred in *Croupier* (UK, Mike Hodges, 1998), and Robert Parks in *Gosford Park* (UK/USA, Robert Altman, 2001). His Arthur, then, though portrayed as an ancestral leader of the Sarmatian Knights, is hardly a typical upper-class officer type. He is a rough-and-ready soldier, the sort of leader who comes up through the ranks, and it is emphasized throughout the movie that, though he serves Rome, his first duty is to his men. He is, however, supported by more upper-class figures such as Ioan Gruffudd and Joel Edgerton as Lancelot and Galahad, though Gruffudd at least emphasizes his Welshness in the voice he uses, especially for the voice-over narration (another curious coincidence between these two movies is that they both use Welsh accents on their narrations). And Owen is also supported by the even more working-class and very shouty Ray Winstone as Bors. This is almost King Arthur as *EastEnders* (a popular British soap opera about a working-class community in East London), where emotion is conveyed though people shouting at each other.
In *The Last Legion*, the central hero is Aurelius – this is a version of Ambrosius Aurelianus, one of the few characters associated with the Arthurian legend who we can, from the work known as the *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, by the fifth-century AD monk Gildas, be reasonably sure is actually historical, though we know almost nothing about him. Aurelius is played by Colin Firth, an actor who is perhaps more dependable and more subtle than Owen, though Owen can be very good when he wants to be and is in the right role. Firth is not someone one would think of as working-class. True, he too went to a comprehensive, and it is Owen who trained at the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA); Firth went to Drama Centre London. But Firth’s parents were both lecturers at King Alfred’s College, Winchester, and Firth is almost the epitome of the upper-middle class Englishman. He is most famous for roles such as the aristocratic landowner Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy in a BBC television adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (UK, 1995), and Lord Wessex in *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998). He has since, of course, reached the top of that tree by playing King George VI in *The King’s Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010).

Firth’s Aurelius, then, is more of an upper-class authority figure than Owen’s Arthur – if Owen came up through the ranks, Firth went to the Roman equivalent of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Firth’s Aurelius certainly is concerned
about the welfare of his men, as is established in early dialogue, but his first loyalty is to his emperor.

It is possible to exaggerate the implications of these differences for how one receives these movies, as, for instance, I do in my abstract. There are many similarities. In both movies, the lead characters are betrayed by the politicians. Both leaders end up abandoning their allegiance to Rome, and transferring it to the defence of Britain. Britain in both movies is depicted as an outpost abandoned by the empire, but where, with the right leadership, a kingdom of peace and justice may be established – somewhere where it is possible to create, for want of a better term, ‘Camelot’.

Nevertheless, I do think that differences exist, and there is some significance in them. They can perhaps be seen by looking at the speeches each leader gives before the final battle (which is in each meant to be the Battle of Badon Hill). The keynote of Arthur’s speech, and the point at which he ends, is freedom – it is very reminiscent of Mel Gibson’s speeches in *Braveheart*. There is in Aurelius’s more patrician speech the implication of freedom, in the rejection of tyranny, but interestingly the term is not used directly, and the speech ends with ‘Hail Caesar!’
I think this does encapsulate a difference between the two movies. *King Arthur* is more anti-authoritarian. Arthur wholly rejects the authority of the Roman empire, in favour of an allegiance to Britain. (It is also interesting, especially in the light of what was said yesterday about *Agora*, that said authority is seen to vest entirely in the Pope and the Catholic Church, through the Pope’s representative, Bishop Germanus. The movie is, however, not anti-Christian, as Arthur’s own Christianity, the right sort of Christianity, is emphasized throughout.) Aurelius does not reject imperial authority – his motivation is the protection of the legitimate Caesar against those who have usurped his power or abandoned him.

The differences in the two speeches point up another issue I’d like to develop briefly. Aurelius delivers his speech to his entire army. Arthur delivers his to his small contingent of Sarmatian Knights. But I actually think Arthur’s speech is the more democratic, more of a speech delivered by one soldier to his fellows, rather than Aurelius’, which is the speech of a leader to his subordinates. This more democratic element in *King Arthur* is emphasized by the characterization given to the Sarmatian Knights, which seems deeper than that given to Vatrenus, Demetrius and Batiatus. (Owen Teale as Vatrenus, is, incidentally, the most significant actor who appears in both movies, playing Pelagius in *King Arthur*, though only in the Director’s Cut.) Of course, this is partly because we have heard of Lancelot,
Gawain, Galahad, Tristan and Bors, so we fill the gaps in. But it is also the case that the cast used for the Sarmatian Knights is rather better-known that that for Aurelius’ men, and we are, therefore, meant to care more about them.

I want to end briefly on the coincidence that each movie features one out of HBO’s *Rome*’s pairing of Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus. Ray Stevenson, the working-class Pullo, is in the more working-class *King Arthur*, as Dagonet, whom *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* would probably characterise as ‘Sir You’ve-never-heard-of-him-so-he’ll-probably-die-first’. (I am aware that Sir Dagonet is a character from Arthurian legend, and appears in Malory, but he is much less well-known than the others – I, at least, had to look him up to confirm that he wasn’t invented for the movie, which I didn’t for anyone else.) Kevin McKidd goes into the patrician *The Last Legion* – but there the theory breaks down, as he is cast as nasty Goth Wulfia.

So, in conclusion ...