

The Legend of King Arthur



WITH NO CERTAIN PROOF THAT KING Arthur ever existed, some historians have concluded he is only a legend. Yet if he never lived, why did people believe for so many centuries that Arthur was a real person?

The answer begins with a book. Somewhere between 1135 and 1139, Geoffrey of Monmouth, an ecclesiastic and chronicler, published a Latin tome called *Historia regum Britanniae* ("The History of the Kings of Briton"). This mixture of fact and fancy portrays King Arthur as a monarch of truly heroic proportions. In its own time, the book was dismissed by the historian William de Newburgh, who called Geoffrey the "father of lies" and derided him for "cloak[ing] fables about Arthur under

A MEDIEVAL IMAGE OF ARTHUR, RULER OF 30 BRITISH KINGDOMS, GLORIFIED THE KING WITH 30 CROWNS AT HIS FEET.

the honest name of history." Despite William's carping, there is archeological support for some of Geoffrey's stories. For instance, he claims that Arthur was born on the island stronghold of Tintagel on the northern coast of Cornwall. Modern archeologists have discovered the remains of a stronghold there, which suggests that Geoffrey was not being purely fanciful.

A WARRIOR IN DARK TIMES

Before the publication of Geoffrey's book, Arthur's name had already appeared briefly in early chronicles. The *Historia Brittonum* of the 9th-century Welsh monk Nennius describes Arthur as the *dux bellorum* ("leader of troops") who crushed invading Saxons at Mons Badonicus (Mount Badon), a site that has never been identified. Gildas' *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*, dating from the middle of the 6th century, makes no reference to Arthur but suggests this battle was fought about 500 AD. The Mons Badonicus victory is mentioned in the 10th-century *Annales Cambriae*, which also records a battle at Camlann where Arthur reputedly fell.

From these tenuous sources, some historians believe Arthur may have been a 5th-century Christian British warrior who defended his country against Saxon invaders in the turbulent days after the departure of the Romans. Unable to stem the invaders, Arthur's followers fled to the mountains of Wales where, through many long and turbulent centuries, they told tales that transformed an obscure warrior into a world-class hero, who fought not only in Britain but also abroad.

Geoffrey's sources for Arthur were these tales, which he had probably heard in his Welsh homeland. The *Historia regum Britanniae* describes Arthur's beautiful wife Guinevere, his treacherous nephew Mordred, and the powerful magician Merlin. It also mentions a popular belief that Arthur was not dead, but would return to deliver his people from their enemies. To this day, Arthur is called "the once and future king."

In the Middle Ages, when most people confused legend and history, English monarchs used Arthurian symbolism to promote patriotism and enhance their own prestige. By the early 17th century, however, skeptical historians had extinguished the legend's hold on the populace.

Geoffrey's vision of Arthur spread to the Continent, where the story enjoyed tremendous popularity during the 12th and 13th centuries. French writers such as



A 15TH CENTURY MINIATURE SHOWS "THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING" PRESIDING OVER THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE.

Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France added some of the legend's enduring elements, such as the love story of Lancelot and Guinevere, the Knights of the Round Table, and the quest for the Holy Grail. In 1469, the first English printer William Caxton issued Sir Thomas Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*, which told Arthur's story as we now know it. The legend has continued to inspire writers, notably the poet Alfred Tennyson, whose *Idylls of the King* revived Victorian interest in Arthur.

THE MYSTERIOUS RIOTHAMUS

The search for the real Arthur continues. Some historic documents lend support to Geoffrey's claims that Arthur left Britain to fight abroad. Although most historians doubt this, the British historian Geoffrey Ashe believes

EDWARD I: ARTHUR'S HEIR?

Most modern historians have doubts about King Arthur's existence, but this has not always been so. During the Middle Ages, it was thought to be good for Britain's morale that royalty should be heirs of such a famous king. English kings not only believed in Arthur's existence, but some claimed kinship: Edward I (in a medieval portrait, right) claimed that, as Arthur's heir, he had a right to rule Scotland as well as England.



otherwise. Ashe is co-founder and secretary of the Camelot Research Committee, which was responsible for the 1966-70 excavation of Cadbury Castle—a strong possibility for the site of King Arthur's Camelot. Ashe decided to take Geoffrey seriously. In his search for clues outside Britain, he discovered records of a "king of the Britons" who led an army to France around 470 AD. In one document, a king who could be Arthur is referred to as Riothamus, which translates as "supreme royal."

Until archeologists or historians turn up something truly conclusive, King Arthur will remain a tantalizing, shadowy figure. He is the stuff of legend—a heroic portrait, possibly assembled from lives of several kings. As yet, no one is ready to forget his story, which has fascinated so many for centuries.

KING ARTHUR, SHOWN ON HORSEBACK IN A 14TH CENTURY FRENCH WORK, HAS LONG INSPIRED WRITERS AND ARTISTS THE WORLD OVER.

