Knights of the Round Table:
Knighthood in History vs. Medieval Arthurian Literature Part 2

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Abstract: Part Two of this three-piece serialization, which compares fictional knights to their real-life counterparts living around the same time and place as when the legends were written. Primarily, this is in England and France from the mid-twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries. This analysis discusses the ways the literature from this period created an ideal knight that, while inspired by the knights living during this time, was very different. Furthermore, this paper explores the influence this literature had on knights and their culture. Part two explains the enduring popularity of Arthuriana, a term used to refer to writings and material related to legends of King Arthur. Arthur has appeared consistently in medieval sources dating back to at least the 9th century, if not earlier. Using these primary sources, it's possible to create a chronology for the Arthurian legend, from this first reference down to the 19th century. This chronology explains how the story developed over the medieval period and how Arthurian influence continues today.

Keywords: *knighthood, medieval literature, Arthuriana, feudalism, courtly love, chivalry*

Arthuriana: A Chronology

The stories of King Arthur and his court were created over centuries by writers who used mythology and history to make their own creations.[i] According to author Rodney Castleden, King Arthur has been reimagined through the lens of different authors [ii] Even though his knights were most prominent in the tales, the King himself remained the most integral part of the Arthurian legend. King Arthur and Camelot are synonymous with the Middle Ages and have been featured in almost every form of media, from animation to advertisements. For many, Walt Disney's 1963 film, *The Sword in the Stone,* was the first and most significant interpretation of the legend.[iii] This film was loosely based on T.H. White's 1958 book *The Once and Future King*, rather than medieval source material.[iv]

By the time White was writing, the character of Arthur and much of the general plot had been consistent since the 15th century. This is largely due to Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Mort D'arthur*, a book written in 1485 that unified a jumbled and very old Arthurian tradition into a single text. It had survived because it comprehensively and compactly told the entire tradition in one narrative.[v] According to Malory, Arthur was the legendary king of Britain, and his court was filled by a circle of knights who sat at a round table in his castle Camelot. In *Le Mort D'arthur* Arthur becomes king of Britain when he "lightly and fiercely" pulls an enchanted sword from a stone put in place by the wizard Merlin.[vi] King Arthur filled his court with many knights, the most famous of which is Lancelot du Lac, who is described in the text as the "noblest knight living."[vii] Lancelot has an affair with Queen Guinevere, King Arthur's wife, which fractures the knights and brings about King Arthur's downfall. In the final battle, Arthur is killed by his nephew and sometimes son, Sir Mordred.[viii]

The Arthurian tradition has made an impact on British culture, which carries on throughout its history. Because the Arthurian legend has been retold in so many different ways over such a long period of time, one may wonder about the story's origins, and in fact some have wondered whether King Arthur had a basis in history. Stories about King Arthur started throughout the British Isles since at least the 9th century, though some speculate even earlier, in the 6th century.[ix] One of the first places he appears is in the Battle of Badon, which appears in many of the earliest records. A mid-fifth century monk and historian named Gildas wrote the only contemporary account of the Anglo-Saxon invasions.[x] Gildas goes into detail in his description of the battle between the Saxons and the Britons, led by Arthur, partly because he was born in the same year and witnesses were supposedly available.[xi] However, Gildas doesn't mention Arthur by name in his account of this battle, which is unusual as his work was very emphatic regarding the failings of the Britons and their kings. According to one expert, "Gildas does not say who the British commander was, or whether the British were besiegers or besieged. No doubt that was partly because his deepest convictions are already decided by God, so historical facts were not very important."[xii]

Arthur is first definitively named as a participant in Badon in the *Annales Cambriae*, a record of Welsh history compiled in manuscripts from the 13th century, but likely written much earlier with some of the earliest records dating to the fifth century.[xiii] Arthur only appears in two lines of the record, which don't reveal much about Arthur or where he came from and doesn't even refer to him as a king. These two lines are the basis for the entire King Arthur legend. The chronicle says that in 516 someone named Arthur carried the cross at the Battle of Badon.[xiv] "The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights on his shoulders and the Britons were the victors."[xv] The next entry, dated to

about 537, is just as vague: “The battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut [Mordred] fell: and there was plague in Britain and Ireland.”[xvi]

The king’s career is first discussed in greater depth in *Historia Brittonum,* a book written around 828 that is often attributed to Nennius, a Welsh monk.[xvii] While some of the book has a historical basis, its references to dragons and its poetic style put the reliability of the text into question; because of the scarcity of sources from that period, the book is still useful according to Castleden.[xviii] *Historia Brittonum* offers a series of battles Arthur supposedly fought against the Saxons, with the Battle of Badon being the twelfth.[xix] Interestingly, Nennius refers to Arthur as *dux bellorum*, a Latin term for war leader, which can also be used to describe a king.[xx]

From the twelfth century onwards, Arthurian legend became more prominent in English writing. Part of this can be attributed to Geoffrey of Monmouth, and his work, *History of the Kings of Britain,* written around 1136.[xxi] Monmouth’s contemporaries and modern readers acknowledge that some of the literary sources referenced in *The History of the Kings of Britain* were invented by Monmouth himself.[xxii] For example, Monmouth references what he calls a “very ancient book” but he never divulges the author or the title of the account which serves as his main source for Arthur.[xxiii] Monmouth introduced or referenced many elements of the legend, including Arthur’s Excalibur, which he calls Caliburn; Arthur’s status as a king; the Isle of Avalon; and Arthur’s eventual resurrection, which drew from pre-existing Celtic traditions at the time.[xxiv] Another notable addition to the legend by Monmouth is the figure of Merlin, who appears to provide assistance to various British kings in Monmouth’s *History*.[xxv] Historian Rodney Castleden said of the wizard, “Merlin comes across as a magical semi-pagan figure, while Arthur is a Christian hero.”[xxvi] King Arthur’s treatment in Monmouth’s writing is one of

the most complete, taking up chapters as opposed to the two lines seen in the *Annales Cambriae*. Arthurian expert Geoffrey Ashe calls this a "flowering of the legend."[xxvii]

Some experts have said Monmouth's *History* was a reaction to the aftermath of various invasions of Britain, but depending on the source, it was either in support of or in opposition to the threat of colonization looming over Wales in the early 12th century.[xxviii] According to medievalist Barbara Harvey, "In 1136, at about the time Geoffrey was writing his History, the Welsh were seizing the chance offered by the death of Henry I to shake off the rule he had imposed upon them."[xxix] There are many interpretations of Monmouth's *History.* Some have argued it is an appeal to the Anglo-Norman rulers for unity, or an "illustrious genealogy" of these rulers, or even to express Monmouth's Breton or Welsh sympathies.[xxx] Those who argue in favor of Monmouth's book as a pro-Welsh history argue that Monmouth was a Breton patriot who promoted, as medievalist Michael Faletra put it, a "pan-Celtic alliance" by glorifying the Bretons of the ancient past and by extension the Welsh.[xxxi] Monmouth used Welsh influences and legends to help write his Arthur, and according to medieval literature expert Victoria Flood, intended for his vision of Arthur to serve as a symbol for the Welsh.[xxxii] However, Arthur became a symbol of the Anglo-Norman monarchy.[xxxiii] Henry II in particular associated himself with the Arthurian tradition: he wanted to compare himself to Arthur, who had complete dominion over Britain, to justify his control of the island.[xxxiv] Henry II was so interested in the legend that he searched for Arthur's supposed tomb in Glastonbury Abbey.[xxxv]

The History of the Kings of Britain marked an important development in Arthuriana as Arthur became less a historical character and more of a literary figure. The twelfth century saw a proliferation of Arthurian texts. Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut*, written around the 1150's, was an elaborate French translation of Monmouth's *History*, and introduced the now famous Round

Table.[xxxvi] Wace's Arthur was aligned with the French ideals of chivalry; this Arthur was, as historian Frances Gies puts it, " the paragon of knighthood, in the tradition of the romances."[xxxvii]Arthur became a part of a larger trend in medieval literature: the burgeoning genre of Romance which made medieval literature increasingly secular. Romances, which originally meant poems written in French rather than Latin, was the genre of poetry concerning courtly manners and chivalric culture.[xxxviii] According to literary scholar Eugene Vinaver, "Love interest and the pursuit of adventures unrelated to any common aim thus displaced the theme of the defence of Christendom and the preoccupation with feudal warfare."[xxxix] In this new genre, Arthur also changed. King Arthur was pushed into the background as the focus of the Arthurian canon now shifted to the knights.[xl] This is not surprising considering that the troubadours who wrote these romances were either knights themselves or worked in their service.[xli] This shift was finalized in the work of French poet Chretien de Troyes, who wrote around the 1170's. His five romances: *Erec et Enide, Cliges, Lancelot* or the *Knight of the Cart, Yvain* and *Perceval,* all featured a different knight of Arthur's court rather than the king himself.

Chretien de Troyes added the character of Lancelot, as well as his affair with Guinevere, who had been briefly referenced in Monmouth's *History*. By the end of the 12th century, they became integral parts of the legend.[xlii] [xliii] The romances represented many aspects of the secular knightly lifestyle from tournaments to heraldry.[xliv] De Troyes' Lancelot was, like Wace's Arthur, the exemplar of knighthood, as were all of the knights-errant in De Troyes' poetry, according to the author. He seemed eager to instruct readers to follow in his protagonists' examples, with characters going on lengthy, edifying asides on the nature of love and courtesy.[xlv] Courtly love and chivalry were introduced through the 12th century romances purely as a literary ideal.[xlvi]

Romance literature dominated the Arthurian canon for the rest of the medieval period, ultimately compiled in Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur* in 1485.

By the time Malory was writing, in the later 15th century, Arthuriana had been around for centuries and left a mark on medieval culture. This impact was perhaps most strongly felt among the knights, who wanted to emulate the prestige of knights in romances, through pageantry and writing.[xlvii] For example, Arnold de Guine, an early 13th century Flemish nobleman and lord , called upon the Arthurian tradition in the chronicle of his life, even requesting to be trained by Phillip of Flanders, who was praised by Chretien de Troyes himself in his romance *Perceval*.[xlviii] Chretien says of Flanders: "Count Philip of Flanders, who surpasses Alexander, whom they say was so great."[xlix] The fact that Arnold de Guine sought to learn under Philip of Flanders after the book was written speaks to the reputation of Arthurian literature. The romances made knighthood glamorous; even King Henry II wanted to emulate Lancelot by asking for the King of Scotland to knight him.[l]

Arthuriana had seeped into tournaments, which became known as round tables, that copied the pageantry of those in the fictional Camelot.[li] One 1279 round table had about one hundred damsels and one hundred knights riding to the grounds while singing.[lii] Arthurian romance often uses the tournament as a theme, as it did in de Troyes' romances. Beginning in the 13th century, the nobility was using fantasy as inspiration for tournaments; Edward I in 1284 had participants take on Arthurian roles during the games.[liii]

In the Middle Ages, King Arthur and Camelot were glorified and were a patriotic symbol of England and its rulers.[liv] Fiction often serves as a representation of culture, as historian Erich S. Gruen aptly puts it: "people strove to articulate their special qualities with reference to the dominant [culture]..."[lv] In the early 12th century the newly minted Norman rulers of England

were looking for a past to hold onto; *The History of the Kings of Britain* fulfilled this need by tracing English history back to its legendary ancient origins, all the way back to the Trojan War.[lvi] According to Higham, Arthuriana "provided the new Anglo-Norman kings with a predecessor of heroic size, a great pan-British king in a long line of monarchs capable of countering contemporary pressures for decentralization, as had occurred in France, and reinforcing claims of political superiority over the Celtic lands."[lvii] The reign of King Arthur, for the British monarchy of the Middle Ages set a royal precedent as well as serving as propaganda.

Some scholars have argued for the existence of a real, historical King Arthur. Much of this argument is built on the appearance of Arthur in a series of sometimes dubious, historical accounts. R.S. Loomis, one of the foremost authorities on Arthurian literature said, "There is a certain amount of early material dealing with him, but the difficulty lies in distinguishing what is, if anything, history from what is legend."[lviii] According to some, sources such as the *Annales Cambriae*, Gildas and Nennius are an earnest attempt to record history, which supposes the actual existence of the legendary king.[lix] Historians in favor of the existence of a historical Arthur have pieced together a theory on his identity: a military leader who lived in the sixth century during the Anglo Saxon invasions.[lx] Medievalist Kemp Malone argued that perhaps the historical Arthur lived earlier, and wasn't even British; in his 1925 book he pointed to a second century Roman commander, Lucius Artorius Castus, as a historical prototype for Arthur.[lxi] In the century that Arthur supposedly lived, there was an increase in the name Arthur in records from the Celtic regions of the British Isles, suggesting the presence of a figure these people were named after, as noted by linguist Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson.[lxii] There is no conclusive evidence as to whether Arthur existed, because of the breadth of representations of Arthur and a lack of

contemporary records.[lxiii] Higham says that, “The likeliest origin was a military leader of repute in Roman Britain who had become legendary...”[lxiv]

The 19th century saw a rediscovery of Arthuriana, as well as all things medieval, as a source of symbolism.[lxv] King Arthur was used to express ideas of England's past, as well as to present certain aspects as an ideal of English identity such as virility and Christian faith.[lxvi] The Pre-Raphaelite art movement of the 19th century reinvigorated interest in the Middle Ages, and Arthur especially.[lxvii] The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of artists that wanted to return to the “moral and descriptive truthfulness” they felt characterized art before the renaissance, that is, medieval art.[lxviii] They were especially concerned with narrative in their paintings, with scenes from Shakespeare and contemporary poetry dominating their paintings.[lxix] This renewed attention to medieval themes was reflected in the works of writers and historians of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, the basis of Disney’s *Sword in the Stone*, demonstrated this continued popularity.

According to Arthurian Experts Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, “despite an external and internal landscape apparently hostile to romance, Arthur returned to English literature after more than three hundred years with an intensity remarkable for both the quality and quantity of works produced.”[lxx] In fact, this period saw much scholarly debate on the historicity of Arthur; in the beginning of the Victorian period, much of the debate was wrapped up in ideas of Anglo-Saxon superiority.[lxxi] “After the Second World War, the British King Arthur who had famously triumphed over Germanic invaders in the Dark Ages was widely, but not always consciously, reconstructed as a historical icon for post-war British society.”[lxxii] As

late as 1997, Scottish politicians recreated Arthur's famous sword in the stone as a means to express Britishness During the United Kingdom General Election. [lxxiii]

To the modern reader, Arthur has come to represent not only British ideals but also the medieval period as a whole. Through Arthuriana, the Middle Ages are both a faraway time, yet accessible to the imagination of the viewer.[lxxiv] Arthuriana evokes a nostalgia that idealizes the past with modern longings and values.[lxxv] The legend of King Arthur is still incredibly popular, and has been reimagined in musicals such as *Camelot*, television shows such as BBC's *Merlin* and loosely in Marvel Comics superhero title *Excalibur*. Arthur has come a long way from his first mention in the *Annales Cambriae.*[lxxvi] The continued popularity of Arthur could be explained simply in its reinvention, but it is still familiar and nostalgic despite reimagining, using the same symbols and scenes to communicate new messages than the work before.[lxxvii]

Arthuriana survives centuries because it is reinvented, with authors using the tradition in new ways to communicate new meanings.[lxxviii] As Arthurian expert Dan Nastali notes: "every Arthurian work represents, to some degree, a personal response to the received material, and each work reinvigorates the tradition, for better or for worse, by placing before the public yet another object to respond to."[lxxix]

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