Northwestern University

Studies in Medieval Literature

King Arthur: From Myth to Modernity

Introduction to King Arthur

- Or -

Who was “King Arthur”? Why should I care?
Intro to Arthur
Revival Of Interest

• 2006

_The 101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived: How Characters of Fiction, Myth, Legends, Television, and Movies Have Shaped Our Society, Changed Our Behavior, and Set the Course of History_

King Arthur comes in at #3, behind "The Marlboro Man" at #1 and George Orwell's "Big Brother" at #2, and just ahead of #4, Santa Claus

• 2005

**IBM Business Consulting Division TV Ad Campaign**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQ-z2uN9Rws](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQ-z2uN9Rws)

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Intro to Arthur
Revival Of Interest

• 2004

*King Arthur*
Film loosely based on the Lucius Artorius Castus theory

• 2001

*The Mists of Avalon*
TV mini-series based on the 1982 book by Marion Zimmer Bradley

• 2000

*The Keys to Avalon*
Attempts to place all Arthurian locations in Wales

(C) Ray Gleason 2018
• 1998

“Arthurian” Graffiti Found at Tintagel in Cornwall

AX[Ω]
PATERN[...]
COLIA VIFICIT
ARTOGNOU [...]

COL [...]
FICIT [...]

Alpha Christ [Omega]
“Patern[...] Colia with force made [...] Artognou”

Col [...] He Made [...]

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Intro to Arthur
Revival Of Interest

• 1998

Merlin
TV mini-series Based on Geoffrey of Monmouth

• 1995

A Kid in King Arthur's Court
Disney film based on Mark Twain's novel

First Knight
Film Based on the Abduction of Guinevere and Adultery with Lancelot

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Intro to Arthur
Revival Of Interest

• 1982

*The Mists of Avalon*
Marion Zimmer Bradley
Arthurian story from the point of view of the women involved in the tale

• 1981

*Excalibur*
*Film adaptation of Malory, Grail Quest. Lancelot and Guinevere, and the Death of Arthur*
Intro to Arthur
Revival Of Interest

• 1978
Mary Stewart completes a trilogy of novels focusing on Merlin
_The Crystal Cave_ (1970), _The Hollow Hills_ (1973), and _The Last Enchantment_ (1978)

• 1977
_The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights_
John Steinbeck’s attempt at a modernization of Malory published posthumously

• 1975
_Monty Python and the Holy Grail,_
Nihilist retelling of Malory’s Quest for the Holy Grail

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Roger Sherman Loomis
“Celticization of Arthur”

One of the foremost authorities on Arthurian literature. Roots of Arthurian legend, in particular the Holy Grail, in native Celtic mythology.

- *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (1927)
- *Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art* (1938)
- *Arthurian Tradition And Chretien De Troyes* (1949)
- *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, A Collaborative History* (1959) editor
- *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (1963)

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Intro to Arthur Revival Of Interest

Sir Geoffrey Ashe

Historical Existence of “Arthur”

• Glastonbury Abbey is “Avalon” and the traditional burial place of Arthur and Guinevere
  *(King Arthur's Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury (1957))*

• Cadbury Castle identified as “Camelot”
  *(Archaeological dig directed by Leslie Alcock in 1966–70)*

• Riotamhus was the basis of an historical “Arthur”
  *(Speculum, April 1981, and The Discovery of King Arthur, 1985)*

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Celtic Revival in Wales, Ireland, Scotland and Brittany

Movements and trends in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries

Renewed interest in aspects of Celtic culture, literature, art, music, myth and pre- Christian religious beliefs and myths.

James Joyce, Seamus Heaney, William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, AE Russell, Edward Martyn and Edward Plunkett, the Chieftains, etc.

Irish Independence, Scottish and Welsh Separatist Movements, Revival of the Breton Language, etc.

Recognition of Arthur as a Celtic Warrior-Hero Against the Saxons

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Who Is King Arthur?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2c-X8HiBng
“Arthur of Myth”
Quasi-Divine Warrior, Brigand, Rogue of the Ancient Britons
_Arth Uthr, “Fearsome Bear”_
_Culhwch ac Olwin_
“Arthur of Myth”

Who Is Arthur?


- Paw Print of Arthur’s Dog
- Grave of Arthur’s Son

C. 1019. Earliest possible date of composition for the Legend of St. Goeznovius, a Breton legend, which, in its preface, mentions Arthur and calls him the King of the Britons.

C. 1090. Hagiographers, such as Caradoc of Llancarfan, write saints lives of St. Gildas, St. Padarn, St. Cadog, St. Iltud, which include mentions of Arthur and his exploits.

(C) Ray Gleason 2018
c.600. Aneirin, writes, *Y Gododdin*, alluding to Arthur’s prowess as a warrior.

c. 830. **Nennius, “The Wonders of Britain.”**
- Paw Print of Arthur’s Dog
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**Red Book of Hergest & White Book of Rhydderch.**
- Mabinogion
  - *Culhwch ac Olwen; The Hunt for Twrch Trwyth*
  - The Dream of Rhonabwy
  - The Dream of Macsen Wledig
  - Owain, or the Lady of the Fountain
  - Peredur
  - Geraint and Enid

Taliesin, “The Spoils of Annwn”

**Black Book of Carmarthen**
- “The Stanzas of the Graves”
- “Conversation Between Merlin and Taliesin”
- “Pa Gur”

**The Welsh Triads**
Intro to Arthur
Who Is Arthur?

“Arthur of Myth”

Mythical King who presides over an idealized chivalric kingdom where knights strive to accomplish great deeds
Tragic figure, betrayed by his wife, son, and best friend

• Sword in the Stone
• Conquest of Rome
• The Holy Grail
• Avalon

Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Sir Thomas Malory

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“Arthur of Romance”

Who Is Arthur?

1136. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*

1155. Wace completes *Roman de Brut*


1160 – 90. Chrétien de Troyes, writes five Arthurian romances: *Eric et Enide; Cligès; Lancelot, Le Chevalier de la Charette; Yvain, Le Chevalier au Lion; Perceval, Le Conte del Graal.*

1190. Layamon publishes Brut.

1210 – 30. *Vulgate Lancelot-Grail Cycle*

1230 – 40. *Post-Vulgate Cycle*


c. 1400. Middle English Arthur: *Alliterative Morte Arthure, Stanzaic Morte Arthure, the Gawain Tales*

1469 – 70. Sir Thomas Malory, *Works*

1485. William Caxton's first printing of Malory’s *Works, Morte d'Arthu*

1486 – 1502. Arthur Tudor, Prince of Wales

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1486 – 1502. Arthur Tudor, Prince of Wales

1599. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*

C. 1660. John Milton rejects Arthur as a theme for his great English Epic

1691. John Dryden’s opera *King Arthur*

1848. Pre-Raphaelite Arthurian Paintings, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, *et al* 1859 – 1885. Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Idylls of the King*

1889 - Mark Twain publishes *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court."

1953. T. H. White publishes *The Once and Future King."

1960. Lerner and Lowe musical, *Camelot*


1978. Mary Stewart Trilogy


1998. TV Series, *Merlin*

2001. TV Series, *The Mists of Avalon*
“Arthur of Myth”

“Arthur of Romance”

“Arthur of History”
A Romanized British war leader who defeats the Scots, Picts, and Saxons
Victor of Twelve Battles
Battle of Badon
Battle of Camlann
Gildas, Nennius, William of Malmesbury

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“Arthur of History”
Texts

Roman Britain

391. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*

c. 400 Claudius Claudianus

417. Orosius, *Historiae adversum Paganos*

c. 498. Zosimus, *Historia Nova*
Intro to Arthur

Who Is Arthur?

Roman Diocese of Britain
Late 3rd Century CE
“Arthur of History”

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c. 400 Claudius Claudianus
417. Orosius, *Historiae adversum Paganos*
c. 498. Zosimus, *Historia Nova*

Sub-Roman Britain
c. 540. Gildas, *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae*

Anglo-Saxon England & Wales
c. 730. The Venerable Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*
c. 830. (Nennius), *Historia Brittonum*
c. 970. *Annales Cambriae*

Norman England & Wales
c. 1120. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*
c. 1198. William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*


C. 1192. Gerald of Wales, *Liber de principis instructione*

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“Arthur of History”

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c. 970. - *Annales Cambriae*

Norman England & Wales

c. 1120. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*

1129. Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*

High Medieval England

1192. Gerald of Wales, *Liber de principis instructione*
c. 1198. William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*

Tudor England

1533 – 44. John Leland, *Itinerary Assertio Inclytissimi Arturii*

1534. Polydore Vergil, *Anglica Historia*

Modern

Sir Geoffrey Ashe
1953. *King Arthur’s Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury*

(C) Ray Gleason 20181985. *The Discovery of King Arthur*
“Arthur of History”

Pre-History

c. 190. Lucius Artorius Castus in Britain

[...]

367. “The Great Barbarian Conspiracy”: Picts, Scots and Saxons overrun the provincial borders

383 – 8. Magnus Maximus (Macsen Wledig), proclaimed Emperor in Britain; conquers Gaul, Spain, Italy, and occupies Rome before being defeated and killed by Theodocius.

397. The Roman commander, Stilicho, comes to Britain and repels an attack by Picts, Irish and Saxons.

402. Stilicho recalls the 6th Legion Victrix from Britain

407. Constantine III hailed as the new emperor by Roman garrison in Britain. He invades Gaul with the 2nd Legion Augusta.

408. Britain attacked by the Picts, Scots and Saxons

410. Britain declares itself independent of Rome

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Intro to Arthur

Who Is Arthur?

“Great Barbarian Conspiracy”

367 CE
Intro to Arthur

Who Is Arthur?

Roman Withdrawal

383 - 407 CE
Who Is Arthur?

Barbarian Invasions

408 CE

Picts

Saxons

Scots
Intro to Arthur
Who Is Arthur?

“Arthur of History”

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410. Britain declares itself independent of Rome.

429. Bishops Germanus of Auxerre leads Britons to "Hallelujah" victory in Wales.


C. 445. Vortigern comes to power in Britain.

446. Britons appeal to Aetius, Roman governor of Gaul, for military assistance.

C. 446. Vortigern authorizes the use of Saxon mercenaries; arrival of Horsa and Hengist.

450. Vortimer leads British resistance to the Saxons.

C. 456. Death of Vortimer; Saxons massacre leading British noblemen at a "peace" conference.

C. 457. Death of Vortigern.

C. 458. Saxons under Hengist conquer southeastern Britain.

C. 460-70. Ambrosius Aurelianus takes control of British resistance to the Saxons.

C. 465. Birth of “Arthur”.

C. 469. Britons under Riothamus invade Gaul as allies of the Romans against the Visigoths.

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Intro to Arthur

Who Is Arthur?

Vortigern’s Wars
c. 445-56 CE

- Britons
- Saxons: Hengist & Horsa
- Saxons: Alle
- Angles
- Scots
- Picts

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Intro to Arthur

Who Is Arthur?

Riothamus Invades Gaul
469 CE

Picts
Angles
Scots
Saxons
Britons

Saxons:
Hengist & Horsa

Saxons:
Alle

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Intro to Arthur

Who Is Arthur?

“Arthur’s” Britain

c. 469 CE

Britons

Angles & Saxons

Picts

Scots
“Arthur of History”
“Arthur’s” Chronology

c. 465. Birth of “Arthur”
c. 470. Ambrosius Aurelianus “high king” of Britain?
477. Saxon chieftain, Aelle, lands on Sussex coast
c. 485-96. Period of “Arthur’s” “twelve battles” (Nennius)
c. 496. Britons, under Ambrosius? and his dux bellorum “Arthur,” defeat Saxons at Mount Badon; birth of Gildas

“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.”

c. 516. Death of “Arthur.”

“The battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell: and there was plague in Britain and Ireland.”

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“Composite Arthurian Chronology”

Romans Leave Britain
Vortigern, King of the Britons
Vortigern Invites the Saxons into Britain
Merlin and Vortigern’s Tower
Aurelius Ambrosius leads the Britons
Uther Pendragon, High King of Britain
Uther Seduces Igraine, Wife of Duke Gorlois of Cornwall
Arthur Born at Tintagel
Merlin Removes Arthur
Death of Uther; Civil War in Britain
Arthur Reappears in the Household of Sir Hector and his son, Kay
Arthur Removes the Sword from the Stone
Arthur Acquires Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake
Arthur Defeats the Britons Who Deny His Legitimacy
Battle of Badon - Arthur Defeats the Foreign Invaders of Britain: Scots, Picts and Saxons.
Arthur Conquers Ireland
Arthur Conquers the North: Northern Isles, Denmark and Norway.
Arthur Conquers Gaul, Killing Frollo the King
Arthur Establishes His Court in Caerlion (Camelot?)

(C) Ray Gleason 2018
“Composite Arthurian Chronology”

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Arthur is Seduced By His Half Sister, Morgause; Mordred is Conceived.
Arthur Marries Guinevere
Arthur Establishes the Round Table Fellowship
Lancelot Comes from France

Period of Adventures and Quests
- Enchantment of Merlin by Vivienne
- Tristan and Iseult Branch
- Abduction of Guinevere by Maleagant
- Lancelot and Guinevere
- Gawain and Dame Ragnel
- Quest for the Holy Grail

Arthur Is Challenged by Lucius, Emperor of Rome
Arthur Invades Gaul, Leaving Mordred as Regent
Arthur Defeats Lucius and Approaches Rome
Mordred Revolts, Imprisons (Seduces) Guinevere
Battle of Camlann - Death of Mordred & Destruction of the Round Table
Mortally Wounded Arthur Removed to Avalon

Arthur Rex Quondam et Rex Futurus

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Arthur: Mythos of Western European Culture

The Nature of Myth

Foundation Tales of a Culture, People or Nation
“Sacred” Narratives
Demigods and Heroes
Often Epic and Tragic Expression

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Intro to Arthur
Why Should I Care?

Arthur: Mythos of Western European Culture

The Nature of Myth

Expresses a Social “Sub-Conscious”
Myth portrays the *mores* of a society
What’s “Good”
What’s “Bad”
The consequences of human acts

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Arthur: Mythos of Western European Culture

Nature of Tragedy

Great Promise Destroyed!

Why?
Moral? Protagonist made a grave “moral” error
Chaos? No reason “moral” or otherwise
Arthur: Mythos of Western European Culture

**Badon** – Arthur restores civilization, safety, prosperity from chaos and violence.

**Camelot** – Arthur channels human violence in a cultured, stable society

**Camlann** – Everything that Arthur achieved is destroyed

Why?