

## Arthur - Fact and Fiction

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Each culture, everywhere in the world, has its hero figures. These are the people who have created the early history of their nation, or are held to have done so by popular myth. Some of these are familiar to us as fairly reliable history, such as Charlemagne, and others are mainly mythical. Most of these myths have some basis in historical reality although some, such as those surrounding Roland, have been very distorted by the passage of time. Some of these distortions are so bad that we have to look very hard to find the truth in them. In our Anglo-Celtic culture, one of the most popular folk tales is of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. It is a tale of heroic struggle and victory over the invader of the homeland. It contains brave deeds but is ultimately a tragedy in that treachery (of some sort) causes the ultimate end of "Camelot". What I have tried to do here is to present a summary of the present state of what we know about Arthur, presenting not every theory in existence, but what I regard as the most likely compilation of facts with the fewest loose ends.

Various writers have contributed to our current views of Arthur. Some have given us fact and others have made up their stories using only enough fact to make themselves convincing. In summary these are;

**Gildas the Wise:** He wrote the "*The Destruction of Britain*" pre-545. Gildas was a contemporary of Arthur and the first to write of Arthur's exploits although Arthur is not mentioned by name. Some accounts say that Arthur killed Gildas' brother. The book was written as an attack upon the moral laxity of the Britons of his day and not as a history. He said that he wanted to show how the decline in morals led to the destruction of Britain so he minimises British successes. He is the only annalist who was actually a Romano-Briton.

**The Welsh Annals:** these were written from circa 600 onwards and added to annually.

**The Venerable Bede:** Wrote "*The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*". A Saxon born near Weymouth in Northumbria about 673, he wrote his history in about 720. He had good contemporary Romano-British sources, not just Gildas, but writes from a very anti-British point of view (he does not mention Arthur by name).

**The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles:** Probably started in the 891-2 it specifically tells the story from the Saxon view. It makes no mention of Arthur, Mt Badon or indeed much that might mention British successes.

**Nennius:** Wrote "*The History of the Britons*" in 858 drawing on earlier Romano-British sources, not just Gildas. He places Arthur's exploits firmly in the Kingdom of Strathclyde (the Scots border country) and gives details of Arthur's twelve great battles against the Saxons.

**The Mabinogion:** This is a collection of Welsh tales that started to be written down around the 1100s. It emphasises the events (such as battles and isolated events) in Arthur's story that took place in or near Wales while totally ignoring otherwise well documented ones that took place elsewhere.

**Geoffrey of Monmouth:** Wrote the "*History of the Kings of Britain*" in 1138. This is basically a novel based (loosely) on Gildas, Nennius, Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles. For instance, as far as we know Shakespeare's "Lear" first appears in this book. Geoffrey was a Welshman who wished to boost the past glory of his race. He located Arthur's adventures in the West Country to please his patron, Robert of Gloucester who had his estates there.

**William of Malmesbury:** Wrote "*The History of the Kings of England*". He wrote pre-1142, and he is very careful and accurate (unlike Geoffrey). He had other material that he worked from and supports the historical nature of Arthur and his father. He gives good support to the idea that Arthur fought about a thousand Saxons at Mt Badon. This was a Norman who could afford to be generous to the British.

**Wace:** He wrote "*Roman de Brut*" in 1155. He was the first to mention a "round table" and he drew on some of the missing texts and eyewitness accounts of existing buildings etc.

**Chrétien de Troyes:** He wrote five Arthurian tales around 1160-90 and was the first of the Continental writers to spread these tales through Europe. The stories were written as romances in the developing troubadour style.

**Wolfram von Essenback:** Wrote "*Parzival*" at around 1200. He seems to have visited the areas he talks about and consulted some local records in what is otherwise a romance.

**Cistercians - The Vulgate Cycle.** Written 1215-35 this consisted of "*The Matter of Rome*", "*The Matter of France*" and "*The Matter of Britain*". These were "edifying tales" based on Arthur and other historical persons and events and as accurate as any religious writing of this period, in other words the moral was more important than the truth.

**Sir Thomas Malory:** Wrote "*Le Morte d'Arthur*" in 1485 this is the book that caught the Romantic Victorian imagination and gave us most of the ideas of Arthur that we have today. Most of the sources were lost (permanently or temporarily) by this time and he drew on the, by then well accepted, histories of Geoffrey of Monmouth, von Essenback and the Cistercians even though we now know that these are largely inaccurate.

**Tennyson:** Wrote "Idylls of the King" between 1830 and 1834. These followed the basic story lines of Malory and the Mabinogion but are more inventive. He used the story as a vehicle to express his feelings on the relations of the sexes and show a Victorian Romantic view relation. Despite this, his verse was regarded as "suggestive" and not entirely proper by many critics. Despite this (or because of it) the first edition sold ten thousand copies in three weeks at a very high price for the time.

**T. H. White:** Wrote *“The Sword in the Stone”*. This is the base for many of our current conceptions of Arthur. Walt Disney, in particular, heavily used this cleaned up and popularised version of Malory.

**Arthur of the Britons:** A British television attempt to provide a historical perspective on Arthur. Whilst it is fairly accurate on many details regarding the Saxon way of life, it lacks much accurate detail about the Romano-British and portrays them also as being uncivilised and more later Celtic rather than Romano-British. Its story line is loosely made up from likely incidents from tales and sagas.

**Excalibur:** This movie version, which received much criticism when it came out, is possibly less inaccurate, in its basic story line, than most of the things written this millennium. The armour, accommodation and dress portrayed are a concession to Hollywood’s conceptions of Arthur and owe very little to reality.

Each successive writer has taken the current myths about Arthur and then given him the attitudes and armour of the writer’s time. Thus Malory has credited him with being a paragon of high chivalry and in *“Excalibur”* they all wear stainless steel and are very amoral. Neither much resembles the historical figure. The point of the story, the successful battles against impossible odds, followed by the tragedy of the treachery of friends and relations remains in all versions that are long enough to have a story line. The story of Arthur was so interesting that each author, from the turn of the millennium onwards placed his own interpretation on the story. They moved his location around to suit their local patrons. It is very interesting that Arthur’s enemies liked the story so much that they ignored the fact that he was their most bitter foe and took him to heart (although the Normans, who also oppressed the Saxons, became his greatest fans). But most of the elements of the myth have some provable or probable basis in fact.

There are certain elements that are common to most of the stories. Looking carefully at each one, we can try to work out what is truth, what is mistranslation and what is made up. We have all played the game where everyone sits in a circle and a message is whispered from person to person. The message that comes back is never the one that starts out. Translating and hand-copying of texts often gives the same result.

**Excalibur:** At the time that the tales of Arthur were happening and being written down, the swords of famous men were given names by the skalds or bards. Arthur’s sword seems to have been called Caliban. After much translation between languages this has become Excalibur.

**The Knights:** Knights did not exist in Arthur’s time. They only came to be with the rise of feudalism around the turn of the first millennium. However, it is known that Rome sent over 15,000 auxiliaries recruited from among the Sarmatians (semi-nomads North and West of the Black Sea) to England, and in particular to the Northern walls. Often Roman auxiliaries became soldier settlers, their armour and weapons being handed down to their sons as heirlooms. An auxiliary’s son could enlist with his father’s weapons. These horsemen were called *kataphractoi* and were very heavily armoured in full mail or scale armour, riding on horses that were armoured with horn or bronze scale. They were extensively used in the Eastern Empire. It is likely that Arthur, who had experience in the East, would have recruited such men as his followers. Such warriors were more heavily armoured and better armed than medieval knights and would have had a devastating effect against lightly armoured and ill-equipped Saxons. Their usual equipment consisted of lance, mace, sword, bow and darts. The devices and heraldry that is often associated with them appears only in the thirteenth century when arms were attributed to all the gentles of the past.

**The Holy Grail:** which only the pure can approach is the result of a mistranslation in *Parzival* from *“lapsit exillis”*, a *“stone from heaven”*. It is likely that it was a portable altar stone (such as St Patrick’s) which he returned with from the Eastern Empire. There is mention of a stone called *“the anvil”*, made of marble, kept at Grail Castle. Unfortunately we do not know which castle this is, but there is a strong possibility that this is the same stone known to history as the Stone of Scone whose mystic provenance is otherwise unknown, but appears to be of a form of marble from Anatolia (in the Eastern Empire). If it is a stone altar, *“the anvil”* being referred to, then the drawing of the sword from the stone (or anvil) in the churchyard (in modern versions like White) would be referring to the consecration of the blade to the service of the Lord on the altar prior to battle against the pagan Saxons.

**The Round Table:** There was, until it was demolished by a nineteenth century developer, a stone building of a beehive-like shape one mile north of the Antonine wall near today’s town of Falkirk. This shape was a popular one for buildings holding the relics of saints in the Eastern Empire, particularly in Anatolia, of the time of Arthur. When Wace (who wrote in Norman French) was translated into Anglo-Saxon by the scribe Layamon he wrote *“First Arthur built a wooden (later round) table”*. This is the whole basis for the round table stories. We still have the original and it actually translates as *“First Arthur built a tabled rotunda”* and continues *“all were seated within the circle and no-one was placed outside”*. This is not possible if it were actually like the famous Winchester Round Table (which possibly dates from Edward I’s time but was repainted in the Tudor period) but easy if the building was a circular shrine.

**Caerleon (or at least South Wales) as Camelot:** At this time Isca, the old city of the Roman Second Legion in South Wales, was the seat of the major Metropolitan (Archbishop) in the island. From this point, and the monasteries, missionaries were (and would continue to be) sent out to re-convert the Franks and to convert the pagan Dutch, South Germans and eventually even the Western Slavs. The Celtic Church was more active in its missionary work before the millennium than the Roman or even the Eastern Churches. It is important to note that the mutual loathing with the Saxons was such that little or no attempt was made to convert them. This was one of Bede’s major criticisms of the Arthurian period Church. The town thus had many holy associations including being, probably during Arthur’s lifetime, the seat of St David who was to become patron saint of Wales.

**Glastonbury:** *“The oldest church ... in England”* according to William of Malmesbury. It possibly dates to apostolic (the first century AC), and certainly to Roman times (pre 300). There is no reference in any of the early sources, who had the means to know, of anything in connection with Arthur or his tomb. The first archaeological mention was the coincidental find, during a visit from Henry II (1154-89), of Arthur and Guinevere’s tomb. This was very unlikely to have been real as the Guinevere they found, despite being a Briton, had long golden hair that was still intact after 600 years.

**Lancelot:** This knight, often regarded as a fable has a name that can be readily traced from L'Ançelot in Norman French to Anguselus in Latin to the Brittonic Aonghas who was well documented as the Pictish sub-King of Alba (between the Rivers Tay and Don).

**Guinevere:** Similarly this name can be traced to Guanhumara the Pict chieftain who is noted as bringing under her control British lands down to the Tyne. The Picts traced inheritance through the matrilineal line and she would have inherited, and passed on, any British lands she gained from Arthur on his death. The Picts also had the rare custom of polyandry, one woman having several husbands, so her "affair" with Lancelot may have been with her second husband.

**Mordred:** The treachery of his nephew is quite possible. Gildas was writing at this time that the fratricidal squabbling of The Romano-British (and their degenerate habits) were the main reasons why the Saxons were winning over the British. The idea of the pagan hordes as 'the Hammer of God' to punish the wicked backsliders was applied by the Pope, only a few years before Gildas wrote, to the ravages of Attila the Hun.

**Arthur himself:** It is likely that he was never a King although it is probable that he succeeded his father, Ambrosias, as a *Dux Bellorum* or 'war Duke'. He is also talked of as *Comes Brittanorum* or Count of Britain and as 'Count of the Saxon Shore' (this is the north-east coast). Today we would call him a general. He fought a battle in 516 or 517 at Mount Badonicus that so decisively defeated the Saxons that their advance was halted for at least 50 years. We know that he was killed in the battle of Camlann (probably in Gloucestershire) with Medraut in 537. We also know that a person called Merlin became insane in 573 and that this was notable enough to record in a journal that gave only one line to each year. We also have information that Arthur was not a 'chivalrous' man but indeed "bloodthirsty from his boyhood".

It is probable that he was a Romano-British war leader, probably with inherited land of his own to pass to his wife. He was selected to lead the British resistance over a number of years. He probably had under his command a small group of very well equipped men. In open battle the Saxons could not compete with him. His men were probably a warrior cult of the Virgin Mary, an early version of the Templars and Hospitallers who had a sacred icon and other symbols. There is mention of Arthur fighting with an image of Our Lady on his shield and this is a characteristic of Eastern Roman officers.

In over twenty years, over the entire divide between lower and upper Britain (the east and the west) and in twelve great battles he drove back a very persistent invader. In a time when the Saxons defined an army as being more than 30 men, Arthur defeated the Saxons so comprehensively that over 600 were slain in just one battle and they lacked the power to push the British for nearly 50 years. This was the Golden Age of Camelot.

#### **TIME SCALE (all dates are CE);**

43: Claudius conquers Britain for Rome.

380: Maximus takes the Legions of Britain to Rome to become the Emperor. He strips Britain of soldiers in his quest, Rome falls and Maximus is crowned. The Legions never return.

409: Rome falls to the Goths (its second fall)

447: Vortigern (the Romano-British ruler and possibly a grandson of Maximus) invites Hengist and Horsa (and their Saxon followers) to help him in putting down civil conflict.

516-7: Arthur defeats the West Saxons at Mt Badon; probably this is Dumbarton near Loch Lomond, possibly it is in the south.

519: Cerdic crowned as the first Saxon King in Wessex (in the South).

537: Arthur dies.

1066: Saxon rule is ended at Senlac (Hastings) by William

#### **Further Reading**

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