

King Arthur in History and Legend

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There are two versions of King Arthur known to the modern historian, as Jonathan Wooding points out. The first is a legendary Arthur who exists only as that - a legend, without any basis for his existence in the historical record. The second is the historical Arthur - an actual being who most likely did exist. There are enough primary sources extant to suggest that such a man did exist, even if but a military chieftain, probably in the fifth century, at the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions. This is the only time it is historically plausible. The fact that there are limited sources from this time allows us to admit the possibility of Arthur's historical existence, but also makes accurate details of his career virtually impossible to uncover. Through these few sources we can discover that the Battle of Badon Hill seems to have been a significant event, and hints at the existence of a famed war leader for the Britons, a leader whose exploits may have provided the basis of the Arthur legends. A second possibility is that the legends evolved from Welsh literature, which itself retained the memory of a great leader from the age of the invasions.

It is easy enough to account for the "legendary" Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), written in c. 1136, contains the first significant mention of 'Arthur' and treats him as an actual historical figure, although there are many obvious historical inaccuracies in his work and it cannot be treated as a reliable source of information. He did not invent the stories of Arthur, because there is a brief mention of Arthur by William of Malmesbury in c.1126. The twelfth century also provides a wealth of chivalrous romantic "Arthurian" stories from France, particularly the stories of Chretien de Troyes - *Cliges*, *The Knight of the Cart*, *The Knight with the Lion*, and *The Story of the Grail*. Perhaps the most influential of these romances was *La Mort le Roi Artu*, written by an unknown author. One of the most famous versions of the Arthur legend was written by Sir Thomas Mallory, an Englishman who lived in the fifteenth century and, whilst in gaol, recorded the legends of Arthur. None of these were written at the actual time of Arthur's supposed existence. They are more relevant to the times in which they were written, and as a result are more examples of what life was like in their times than Arthur's. Wooding claims that many of the elements of the Arthurian legend were developed to fit contemporary needs. The legends have also undoubtedly been passed down through word of mouth, through many generations, and this would have made them subject to exaggeration. Though the legends cannot be seen as useful documents for the time of Arthur, they can still be useful to reveal the nature of medieval society at the times they were written.

Very little evidence about Arthur exists from the medieval era, and little of that can be seen as reliable. In spite of this lack of information, however, there are a few sources that allow us a glimpse of the true Arthurian times. The most important of these are: Gildas, *De Exidio Britanniae*; Bede: *De Ecclesia Anglorum et Gentes*; Nennius: *Historia Brittonum*; and the Anonymous *Annales Cambriae*. All of these sources are older than Geoffrey of Monmouth's account. The first two do not mention Arthur, but he is mentioned in by Nennius and the *Annales Cambriae*, so it is obvious that there was already a legend about Arthur before Geoffrey wrote. Although it is difficult to place the time of Arthur's supposed existence, the fifth century is the only time in which it may have been at all possible for him to exist, due to the reliable historical record kept both before and after this period, though not between.

As well as the lack of texts in the period of the Saxon invasions, the contradictions between those that have survived further confuse the matter. The earliest source, Gildas, which is practically contemporary, does not mention Arthur. Both Gildas and Bede mention only one great hero of that time:

"Their leader at this time was Ambrosius Aurelianus, a man of good character and the sole survivor of Roman race from the catastrophe"

Both sources make no mention at all of anyone called 'Arthur'. As Bakken points out, both Gildas and Bede, in their details, could not have overseen a man as great as the legends of Arthur depict.

"Gildas made no mention of the British hero Arthur. Since his battles are reputed to have taken place during this time, Gildas should not have ignored him if he had been as famous as indicated by Nennius. "

The fact that his name might not have been 'Arthur' would explain the lack of textual evidence about a man of that name. However, Nennius states that Arthur fought with Ambrosius Aurelianus, suggesting that he was a different person from the hero mentioned by Gildas. One of the most important sources to Arthurian scholars is the *Annales Cambriae* (Annals of the Welsh) of the tenth century. This record states that Arthur in fact died in battle - "The Battle of Camlann, in which Arthur...fell." - a statement that would certainly lead to the assumption that he was, indeed, some sort of military official. The *Annales Cambriae* also make a link between Arthur and Badon, claiming that Arthur himself was there. There is no mention of Ambrosius Aurelianus.

"The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights and the Britons were victorious."

Wooding (p.16) argues that this is " a possibility, at best a probability" and dismisses the information as mere legend. He points out that the *Annales Cambriae* may not be the source of the legends of Arthur. It is quite possible that the legends came from elsewhere, and were taken into Welsh literature. It all depends on whether the tradition of Arthur can be shown to have existed earlier than the writing of the *Annales*. The lack of source material makes it impossible to clarify this with any detail or certainty. Richard Barber points out that the legends appear at an early date in France and Italy as well, and suggests that they may have been transmitted by the Bretons of Brittany.

It is possible for Arthur to have gone by a name other than that which he is known today, so an examination of other great military chieftains of the time may provide a clue to his existence. The Battle of Badon Hill seems to have been a very significant event in the times of the Saxon invasions. According to Bede, the Britons, led by Ambrosius Aurelianus, made a decisive victory over the invading Saxons in about AD 493 at Mount Badon. Ambrosius Aurelianus is definitely the most important and famous of the time due to his victory at the battle of Badon Hill. Perhaps, as Ingrid Bean points out, this is the great leader whose exploits became the basis for the Arthur legends. (Bean : CLIO) The foremost scholar of Roman Britain, RG Collingwood, put forward an interesting hypothesis:

"Whatever later stories said, he was not a king, still less king over all the kings of Britain. To call him *dux bellorum* implies that the governments of the day entrusted him with a special military command; in the same way Bede describes St Germanus as *dux belli* His (army) was, in fact, a mobile field-army of that kind which, early in the fifth century, had been commanded by the *comes Britanniarum*. When the Britons appealed to Aetius (AD) .. the purport of their petition is obvious: they were asking for a new count of Britain. Now, half a

century later, they created one for themselves; and this, though they or their historian had forgotten his correct title, is what in effect Arthur was." Collingwood, 1981, pp 321-322

The legends of Arthur known by us today may be based on someone who once existed. Though they are not, under any definition of the word, historical fact, they are still useful to reveal the nature of medieval society at the time of their composition, which is certainly not that of Arthur's time. If Arthur did exist it was probably during the fifth century, when the Saxons were invading Britain. He may have been the one to lead the Britons to a victory over the Saxons at Badon Hill, but a lack of evidence, and contradictions in what evidence there is, are the main obstacles to an understanding of the 'real' Arthur.

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