

ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

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What do we know about the King Arthur legends?

Historical kernel: **ARTHUR = 5th-6th c., non-royal warleader from southwest Britain, Wales, Cornwall or possibly southern Scotland (new theory).**

CELTS:

2 races: Earlier Indo-Europeans = Irish/Scot Gaelic, Manx
700BC tall Gallic horse-riders migration = Welsh, Cornish, Breton

1st c. AD = ROMAN INVASIONS

- “eloquent” – historian Cato, “drunk & reckless in battle” – Caesar’s invasion of Gaul records, “naked Celt spearmen wearing only torcs” – historian Polybius, “people of the designs” (body art/tattoos widely reported) - Ptolemy
- “women are powerful figures” – historian Dio Cassius (Queen Boudicca = 60/61AD)
- “druidic class, horse warriors, and plebes”, “druids were powerful, pan-tribal priests, bards, historians, lawyers, doctors” (Roman records)
- Oral tradition, not literate

Blended with roman language, naming practices, architecture, tactics, etc. = **BRITONS (Romanized Celts)**

*Interesting side note re: Sarmatians: orig. Indo-Iranian horsemen, whom the Romans granted land near Ribchester. Had **LONG SPEARS/LANCES** adopted by Romans, also the **DRACONARIUS** (writings of Roman Ammianus, 294AD): hollow open-mouthed dragon head fitted to the head of the lance, with a windsock and noise-makers which billowed and hissed when galloping. ***Later (Nennius): Merlin and Vortigern legend.*

410 AD = ROMANS RETREAT FROM BRITAIN

- invasions and migrations by Irish, Scots, Scandinavian Vikings, Angles & other Germanic tribes push the Britons out of the east and south by 461 AD.
- North (Celtic Strathclyde especially) and west (Wales, Cornwall, French Brittany) remain strongly Celtic.
- A-Sax Chronicle: <30 = Warband, >30 = Army.

ARTHUR IN EARLY SOURCES:

BATTLE OF MT. BADON (no mention of “Arthur”) =

- 1) Monk GILDAS: 547 AD, “*On the Downfall & Conquest of Britain*”
 - (110 chapter Latin sermon), mentions great battle at Mt. Badon & “time of security” from 500-560AD. Noble Roman-Celt leader Ambrosius. **Later (Geoffrey): Uther’s brother*
- 2) The Venerable BEDE: 731 AD, “*Ecclesiastical History of Britain*”
 - dates Mt. Badon to 493 AD. Celtic leader (not King) Vortigern (“great leader”) invites Saxons to defend against Picts, but is betrayed by Hengist (“the stallion”) & Horsa in 442AD. **Later (Nennius): Merlin’s red/white dragon prophecy.*

ARTHUR =

Book of Aneirin: ca. 600 (13th c. MS) "*The Gododdin*" poem version B

- first ref. to Arthur: "Gwawrddur, though he were not Arthur..."; Gododdin was a Celtic kingdom in S. Scotland.

Welsh Nennius: ca. 800 (11th c. MS) "*Historia Brittonum*"

- lots of development from colourful Welsh storytelling tradition: Arthur bears image of Mary, 12 great battles, leading kings, Gawain (older Welsh hero), Merlin's dragon prophecy to Vortigern appears for first time.
- "Then Arthur fought against them in those days, with the Kings of the Britons, but he himself was the Leader of Battles".

The Mabinogion: ca. 1st millennia (14th c. MS):

- 11 Welsh tales incl. *Culhwch and Olwen*; Kay, Bedwyr, Gawain as Arthur's knights, names many other companions.

Other texts ("*Annales Cambriae*", "*The Easter Tables*") = final battle at Camlann in 516/517AD, Medraut (later Mordred, Arthur's son & nemesis), historical writers Myrddin/Merlin (lived ca. 60yrs. after Arthur's death) & Taliesin became part of legend.

1066 = NORMAN INVASION

**Geoffrey of Monmouth: 1138 AD "*Historia Regum Britannie*"

- Welsh-speaking priest in Oxford; wildly popular = survives in 200+ MS, incl. 5 Welsh versions, a Polish version and a pre-1300 Old Norse version.
- Arthur is now a King of a Norman-style court at Caerleon. Appeals to new concept of "fin d'amours" or Courtly Love (illicit, suffering, sensual, yet ideal & largely platonic)
- Arthur is son of Uther & Igerne, renames and expands magical Merlin character (Myrddin= ~~Merdinus~~ =Merlin), Arthur battles Romans & has continental conquests, is betrayed while abroad by Guinevere and nephew Mordred. Healing at Avalon, eventual return.
- **STRONG CIVIL WAR FOCUS = Stephen vs. Matilda**

Wace: Norman French adaptation of Geoffrey, introduces Round Table.

Chrétien de Troyes: 1160-1185AD, "*Erec & Enide*", "*Perceval (Conte du Graal)*", "*Lancelot*", "*Yvain*", "*Cligès*" (Norman French romances)

- **STRONG COURTLY LOVE FOCUS = Eleanor of Aquitaine & Marie, Countess of Champagne.**
- First introduces Lancelot, first to tie ancient British "Grail" tradition to Arthur.

Gottfried von Strassburg: 1210 AD (German), "*Tristan*"

Thomas of Britain: 1170AD (British, Breton?) "*Tristan*"

- Tristan & Isolde very popular in Brittany & the Continent; minimal connection to Arthur. Gottfried's ending has not survived; Thomas' beginning has not survived.

“Alliterative Morte Arthure”: 1360-1420? AD

- Returns to battles & heroism, discards courtly love. Expands on Geoffrey = Arthur marches on Rome itself.

“Alliterative Gawain & The Green Knight”: ca. 1400 (English)

- Alliteration already falling out of use (survives in only one MS), in favour of more accessible Chaucerian English. Great translation by Professor Tolkien (pub. 1975).

**Sir Thomas Malory: 1469 AD, “Le Morte Darthur”

- Lancastrian knight & landowner; spent most of adult life under house arrest: reputed crimes are: 1) robbery, theft, extortion (300 sheep!), two cattle raids, rape, attempted murder of duke (all in 18 mos.), 2) escape by swimming moat, break into abbey, stole artifacts/money, dispute with and insult monks & abbot, broke 18 doors, did it again a few days later with friends; 3) carried off 6 does from game park, stole oxen/horses from abbot while on bail, gave shelter to criminal; 4) defaulted from debt, swam another moat... while it **was** a time of civil war, he may well have been more a victim of being on the losing side.
- spent most of his imprisonment researching and compiling a cohesive narrative from other sources. Considered definitive up to the present day.
- finished in 1469, died in 1471, edited and published by contemporary printer Caxton in 21 volumes in 1485. Original unedited MS found in Winchester Library in 1934, re-edited into 8 “books” by Eugene Vinaver.
- **STRONG CIVIL WAR FOCUS** = Wars of the Roses (York / Lancaster families)
- **STRONG TRAGIC HUMAN FLAW FOCUS** = prisoner of war
- very human, tragic, honour and fellowship; Lancelot and Guinevere flee Camelot and cannot aid Arthur at Camlann.

ARTHUR IN POST-PERIOD:

Victorian Revival: 19th c.

- Pre-Raphaelite painters, Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “*Idylls of the King*”
- **STRONG BRITISH EMPIRE FOCUS** = age of colonization
- **STRONG “SIN” FOCUS** = Arthur no longer a bastard, women are virgin-temptresses, Guinevere’s adultery dealt with harshly (Tennyson)

20th Century:

- T.H. White: “*The Sword in the Stone*” = British boys’ education
- T.H. White: “*The Once and Future King*” = fascism and World Wars
- **STRONG FEMINIST FOCUS** = Marion Zimmer Bradley: “*Mists of Avalon*”
- **STRONG CHRISTIAN/PAGAN FOCUS** = re-emergence of pagan religions
- **STRONG ‘REALISM’ FOCUS** = Mary Stewart: “*The Crystal Cave*”

These legends can be used as a lens through which we can examine the values, ideals, relationships, and cultural focus of each audience (covering 1000 years and many countries).

For more info on the King Arthur legends, as well as my original Modern Celtic music, please drop by my website at www.HeatherDale.com .

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