



Skeptics and King Arthur



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Few names are better known in Western mythology than King Arthur. The stories of Camelot, the Knights of the Round Table, Merlin, the search for the Holy Grail, Excalibur, Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, and Arthur's betrayal and death at the hands of Mordred are retold over and over, both through movies such as "Excalibur", "First Knight" and "King Arthur", and through a multitude of books, such as those by Rosemary Sutcliffe or Bernard Cornwell.

But how much truth is there in these stories? Did they actually occur? Are they complete fiction? Or does the truth lie somewhere in between the two extremes?

Most people associate the stories with knights in shining armour and massive castles. This appears to set the tales in medieval times, perhaps the 14th or 15th centuries. But we know the history of this time well, and there are no historical figures which match these descriptions at that time. Even if we go back another few hundred years, we still find no real person matching the Arthur of legend.

In fact, the story of King Arthur as we know it today was gradually built up over 400 years by a series of authors and poets. The first person to refer to King Arthur in detail was the Welsh cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth in about 1135. His "History of the Kings of Britain" told what he understood was the truth, though it contains a lot which we now know is incorrect. Nevertheless, Geoffrey's work was popular. This was the start of the Age of Chivalry, and tales about great and noble kings caught people's imagination across Europe. In the following 100 years, four works were written which embellished the legend. The poet Wace, from the island of Jersey, wrote a story about Arthur which was the first to mention the Round Table. The French writer Chretien de Troyes was the first to name Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, and located Arthur's court at Camelot. The Burgundian poet Robert de Boron introduced the Holy Grail to the Arthurian legend. And finally, the anonymously composed "Vulgate Cycle" of stories incorporated the origins and actions of Mordred. All of these works were known to be fiction. They were fairy tales intended to instruct and entertain; they weren't intended as history.

Around this time, the abbey of Glastonbury was destroyed by fire. While excavating the ruins prior to starting reconstruction, the monks allegedly found an old grave containing some bones and a cross inscribed with writing claiming the bones were those of King Arthur. As a result, the abbey attracted many pilgrims, and these pilgrims were an important source of money for the abbey's reconstruction. Unfortunately, it's likely the monks made the whole thing up, solely for the money. The main evidence is that the inscription was written in the Latin of the 12th century, as different from Arthur's Latin as Shakespeare's English is different from ours.

All of the Arthurian legend was brought together into Sir Thomas Malory's book "The Death of Arthur", which was printed in 1485 - one of the first books produced by this new technique.

But for all these inventions, there are still older documents which place Arthur in a historical context, although in these documents he's a very different person from the popular legends. Nearly all the familiar trappings are gone. Instead, we read of a warlord, often unpopular with the church, leading a desperate people against foreign invaders. The first of these documents is the "Annals of Wales", written early in the 12th century. It states that Arthur won the Battle of Badon in 518, and died along with Medraut (Mordred) at the Battle of Camlann in 539. The second document is the "History of the Britons", written in the 9th century by the Welsh monk Nennius. It lists twelve battles fought by Arthur, up to his victory at Mount Badon. The third document is "On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain" by the 6th century Welsh monk Gildas. Gildas doesn't mention Arthur, but does name the Battle of Badon.

By combining these documents with letters written by British bishops and monks in the 5th century, lives of British and Welsh saints, excavation of British and Saxon settlements, and indirect statements in other documents, it's possible to reconstruct a fairly coherent history of Britain at the time of Arthur, as well as a reasonable description of who Arthur was, and what he achieved. Interestingly, however, we're not sure if his name was Arthur (it may have been a nickname). Whether reality is more noble and romantic than legend, or less, is up to you.

At the start of the 5th century, Britain (that is, what's now England and Wales) had been part of the Roman Empire for about 350 years. The whole Empire was under attack, with Britain being raided by Irish, Picts and Saxons. In 407, the Roman Governor of Britain rebelled against the Western Roman Emperor, and took nearly all the troops in Britain to the Continent in an attempt to seize the throne. But his army was defeated and he was killed. The civil authorities in Britain (British tribal princes and Roman bureaucrats) appealed to the Emperor for help in 410, but all

he could do was allow them to raise their own troops. This is generally accepted as the date of the end of Roman rule in Britain.

The civil authorities in Britain created a copy of the Roman state, with their own Senate and Emperor. The problem was that no candidate for Emperor was acceptable to everyone, and for about a decade there was a series of coups as Emperors were overthrown, along with continuing barbarian raids. This instability ended when a British prince known to us as Vortigern was able to establish himself as overlord of Britain. The main source of Vortigern's power was his employment of Saxon mercenaries. Traditionally, this action has been blamed for the collapse of the Romano-British civilisation, but for at least 10 years his policy worked well, with the Saxons defeating Irish and Pictish raiders. Instead, the security gained by Vortigern's decision seems to have encouraged other British princes to indulge in civil war again, and the Saxons took advantage of this infighting to rebel as well, in 441.

The Saxon Wars continued on and off for about 80 years, during which time much of the Roman-created civil society collapsed. The British defence was initially led by Vortigern, then by Ambrosius Aurelianus (also known as the "last of the Romans"), and finally by Arthur. Arthur's victory at Mount Badon in 518 resulted in peace between Saxons and Britons which lasted for more than 50 years. Mount Badon can be confidently placed near Bath, simply because ancient writers speak of Badon's hot springs, and the only location in the British Isles with hot springs is Bath. Camelot is most likely the old Roman town of Camelodunum (now Colchester), located near London in lands Arthur reconquered from the Saxons. But it's unlikely to have been Arthur's capital, as it was nearly surrounded by Saxon lands, and too remote from British lands to have been a convenient administrative centre.

Arthur lived for about 20 years after Mount Badon, during which time there was some rebuilding of society. But once again, peace with the Saxons brought problems for the British. Firstly, the Saxons were by this time too numerous to expel from Britain, so an ultimate solution was merely delayed. Secondly, Arthur's victory had been gained through the creation of a new warrior class. But after the Saxon war ended, the warriors took to fighting each other, particularly after Arthur's death, weakening the British further. When Saxon attacks resumed in the 570s, the lowland British kingdoms collapsed within a decade. British kingdoms were restricted to Devon and Cornwall in the south, Strathclyde in the north, and Wales, although many British-speaking communities survived for centuries in England.

British archaeologist Francis Pryor has challenged this thesis, suggesting that Saxons who supposedly conquered Britain were in fact the direct descendents of the people who lived in Britain in Roman times, and that they exchanged Latin and British for English due to cultural influence. His two main pieces of evidence are that English grammar appears to be based on old British grammar, and that some excavations show continuity of settlement and gradual cultural change, rather than the destruction and break of continuous settlement which would be more expected of a violent conquest. However, both pieces of evidence are flawed. Firstly, massive linguistic change around the world is almost only ever accompanied by violent conquest; in fact, conquered communities often retain their native language for centuries afterwards. British society adopting English solely on the basis of cultural influence has virtually no precedent. Secondly, Vortigern is understood to have peacefully settled communities of Saxons around Britain to provide security, and the example Pryor presents may be one of these.

Why should King Arthur be of interest to Skeptics? Three reasons. Firstly, despite the amount of mythology surrounding King Arthur, it's possible to investigate him as a historical individual, and to learn a lot about the times in which he lived. Secondly, regardless of the fiction which has clouded the historical King Arthur, the reality of British history in the Dark Ages is interesting in its own right. Thirdly, it shows that skepticism can easily be applied to history as to any other topic.

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