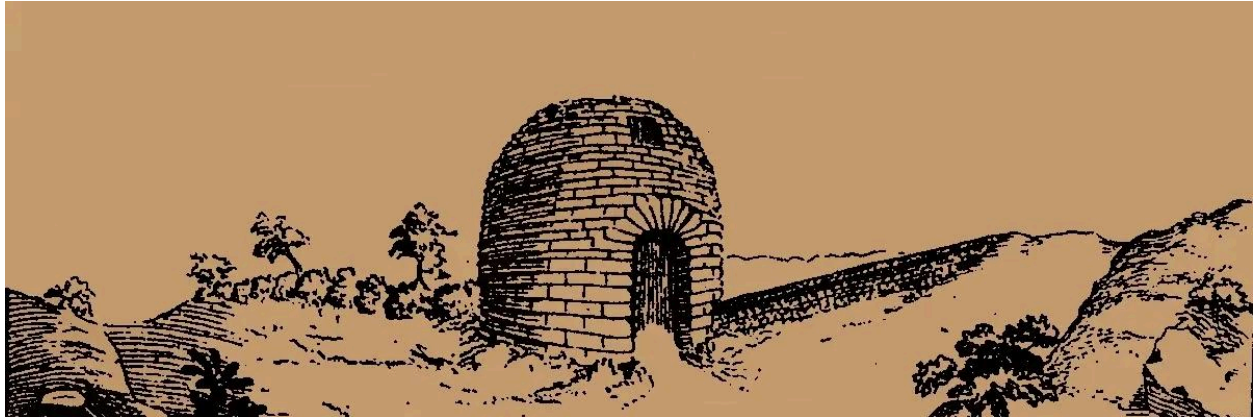


# Arthur's O'on: A Scholar's Return, 15 Years Later

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Sepia toned (edited) drawing of Arthur's O'on in its 18th-century landscape, by William Stukeley (1720).

## Part 1: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Fifteen years ago, I completed my master's thesis at the University of Durham on a monument that no longer exists. Arthur's O'on—sometimes called Arthur's Oven—was a curious, domed stone structure that once stood on the banks of the River Carron in central Scotland, near Falkirk and the Antonine Wall. Destroyed in the eighteenth century, it has survived only in sketches, antiquarian debates, folklore, and the lingering names of places in the landscape.

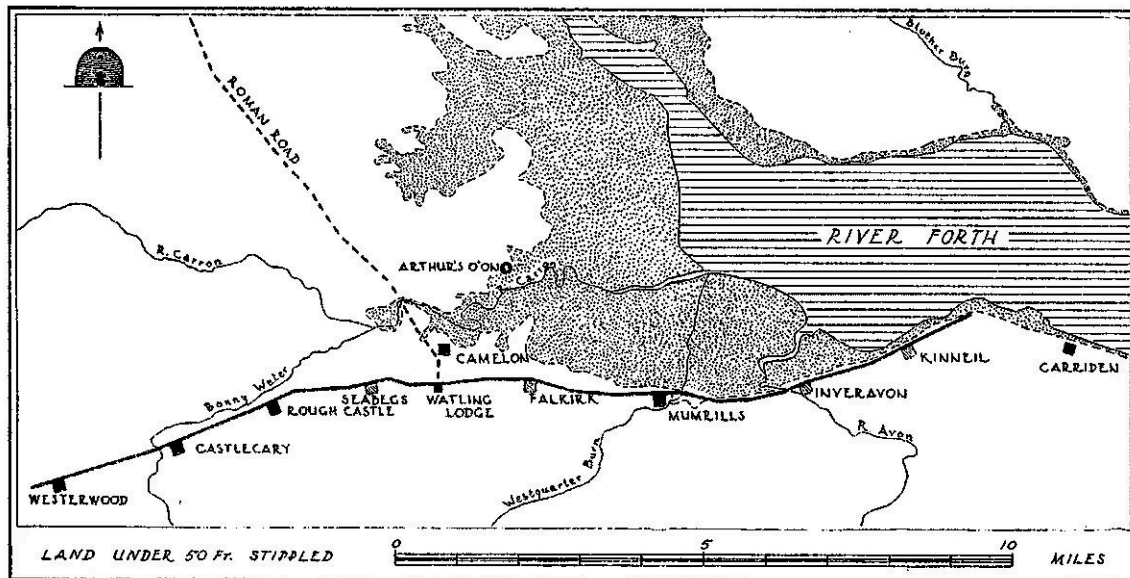
It was, to be candid, a strange choice for a dissertation topic. Few modern scholars had much to say about Arthur's O'on—with the notable exceptions of Ken Steer and Iain Gordon Brown—and others who did usually dismissed it as an antiquarian curiosity. But for me, it was irresistible: here was a monument that was once celebrated as one of the “Wonders of Britain,” that carried centuries of myth and memory, and yet had slipped into near obscurity.

### A first foray into serious research

This was my first substantial piece of scholarship, and it was both daunting and exhilarating. I quickly discovered that studying Arthur's O'on meant diving into a sea of manuscripts, antiquarian treatises, folklore collections, and early modern debates. Even more challenging, I chose to approach it through an unconventional lens—borrowing Michel Foucault's “archaeology (or genealogy) of knowledge” and applying it to the physical traces of archaeology. In other words, I wasn't just interested in what Arthur's O'on was, but in how it had been written about, reinterpreted, and repurposed over the centuries.

At the time, this felt like an odd methodological experiment in a niche corner of Roman frontier studies. I couldn't quite articulate why it mattered beyond my personal fascination, or beyond

the small circle of scholars who might care about Roman Scotland or Foucault's historiography. But the project was empowering precisely because of that challenge. I had carved out a space for myself, however small, and proved to myself that I could contribute something original.



Map showing the eastern section of the Antonine Wall with the location of Arthur's O'on near Falkirk.  
From Kenneth Steer (1960, *The Archaeological Journal*).

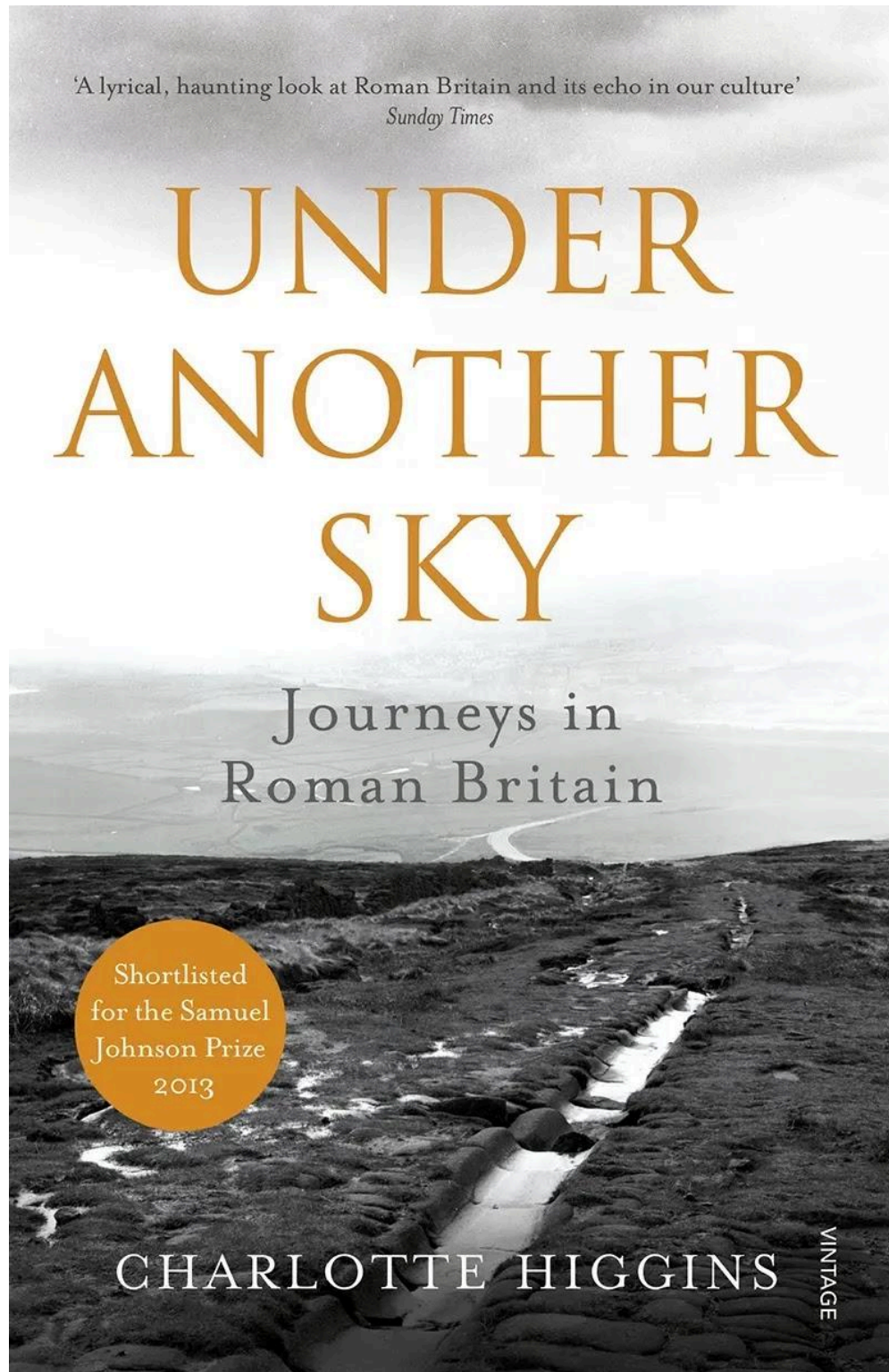
## Seeds of a scholarly path

Looking back, I can now see how much of my later work was seeded in that MA thesis. My subsequent research on chorography—the study of place and its representations—was directly inspired by Arthur's O'on. My first peer-reviewed article, on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scottish antiquarians and their chorographic writings, grew straight out of these early investigations. That piece, published in the *Journal of Art Historiography*, set me on a trajectory that would shape my doctoral dissertation and has since become one of my most cited contributions.

More broadly, Arthur's O'on marked the beginning of my commitment to what I've come to call the "archaeology of place:" a way of thinking that takes landscapes, monuments, and even ruins not as static objects, but as sites of layered meaning—material, cultural, and imaginative. From Scotland to Jordan, that orientation has become one of my strongest intellectual compasses.

## Reaching beyond academia

What I didn't expect at the time was that my MA research would also ripple into wider public conversations. In 2013, journalist and author Charlotte Higgins drew on my work for her acclaimed book *Under Another Sky: Journeys in Roman Britain*. She and I exchanged long conversations about Arthur's O'on, and I shared my thesis with her. Her chapter on Roman Scotland—an edited extract of which appeared in *The Scotsman*—featured the O'on's story and brought the monument to a far larger audience than I could have reached myself.



Charlotte Higgins' acclaimed trade book, *Under Another Sky: Journeys in Roman Britain*, which draws on personal interviews and my research on Arthur's O'on and the Antonine Wall.



That moment was a small but formative lesson in public scholarship: the stories we uncover in the archives, footnotes, or on/in the ground don't have to stay there. They can resonate with readers, shape cultural memory, and even change how the past is remembered.

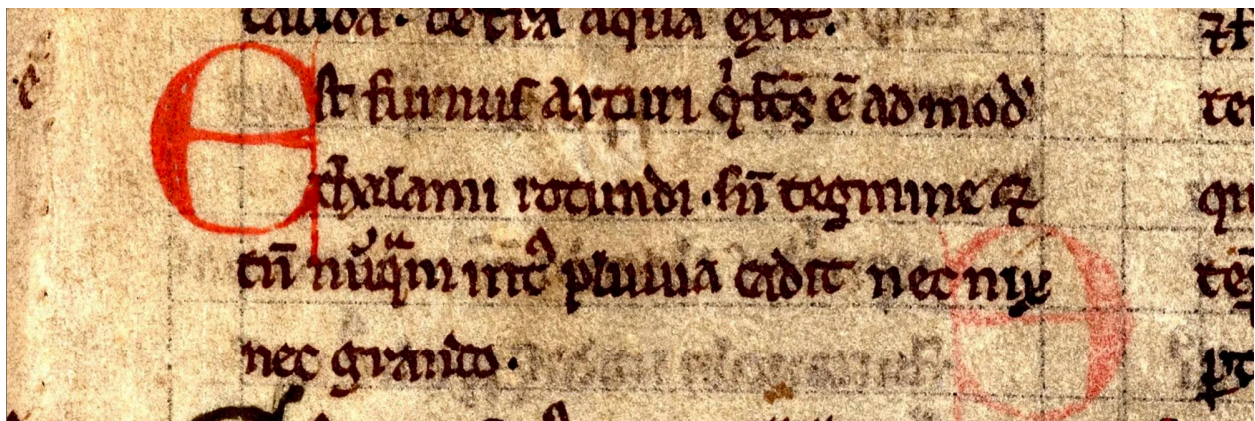
## Setting the stage

This essay is my return to Arthur's O'on—fifteen years on. In what follows, I will retell the story of the monument: what it was, how it was imagined, why it was destroyed, and how it has lived on in myth, memory, and material traces. But I will also reflect on what it has meant for me as a scholar, and why I still find lessons in a ruined and forgotten monument in central Scotland while working today in the very different landscapes of Jordan.

Arthur's O'on is long gone. Yet it endures—as a wonder, a warning, and a window into how people make meaning from the past.

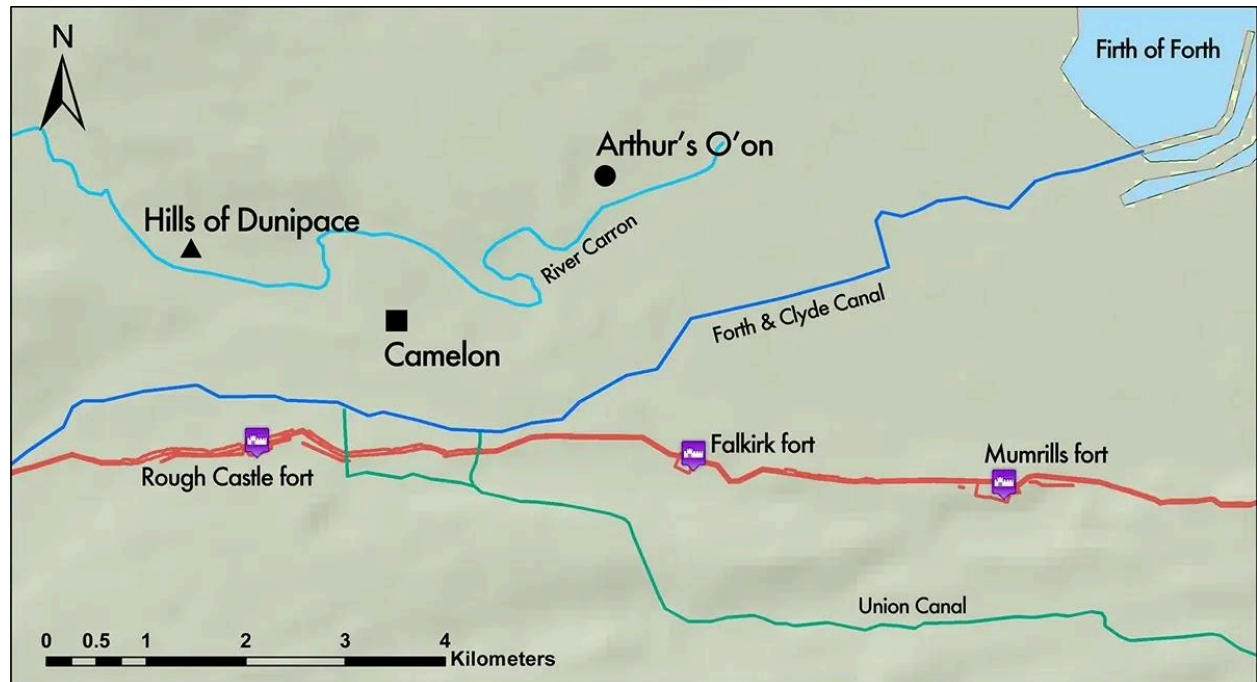
## Part 2: The Monument That Was

When Ralph de Diceto, dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, compiled his *De Mirabilibus Britanniae*, “On the Wonders of Britain,” in the late twelfth century (CCCC MS 313, ff. 98v–100v), he listed sights that seemed both extraordinary and enduring: Cheddar Gorge, the hot springs at Bath, Stonehenge—and, nestled among them, something called *furnus arturi*, “Arthur's Oven.” Diceto described it as “a round, roofless chamber into which rain, snow, or hail could never penetrate.”



Ralph de Diceto's short entry on *furnus arturi*, “Arthur's Oven,” in *De mirabilibus Britanniae*, Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 313, f. 100r.

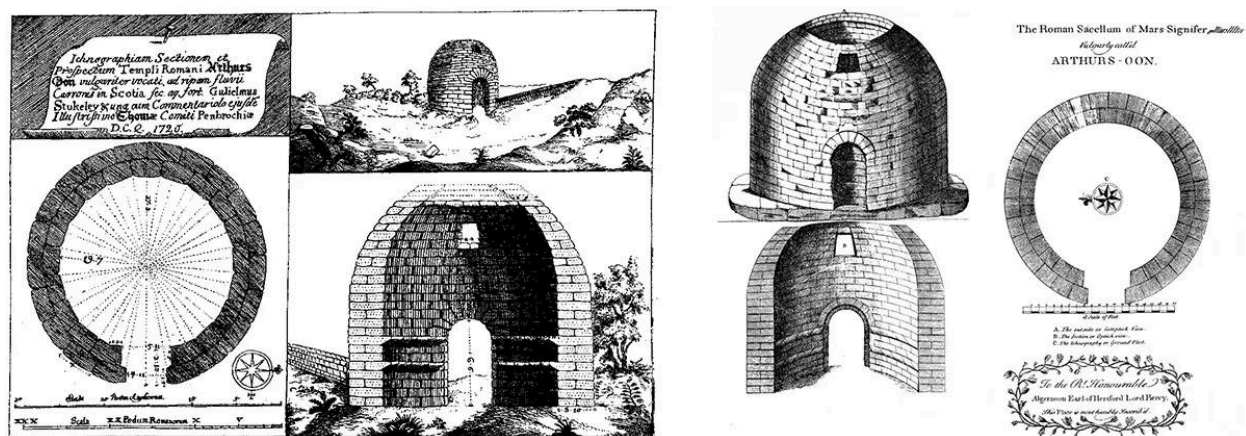
That brief sentence is one of our earliest glimpses of Arthur's O'on, the monument that once stood on the north bank of the River Carron near Falkirk. Over the centuries, this peculiar domed structure was described, debated, sketched, and even mythologized. By the early eighteenth century, it had become one of the best known “curiosities” of Roman Britain.



Map showing the location of Arthur's O'on in its geographic context with the Firth of Forth, River Carron, and the Antonine Wall. From my own (2014) doctoral thesis.

## What it looked like

Thanks to detailed antiquarian descriptions and drawings by William Stukeley (1720), Alexander Gordon (1726), and others, we can reconstruct the O'on's appearance with some confidence. It was a circular ashlar masonry building, about 22 feet tall, with an internal diameter just under 20 feet. The walls were built of finely dressed stone in corbelled courses—at least 23 layers in all—without visible mortar.



Antiquarian plans of Arthur's O'on by (left) William Stukeley (1720) and (right) Alexander Gordon (1726).

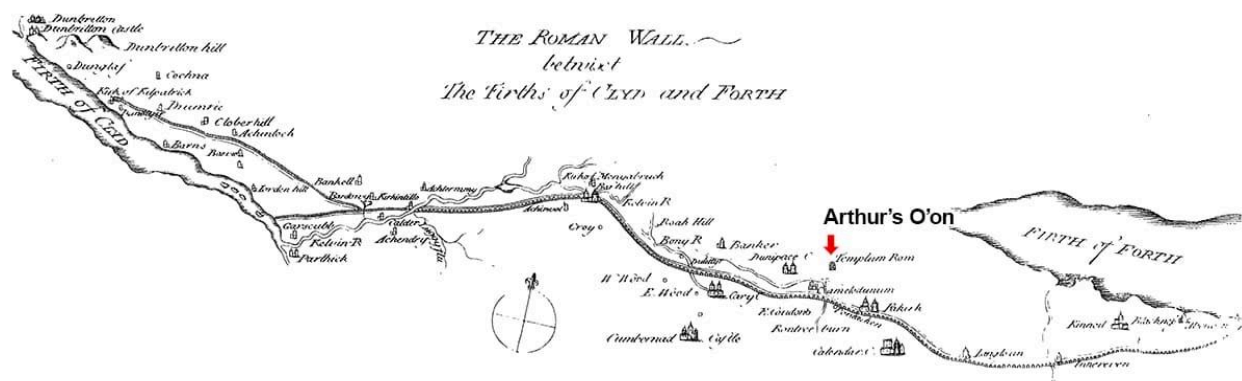
The doorway, more than nine feet high, faced east, and directly above it was a trapezoidal window, aligned with an open aperture at the very top of the dome. Inside, the floor was paved, with a large stone in the center that may have been an altar or base for a statue. Some

antiquarians (e.g., Sir Robert Sibbald) even reported carvings of eagles, winged victories, or military symbols. The combination of fine stonework, symbolic decoration, and monumental scale made it unlike anything else in Britain.

In short: it was striking, unusual, and, for many, unforgettable. No wonder John Clerk of Penicuik, writing in 1743 after the O'on's destruction, could call it "the best and most entire old building in Britain."

## A Wonder of Britain

From the twelfth century onward, Arthur's O'on circulated in both learned and popular traditions. Medieval chroniclers linked it to King Arthur. Early modern writers claimed it was a victory monument left by Julius Caesar, or a temple of the god Terminus, or a shrine to Mars Ultor. By the time of Stukeley and Gordon, the Roman attribution had become mainstream, and both men believed it was a Romano-British temple, tomb, or trophy associated with the Antonine Wall (which hadn't yet received that name or been correctly identified with its commissioning emperor Antoninus Pius, but that's a different story—one I covered in my subsequent doctoral research—that I'll tell here sometime soon!). Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, Midlothian, used Gordon's plans and measurements to reconstruct a replica atop the stable-blocks at Penicuik House, functioning as a dovecote.



Map of the Antonine Wall, with Arthur's O'on, by Sir Robert Sibbald (1707).

In truth, we cannot be certain what its original purpose was. Modern consensus, following Kenneth Steer's mid-twentieth-century study, identifies it as a *tropaeum*—a Roman victory monument—probably dating to the Antonine period (c. 140–160 CE). But what mattered more than its precise function was the awe it inspired. For Stukeley, it was "the most genuine and curious Antiquity of the Romans in this Kind, now to be seen in our Island or elsewhere."

## My first deep dive into antiquarian sources

As a young MA student, piecing this story together meant immersing myself in medieval and early modern manuscripts, printed tracts, and eighteenth-century correspondence. It was the first time I had to do the painstaking work of comparing conflicting descriptions, deciphering



paleographic “hands” of different periods—and the peculiarities of medieval and early modern Latin, English, and Scots writing—weighing drawings against measurements, and trying to imagine what no longer stood from the evidence left behind by such disparate records.

I remember feeling both the thrill and the frustration of absence: the O'on itself was gone, yet the documentary trail was dense. It forced me to think critically about sources, interpretation, and the “archaeology of knowledge” long before I had the vocabulary to express those ideas with confidence.

In retrospect, this was my first encounter with what I would later call the “archaeology of place.” Arthur's O'on was not just a building or an artifact from one particular period and with one particular function: it was a place in the landscape, layered with memories and meanings that shifted with each new description, drawing, or myth. That realization shaped much of my later scholarship, and it began right here, in the shadows of a lost stone dome on the Carron.

## What comes next

Of course, the story of Arthur's O'on is not only about what it looked like, what period it was built in, its functional purpose, or how it was described. It is also about what happened to it—the antiquarian debates, the folklore it generated, and ultimately, its destruction in the 1740s.

In the next part, I'll turn to those myths, names, and contested interpretations: how Arthur's O'on became Camelot for some, Caesar's sleeping chamber for others, and why stories can be just as enduring as stone.

## Part 3: Myths, Names, and the Making of Meaning

By the time medieval chroniclers began to write about the stone dome on the River Carron, its Roman origins were already fading from memory. In John of Fordun's fourteenth-century *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, the building appears as a *rotundam casulam columbaris ad instar*—“a round chamber, in the form of a dovecote.” He gives his own theory that this structure was built by Julius Caesar who had built it as a boundary marker or “lasting monument” at the northern edge of his campaigns in Britain, but also reports another story—“chiefly a rumour spreading among the multitude”—that the structure was a kind of movable “stone tent” that was rebuilt daily so that Caesar could rest more safely than canvas would allow, and that it had been left behind only because of an urgent need to return to the continent.

This was the beginning of a long tradition of making meaning around Arthur's O'on. Lacking direct knowledge of its purpose, writers and local communities filled the gap with their own stories.

## Arthur's Oven, Camelon, Camelot

By the late Middle Ages, the monument's popular name was “Arthur's Oven” (Arthur's O'on in Scots). The reasons are not entirely clear, but proximity to the village of Camelon (pronounced “came-lon”) may have invited associations with Arthurian legend. Some identified Camelon with

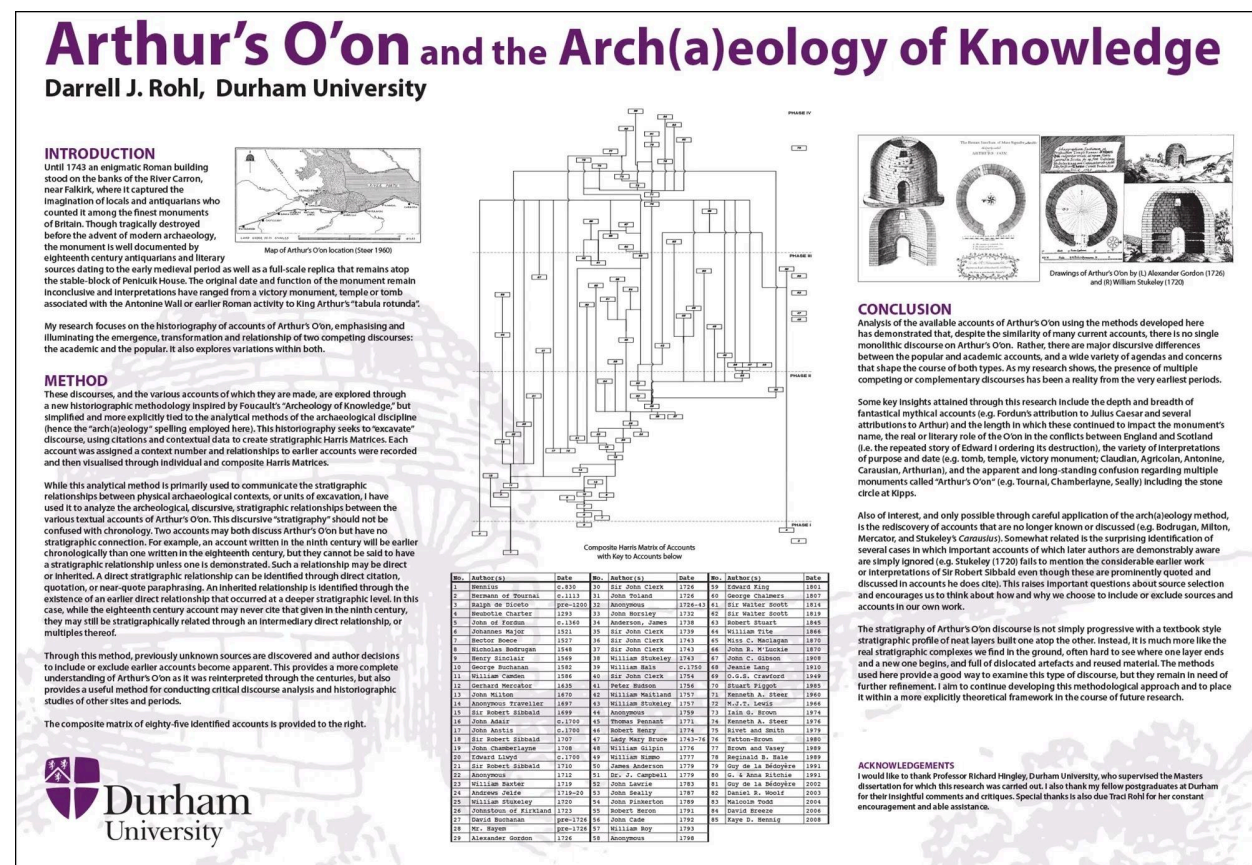
Camelot itself. In this mythic landscape, the domed structure became a fitting relic of Britain's heroic age: a place where Arthur might once have feasted, fought, or worshiped.

The O'on thus entered folklore as one of Britain's wonders. The name survived even into modern place-names: Stenhousemuir, the town that grew nearby, takes its identity from the "stone house" (i.e., Arthur's O'on) that no longer stands there.

## Antiquarian imaginations

Eighteenth-century antiquaries, meanwhile, were busy debating the O'on's origins. William Stukeley, never one to understate, proclaimed it a Roman temple dedicated to Romulus, the city's founder and "primitive Deity of the Romans." Without ever having visited Scotland—but having commissioned the architect Andrews Jelfe to survey and report on the monument for him—he compared it to the Pantheon in Rome. The Scotsman Alexander Gordon, who had seen it shortly after Stukeley's publication, insisted instead that it was a shrine for the Roman military standards.

Each interpretation was as much about the antiquary's own imagination as about the building itself. Stukeley's romantic comparanda, Gordon's military focus, Fordun's Julius Caesar, the medieval Camelot associations—all reveal more about the tellers than about the monument.



Research poster, deriving from my MA thesis, presented at the Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC), Oxford University, 2010.



## Meaning as much as masonry

What fascinates me, looking back, is how Arthur's O'on became a vessel for so many different narratives: Roman trophy, Arthurian relic, dovecote, temple, shrine, wonder. Each generation projected its own values and questions onto the silent stones.

This is exactly what I would later come to frame as the archaeology of place: the recognition that monuments are never fixed in meaning. They are reinterpreted and reimagined, and those re-imaginings shape identities and landscapes just as surely as walls and domes.

As a young researcher, I could see that Arthur's O'on was more than just an archaeological puzzle. It was a case study in how communities—medieval, early modern, antiquarian, contemporary—construct the past to make sense of their own present. I didn't yet have the language of "chorography" at my disposal, but the seeds were here.

## What comes next

Of course, these stories and meanings make the O'on's fate all the more poignant. Next, I'll turn to the eighteenth-century scandal of its destruction: how Sir Michael Bruce tore it down for dam stones, how antiquaries across Britain fumed in outrage, and what that tells us about the values attached to monuments—and the consequences when those values are ignored.

## Part 4: Destruction and Outrage

By the early eighteenth century, Arthur's O'on was one of the most celebrated antiquities in Scotland—indeed, in all of Britain. Antiquarians described it in glowing terms, artists sketched it, and scholars debated its origins. For William Stukeley, it was "the most genuine and curious Antiquity of the Romans in this Kind, now to be seen in our Island or elsewhere."

And then, in 1743, it was gone.

## The demolition

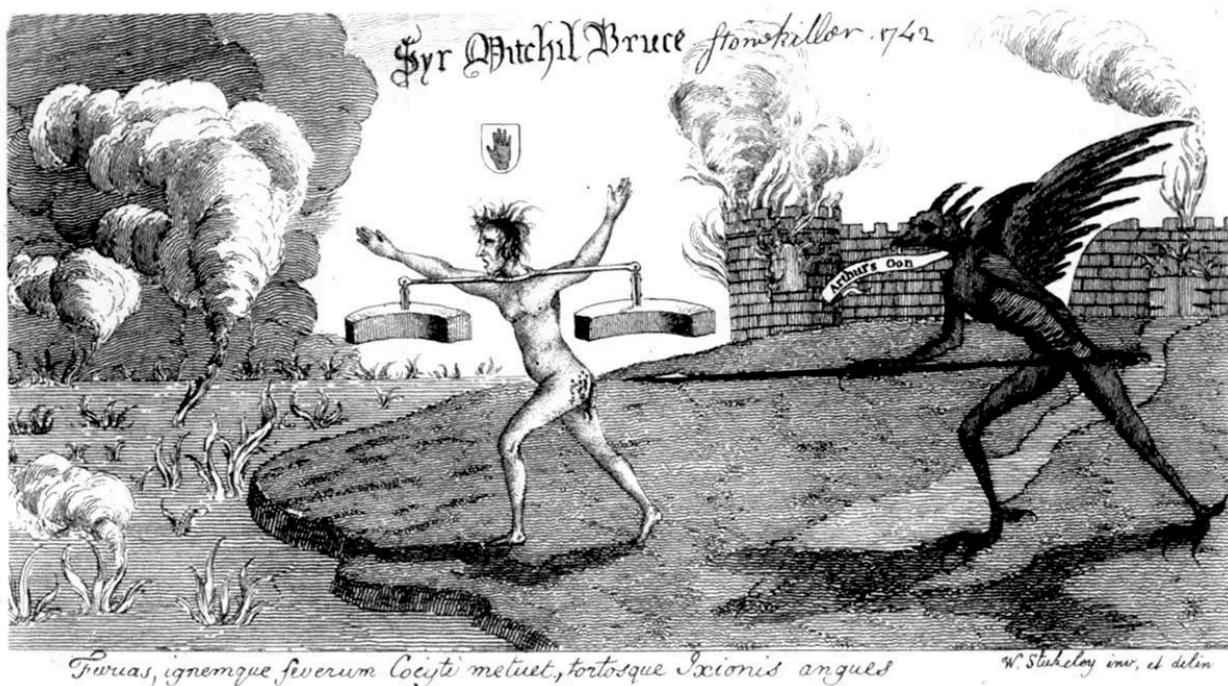
Sir Michael Bruce of Stenhouse, whose estate straddled the River Carron, had decided that his new mill needed a dam. Rather than quarry fresh stone, he turned to the ancient structure standing nearby. Arthur's O'on, with its carefully dressed ashlar blocks, was in his eyes a ready-made source of high-quality building material.

Within weeks, the best-preserved Roman monument in Scotland was reduced to nothing, its stones—even the foundations—pried apart and carried away for the dam's construction.

For Bruce, this was pragmatic economics. For antiquaries, it was cultural vandalism of the highest order. The irony was cruel: a building that had survived nearly sixteen centuries of weather, warfare, and neglect was undone by the spade of its landlord.

## Antiquarian outrage

The reaction was swift and furious. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, a leading Scottish antiquary, called it the work of a "Goth," lamenting that "no other motive had this Gothic knight, but to procure as many stones as he could have purchased in his own quarries for five shillings." His friend Roger Gale transcribed the news into the minutes of the Society of Antiquaries of London, ensuring that the demolition would be remembered as a cautionary tale of wanton destruction.



Stukeley's drawing of Sir Michael Bruce, "Stonekiller," eternally punished for his destruction of Arthur's O'on.

William Stukeley, who had never seen the O'on in person but had increased its fame through his engravings and published tract, was enraged. In one extraordinary drawing, he imagined Bruce suffering divine and eternal punishment. For Stukeley, Bruce's crime was not only against Scotland, but against Rome itself, whose noble legacy had been desecrated. In a letter he sent to Gale with the image, he says that:

I would propose, in order to make his name execrable to all posterity, that he should have an iron collar put about his neck, like a yoke; at each extremity a stone of Arthur's O'on to be suspended by the lewis in the hole of them; thus accoutred, let him wander on the banks of Styx, perpetually agitated by angry demons with oxgoads; "Sir Michael Bruce," wrote on his back in large letters of burning phosphorus.

The outrage also spilled into verse. One poet imagined a traveler walking along the Carron, conversing with the scattered stones of the demolished O'on. Each fragment laments its fate, recalling the monument's former glory and cursing the man who destroyed it. The pathos is striking: the monument itself, through its fragments, becomes a witness to its own undoing.

## A DIALOGUE BETWEEN A TRAVELER AND CERTAIN STONES IN THE MILL-DAM OF STANNERS, &C IN THE RIVER OF CARON

**Traveller:** I think I see something venerable in your aspect!

**Stones:** Ah, sir, we who in this neighbourhood composed the most celebrated piece of Roman antiquity in Scotland, are now reduced to the mean and despicable state you see us in!

**Traveller:** What was your condition heretofore?

**Stones:** We who, by the manner of our construction, were by the people denominated Arthur's oven, were erected near seventeen hundred years ago, by that magnanimous and celebrated Roman hero Julius Agricola; a temple sacred to the Romans, for the celebration of the holy mysteries of that great and renowned nation in this part of Britain.

**Traveller:** How! A temple, sacred to the wise and magnanimous Romans! What impious wretch durst presume to lay profane hands on the edifice?

**Stones:** The building wherein we were erected had the misfortune to become the property of an ignorant, sordid, and ungenerous man, who, abandoned to covetousness, made us the object to glut his insatiable thirst of lucre; and tho' revered for so many centuries, by the most learned, curious and worthy part of mankind, we at last fell a sacrifice to his boundless avarice.

**Traveller:** Were you known to foreigners?

**Stones:** Yes, many having repaired to visit us in our flourishing state have celebrated our praises at the return to their respective countries, by which our memory will be preserved in those parts to future ages, in honour of our great founder, as it has and will be by the curious observations made on us in our late state by the ingenious and learned antiquaries of our own country, though now reduced to the ignoble condition you behold us in!

**Traveller:** O thou once precious and inestimable monument of antiquity, which stood the test of time, inclemencies of the weather, and danger of the most inveterate enemies of the Scottish nation for so many hundreds of years; one whereof, the most implacable, Edward I. king of England, though he aimed at the destruction and extirpation of the Scottish race, yet, regarding thee as a sacred pile, offered thee not the least indignity. And though at least thou art fallen a prey to a sordid, insatiable, and detestable creature, you will have this consolation, that whilst he shall become the just reproach of, and his memory stink to future ages, thine will be revered by the curious, great and wise, till time shall be no more.

"A Dialogue between a traveler and certain stones," published in response to the destruction of Arthur's O'on. Anonymous but possibly by Allan Ramsay.

In another letter to Gale, Clerk condemned Bruce "with Bell, Book, and Candle," calling down ecclesiastical malediction upon his name. Five years later, while still fulminating in letters, Clerk gleefully reported that the mill and dam built from the O'on's stones had been destroyed by thunder and lightning. For him and others, this was poetic justice: nature herself had avenged the ruin of Arthur's O'on.



But Clerk's response went beyond fury. At his estate of Penicuik House, he instructed his son James to design a new stable block crowned by a dome modeled directly on Arthur's O'on. Using Alexander Gordon's drawings and descriptions as a guide, they built a dovecote replica perched above the stables. It still stands today. Outrage had given birth to reconstruction: the O'on was gone from the Carron, but reborn in stone on the slopes of Penicuik.

## Sacrificed to the Industrial Age

To modern minds, the O'on's destruction seems almost symbolic: a sacrifice to the onrushing industrial age. Only a few years later, the Carron Ironworks would rise nearby, producing cannon for Britain's wars and growing into one of Europe's largest industrial plants. The Carron, once a river of Ossianic legend and Roman frontiers, had become a corridor of mills, forges, and smoke.

Arthur's O'on thus became an early casualty of industrial progress, reduced to fuel the very transformation that would dominate the modern world. Yet the fury it provoked is telling. Antiquaries did not shrug off its loss: they mourned, cursed, mythologized, and sought to preserve its memory in word, image, and stone. Their outrage demonstrates that even in the eighteenth century, heritage mattered—not only the survival of stone, but the survival of meaning, identity, and wonder.

## Reflections on destruction

As an MA student reading these letters and reports, I was struck by how alive the emotions were. Clerk's indignation, Gale's despair, Stukeley's lament—they were reminders that monuments are not inert. They matter, and when they are destroyed, people feel that loss viscerally.

Today, when we witness the deliberate destruction of monuments in war zones, or the steady erosion of heritage under development pressure, the debates feel uncannily familiar. The questions raised in 1743—what value do we place on the past, who gets to decide its fate, and how should we respond to its loss—remain urgent today.

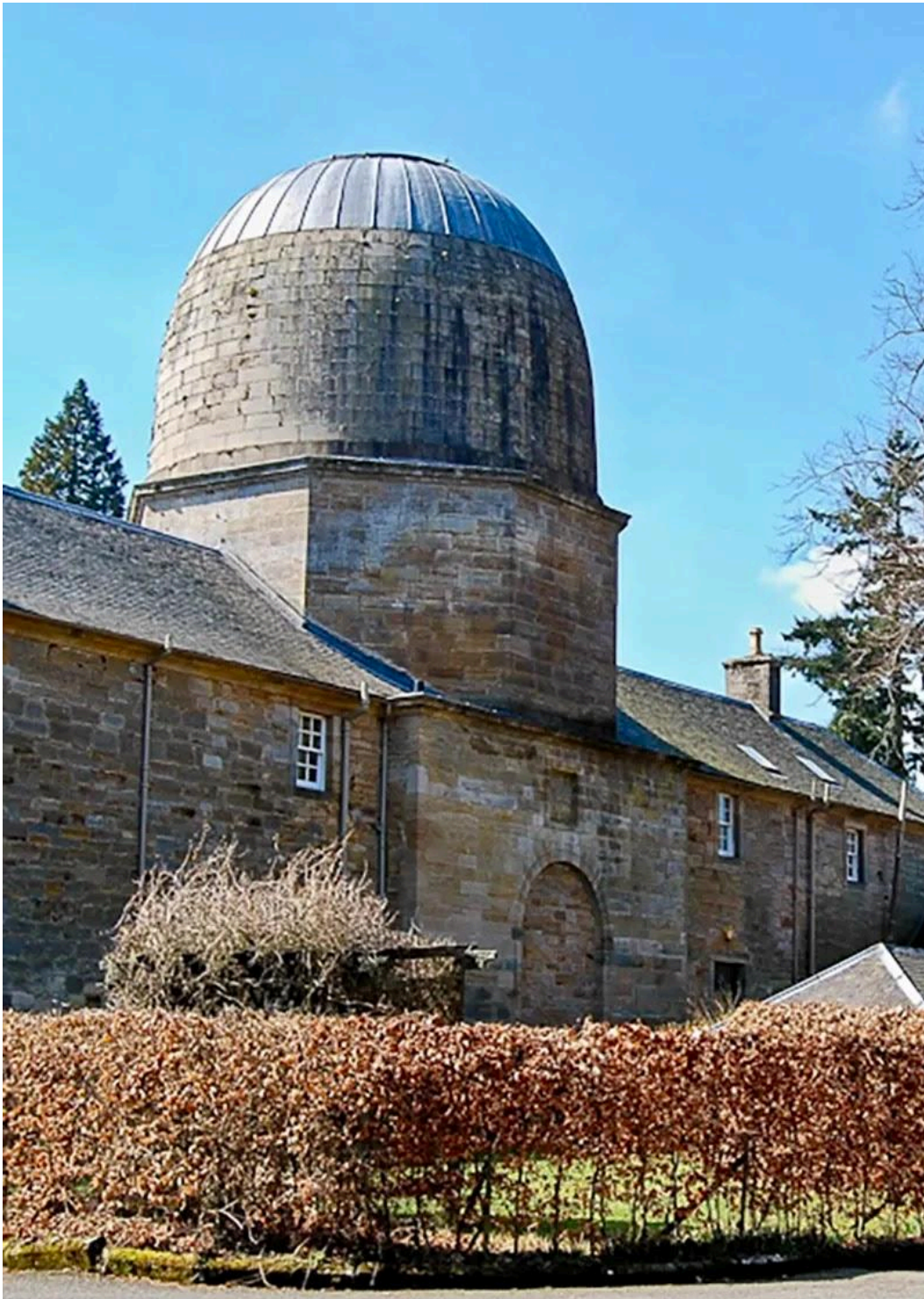
## What comes next

But even in absence, Arthur's O'on endured. It was rebuilt, reimagined, and remembered in unexpected ways: as a dovecote replica at Penicuik House, in Ossianic verse, in nineteenth-century romantic antiquarianism, and even in a twenty-first-century book by Charlotte Higgins. We now turn to these afterlives—how a demolished monument refused to vanish from cultural memory.

## Part 5: Afterlives and Reimaginings

When the last stones of Arthur's O'on were carted away for Sir Michael Bruce's mill dam in 1743, antiquaries declared the monument "lost." And yet, in a very real sense, it never

disappeared. Over the next centuries, the O'on was reborn in memory, rebuilt in replica, and reimagined in stories.



Replica of Arthur's O'on above the stable-block at Penicuik House, Midlothian.  
Reconstructed using Alexander Gordon's (1726) plans and measurements.



## The Penicuik replica

The most tangible afterlife of Arthur's O'on stands today in Midlothian. Sir James Clerk, son of the furious antiquary Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, built a new Arthur's O'on atop the stables at Penicuik House in the 1760s. This replica was intended as a dovecote, and its domed roof still rises above the estate. Antiquarians at the time praised it as an act of preservation: if the original could not be saved, at least its form would live on.

To modern visitors, the Penicuik replica raises questions about authenticity. Is a copy "real"? Does rebuilding preserve memory, or obscure it? These are not antiquarian questions alone. They echo in debates over heritage reconstruction today, from Warsaw's Old Town to Palmyra's temples and arches.

## Romantic ruins and Ossianic landscapes

The O'on also lived on in literature. James Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* (1760s) presented themselves as translations of ancient Gaelic epics handed down from the third-century bard Ossian. To many contemporaries, they seemed like a Scottish Homer, proof that Scotland's landscape was alive with echoes of heroic antiquity.



Wilbur Woodward, *Ossian*. Salon de 1880.

Almost immediately, critics accused Macpherson of fraud. Samuel Johnson dismissed the poems as "forgeries," while others questioned his sources and methods. Debate has never fully subsided: were the Ossianic poems authentic survivals of ancient tradition, or largely Macpherson's invention? Most scholars today acknowledge both—the poems were stitched together from fragments of genuine oral tradition, but heavily reworked, expanded, and framed by Macpherson's own romantic sensibilities and new knowledge of the past revealed in recent decades by the work of antiquarians like Sibbald, Gordon, and Stukeley.

Yet whether ancient epic or eighteenth-century creation, Ossian mattered. The poems inspired Goethe and Napoleon, captivated Romantic artists, and reshaped how Scotland's landscapes were imagined. They also provided a vivid literary afterlife for Arthur's O'on.



Two poems in particular are relevant. In *Comála: A Dramatic Poem*, the River Carron runs red with blood as a young woman laments her beloved Fingal, thought dead in battle. The setting on the Carron—where Arthur's O'on once stood—becomes a stage for tragedy and love lost. In *The War of Caros*, the poet's son Oscar—grandson of Fingal—fights the Roman usurper Carausius on the same banks, his heroism immortalized against the backdrop of tumuli and ruins. Both poems tie memory, loss, and landscape into a single dramatic vision.

Quotations capture the tone and also the geography:

O Carun of the streams! why do I behold thy waters rolling in blood? (*Comála: A Dramatic Poem*)

What does Caros king of ships, said the son of the now mournful Ossian? spreads he the wings of his pride, bard of the times of old?

He spreads them, Oscar, replied the bard, but it is behind his gathered heap. He looks over his stones with fear, and beholds thee terrible, as the ghost of night that rolls the wave to his ships. (*The War of Caros*)

Later in the same poem, after days of battle, Oscar is alone “on the banks of Carun:”

A green vale surrounded a tomb which arose in the times of old. Little hills lift their head at a distance; and stretch their old trees to the wind. The warriors of Caros sat there, for they had passed the stream by night. They appeared, like the trunks of aged pines, to the pale light of the morning.

Oscar stood at the tomb, and raised thrice his terrible voice. The rocking hills echoed around: the starting roes bounded away. And the trembling ghosts of the dead fled, shrieking on their clouds. So terrible was the voice of my son, when he called his friends. (*The War of Caros*)

The imagery here is striking. The “heap” behind which Caros (the usurper Carausius) and his men are said to cower is almost certainly the Antonine Wall itself—the massive turf rampart and ditch cutting across central Scotland just south of the Carron. And the “tomb” in the “green vale,” before which Oscar raises his cry, is best read as Arthur's O'on. For eighteenth-century readers familiar with the monument and its landscape, these references would have been unmistakable: the lost dome of the O'on transformed into the resting place of Caledonian heroes, standing in poetic counterpoint to Rome's northernmost frontier.

This is precisely how Macpherson's *Ossian* worked: weaving landscape, ruin, and legend together in ways that collapsed time and gave stones new voices. Even if the poems were largely his invention, they exemplify the enduring power of heritage storytelling. Arthur's O'on became not just an antiquarian curiosity but a stage for epic battles, laments, and heroic memory.

## The Penicuik replica and the “Hall of Ossian”

The Clerk family's replica of Arthur's O'on at Penicuik House formed part of the same cultural moment. It was not built in isolation, but within a broader landscape of memory and imagination. Inside Penicuik House, Sir James Clerk designated one room as the “Hall of Ossian,” commissioning the artist Alexander Runciman to paint the walls and ceilings with scenes from Ossian's poems. Outside, the dovecote replica of Arthur's O'on anchored the estate in Roman and antiquarian history. Together, they created a paired celebration of Scotland's *actual* and *mythic* pasts: Ossian's literary ruins on the walls and ceilings, Arthur's O'on resurrected in stone above the stables.



“The Blind Ossian Singing and Accompanying himself on the Harp,” by Alexander Runciman, circa 1772.  
David Laing Bequest to the Royal Scottish Academy transferred 1910. National Galleries of Scotland.

This blending of antiquarian reconstruction and literary imagination speaks volumes about eighteenth-century heritage-making. For the Clerks and their circle, history was not just about facts. It was about evocation, imagination, and giving physical form to memory. The O'on, *Ossian*, and Penicuik together formed a dialogue between invention and authenticity that still resonates in heritage debates today.





"The Death of Oscar," by Alexander Runciman, circa 1772. David Laing Bequest to the Royal Scottish Academy transferred 1910. National Galleries of Scotland.

While the replica of Arthur's O'on remains today, Penicuik's "Hall of Ossian" was destroyed by fire in 1899. The original paintings are, therefore, lost forever but some of Runciman's preliminary sketches are preserved in the National Galleries of Scotland.

## Twentieth and twenty-first century memory

Though neglected by archaeologists—with the notable exception of Ken Steer—for much of the twentieth century, Arthur's O'on never fully left the stage. It cropped up in local heritage societies, in guidebooks to the Antonine Wall, and in the footnotes of Roman Scotland studies.

In 2013, journalist Charlotte Higgins revived the story for a new audience. Her book *Under Another Sky: Journeys in Roman Britain*—shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize and other non-fiction book awards—devoted a chapter to Roman Scotland, including Arthur's O'on, weaving elements of my own MA and PhD research into her narrative.



## Meaning in absence

For me, these afterlives are as significant as the monument itself. They show that heritage does not end when stones are toppled. Arthur's O'on survived because people remembered it, talked about it, rebuilt it, and reimagined it. In its absence, it became more pliable—able to serve as a romantic ruin, a local legend, a scholarly case study, even a symbol of loss.

This realization was one of the seeds of my own later work: to study not just monuments as they were built, but as they are remembered, retold, reimagined, and repurposed. In that sense, the O'on has never stopped teaching me.

## What comes next

In the final part, I will step back and reflect more personally: what Arthur's O'on has meant to me as a scholar, how it influenced my turn to chorography and the archaeology of place, and why a lost monument in Scotland still shapes the way I work in Jordan today.

## Part 6: Echoes Across Ruins—From Arthur's O'on to Umm Al-Jimal

A little more than fifteen years ago, I chose to study a monument that no longer existed. Arthur's O'on was demolished in the 1740s, its stones carted off for a mill dam, its memory preserved only in antiquarian drawings, letters, poems, and folklore. My task was to reconstruct not just its appearance and possible function (for the record, I think a tomb interpretation is most likely), but its story: how people imagined it, named it, fought over it, and mourned its loss.

At the time, I knew I was tackling a niche subject. What I didn't yet realize was that Arthur's O'on was teaching me something much bigger. It showed me that archaeology is never *just* about stones and the stuff we uncover. It is also about stories. Sites and monuments matter not only for what they were in the past, but for how they are remembered, retold, and reimagined.

This realization became the seed of my later work on chorography—the study of place as layered with history, meaning, and imagination—and the archaeology of place, an approach that continues to guide my research today.

## Echoes at Umm Al-Jimal

Years later, when I began working at Umm Al-Jimal in northern Jordan, I encountered the same dynamic in a different landscape. Umm Al-Jimal is a sprawling site of basalt ruins, with houses, churches, water reservoirs, two Roman forts, and the ruins of multi-storey buildings in the desert. While incredibly different in terms of form and scale, like Arthur's O'on, it invited both careful evidence-based inquiry and fascination and creative invention.



Photo collage featuring basalt stone buildings, including a Byzantine arch with a sculpted cross and Alpha and Omega, multi-storey ruined homes with doorways, staircases, and windows.

Nineteenth-century travelers recorded a wealth of local stories about the site. John Burckhardt heard that its name meant “Mother of Camels” and linked it to caravans resting there. Selah Merrill collected tales of buried treasure. Cyril Graham reported ghostly figures seen among the ruins at night. And the American missionary William Ewing wrote down a particularly vivid legend: that the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) had hidden vast treasure beneath Umm Al-Jimal, “guarded by forty giant negroes, an enormous camel, and a snake whose vast sinewy folds remind one of Leviathan.”

These stories were not “accurate” in a historical sense, just as Arthurian legends or Caesar’s “stone tent” were not accurate accounts of Arthur’s O’on. But they were powerful. They explained the ruins to those who lived alongside them. They invested the stones with meaning, whether sacred, dangerous, or enchanted.

In Scotland, Arthur’s O’on became associated with Arthurian Camelot, Caesar’s trophy, or a temple of Mars. In Jordan, Umm Al-Jimal became the site of hidden treasure, supernatural guardians, or petrified people. In both cases, ruins inspired stories, and those stories gave the ruins new life.

## Lessons for heritage and scholarship

For me, the continuity is striking. My MA thesis on Arthur’s O’on taught me to listen not just to archaeology, but to the voices surrounding archaeology: the folklore, the myths, the antiquarian passions, the literary retellings. Umm Al-Jimal confirmed that this listening is not optional: it is



essential. If we want to understand how heritage works in human societies, we must pay attention to how people imagine, narrate, and even mythologize ruins.

This perspective has carried me from Scotland to Jordan, from a demolished dome on the River Carron to the basalt homes and towers of Umm Al-Jimal, from a student project to a career in archaeological research and world heritage work. It has shaped how I think about digital tools and methods for heritage, UNESCO nominations, and the responsibilities of archaeologists to living communities.

## A personal reflection

Looking back, I can now see that Arthur's O'on was never just a quirky antiquarian puzzle. It was my training ground. It taught me how to read ruins as texts, how to see landscapes as layered narratives, and how to understand that loss itself can generate meaning.



Lichen growing on the basalt ruins of Umm Al-Jimal, Jordan. Photo by Bert de Vries.

And as I walk through Umm Al-Jimal today—past churches now roofless, towers crumbling, stones covered in lichen from centuries of abandonment—I hear the echoes of Arthur's O'on. I hear them in the treasure tales, the ghost stories, the local names, and in the urgent questions about how to preserve and present this heritage for the future. And when we encounter signs of looting or vandalism, I feel the righteous anger expressed centuries ago by Clerk and Stukeley.

Arthur's O'on is gone. Umm Al-Jimal still stands. But both remind me of the same truth: that ruins endure not only in stone, but also in story. In the face of continued threats to the “wonders” left over from the past, that, perhaps, is the most powerful lesson archaeology has to offer.



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