Western Oregon University

Digital Commons@WOU

Honors Senior Theses/Projects   Student Scholarship

6-1-2015

Legendary: Was King Arthur a Living Hero or a Popular Legend?

Emily Walley
Western Oregon University, ejw716@charter.net

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/honors_theses

Part of the Medieval History Commons

Recommended Citation

Legendary: Was King Arthur a Living Hero or a Popular Legend?

By

Emily J. Walley

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Western Oregon University Honors Program

Dr. Elizabeth Swedo,
Thesis Advisor

Dr. Gavin Keulks,
Honors Program Director

Western Oregon University

June 2015

Table of Contents

Abstract

Despite being a well-known figure in Western culture, the historical evidence for King Arthur is very small, and scholars have not even been able to identify a specific person as the historical Arthur. New information concerning Arthur on three basic details—the dates of significant events of his life, his ancestry and close family members, and the area of Britain in which he was militarily active—would be extremely useful in identifying the mysterious historical figure that Arthur has become. This paper examines multiple sources related to the existence and identity of Arthur, approaching the topics in a roughly reverse chronological order, evaluating first what is most historically certain before analyzing aspects of Arthur that are more contested. While little information regarding Arthur's lineage and location in Britain was discovered, a combination of several elements of the Arthurian tradition and various textual sources resulted in a new timeframe for Arthur's life, based on the dates of two of Arthur's major battles.

Introduction

Arthur gathered his strength and quickly slipped out of the giant's clutches. Moving like lightning, he struck the giant repeatedly with his sword, first in this place and then in that, giving him no respite until he had dealt him a lethal blow by driving the whole length of the blade into his head just where his brain was protected by his skull. At this the evil creature gave one great shriek and toppled to the ground…The king laughed with relief.[1]

Geoffrey of Monmouth included this encounter with a giant in his book *History of the Kings of Britain*, known among Arthurian scholars as being the earliest text containing a detailed account of King Arthur's whole life. Unfortunately, details such as these have caused immense debate over the years on Arthurian subjects, even causing scholars to question the very existence of Arthur. Partly because Arthur lived during a period known as the Dark Ages—so named for the shortage of historical records coming from this period—references to Arthur are few and extremely far between. Moreover, many of these mentions raise doubts by mixing fantastical elements with historical accounts, or are subject to faulty dating, or are guilty of some other fallacy. All in all, the deck seems stacked against the possibility of ever proving with finality whether Arthur ever lived and walked upon the earth. Yet this has not stopped historians from trying. Scores of historians have attempted the daunting task of proving Arthur's existence, devoting their entire lives to Arthurian studies, putting forth a multitude of theories as to his foggy identity. These theories range from the well-researched and sensible to the incredible, yet none has ever stood out as the obvious answer to the Arthurian puzzle.

---

[1] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 240.

For as many supporters of Arthur's existence, there is also an equal number of those who would dismiss him entirely, begging to put this issue, which has been so extensively scrutinized for so many years, to bed, much in the way that the legendary king himself is supposed to be sleeping.

Despite being so thoroughly studied, Arthur seems to defy identification. Assuming that he did exist, what kind of a man was he? Most modern scholars reject the traditional idea of Arthur as king, since the modern concept of kings did not exist in Britain during the time period that he is supposed to have lived. This brings up another issue: scholars have been unable to narrow down the dates between which Arthur could have lived. Many historians have proposed dates for Arthur, yet very few can agree on these dates. Arthur's lineage also refuses to be determined. Although the names of his parents have been passed down through legend, they do not appear in any sort of historical record or in any of the royal lines of the Dark Age kingdoms. Neither does Arthur seem to hail from any specific region in Britain; instead, his battles seem to be scattered across the island like the many landmarks which bear his name. If these three things—Arthur's dates, family, and location—could be determined, discovering Arthur's identity would become an easier task. Much of Arthur's life merits evaluation, despite being difficult to study due to the vague nature of the evidence. An exploration of the major events in Arthur's life through a close examination of textual evidence in particular will help to reveal more information regarding these three main topics of dates, lineage, and location—especially dates—and bring scholars one step closer to identifying him.

When discussing the identity of Arthur, the issue being discussed is the determining of the identity of the "historical Arthur," defined for the purposes of this

discussion as the Arthur who fought at two battles: Badon and Camlann. At Badon, he was the victor, and, at Camlann, he perished. It was around this Arthur that the legends grew.

The Legend

The basic, most common elements of the Arthurian legend as told by Geoffrey of Monmouth, are as follows:

Arthur's story was set in the context of early medieval Britain after the departure of the Roman Empire, whose presence had been more or less established on the island since the campaigns of Julius Caesar c. 55 BCE. With the departure of the Romans, tribes called the Scots and the Picts, who were primarily from the areas that are now Scotland and Ireland, began attacking the Celtic Britons who inhabited the majority of what is now England, Wales, and Cornwall. At their wits' ends and receiving no help from their Roman protectors, the Britons invited a people known as the Saxons to come to Britain as mercenaries and fight off the Scots and Picts. The Saxons did their job beautifully, and then they decided that they liked the island, so they turned on the Britons and began forcing them out of the eastern side of the island and into the hills of Wales, Cornwall and northern England.

Arthur, the illegitimate son of King Uther Pendragon, was conceived by Ygerna after Uther seduced her with the help of the wizard Merlin's magic in her husband's fortress of Tintagel. Arthur appeared on the scene after Uther's death, leading the armies of Britain in a series of successful battles against the Saxons, Scots, and Picts. Arthur was crowned king, and maintained peace for approximately twenty years. During this time, Arthur established his famed court at Camelot, gathering renowned and loyal

warriors to his side. Arthur also campaigned on continental Europe, winning battles of particular note in Gaul.

Disaster struck when Mordred, Arthur's nephew, seized power while Arthur was away. Mordred declared himself king and took Arthur's wife, Guinevere, as his queen. Arthur rushed back to Britain and confronted Mordred, whom he had trusted and set up as regent in his absence. The two met at the battle of Camlann, where each fatally wounded the other. Mordred died, and Arthur was taken to the Isle of Avalon to have his wounds healed.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's fantastical tale ends quite abruptly, with no details about the rest of Arthur's life, whether he recovered from his injuries or died soon after his journey to Avalon. This vagueness that seems to accompany Arthurian stories wherever they are found is one of the primary reasons why scholars are so unclear on many of the questions raised that concern Arthur. Unfortunately, this quality of Arthurian studies makes debate on any proposed theories very easy, and the result is a massive body of research and study on the subject of Arthurian history.

Literature Review

King Arthur has been the subject of much research over the years. However, despite the many years scholars have given to the study of Arthur, his existence has yet to be verified by any incontrovertible proof. This debate over Arthur becomes even more complex when historians take their research even further and declare Arthur to be a specific person in history, claiming that they not only believe Arthur existed, but that they also know his identity. The vast body of Arthurian literature, which includes material from church records to fables as well as many archaeological findings that are considered

to be 'evidence,' makes it difficult to narrow down the identity of Arthur to one single person. As a result, there are many theories pertaining to the true identity of King Arthur, each one pointing to a different Arthur.

There are those, of course, who do not believe that King Arthur was based on an actual person in history. These are the scholars who believe that Arthur began a hero of Celtic folktales and whose legends have grown in a significant way unlike those of other characters of the Celtic mythological cycle. They do not see enough solid proof in the evidence that has been found to justify the opinion that a real Arthur once lived, and often see evidence that has been provided as medieval publicity stunts. It is difficult to find literature coming from these scholars as most people who publish an article on King Arthur are doing it to support his existence. These scholars have their importance in the field, however, because they keep the research grounded, always testing and challenging. This can be helpful because it requires that the evidence that is found is thoroughly examined and that every possibility is explored. In a way, these skeptics provide the extra push that inspires innovation in the field.

Literary sources supporting the existence of King Arthur can generally be divided into two groups: the Welsh sources and the Latin sources.[2] In the field of Arthurian study, many historians seem to be of the opinion that the Latin sources are more relevant than the Welsh sources, and thus the Latin sources often become the most emphasized.[3] This idea comes about due to the fact that many of the Welsh sources come from

---

[2] Some of the more common works of the Welsh Matter are the *Welsh Triads*, the tales of the *Mabinogion*, and *Pa Gwr.* Latin sources include Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* and Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Brittanniae*.

[3] Geoffrey Ashe in *The Discovery of King Arthur*, referring to *De Excidio*, *Historia Brittonum*, and *Annales Cambriae*, "Until fairly recently attempts to get at the 'historical Arthur' all depended on this Welsh material," 78.

unknown authors. Even when the author of a Welsh poem is known, it is only his name;

nearly all other information is lacking. The Latin sources, on the other hand, come

primarily from the few chroniclers of Dark Age Britain. These men, often connected to

the church, are known, not only by their names, but by their backgrounds and reputations.

However, while the Welsh sources may seem less reliable than those of the Latin

tradition due to their mysterious authors, they should certainly not be neglected.

While the majority of historians at least consider the Welsh matter, there are quite

a few who use it to a great extent in their research. In these cases, H. R. Ellis Davidson

lays out three important guidelines: "First, we must know a good deal about the kind of

evidence which we are using…Secondly, we must know a good deal also about the

history of religion and culture in the particular locality and period with which we are

concerned. Thirdly, the folklore which we use must be reliable and must be considered

in its full context."[4] The first and second rules which Davidson sets forth can be

answered in a tentatively positive manner when examining Welsh materials. The period

between Roman Britain, which ended in 410, and Anglo-Saxon England, which began ca.

650, is often referred to as the Dark Age of the island of Britain, and it is precisely in the

middle of this period that Arthur belongs. Although much work has been done within the

last century to increase the knowledge of this time period, there are still regrettable gaps

concerning many areas of society, including those relating to Arthur. Davidson's third

rule is where things get especially sticky, for many of the Welsh sources come to us in

the form of fragments, and the Welsh body of mythology from which these sources come

is far from complete. In the light of these guidelines and the doubts they cast on the

---

[4] H. R. Ellis Davidson, "Folklore and Man's Past," *Folklore* 74, no. 4 (1965): 528-9,
http://www.jstor.org/stable/1258734.

Welsh matter, it has become necessary that historians provide several other pieces of evidence alongside any evidence from Welsh literary sources in order to build a strong argument.

When trying to prove simply the existence of King Arthur, it seems that historians look primarily to archaeological evidence, as those who deny Arthur's existence tend to find ways to quickly, and often unfairly, dismiss the literary evidence. D. R. Woolf discusses this tendency and its repercussions in the field:

> We have in increasing volume as the past approaches the present, a multitude of books, documents, letters, manuscripts, coins, funeral urns, paintings and maps, from which to reconstruct history. Such "hard" evidence is to be preferred, where it can be found, to the "soft" evidence of folk-tale, unwritten and undatable local custom, and ancestral tradition, because only the former is tangible.[5]

While those who deny Arthur's existence can easily refute evidence of a literary nature on the basis of reliability, it is a bit more difficult to argue against a physical piece of evidence that cannot be edited or forgotten in the way a written work can.[6] Thus, historians have begun to favor archaeological evidence and it has become harder to present an argument based on purely textual evidence.

Ralegh Radford, an Arthurian scholar and archaeologist, tends to conduct his research on Arthur primarily through archaeological studies. In a way, Radford used his archaeological discoveries to verify and strengthen literary sources. For example, Radford's excavations at Tintagel castle, the rumored birthplace of Arthur, helped to

---

[5] D. R. Woolf, "The 'Common Voice': History, Folklore and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England," *Past and Present* no. 120 (1988): 27, http://www.jstor.org/stable/650921.
[6] While archaeological artifacts may at first seem authoritative, it is necessary to remember that they require varying amounts of interpretation, which often involves drawing conclusions based on inferences.

clear up some of the confusion and disagreement that surrounds the location, as well as temporarily restore some credibility to Geoffrey of Monmouth, author of *Historium Regum Britanniae*.[7] Geoffrey names Tintagel as the place of Arthur's birth in the version of *Historium Regum Britanniae* dating from the year 1145. It is not certain whether Tintagel was also referenced in the previous version from ca. 1136, which has been lost over the course of history. It seemed unlikely that it would, though, because the castle which is currently known as Tintagel was not constructed until the year 1141. This inconsistency of dates cast a considerable amount of doubt on Geoffrey's reputation as a reliable writer. However, Radford's excavations revealed that a Celtic monastery once stood on the site, dated to the 5th and early 6th centuries by some sherds of pottery.[8] Radford's basic method of strengthening his argument by using archaeology to back up information gleaned from texts seems effective. The downfall to Radford's research for the purpose of establishing Arthur's identity is that, while looking at the evidence through the lens of Arthurian study, his main focus seems to be establishing a firmer idea of early medieval culture in Britain.

Leslie Alcock is another Arthurian historian who, like Radford, focuses his research on archaeological findings. Among his accomplishments are several Arthurian and Dark Age excavations at sites throughout Britain. In his book, *Arthur's Britain*, Alcock describes his methods:

As a historian, I was trained to regard record-history as incomparably superior to chronicle-history…As an archaeologist, I have been brought up to regard the

---

[7] C. A. Ralegh Radford, "Romance and Reality in Cornwall," *The Quest for Arthur's Britain*, Geoffrey Ashe, ed. (Great Britain Pall Mall Press Ltd, 1968, 59-77.
[8] Radford, "Romance and Reality," 64.

recognition of valid associations between objects and structures at the moment of

their recovery from the soil as central to all archaeological thinking.[9]

Alcock does place importance on written evidence but illustrates the idea that not all

written sources are created equal. In his book, Alcock devotes a section to written

evidence for Arthur's existence. However, the main thrust of his argument seems to come

later in the book during his discussion of the archaeological evidence.[10]

The argument in Alcock's book does not try to champion a specific Arthur as the

original hero around whom the legends later grew. Instead, his main goal is to prove that

Arthur existed, lived in the early Middle Ages, and most likely died in battle in the year

511.[11] He only attempts to establish where Arthur would have been based and clarify

what sort of a figure he would have been; he does not pinpoint any candidate in particular

as the Arthur who fought at Badon or died at Camlann. Alcock goes about this by first

briefly examining the written evidence for Arthur's existence. He then presents the

scenario in which Arthur enters as the hero of Badon. Alcock then dives into the

archaeological evidence which can be used as proof for Arthur's existence, looking

specifically at supposed Arthurian places like Tintagel and Cadbury hill-fort for evidence

of use by wealthy or militant figures to support an Arthurian-like presence at these

places. Alcock wraps up his argument by trying to describe what Britain would have

looked like culturally in the fourth century in order to better communicate what kind of

---

[9] Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (United States, The Penguin Press: 1971), xvi.

[10] This emphasis makes sense when considering that Alcock was a Professor of Archaeology at the University of Glasgow. One of his most significant projects was a 5-year excavation campaign at Cadbury Castle, a possible site for Camelot.

[11] In his book, Alcock admits uncertainty as to the year of Arthur's death, but he writes that "This chronological ambiguity should not perturb us. At least two dating schemes are possible for the great Babylonian ruler Hammurabi, yet no competent scholar doubts his historicity." *Arthur's Britain*, xv.

'king' Arthur would really have been, a warrior who was successful in his lifetime in delaying widespread Anglo-Saxon settlement in Britain.

Through the course of his research, Alcock places Arthur in the south-western part of England. This idea is supported by "a somewhat later body of texts, folkloristic and literary rather than historical in the character of their content."[12] Historians have observed that many of the earlier writings, particularly Nennius' 9th century *Historia Brittonum*, seem to support the existence of a northern Arthur. However, in addition to the plethora of sites associated with Arthur in the southwest of Britain, many of the Arthurian legends come from Wales and Cornwall. W. Gruffydd states that "'To the Dumnonii [the people of the early British kingdom that occupied the area that is now Cornwall] must be given the credit of cradling the superb mythology of Arthur.'"[13] There is considerable debate over where Arthur was located within Britain. But Arthur was not necessarily based in the southwest of Britain simply because of the fact that this is the area that generated the most legends about him.

The main issue that limits Alcock's research is that it is a bit out-of-date. *Arthur's Britain* was first published in 1971 and could probably be considered one of the first major books to be published in the field of modern Arthurian research.[14] Alcock's excavations at Cadbury Castle were extremely important, not only because of the discoveries made, but also because they seemed to ignite an interest in revealing more

---

[12] Susan M. Pearce, "The Cornish Elements in the Arthurian Tradition," *Folklore* 85, no. 3 (1974): 146, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1260070.

[13] W. Gruffydd in Pearce, "Cornish Elements," 145.

[14] Arthurian studies have experienced several renaissances. During the Romantic Era, the legends were revived by artists. More recently, effort began to be put into pinning down a historic Arthur. Besides Alcock, some of the earlier scholars in this effort include E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*; R. G. Collingwood, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*; John Morris; *The Age of Arthur: A History of the British Isles from 350-650*; and Kenneth Jackson, "The Arthur of History."

information about the mysterious King Arthur. As more and more research was done, the holes in Alcock's research (which are still included in all Arthurian theories) became more evident and received much criticism. Alcock himself wrote in the preface of a later edition of his book, "[critiques] have largely undermined the case which I had advanced for the historic Arthur: indeed, some scholars would claim that they have destroyed that case completely. As a result, *Arthur's Britain* is no longer a reliable guide to the present state of knowledge, hypothesis and opinion."[15] In the revised edition of the book, Alcock included a bibliography of new critical analyses pertaining to aspects of his research, acknowledging issues that could be found with his research.[16]

Unlike Alcock and Radford, Geoffrey Ashe, one of the foremost Arthurian historians of the present day, bases his case firmly on both textual and archaeological evidence, treating each form of evidence with equal investigation and criticism. Ashe does place a large amount of importance on archaeological evidence to support the case for Arthur's existence. He was present at the 1963 excavations of Glastonbury directed by Ralegh Radford which attempted to verify the story of the grave supposedly discovered by monks in 1191. However, despite his experience in archaeological work, the majority of Ashe's book, *The Discovery of King Arthur*, is a discussion of the various medieval writings on King Arthur.[17] Regarding the debate over the importance to be placed on the Welsh sources, Ashe writes "personally, I would not dismiss them as altogether worthless, but at best they do not go very far, and they certainly fail to prove

---

[15] Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, xvii

[16] In Geoffrey Ashe's *The Discovery of King Arthur*, "In 1982 Alcock acknowledged the force of some of the criticism, and declared himself now 'agnostic' regarding Arthur personally," 90.

[17] Geoffrey Ashe, *The Discovery of King Arthur* (Henry Holt and Company, Inc, 1985).

Arthur's existence."[18] Ashe includes certain pieces of Welsh literature in his discussion,

such as, such as *Y Gododdin* and *The Song of the Graves*, but focuses the majority of his

analysis on the chroniclers: Gildas, Nennius, and Bede.

Ashe devotes much of his attention to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum*

Britanniae. He maintains that Geoffrey is a valid source, moreover an integral one, and

focuses much attention on Geoffrey's writings. Even in Geoffrey's own day (d. 1155),

this validation of *The History of the Kings of Britain* would have garnered much

criticism. Geoffrey's book was ridiculed when it was finished and considered to be purely

fantasy. Even today, many Arthurian scholars advise caution when dealing with

Geoffrey as evidence for Arthur's existence due to the amount of fantasy Geoffrey

includes. Historian John J. Parry observes, "there is a general tendency to misunderstand

the method of Geoffrey. We pride ourselves upon discovering that what he wrote was

not history, and we overlook the care he took to have it accepted as history."[19] What

seems to happen is that historians look at Geoffrey's tale, notice the obvious fiction, and

discount every part of the story. They do not seem to see the possible benefits of sifting

through the fantasies to discover any realities that lie beneath by examining the story with

a serious eye and cross-referencing with other medieval texts.[20]

Ashe credits Geoffrey with the creation of Arthur's reputation as a great king, and

based on modern scholarship, it is difficult to argue against Geoffrey's hand in the

growth of Arthurian legend. While there were stories of Arthur before Geoffrey of

---

[18] Ashe, *Discovery,* viii.
[19] John J. Parry, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Paternity of Arthur," *Speculum* 13, no. 3 (1938): 271-272, doi:10.2307/3038944.
[20] By picking out small, specific details, such as names, dates, or unique events, information can be verified, amended, or dismissed based on corresponding information gleaned from other sources.

Monmouth, Geoffrey's was the first book to give a detailed account of Arthur's entire life, even if he does include a healthy dose of fantasy as well. *The History of the Kings of Britain* tells the story of Arthur's unique conception, his ascension to the throne and eventful reign, and his unfortunate death in the late third century. However, Ashe also believes that Geoffrey also included much truth in his story, even if it is masked by an imaginative fable, at least getting the facts of the story mostly right (if still a little skewed) even if he did get the names wrong. Ashe argues that the events that Geoffrey narrates in order to give historical context to Arthur are more or less accurate, even if the names are changed and generations are blended together. What redeems Ashe's research from being completely undermined by skeptics is that, although he puts emphasis on Geoffrey of Monmouth's contributions, he does not rely overly much on him for proof of Arthur's existence and identity and draws on many other sources, both literary and archaeological.

An Arthurian scholar who, like Ashe, focuses largely on literary sources for his theory on Arthur is Mike Ashley. However, where Ashe was nearly balanced in his use of textual and archaeological evidence, Ashley tips the scales heavily in favor of textual evidence. In his book, *A Brief History of King Arthur: The Man and the Legend Revealed*, Ashley provides primarily written evidence for Arthur's existence and identity, almost relying completely on them (Gildas and Nennius in particular) and only including little bits of archaeological evidence.[21] The pieces of archaeological proof that Ashley does provide are generally from well-known Arthurian excavation projects, such as those of Tintagel, Glastonbury, and Cadbury, and supportive of his own theory. Ashley does

---

[21] Mike Ashley, *A Brief History*, 11.

not present any new archaeological evidence of his own; his primary evidence comes from the various pieces of early medieval literature dealing with Arthur.

In his research, Ashley examines the Latin sources very closely, but also devotes quite a bit of study to the king lists and ancestral records of the early British kingdoms. Using primarily the research of P. C. Bartrum, Ashley pieces together a chronology in order to clarify the timeline of historical events leading up to Arthur's career.[22] Ashley alters Bartrum's work in certain places where he sees issues and manipulates the genealogies by "dead-reckoning," or counting back generations at a set rate, in order to account for inconsistencies in generations.[23] Ashley's dexterous use of these genealogies and king lists results in an acceptable timeline and provides a solid base on which to build his theory. His obvious appreciation of these documents resembles Alcock's preference for record-history versus chronicle-history. Like Alcock, he values official documents over narratives and folklore. While Ashley does explore the Welsh matter (the body of Welsh poetry), he chooses to use it as supporting evidence or interpretive material rather than as central proof.

Ashley is one of the authors who not only attempts to prove that Arthur existed but also attempts to establish the specific identity of Arthur. However, his final decision on who Arthur really was seems a bit abrupt and relatively unsupported compared to the thorough research that is apparent in the preceding chapters. In his book, Ashley establishes and supports his claim that King Arthur is a conglomeration of various different early medieval royal Arthurs, including Riocatus, and Arthwys ap Mar. However, Ashley maintains that the original basis for the Arthurian legends, the Arthur

---

[22] Ashley, *A Brief History*, 50-68.
[23] Alcock uses this particular phrase and provides a succinct explanation in his book, *Arthur's Britain*, 11.

remembered as the victor of the battle of Badon, was a combination of Arthur of the

Pennines and Cadell of the Gleaming Hilt. While many disagree based on their own

research on Ashley's ultimate identification of Arthur, or Arthurs, as Arthur of the

Pennines and Cadell of the Gleaming Hilt, the initial part of his theory in which he argues

for a conglomerate Arthur is actually very popular. To a certain extent, it is even very

true, in that the legends of Arthur have grown so much, even during the Middle Ages,

that they have exceeded the abilities of any one man, even an exceptional one. Many are

of the opinion, and probably rightly so, that the original Arthur most likely made a few

impressive achievements, and that more deeds were accredited to him as time passed,

making him the legend he is today.

Ashley is not the only scholar to promote a theory that departs from the traditional

conception of Arthur, breaking out of the parameters of location and time that are

generally associated with Arthur.[24] Another author with a theory that is a bit unusual is

Simon Andrew Stirling. In his book, *The King Arthur Conspiracy: How a Scottish

Prince Became a Mythical Hero*, Stirling uses primarily textual evidence much in the

way Ashley does, yet stands out from other scholars in his use of the Welsh literary

sources.[25] Both authors rely heavily on textual sources for their evidence, but they differ

in the types of literary sources they use. A large portion of Stirling's research centers on

the many Welsh poems that reference Arthur and his knights. Stirling is clearly very

familiar with the poems that make up the Welsh Matter, and it shows in his research

---

[24] There exists a generally accepted time and location for Arthur: the dates in the *Annales Cambriae* (early 6th century) and southern England (so that he is in an area affected by the Saxons).

[25] Simon Andrew Stirling, *The King Arthur Conspiracy: How a Scottish Prince Became a Mythical Hero* (Great Britain, The History Press, 2012).

when he uses several of the more obscure poems.[26] More importantly, his interpretations

of these poems are insightful and present intriguing possibilities when then considered in

the context of the Arthurian legends. Stirling provides clarity on the identities of

Arthur's parents, Uther and Ygraine, whose names in their original Welsh forms can be

understood as variations on "Father" and "Lady" respectively. Stirling's knowledge of

early medieval Britain and its traditions is probably his greatest asset in his research as it

leads to some truly interesting observations concerning the poems he analyzes,

particularly concerning the identities of Arthur's ancestors and associates.

Over the course of his book, Stirling works to establish a case to support his claim

that Artuir mac Aidain, a Scottish prince, is the basis for the Arthurian legends. Stirling

makes many interesting connections, perhaps the most impressive of which involves

identifying all twenty-four of Arthur's knights as listed in the *Pedwar Marchog ar*

Hugain Llys Arthur (or, *Four Horsemen and Twenty of the Court of Arthur*). Yet, his

theory remains questionable in some areas. A main concern is that he uses primarily

Welsh poems to support the idea of a Scottish Arthur. While it is accepted that the

authors of these poems were mobile due to their need for patronage, traditionally most

scholars are generally resistant to the Scottish Arthur.[27] Besides a general sense of

discomfort with an Arthur who is not British, the argument exists that the real Arthur had

to have been from Wales since this is the area from which many of the earliest legends

seem to have originated. A Scottish Arthur such as the one whom Stirling proposes is not

necessarily greeted with much enthusiasm by the more traditional Arthurian researchers,

---

[26] For example, *Ymiddiddan Gwyn aap Nudd a Gwyddno Garanhir*, in the *Black Book of Carmarthen*, *Song of the Sons of Llyr*, and *Cad Goddau*.
[27] Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, 82.

even if he does have some intriguing theories. Stirling's research, while innovative, has yet to satisfy the need for conclusive evidence on Arthur's identity.

Another non-traditional suggestion for the identity of Arthur is presented by C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas. Their theory is that the name *Arthur* originally came from Lucius Artorius Castus, the first commander of the Sarmatian warriors sent to Britain by the Roman emperor in 175 BCE.[28] These cavalry men were from a tribe called the Iazyges, which inhabited the Danube region, and they spoke a dialect of northeastern Iranian similar to the dialect spoken by the people groups living in the Caucasus.[29] The theory can be simplified and explained in three basic points. Firstly, the Sarmatians which Castus commanded were mounted warriors. This, according to Littleton and Thomas, parallels nicely with the knights of the medieval ideal. Secondly, Castus led these Sarmatian warriors to Gaul in 184 in order to quell tribes rebelling against Roman authority. Littleton and Thomas point out that, in later legends, Arthur also leads campaigns in Gaul, and the authors suggest that this could be the origin of this tradition in the legends. Thirdly, Littleton and Thomas use the similarities between the Arthurian grail legend and a parallel Ossetic folktale to illustrate the common points between the Arthurian and Ossetic traditions.[30] Littleton and Thomas propose that subsequent leaders of the Sarmatian warriors took the name 'Artorius' as a sort of title in honor of their original leader and that it was one of these leaders generations later who is the Arthur recorded as fighting at Badon and Camlann.

---

[28] C. Scott Littleton, "Were Sarmatians the source of Arthurian legend?" *Archaeology* 50, no. 1 (1997), 48, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

[29] Littleton, "Were Sarmations?" 48.

[30] The Ossetians are the modern inhabitants of the Caucasus whose ancestors spoke a similar dialect to that of the Sarmatians.

In his critical article analyzing their argument, Richard Wadge points out several weaknesses to this theory. He sees their paper proposing the theory as having a four-part argument with three of these points discussing connections and one discussing the historical background concerning the Romans, Sarmatians, and Britons.[31] Wadge claims that this final point is the most important because "if his historical construction is insecure, there is no way of explaining how a Sarmation tradition can be found as the starting point for one of the most significant British legends."[32] Indeed, if Littleton and Thomas cannot establish a satisfactory connection between the inhabitants of Britain and the Sarmatian immigrants, there is almost no point in analyzing the similarities between the two traditions. It is nearly impossible to establish such a connection due to the scarcity of information available concerning the island of Britain during this time period, and their connections seem less than compelling.

Another weakness of their argument is that one of their primary connections between the two myth systems is the story of the Holy Grail. However, parallels to the Holy Grail legend can be found in Celtic mythology in the story "Branwen," which focuses on the British King Bran, also known as Bran the Blessed. As Wadge points out, "it is quite probable that Sarmatian tradition had already absorbed Celtic influences in the pre-Christian era," so it seems to be a matter of confusion concerning who influenced whom.[33] Due to the abundance of Arthurian material in Wales and Cornwall, places steeped in Celtic tradition, it seems that many who support the idea of a south-western

---

[31] C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas, "The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origin of the Arthurian and Holy Grail Legends," *The Journal of American Folklore*, 91, no. 359 (1978): 513-527, doi: 10.2307/539571.
[32] Richard Wadge, "King Arthur: A British or Sarmation Tradition?" *Folklore* 98, no. 2 (1987): 204, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1259982.
[33] Wadge, "British or Sarmatian?" 213.

British Arthur would be opposed to this Sarmatian theory which places Arthur's roots in an entirely different folkloric tradition, much in the same way that many would be opposed to Stirling's Scottish Arthur.

Another potential weakness of Littleton's and Thomas' argument is the limited scope of sources that he uses for evidence. They rely primarily on British lore and legend about King Arthur and then compare this material to legends coming from the Caucasus Mountains in Eastern Europe. As discussed previously, many historians are in agreement that it is no longer sufficient to provide solely textual evidence, particularly of a folkloric nature, in support of an Arthurian theory. Moreover, the Arthurian literature that they do use comes from a slightly later time period, after the legends surrounding Arthur had begun to develop. In most cases, it is ideal to use textual evidence that dates from as near the event being researched as possible. In the case of their research, it makes sense in a way to look a bit later in the development of the legends because they are examining the legends in order to find an origin, yet this still seems a little less reliable. While some of the similarities between the two groups of lore are striking, from these commonalities Littleton and Thomas extrapolate the idea that Arthur was closely connected to these Sarmatians, which is just too big a leap without having more solid proof to support it.

Although much research has been done on the subject of the identity of King Arthur, most scholars cannot reach an agreement. Theories range from the traditional British king to the more unusual Roman commanders and Scottish chieftains. Debate in the field covers, obviously, Arthur's existence but also which sources are more useful, which sources are reliable, and the true identity of the real Arthur on whom all the legends are based. All of these questions, as well as countless others, have been

answered multiple times in multiple ways by multiple scholars, yet they all remain unanswered.

The most notable area in which great progress has been made is in determining the correct time period for Arthur and establishing a historical framework in which to place him. Although there is still some debate surrounding this accomplishment, the window for Arthur's activities has been at least narrowed down, albeit to the rather broad period of the Dark Ages, c. 400-600, spanning roughly two hundred years. Due to this periodization and other achievements in other fields, there now exists a better idea of the sort of position and command that "King" Arthur would have held and a clearer picture of the culture in which he would have lived. Despite these achievements in the field, there still remain many questions concerning Arthur to be answered, many of which can be explored by an examination of Dark Age documents. One question rises to a position of prominence over the others: did Arthur even exist?

Textual Sources Concerning Arthur

When looking for proof that Arthur did indeed exist, the generally accepted starting points are the range of medieval texts in which he appears. The Welsh sources, considered to be less reliable than the Latin sources, are often characterized very generally as fiction, while the Latin sources are broadly called historical. Another issue with the Welsh sources is that most are considered to be folklore and come from the Celtic mythological tradition. Despite these qualities of the Welsh sources—seen as shortcomings by many scholars—there are several sources which stand out from the rest as giving interesting insight on Arthur.

Many of the Welsh traditions are communicated in the form of poetry. There are several medieval books of early Welsh poetry that are still in existence today. The *Black Book of Caermarthen* dates from some point within the years 1154 to 1189; the *Book of Aneurin* was copied in the latter part of the thirteenth century; shortly after that, in the beginning of the fourteenth century, the *Book of Taliessin* was copied down; and the *Red Book of Hergest* was compiled throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[34] The poems in these four books are attributed to four Celtic bards living in the sixth century: Myrddin (Merlin), Aneurin, Taliessin, and Llywarch Hen. Some of the attributions are obvious as the authors are named in the titles of the books or poems. For example, one poem begins with the phrases "This the Gododdin. Aneurin composed it," making it quite clear who the author was.[35] Many of the poems are written in the first person and use phrases such as "I am Taliessin" at different points throughout the text of the poem.[36] Little is known about these authors besides their names, although a bit more research has been done on Myrddin, as several have supposed that, due to his name, he is the basis of the character of Merlin.[37]

Also found in these books are several sets of Triads, which the Welsh bards used as a device for remembering the names of people and places. Like the poems, Triads are considered to be some of the earliest textual mentions of Arthur, despite the fact that they were written down long after their initial oral composition. The *Black Book of Caermarthen* contains a set of Triads named *Trioedd Arthur ac gwyr*, or *Triads of Arthur*

---

[34] William F. Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (Forgotten Books, 2007), 2.
[35] Skene, *Four Ancient Books*, 286.
[36] Skene, *Four Ancient Books*, 422.
[37] Scholarship on the figure of Merlin includes *The Quest for Merlin* by Nikolai Tolstoy and *Merlin: Shaman, Prophet, Magician* by John Matthews.

and his warriors. This same set of Triads is also found in the *Red Book of Hergest* within

a larger set of Triads known as the *Trioedd ynys Brydain*, or *Triads of the island of*

Britain.[38] The Triads mention Arthur several times, as well as people and places

associated with him. Events pertaining to Arthur are also mentioned, although few to no

details are included since each snippet of information is communicated in the stanzas that

are the Triad form. Some of the Triads are extremely short:

> Three Wanderers of Arthur's Court:
>
>> Heledd,
>>
>> and Llywarch,
>>
>> and Llemenig.[39]

There is very little information communicated in this stanza. Although it is quite

straightforward, it is difficult to interpret clearly. Other stanzas give more details:

> Three Faithlesss (Unchaste) Wives of the Island of Britain. Three daughters of
>
> Culfanawyd Prydein:
>
>> Essyllt Fair-Hair (Trystan's mistress),
>>
>> and Penarwan (wife of Owain son of Urien),
>>
>> and Bun, wife of Fflamddwyn.
>>
>> And one was more faithless than those three: Gwenhwyfar, Arthur's wife,
>
> since she shamed a better man than any (of the others).[40]

This Triad gives much more information, and the meaning is communicated a little more

clearly. However, in the tradition of the Triads, there really is no story told in the stanza.

---

[38] Skene, *Four Ancient Books*, 18.

[39] Rachel Bromwich, ed., *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 207.

[40] Bromwich, *Trioedd*, 210.

Clearly, there are stories behind the lines of the Triads, but a bard who is well-versed in folklore is needed to elaborate on the stanzas. The various stanzas related to Arthur pose difficulties similar to those in these two examples: either they are too brief to be interpreted in any meaningful way or they give vague details that hint at a larger story.

Besides the Triads, the *Red Book of Hergest*, the earliest extant manuscript dating from c. 1400, also includes the stories known now as the *Mabinogion*. The *Red Book of Hergest*—although not the earliest text to contain these stories—is the earliest text to contain *all* of the stories in their complete forms. The *Mabinogion* today is a set of eleven early medieval Welsh stories. These stories can be divided up into smaller categories. The Four Branches of the Mabinogi are "Pwyll, Lord of Dyved," "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr," "Manawyden, Son of Llyr," and "Math, Son of Mathonwy."[41] Within the context of the *Red Book of Hergest*, these stories are assumed to have been copied down by the same person, and, in each other manuscript in which they appear, they are in the same order and are not separated by any other material.[42] Each of these four stories ends with the phrase "so ends this Branch of the Mabinogi," giving the collection of stories its name.[43] None of the rest of the stories ends with this phrase, yet they appear in various manuscripts with the first four stories. "The Dream of Maxen" and "Lludd and Llevelys" are pseudo-histories, telling the stories of Magnus Maximus and King Lludd respectively, both of whom appear in traditional Welsh history. "How Culhwch Won Olwen" is an Arthurian tale, and, although it does not center on the story of Arthur, it is

---

[41] *The Mabinogion*, translated by Jeffrey Gantz (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 11.
[42] *Mabinogion*, 30.
[43] *Mabinogion*, 31.

thought to be the earliest appearance of Arthur in traditional Celtic prose.[44] Arthur turns

up again in "The Dream of Rhonabwy." In this story, Arthur noticeably fits the role of a

legendary, surrounded by opulent pavilions and waited on by many attendants; these

details and Arthur's evident status suggest that "Rhonabwy" is one of the last tales to be

composed. "Owein," "Peredur, Son of Evrawg," and "Gereint and Enid" are often

termed as "the Romances" and are very similar to the French tales of Chretiens de

Troyes, "Yvain," "Perceval," and "Erec" respectively.[45] All three of the Romances take

place in the context of Arthur's court, and, although they are grouped by modern

scholars, they do not appear in the same order, or even consistently as a unit in any of the

manuscripts in which they appear.[46] This suggests that these three stories were by

different authors and likely later additions to the four initial stories, making them less

helpful in identifying Arthur.

The earliest manuscript in which any of the stories of the *Mabinogion* are found is

the manuscript named Peniarth 6. This manuscript, dating c. 1225, contains only a few

lines from the Four Branches.[47] Another medieval Welsh book, the *White Book of*

Rhydderch, dating c. 1325, is recognized as being the earliest version of what can be

called a complete manuscript of the stories. Although thought to have once contained all

of the stories, the surviving copy is damaged and only contains incomplete version of a

few of the stories.[48] These eleven stories remained relatively unnoticed in the language

---

[44] *Mabinogion*, 11, Although the exact date of the composition of "How Culhwch Won Olwen" is unknown, historian Geoffrey of Monmouth can be used as a gauge: while the other stories in *The Mabinogion* are clearly derivative of Geoffrey, "'Culhwch,' by contrast, appears entirely free of such influence," 25.

[45] *Mabinogion*, 192.

[46] *Mabinogion*, 11.

[47] *Mabinogion*, 21.

[48] *Mabinogion*, 29.

of their composition until 1848, when Lady Charlotte Guest translated them from Welsh

to English and published them under the title of *The Mabinogion*.[49] These stories are

thought by scholars to have come from a much older tradition than the manuscripts' dates

suggest. They were originally part of the oral tradition of the Celtic mythological body.

As such, they were likely subject to much alteration before they were at last written

down, but the language and style of the stories suggests that they had evolved to their

present form at some point between 1000 and 1250.[50] These stories are some of the most

detailed pictures of a Welsh Arthur that are available to scholars, and, since they are so

old, they are most likely depictions of him prior to the blossoming of his legends.

    This explosion of Arthur's legends came about partly as a result of the writings of

Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey's book, *History of the Kings of Britain*, or *Historia*

Regum Britanniae, written c. 1136, was extremely influential in the expansion of

Arthurian legend. Arthurian historian R. S. Loomis credits him with "determin[ing] the

character of the genre which we may best call Arthurian pseudo-history."[51] Many believe

all Arthurian texts following the *Historia* to be heavily influenced by Geoffrey's work,

which is, ultimately, the first biography of Arthur. Geoffrey includes significantly more

details on Arthur's life in the *Historia* than had ever before been given, and many of

which do not appear in any histories prior to the time of Geoffrey's writing. Geoffrey's

inclusion of specific details, which include dragons, prophetic dreams, and giants, have

caused many scholars to discount the *Historia* as an unreliable source for Arthurian

---

[49] *Mabinogion*, 31.
[50] *Mabinogion*, 21.
[51] Roger Sherman Loomis, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthurian Origins," *Speculum* 3, no. 1 (1928): 20, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2848118.

information, yet others believe that the book is "built around a slender core of fact."[52]

The game then becomes figuring out what can be discarded as Geoffrey's overly-active

imagination and what can be regarded as historical. And there is indeed evidence that

Geoffrey did include historical information in the *Historia*. His uses many sources of

information. Loomis writes:

> Geoffrey's Arthurian materials are a complex product. One may distinguish the
>
> historical basis from Nennius; the strands of Welsh mythology; a list of heroic
>
> Welsh names; the stories of Arthur's birth and the war with Mordred, which seem
>
> to betray in localization and nomenclature a Cornish origin…his oratorical style,
>
> which borrows…everything from the Latin historians.[53]

Although it is evident that Geoffrey was quite reliant on several of the renowned

chroniclers to whom modern scholars commonly refer, the *Historia* is still questioned

rigorously regarding its content and the reliability of its author, seemingly due to

Geoffrey's inclusion of fantastic elements and his blatant dramatic flair.[54]

The texts from which Geoffrey so obviously draws for historical information for

the *Historia* come from the second category of Arthurian texts, the Latin sources. These

sources—of which Geoffrey is technically a member—are primarily written in Latin and

are the products of medieval historians who, in general, are also members of the clergy,

since the clergy were typically the only members of society who were literate. Many

scholars regard these sources as being more reliable than the Welsh sources because of

---

[52] John J. Parry, "Paternity of Arthur," 272.

[53] Loomis, "Arthurian Origins," 18-19.

[54] An example of an author who critiques Geoffrey of Monmouth—and using Geoffrey's text as evidence for Arthur's existence—is G. H. Gerould in his article "King Arthur and Politics," *Speculum* 2, no. 1 (1927): 33-51.

their origins and respected authors. In fact, one of the reasons for Geoffrey's

unpopularity is because of his place in this group.

One of the Latin sources that Geoffrey uses is Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*, or

History of the Britons.[55] Nennius, writing in the ninth century, gives a history of the

inhabitants of the island of Britain that agrees for the most part with the accounts of other

medieval chroniclers. However, differing from other authors, Nennius compiles a list of

twelve successful battles that Arthur fought against the Saxons, the last of which he

names as Mont Badonis (Badon), saying that, after this decisive battle, the Saxons were

beaten back for nearly a century. Nennius also includes a collection of various

miraculous or wondrous things in Britain, several of which are related to Arthur in some

manner.

Nennius' account of British history agrees almost completely with the account of

Gildas, also known as Gildas Sapiens, or Gildas the Wise. Gildas' work, *De Excidio*

Britanniae (*On the Ruin of Britain*),[56] tells of the history of the island upon the departure

of the Romans, detailing the incursions of the Scots and the Picts, as well as those of the

Saxons. The second part of *De Excidio*—and Gildas' primary reason for writing—is a

series of criticisms of the kings of the different regions of Britain. *De Excidio* was

written in response to the attacks of the Angles, Saxons, and Picts and blames a morally

degenerated population with degenerate rulers for the attacks, ascribing them to God's

wrath. Gildas lived in the early sixth century and wrote *De Excidio* c. 540, meaning that

he lived at a time in which he should have been a contemporary of Arthur, depending on

where exactly Arthur is placed in the Dark Ages. This makes *De Excidio* particularly

---

[55] Nennius, *History of the Britons*, trans. J. A. Giles (USA).
[56] Gildas, *On the Ruin of Britain*, trans. J. A. Giles (Dodo Press).

frustrating because Gildas does not include any details about Arthur in the book.   He

discusses the battle of Badon, yet does not mention Arthur one single time throughout the

whole of his book, even in the section criticizing the kings supposedly belonging to

Arthur's time period.

Gildas' exclusion of Arthur is troubling, yet there are several theories to account

for it. One theory comes straight from medieval sources. In his *Vita Gildae*, Caradoc of

Llancarfan confirms that Gildas lived at the same time as Arthur, "whom [Gildas] loved

exceedingly, and whom he always desired to obey."[57] The author goes on to describe

how Gildas' many siblings did not like Arthur and how the eldest, Huail, eventually

rebelled against Arthur, who killed him in retaliation. The same story is told by Geraldus

Cambrensis, who writes in *The Description of Wales*:

> The Britons maintain that, when Gildas criticized his own people so bitterly, he
>
> wrote as he did because he was so infuriated by the fact that King Arthur had
>
> killed his own brother, who was a Scottish chieftain. When he heard of his
>
> brother's death, or so the Britons say, he threw into the sea a number of
>
> outstanding books which he had written in their praise and about Arthur's
>
> achievements. As a result you will find no book which gives an authentic account
>
> of that great prince.[58]

Another explanation of Arthur's absence from *De Excidio* is that he is not actually

absent. In Gildas' complaint against his contemporary kings, he criticizes Cuneglasus

---

[57] Caradoc of Llancarfan, *Vita Gildae*, in *Two Lives of Gildas*, trans. Hugh Williams (Llanerch Press, 1990): 84-103, 92.

[58] Gerald of Wales, "The Description of Wales," in White, *King Arthur in Legend and History*, ed. Richard White (New York: Routledge, 1997), 21.

who, although a king at the time of Gildas' writing c. 540, he describes as being a

charioteer for "The Bear" in his younger days. The Bear is not mentioned again, nor does

Gildas ever name him. It has been noted by some that the Welsh root for *bear* is *arth*,

and, thus, it has been proposed that The Bear is Arthur. It is plausible that Cuneglasus

could have been Arthur's charioteer in his youth, because the battle of Badon is dated

roughly twenty years prior to the time of Gildas' writing.[59] Whether or not either of these

theories is correct, it remains that Gildas omits any mention of Arthur from his narration

of history, a point which many use as a strong piece of evidence in arguing against the

existence of a historical Arthur.

It is not surprising then that Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*,[60]

long regarded as the most reliable early medieval source for early medieval history, fails

to mention Arthur, as it is evident that Bede relied almost exclusively on *De Excidio* for

the history of this time period. Writing in 731, Bede was two centuries removed from

events, but he was most likely was aware of Arthur through folklore, although this cannot

be proven. A possible reason why Bede chose not to include Arthur is because he was

writing a history specifically about the English church. If Arthur was not significant in

the early development of the Anglo-Saxon church—and it is highly unlikely that he

was—then Bede would not have seen any reason to include him, especially if Gildas had

not mentioned him. The fact that Arthur is not present in the writings of Bede, the

premiere historian of early Anglo-Saxon England, is problematic. However, considering

---

[59] Also, Rodney Castleden notes that Gildas gives another one of the kings an animalistic nickname, calling the king Cynan by the name "Caninus," or "the Dog," in *King Arthur: The Truth behind the Legend* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 28.

[60] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

that Bede was several centuries removed from the Arthurian era and drew on Gildas extensively for information on this period, his silence concerning Arthur is not surprising—nor should it be condemning.

A sub-category of the Latin sources takes the form of the various *vitae*, hagiographical writings about the lives of saints. Arthur appears in episodes contained in several of these hagiographies. Sometimes he interacts with the saints in a friendly manner; at other times, he is depicted as a fierce, avaricious, and war-like king. Many of these *vitae* do not seem to have been influenced by the romantic traditions of Arthur produced by 12th-century French authors, such as Chretien de Troyes, soon after Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his *Historia*. Thus, the Arthur who appears in these hagiographies seems to be more like the Arthur who appears in the Welsh sources and, thus, slightly closer to the historical Arthur in term of his status and historical interactions with people. It is however, important to note that *vitae* are generally highly-stylized and tend to follow specific, generic conventions, in order to provide Christian models of saintly behavior. Whenever Arthur appears in the *vitae*, he is more than likely nothing more than a well-known name filling a specific role, and it is doubtful that the details of these encounters are accurate. Therefore, it is difficult to pull any solid information about Arthur from the *vitae*; still, they are useful as sources from which to glean ideas.[61]

The Legend of St. Goeznovius is probably the most important hagiographical source dealing with Arthur.[62] Written c. 1019, it was composed before Geoffrey on

---

[61] Although useful for historical study and research, it is important to remember that the primary purpose of a hagiography is to provide a model of ideal Christian behavior for other people to emulate. For more information on the genre of hagiography, see Thomas Head's article, "Hagiography," *The ORB: The On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies*, College of Staten Island, City University of New York, edited by Kathryn Talarico, http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/religion/hagiography/hagio.htm.

[62] "*The Life of St Goeznovius (Legenda Sancti Goeznovii)*," in *Legend and History*, 12-13.

Monmouth's *Historia*, yet it corroborates one of Geoffrey's most ridiculed claims, placing Arthur in Gaul towards the end of his military career. Goeznovius is a saint from the region of Brittany in northern France and has been tentatively identified as a man named Gwyddno, who emigrated from Wales sometime in the late 5th or early 6th century.[63] *Goeznovius* was not discovered until 1883, when A. de la Borderie discovered a mention of the *Legend* in a chronicle from the fourteenth century. Although no complete copy of the *Legend* survives, extracts exist in a manuscript from the fifteenth century, and the original *Legend*, originating in Brittany, can be confidently dated to the early eleventh century.[64]

    The Legend of Goeznovius is important because it is the second source that independently places one of Arthur's military campaigns in Gaul. Since an early copy of this *vita* does not exist, it cannot be proved definitively that *Goeznovius* does not take material or concepts from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. However, Geoffrey Ashe, probably *Goeznovius'* greatest proponent, argues that the Arthurian information in this *vita* was not derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth's story.[65] Ashe argues that it seems more likely that *Goeznovius* and Geoffrey's *Historia* relied on the same source for their Arthurian information—particularly the detail of Arthur's presence on the continent.[66] In this way, Ashe validates Geoffrey of Monmouth, who cites in his dedication a "certain very ancient book written in the British language" given to him by an Archdeacon of Oxford.[67] Since the publishing of *Historia Regum*

---

[63] Ashe, *The Discovery*, 110-111.

[64] Geoffrey Ashe, "'A Certain Very Ancient Book': Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History," *Speculum* 56, no. 2 (1981): 301-323, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2846937, 305.

[65] Ashe, "Very Ancient Book," 304.

[66] Ashe, "Very Ancient Book," 305.

[67] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 51.

Britanniae in the twelfth century, it has been assumed by most that Geoffrey was making

up his source (like he made up the rest of his book), yet *The Legend of St. Goeznovius*

demonstrates the possibility of another Arthurian source, probably lost to modern

scholars, existing in the Middle Ages.

Another category of sources which is related to the Latin sources are the annals.

Annals are records that are usually kept in churches or monastic communities, keeping a

record of the major events of each year in order to keep track of the date of Easter which,

although cyclical, was inconsistent from year to year. The general format was two

columns: a column for the year and a corresponding column for the events of that year.

Generally, several religious institutions kept the same annal, and an event was copied

from the original annal in which it was listed to all the others. Annals did not necessarily

begin with the earliest date listed; often, an annal begun later in the Middle Ages would

either copy earlier events from an earlier annal or estimate the dates of well-known

events, particularly if these events were significant in Christian history. As a result, this

means that much of the early materials in various annals is questioned extensively before

it is accepted.[68]

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a famous set of annals. The earliest copy of the

Chronicle, known as the Winchester Manuscript, dates from before the end of the ninth

century.[69] The beginning date of the Winchester Manuscript is uncertain—the earliest

date listed is 494, but that does not mean that the manuscript was begun in this year—but

---

[68] For further information on Annals and Chronicles, see chapter 2, "Tracing the Middle Ages," in John H. Arnold, *What is Medieval History?* (Great Britain: Polity Press, 2008); Eldbjørg Haug also discusses using Annals for historical research in the article "The Icelandic Annals as Historical Sources," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 22, no. 4 (1997): 263 — 274.

[69] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Michael Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1998).

the final entry is the year 891. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* gives a very detailed account

of the Saxon conquest of England and the following developments up until the middle of

the twelfth century. The *Chronicle* does not mention Arthur, although this generally does

not deter Arthurian scholars, since it is not likely that the Saxons would include a positive

portrayal of a leader of the Britons who had thwarted their conquest in a significant way.

In fact, during the Arthurian period, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not record any

defeats of the Anglo-Saxon armies.

Another set of annals, the *Annales Cambriae*, or the *Welsh Annals*, mention

Arthur twice: the battle of Badon and the battle of Camlann. There are five surviving

copies of the *Welsh Annals*, three of which begin with entries early enough to include

these two Arthurian events. The earliest of these three, a manuscript called *Harleian*

3859 seems to have been composed starting c. 795.[70] The other two manuscripts which

mention Arthur are similar to the first in their early sections, suggesting that the source

material for all three manuscripts was the same, or that the material was simply copied

from *Harleian 3859*. The second manuscript, *PRO E. 164/1* is dated tentatively to the

year 1135, although there is an abundance of material for the years between 1255 and

1263, indicating that the manuscript was probably best kept during these years and, most

likely edited extensively at this time.[71] The third manuscript, *Cotton Domitian A.1*, dates

a bit more confidently to c. 1289 and is a bit different from the first two manuscripts, in

that it refers to Arthur as "the illustrious King Arthur of Britain" and calls Mordred "his

traitor" in the entry for Camlann.[72] Many scholars cite this sudden detail as Geoffrey of

---

[70] *Annales Cambriae*, trans. Paul Martin Remfry (United Kingdom: Castle Studies Research & Publishing, 2007), 4.
[71] *Annales Cambriae*, 10.
[72] *Annales Cambriae*, 203.

Monmouth's unfortunate tampering with Arthur's story and discount this manuscript of the *Welsh Annals* from the rest of the legitimate evidence. It has also been argued that all the references to Arthur in the *Welsh Annals* were later additions, although most scholars disagree with this argument since the Arthurian entries match the surrounding entries in tone and sparseness of detail. As annals go on and the years progress, the entries often become more detailed and often the author of an entry will allow some amount of bias to creep in. This sort of personalization appears in the Camlann entry in the *Cotton Domitian A.1* manuscript of the *Annals*, but it is not present in the other two manuscripts. This suggests that the entries concerning Badon and Camlann in the first two manuscripts of the *Annals* were not added simply as a result of Arthur's increasing fame.

Nearly all of the textual sources which can be used when studying Arthur can be criticized and considered unreliable. Some are incomplete; some do not have a known author; many are derivative of a previous work. However, by comparing sources and using different texts to cross-reference each other, some basic information can be extracted from these sources. While no single text that exists has been accepted as a full, complete, and—most importantly—accurate portrayal of the whole of Arthur's life, many shorter sections of manuscripts can be examined, compared, and backed up by archaeological findings in order to reveal a deeper, more solid understanding of the different events of Arthur's life.

Camlann: the Last Battle

The next portion of research will be divided into sections of Arthur's life, which will be analyzed—with some exceptions—in reverse chronological order. Arthur's last battle, Camlann, is one of the most important points of his life. Besides marking the end

of his military career, it is an Arthurian event that most scholars can agree on to some degree. In general, it is one of the few Arthurian events that is believed to be historical. It is viewed by even the most conservative scholars as "the single Arthurian happening which we can be sure of as a fact, present in the tradition from the beginning," appearing in both the *Annales Cambriae* and the *Welsh Triads*.[73]

In the *Welsh Annals*, Camlann appears under the entry for the year 537, simply saying, "The battle of Camlann in which Arthur and Medraut fell. And there was mortality."[74] The entry places Arthur's death at Camlann and also gives the information that Medraut, or Mordred, died at Camlann. What the entry does not tell us, however, is which side of the battle Arthur and Medraut each fought on. Who was Arthur fighting against? Was Medraut his ally or enemy? Another manuscript of the *Annals* dating from a later time clarifies that Mordred was treacherous and killed Arthur, even as Arthur killed him.[75] However, since this version of the *Annals* dates after Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, this information is believed by many scholars to be tainted and modelled after the dramatic events detailed by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

The story of Mordred the usurper facing off against the rightful king, Arthur, on the fields of Camlann has intrigued and fascinated audiences for centuries. In versions of the Arthurian legend that are even later than Geoffrey's *Historia*, Mordred is Arthur's illegitimate son by his half-sister. This concept of Arthur being responsible for the death of a younger male relative, either a nephew or a son, seems to be a consistent theme woven throughout the legends since nearly the beginning. Nennius, in his list in the 9th-

---

[73] Ashe, "Ancient Book," 302.
[74] *Annales*, 156.
[75] *Annales*, 203.

century *Historia Brittonum* of miraculous occurrences in Britain, tells of the tomb of a man named Anir, whom Nennius records as being "the soldier Arthur's son, and Arthur himself killed him and buried him there."[76] In this list, Arthur is recorded as killing his son, although Nennius does not give details as to why; nor does he seem to judge Arthur in any way for this deed. Geoffrey seems to have combined the death of Medraut as recorded in the *Welsh Annals* and Anir's death as recorded by Nennius to create his version of the conflict at Camlann.

Although there are traces of the tale to be found in the *Welsh Triads*, the story "in its classic form" is first told by Geoffrey of Monmouth.[77] As a result, those who criticize Geoffrey of Monmouth are dismissive of the event, despite the earlier references of the *Annals* and the *Triads*. Camlann, though, seems to be one part of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* that Geoffrey is very serious about, saying in the text of the *Historia* that Camlann was an event "he found in the British treatise" and that "he heard it, too, from Walter of Oxford, a man most learned in all branches of history" and the archdeacon who Geoffrey says gave him the book.[78] While some scholars may remain skeptical of this claim, Geoffrey's mention of the "certain very ancient book" at this point in the text seems to be significant: it is the only episode in the *Historia* that Geoffrey "specifically says was taken from the book."[79] In fact, it is also only one of three places in the entire *Historia* that Geoffrey gives a specific date for an event.[80] Geoffrey claims that the battle

---

[76] Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, White, *Legend and History*, 6.
[77] Ashe, "Ancient Book," 303; in the Triads, the battle of Camlann is mentioned several times and is attributed to the blow that "Gwenhwyfach struck upon Gwenhwyfar," 150; in another triad, Medrawd supposedly "dragged Gwenhwyfar from her royal chair, and then he struck a blow upon her," 153.
[78] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 258.
[79] Ashe, "Ancient Book," 301.
[80] Ashe, "Ancient Book," 303.

of Camlann occurred in the year 542.[81] While this date is not exactly the same as the date given in the *Annales Cambriae*, it is only five years later. Considering the relatively poor standards of record-keeping in the medieval time period, a gap of five years is hardly a significant inconsistency.

Just as important as narrowing down the dates of Arthur's life is the task of locating his activities. Several locations have been proposed for the battle of Camlann. Geoffrey of Monmouth, place Camlann, along with several other Arthurian events, in Cornwall. Specifically, he claims it took place beside the River Camblan.[82] In his translation of the *Historia*, Lewis Thorpe writes:

> On 4 August 1960 I visited Camelford and walked along the River Camel as far as Slaughter Bridge. According to local legend the battle between Arthur and Mordred took place in the near-by water-meadow. On the bank of the Camel…I found an ancient stone…with some partly-defaced lettering...the following fragment of an inscription was clearly to be deciphered: LATIN…IIC IACIT FILIVS M…AR…[83]

Some have interpreted this to mean 'Latinus hic iacit filius Merlini Arturus,' optimistically connecting the stone to Arthur and, thus, Camlann. However, "modern scholarship reads the stone as: LATINI HIC IACIT FILIIUS MAGARI. [The monument] of Latinus: here he lies, the son of Magarus."[84] The stone and its inscription would seem to have nothing to do with Arthur; unfortunately, there is nothing more to connect Arthur to this site. The connection of Arthur to the location of the River Camel

---

[81] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 261.
[82] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 259.
[83] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 260-61.
[84] Castleden, *Behind the Legend*, 181.

through this stone and a similar-sounding name is a bit of an optimistic interpretation,

and the evidence is simply not sufficient to form a convincing argument.

"The Dream of Rhonabwy," a Welsh tale from *The Mabinogion*, also seems to

support a Cornish location for Camlann. "The Dream of Rhonabwy" relays the events of

Camlann through a series of messengers and parallels a game of *gwyddbwyll* between

Arthur and Owein with the events of a battle.[85] Historical characters date the story as

developing no earlier than 1200, making this one of the younger stories of *The*

Mabinogion, yet the absence of typical elements of the French Romantic style suggest

that "'Rhonabwy,' however late its composition, largely preserves the ambiance of the

earlier tales" of *The Mabinogion*.[86] In this story, Arthur's court is significantly located in

Cornwall, rather than its usual association with Wales, suggesting a near-by location for

the battle of Camlann.

With little evidence supporting that the River Camblan, the traditional site of the

battle of Camlann, was the River Camel in Cornwall, multiple alternate locations have

been proposed for the battle which ended Arthur's military career. In his article, "Once

Again Arthur's Battles," Kenneth Jackson uses philology to trace words back to their

origins and follow likely patterns of transformation.[87] He asserts that the location of

Birdoswald, a fort on Hadrian's Wall in the north of England, is a reasonable proposal for

the location of the battle of Camlann.[88] The Welsh name for Birdoswald is

Camboglanna, a word in the vocabulary of the Celtic people living in Roman Britain that

---

[85] The game of *gwyddbwyll* is similar to chess. Owein and Arthur play with a set "whose men were gold and whose board was silver." *The Mabinogion*, 185.

[86] *Mabinogion*, 177.

[87] Kenneth Jackson, "Once Again Arthur's Battles," *Modern Philology* 43, no. 1 (1945): 44-577.

[88] First proposed in Ekwall, *River-names*, 67; later in Crawford, "Arthur and his Battles," 289-90; according to Jackson, "Once Again," 56.

meant *crooked bank*. The modern Welsh word *Camlann* is a newer form of the Old

Welsh *Camglan*, which traces its roots back to *Camboglanna*.[89] This places Arthur's

death in the north on nearly the opposite end of England from Cornwall, contradicting

Geoffrey, but complementing the poems and triads of the sixth-century bards, who were

primarily located in the north and, thus, tended to include northern battles and heroes in

their works. It is not uncommon for a particular Arthurian event to be located in several

areas that are on opposite ends of the island; however, it is this inconclusive aspect of

Arthurian research that makes it so difficult to place Arthur in a specific region of Britain

which might be a helpful contribution to identifying him.

Despite the disputed location of the battle of Camlann, it is an event that seems to

have made a lasting impression on the minds of the Britons of early medieval Britain. In

the *Red Book of Hergest*, line 30 of poem XXII says that "Camlann will be heard

again."[90] The poet discusses another battle and references Camlann to demonstrate his

point that "scenes of groaning will again be seen, / and dismal lamentations, / and

mischevious contention."[91] The battle of Camlann clearly lived on in memory, standing

out as one of the most horrible conflicts of the early Middle Ages. Although not many

battles are noted in the earlier years of the *Welsh Annals*, Camlann clearly had enough

significance to be mentioned, as did the famous leader to whom the battle is linked:

Arthur. Perhaps one of the reasons why Camlann was so remembered by the medieval

bards was due to Arthur's presence and major role in the battle. Whatever the reason,

---

[89] Jackson, "Once Again," 56.
[90] Skene, *Four Ancient Books*, 208.
[91] Skene, *Four Ancient Books*, 208.

Camlann was not just one of the many battles fought between the Britons and the Saxons; it was a significant conflict in the minds of the Britons.

Of Arthur's end after the battle of Camlann, Geoffrey of Monmouth only says that he was taken to the Isle of Avalon. He does not say whether or not, once there, Arthur's wounds were healed successfully. The *Annales Cambriae* are very clear that Arthur died either at or soon after the battle of Camlann, yet Geoffrey remains vague on this point, simply saying "Arthur himself, our renowned King, was mortally wounded and was carried off to the Isle of Avalon, so that his wounds might be attended to."[92] He does not say if Arthur died and was buried there, or if he was healed and lived on, although since he does not mention Arthur in the rest of his narrative, it is generally assumed that Arthur dies shortly after he is taken to Avalon. *The Legend of St. Goeznovius* is equally evasive on this point, saying that Arthur "was recalled at length from worldly actions," using vaguely religious phrasing that seems to communicate Arthur's death.[93] In this, Geoffrey's *Historia* and *Goeznovius* seems to agree on this important aspect of the ending of Arthur's life. Each account remains vague: Geoffrey in a stunning and conspicuous lack of details and *Goeznovius* in this single, strange phrase. Despite the reticence of both these accounts, it seems fairly clear that Arthur died at the battle of Camlann, if not soon after it.

While the battle of Camlann defies being located, the identification of the place of Arthur's death and burial might help in locating the place of the battle, since the two are sure to be near to each other. Popular tradition has identified the Isle of Avalon—the last earthly location with which Arthur is associated—as the modern-day location of

---

[92] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 261.
[93] "Goeznovius," in White, *Legend and History*, 13.

Glastonbury. The town of Glastonbury is not on an island; instead, it is on a low-lying plain. Near the town stands a steep, 500-foot hill called Glastonbury Tor. In the present, a medieval church tower stands on top of the Tor. Research suggests that the area was once completely underwater, perhaps accounting for its traditional name, Ynys-witrin, or Isle of Glass.[94] If this is the case, the Tor would have indeed appeared as an island.

There is some speculation on Glastonbury's name and its decided lack of similarity to the name *Avalon*. Traditionally, *Avalon* supposedly means *apple orchard*, an interpretation supported by the apple trees growing on the slopes of Glastonbury Tor. The word *Glastonbury*, from the Anglo-Saxon word *Glaestingaburg*, could also be translated as the phrase *settlement of the Glaestings*. According to local legend, a Celt from the northern part of Britain chased his favorite pig across the entire island of Britain, finally catching up to her on Glastonbury Tor where he found her nursing her piglets underneath an apple tree.[95] This Celt—named Glaesting—decided to move his family to the area and the settlement that grew there carried his name. Still another suggestion, departing entirely from apples, is that *Avalon* is the name of the realm of Avallach, the Celtic deity who rules over the otherworld.[96] Support for this name suggestion is found in the Triads, which record that, after the battle of Camlann, it was "from that (wound) he died, and was buried in a hall on the Island of Afallach."[97] It is an intriguing connection and, in a way, it makes sense that Arthur, if he were fatally wounded, would be taken to the island of the lord of the dead.

---

[94] Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon*, 7.
[95] Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon*, 7.
[96] Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon*, 7-9.
[97] Bromwich, *Trioedd*, 139.

Besides having a mystical reputation as the realm of the dead, Glastonbury also claims somewhat tenuously to have been the resting place of Arthur's remains. In the *Chronicon Anglicanum*, Abbot Ralph of Coggeshall, writing c. 1187-1224, records that in 1191, at Glastonbury were found "the bones of the most famous King Arthur…when people were digging the earth to bury a certain monk…they found this coffin, over which was placed a lead cross, upon which were engraved the following words: 'Here lies the famous King Arthur, buried in the Isle of Avalon.'"[98] Gerald of Wales, writing at nearly the same time as the abbot, c. 1193-9, in his book *Instruction of a Prince*, gives a few more details.[99] He specifies that Arthur was buried with Guinevere who was, according to the inscription on the cross, his second wife. Gerald also mentions that he made a rubbing of the cross, which has survived to the 21st century even though the cross was lost. Besides noting that the bones of the man (presumably Arthur) were extremely large, Gerald writes that "ten or more wounds could clearly be seen" on his skull, "but they had all mended except one. This was larger than the others and it had made an immense gash. Apparently it was this wound which had caused Arthur's death."[100] Gerald also narrates how the bones of both Arthur and Guinevere were moved from the "hollowed-out oak-bole" in which they were buried to a marble coffin inside the church.[101] Unfortunately, the coffin was destroyed and the bones and cross lost during the dissolution of the monasteries during the reign of Henry VIII.

Although the monks claimed that the grave they found was Arthur's, there is much skepticism on the subject. Perhaps the monks were lying about finding the grave in

---

[98] Ralph of Coggeshall, "Chronicon Anglicanum," in White, *Legend and History*, 517.
[99] Giraldus Cambrensis, "Instruction of a Prince," in White, *Legend and History*, 517-19.
[100] Giraldus Cambrensis, "Instruction," in White, *Legend and History*, 519.
[101] Giraldus Cambrensis, "Instruction," in White, *Legend and History*, 517.

order to gain funding for their abbey through the publicity that would result from the finding of the grave of the great King Arthur. Even if the monks did truly find a grave in the state that is described, how can modern scholars be sure that the remains had indeed been Arthur's?

These doubts cannot be assuaged with modern dating and tests since the bones have gone missing. Excavations conducted at the site in Glastonbury by Dr. Ralegh Radford beginning in 1962 revealed that "some prominent person was indeed buried there in the right period," so it would appear that the monks were not completely falsifying their claims.[102] Radford's excavations demonstrated through soil disturbance that the monks did dig up something that was consistent in shape and size to a coffin. Analysis of the drawing of the lead cross found on top of the grave suggests that the monks would have had difficulty composing such a realistic reproduction, as the lettering is archaic, suggesting that it was "more likely that it was a genuine relic of pre-Conquest date."[103]

Furthermore, Arthur's death is not the only occasion on which he is said to have visited Glastonbury. Arthur was associated with Glastonbury even before his supposed grave was found there; an anecdote placing Arthur at Glastonbury appears in Caradoc of Llancarfan's *Vita Gildae*, which dates from c. 1130.[104] In this vita, Gildas, serving at this point in his life as the abbot of Glastonbury, restores Arthur's wife, Guinevere to him after her abduction by King Melvas. Interactions with Gildas aside, this story demonstrates a connection to Glastonbury in both Arthur's life and death.

---

[102] Geoffrey Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury* (England: Sutton Publishing, 1957), xx.
[103] Ralegh Radford, "Glastonbury Abbey," in *The Quest for Arthur's Britain*, ed. Geoffrey Ashe (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1968), 101.
[104] Ashe, *King Arthur's Avalon*, xi.

A rediscovery of Arthur's burial place would be extremely helpful in the search for facts about his life. At this point, it seems that Glastonbury would be the most likely location for Arthur to have been buried, although there are other suggestions, of course.[105] Without the alleged remains and lead cross, there does not seem to be a conceivable way to prove that Arthur was indeed buried at Glastonbury; probably any sort of evidence found would only support—rather than prove—the theory. The only way to resolve the matter would be the unexpected finding of Arthur's remains elsewhere. Despite the fact that there is not much solid evidence of Glastonbury as the resting place of Arthur, Glastonbury is firmly established as a part of the Arthurian tradition.

The Debate of the Gaulish Campaign

If the battle of Camlann is one of the most certain Arthurian events, Arthur's campaigns in Gaul are the most uncertain and hotly-contested. In fact, it is primarily due to the large portion of *Historia Regum Britanniae* in which Geoffrey of Monmouth narrates Arthur's time in Gaul that the book has always been so vehemently declared to be a piece of fiction. Geoffrey actually records Arthur as having made two trips to Gaul. The first began with the defeat of Tribune Frollo, the Roman dignitary ruling Gaul in the name of the emperor. After Frollo's defeat, Arthur spent nine years in Gaul, bringing the whole region under his control. Arthur returned to England for a short time, and then returned to Gaul to do battle with Lucius Hiberius, procurator of Rome, who was charged

---

[105] Geoffrey Ashe suggests Arthur is buried in Avallon, located in the Burgundy region of France, in Ashe, *The Discovery*, 103; Simon Andrew Stirling suggests Arthur's body is buried in one location in Scotland, while his head is in another, in Stirling, *The King Arthur Conspiracy*, 256; Rodney suggests Whithorn in Galloway, Ireland, which housed the religious community of St Ninian, in Castleden, *The Truth Behind the Legend*, 199.

with punishing Arthur for his conquest of Gaul. Arthur's army of Britons battled the
Roman soldiers and suffered many losses, Kay and Bedivere included, but eventually
Lucius Hiberius was killed and the battle ended. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth,
Arthur did not have much time to celebrate, however, because it was almost directly after
this battle that he learned of Mordred's treachery and returned to Britain. Historically, it
is quite obvious that Arthur never conquered Gaul, just as he did not conquer Norway or
Denmark, as Geoffrey also records. Since Arthur's first 9-year campaign in Gaul is
therefore extremely unlikely, the second is also often considered to be yet another one of
the fantastic workings of Geoffrey's imagination, as for a long time there were thought to
be no other texts which place Arthur at any time during his life in Gaul.

This dismissal of Arthur's campaign in Gaul unfortunately often happens a bit too
quickly, because Geoffrey of Monmouth is actually not the only author to place Arthur in
Gaul. *The Life of St Goeznovius*, written approximately a century before Geoffrey's
Historia, briefly mentions that Arthur was actively winning military victories in both
Britain and Gaul. *The Life of Goeznovius* states that Arthur achieved "many splendid
victories, which he won in parts of Britain and Gaul" before his death (or lack thereof).[106]
Since *The Life of Goeznovius*, a slightly earlier source Geoffrey's *Historia*, also mentions
Arthur's presence near the end of his life in Gaul, perhaps Geoffrey's narration does not
seem as far-fetched as it once did. Scholars have pointed out that, although both *History
of the Kings of Britain* and *The Life of Goeznovius* date from around a similar time,
neither source seems to be copying the other, suggesting that each had a similar (or the
same) older source.[107]

---

[106] "Goeznovius," in White, *Legend and History*, 13.
[107] Ashe, "A Certain Very Ancient," 309

Prominent Arthurian historian Geoffrey Ashe uses this evidence to support his idea that Riothamus, a fifth-century 'king of the Britons,' is the root from which the Gaulish part of the Arthurian legend found in *Historia Regum Britanniae* and *The Legend of Goeznovius* springs.[108] Riothamus is a historical figure who appears in Jordanes' *Gothic History*, which dates from 551.[109] According to *Gothic History*, a Byzantine noble being troubled by Visigoth invaders wrote to Riothamus asking him to bring his British army to Gaul in order to fight the Visigoths.[110] Riothamus did this successfully, but then suffered a betrayal and was forced to flee back to Britain: a consistent narrative of success in Gaul followed by betrayal and a return to Britain.[111]

Although Riothamus lived from approximately 430-500, these early dates do not phase Ashe, who writes that "a sixth-century Arthur could have no military business in Gaul and no fresh Saxon invasions followed the supposed Arthurian phase" that is traditionally placed in the mid-sixth century.[112] In support of his identification of Arthur earlier in history than is usual, Ashe discusses Emperor Leo I, a person to whom Geoffrey of Monmouth refers three separate times over the course of relating details of Arthur's campaign in Gaul. Ashe explains that Geoffrey is referring to Emperor Leo I of Constantinople who reigned from the years 457 to 474, precisely around the time when Riothamus traveled to Gaul.[113] Ashe also hypothesizes that Geoffrey's "Pope Sulpicious," a person who never existed, is in fact Simplicious, a Pope between the years

---

[108] Ashe, "Very Ancient Book," 313.
[109] Jordanes was a Gothic historian writing c. 550; his *Gothic History* was based on an earlier historical text by the same name composed by Cassiodorus c. 520-30, in Walter A. Goffart, *The narrators of barbarian history (A.D. 550-800) Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 21-3.
[110] Jordanes, *Gothic History*, in Ashe, "Very Ancient Book," 310.
[111] Ashe, "Very Ancient Book," 314-15.
[112] Ashe, "Ancient Book," 309.
[113] Ashe, "Very Ancient Book," 309.

of 467 and 483, dates which coincide nicely with the reign of Leo I.[114] The assertion that Riothamus was active in Gaul during the mid-5th century which Ashe provides is simple and makes sense, but Ashe's explanation does not answer the question of the identity of the historical Arthur, the victor of Badon, as Riothamus did not die at Camlann. Instead, Ashe's explanation provides a plausible explanation for the origin of Arthur's Gallic campaign and restores a bit of credibility to Geoffrey of Monmouth. Riothamus and his campaign in Gaul may have been incorporated into Arthurian legend, but Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur—the historical Arthur, the victor at Badon who died at Camlann— remains a mystery.

Arthur's Growing Fame

Another element in the identification of the historical Arthur is an understanding of what his rule might have resembled. Prior to his campaigns in Gaul, Arthur supposedly reigned over a peaceful Britain for a period of twenty years. Many of the stories of the deeds which made Arthur famous are set during this period of peace. It is during this time that Arthur is said to have gathered his famous retinue of knights and established his court at Camelot.

The knights of the round table are probably one of the most popular aspects of the Arthurian legends. In fact, many of the later Arthurian romances focus on the knights, relegating Arthur to a background role in the stories. Many of these knights appear in the earlier Welsh sources. Probably the most noteworthy of Arthur's knights are Kei and Bedwyr, who have lived on in the legends as Kay and Bedivere.[115] These two men

---

[114] Ashe, "Ancient Book," 309; 318.

[115] Lancelot is not an original member of Arthur's retinue. He is popularized in the writings of French romance author Chretien de Troyes in the 12th century

appear in a few of the Arthurian tales in *The Mabinogion*, as well as in several of the

poems and the *Triads*. Gawain seems to appear under the name of Gwalchmai, and

Gereint and Owein are both mentioned, although they are not as closely tied to Arthur as

Kei and Bedwyr. In the group of *Triads* known as the "Triads of Arthur and his

warriors," Arthur's twenty-four knights are listed, often accompanied by a brief

description of their best attributes. These stanzas are almost certainly not among the

earliest of the *Triads* produced, as the term *knights* serves as a way of dating them,

indicating the influence of high medieval ideals. The idea of the knight as a chivalrous

hero who defends damsels in distress comes from the French romantic tradition imported

to England after the Norman invasion and especially popularized during the reigns of

Henry II and the subsequent Angevin monarchs. This means that any companions of

Arthur would not have been high medieval knights in the modern way of thinking.

Instead, they would have been Dark Age warriors, allying themselves with a stronger,

wealthier military leader—Arthur.

Some of the most enduring legends were said to have occurred during Arthur's

peaceful reign. Like the modern concept of Arthur's knights, the traditional connection

of Arthur and the Holy Grail would seem to have its roots in 12th-century French

romance, although there seem to be several faint parallels in older materials of the Welsh

tradition. Several of the early stories of *The Mabinogion*, such as "Branwen, Daughter of

Llyr" and "Owein," have an interesting story pattern of Arthur and his warriors

journeying to the Celtic underworld, Annwvn, in order to retrieve a magical cauldron or

bowl.[116] This motif is thought to be "an early and primitive version of the Grail

---

[116] In the case of "Branwen," the legendary king Bran is the leader of this expedition; some say that Bran is
an Arthur-figure.

legend."[117] This story is also found "The Booty of Annwvn," a poem in the *Book of Taliessin*.[118] In this version, the magical item to be obtained is the "cauldron of the chief of Annwvn" and the poem repeats the same ominous phrase at the end of each stanza: "except seven, none returned."[119] The legend of the Grail was expanded and transformed with the growth of the romances in the high medieval period, yet it seems to have at least some of its roots in the Celtic mythological cycle, perhaps explaining its persistent attachment to Arthur.

While Arthur's knights and their exploits were often highlighted as the Arthurian legends grew, Arthur himself tends to be somewhat overlooked. The story "How Culhwch Won Olwen" of *The Mabinogion* is set at Arthur's court at the height of his reign and power.[120] However, "Arthur…has a disappointingly minor role; already established as the great king of the British, he displays little personality."[121] In other stories of *The Mabinogion*, Arthur's participation is of a similar kind. He rarely takes the spotlight; his court is merely a backdrop and he a prop to enhance the setting. The *Triads* feature Arthur a bit more. They give an interesting, if confusing, picture of Arthur, describing him as a "frivolous bard," a "red reaper" or "despoiler" of Britain, and the "chief of princes."[122] Between these short descriptions and a lack of details in high medieval romances, Arthur remains a vague figure, even as his legends developed.

Arthur seems to have more personality in the five *vitae*, or Saints' Lives, in which he appears, although they portray a picture of Arthur during the golden age of his reign

---

[117] *The Mabinogion*, 66.
[118] "Book of Taliessin, XXX," in *Four Ancient Books*, 182-3.
[119] "Book of Taliessin XXX," in *Four Ancient Books*, 182.
[120] *The Mabinogion*, 135-176.
[121] Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, 134.
[122] Trioedd Ynys Prydein, 22; 39; 1.

that is as confusing and contradictory as that of the Welsh sources. Arthur appears in five

vitae: *Vita Cadoci*, *Vita Paterni*, *Vita Carantoci*, *Vita Gildae*, and *Vita Illuti*.[123] All

written after the year 1000, they are a little far removed to be considered accurate

portrayals of Arthur, but they are still generally supposed to have been written before or

around the time that Geoffrey of Monmouth was active. Thus, they are considered by

some to be more reliable as they are free of the stigma of being derivative of *Historia*

Regum Britanniae.

Vita Cadoci (c. 1075) and *Vita Paterni* (twelfth century) paint a negative picture

of Arthur, describing him as greedy, insulting, and violent.[124] In *Vita Carantoci* (1100),

Arthur is decidedly less offensive, working with Saint Carannog to rid the countryside of

a dragon.[125] Even in the *Vita Gildae* (c. 1155), the life of the chronicler Gildas, Arthur is

not described in poor terms until after he has killed Gildas' brother, and the author,

Caradoc of Llancarfan does clarify that, in this action, Arthur was provoked. These lives

of saints give an astonishing array of personalities for Arthur, some benevolent and others

violent. There does not seem to be a pattern to these personalities: he is not hostile in the

earlier *Vitas* and kind in the later ones, or vice versa.

In this particular genre of sources, Arthur serves the general purpose of helping

the saints to appear more saintly. When he is a benevolent ruler, the saint is in need of

someone to bless; when Arthur is portrayed in a more negative light, he is an opposing

---

[123] In White, *Legend and History*, 13-16; 18; 16-17; 19-21; 18. Cadoc, who probably died c. 560, founded the church at Llancarfan (South Wales); Padarn was a bishop in southeast Wales who lived in the 5th and 6th centuries; Carannog (or Carantoc) was active in the 6th and 7th centuries and built a monastery in Somerset; Illtud died in the early 6th century and was responsible for founding the monastery of Llanilltud Fawr; in David Hugh Farmer, The Oxford Dictionary of Saints, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71; 343-4; 78, 222.

[124] *Vita Cadoci*, in White, *Legend and History*, 13-16; *Vita Paterni*, in White, *Legend and History*, 18.

[125] *Vita Carantoci*, in White, *Legend and History*, 16-17.

force causing strife for the saint to overcome. In these *vitae*, Arthur was used not only as a character with whom the saint could interact, but also to boost the reputation of the saint by showing that the saint had crossed paths with the famous King Arthur. While this might make Arthur seem like a mere stock character, it is also indicative of his status and growing fame, even in the early Middle Ages.

The medieval *vitae* also include information about Arthur's famous court at Camelot, another well-known piece of the Arthurian legends. In *Vita Illuti* (c. 1100), Illytud, a cousin of Arthur, visits him at his court because he has "heard about all the victories of his cousin" and was "eager to visit the king's magnificent court."[126] Camelot is one of the most well-known locations related to Arthur, and it is another important aspect of his growing fame, as it become the setting of the majority of the medieval Arthurian legends.

Despite its popularity in Arthurian legend, the location of Camelot has yet to have been definitively proven. Geoffrey of Monmouth placed Arthur's court at the City of Legions, which he specifies is on the River Usk.[127] This refers to Caerleon, which derives from the Latin name *Castra Legionis*, or *City of Legions*; in Old Welsh, *Cair Legion*.[128] Caerleon is in southern Wales, some distance outside of modern-day Cardiff. It is a popular location for Camelot, but there is little to tie it to Arthur other than the common association which began with Geoffrey of Monmouth. There are many other suggested locations for Camelot, although there is minimal evidence at any of the sites, so they remain suggestions. Most are too new to have existed during the early Middle Ages.

---

[126] *Vita Illuti*, in White, *Legend and History*, 18.
[127] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 226.
[128] Jackson, "Once Again," 50.

The most likely location for Camelot seems to be the Cadbury hill-fort. Cadbury makes its first debut in writing as the legendary court of Arthur in the middle of the sixteenth century, although there is reason to believe that it was thought of as Arthur's court at least a few centuries earlier. John Leland writes about his travels in 1542, saying, "at South Cadbyri standith Camallate, sumtyme a famose toun or castelle. The people can tell nothing thar but that they have hard say that Arture much resortid to Camalat."[129] Interestingly, Cadbury hill-fort is located only a few miles from Glastonbury, another strongly Arthurian location. Cadbury seems to be the ideal location for Camelot, surrounded by popular legend and other Arthurian associations.

Excavations done in the 1960s by Leslie Alcock revealed that the hill-fort at Cadbury had existed even before the Romans had come to Britain. The 1966 excavation resulted in the finding of pottery known as Tintagel B at all of the dig sites on the hill.[130] This type of pottery dates from the Arthurian period (c. 400-600), and the explanation given for its consistent presence on the hill is that "the dark-age occupation had been a major one."[131] From the presence of Tintagel B pottery, it was assumed that "it could now be said that a person of importance—an Arthur-type figure, so to speak—had lived in the hill fort at approximately the right time."[132] Further excavations at the Cadbury hill-fort site in 1967 revealed evidence to show refortifications of a large scale were completed on the hill-top precisely during the Dark Age (c. 400-600). What is significant is the style of the refortifications. They did not follow the Roman style of architecture.

---

[129] John Leland, in Leslie Alcock and Geoffrey Ashe, "Cadbury: Is it Camelot?" 125, in *The Quest for Arthur's Britain*, ed. Geoffrey Ashe (Great Britain: The Pall Mall Press Ltd, 1968), 123-147.
[130] Alcock and Ashe, "Cadbury," in Ashe, *The Quest*, 134.
[131] Alcock and Ashe, "Cadbury," in Ashe, *The Quest*, 134.
[132] Alcock and Ashe, "Cadbury," in Ashe, *The Quest*, 134.

Instead, they reverted back to the construction style of the Celts, demonstrating that the architect was "a restorer of the ways of Celtic forefathers."[133] Not only is the style noteworthy, but the scale of the refortification is also significant.[134] While there are many other iron-age hill-forts that are comparable to the site at Cadbury and many of these hill-forts were reoccupied and refortified after the departure of Rome, none of the excavations at these hill-forts reveal that any was refortified to the extent of Cadbury. The evidence suggests that Cadbury was not reoccupied by common people. The presence of the pottery and the scale to which Cadbury was rebuilt demonstrates that the Dark Age occupant of Cadbury had wealth and power. If he was not Arthur, then he was the legendary leader's equal.

While these pieces of evidence do not give a clear answer regarding Arthur's existence, they reveal other items of importance. A picture of Arthur's personality is a bit too much to hope for, but an idea of the man who might have lived begins to solidify. If based at Cadbury hill-fort, as folklore would seem to suggest, he was not a king, but a man with wealth and military authority responsible for protecting those inside the fort as well as those living on the land surrounding it. In order to gain command of a hill-fort and the considerable power accompanying this position, Arthur would have had to prove himself worthy as a military leader.

12 Battles: the Arthurian Campaign

Traditionally, Arthur is attributed with twelve victories in battle near the beginning of his career: the battle at River Gleni, the four battles at River Duglas, the battle in the region of Linuis, the battle at River Bassas, the battle in the wood of Celidon

---

[133] Alcock and Ashe, "Cadbury," in Ashe, *The Quest*, 140.
[134] Alcock and Ashe, "Cadbury," in Ashe, *The Quest*, 146.

(or Cat Coit Celidon), the battle near Gurnion castle, the battle at the City of Legion (or

Cair Lion), the battle at the river Trat Treuroit, the battle at the mountain Breguoin (or

Cat Bregion), and the battle at Badon hill.[135] It is this series of battles against the Saxons

that initially wins Arthur the respect and renown which eventually turned him into a

legend. These battles are first recorded by Nennius, a ninth-century historian, but he does

not include much detail in what is essentially a list of battles attributed to Arthur.

Unfortunately, the names of the locations that Nennius gives for the twelve battles are

names that are not in use today, and the locations of the battles remain very unclear. As

with most of Arthur's other activities, the primary focus of scholarly research when

looking at the twelve battles is to determine their locations. In searching for the locations

of the twelve battles, Kenneth Jackson points out that "there has been a tendency to

decide first on historical or other grounds where…Arthur seems likely to have

functioned, and then to 'find' the battles in place-names within that area."[136] It seems

that a bias towards a particular region would skew the resulting locations of the rest of the

battles. Moreover, as some locations would seem to be more obvious than others,

Jackson states that "an equally unsound procedure is to conclude that because some one

of the twelve places may seem certain, the rest must be in the same region."[137] Many

different historians have attempted to locate all of Arthur's battles definitively, but the

results are often different, some finding locations in the north, others in the south, still

others in Wales.[138] If all twelve battles were concentrated in a certain region, then

---

[135] Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, 32.
[136] Jackson, "Once Again," 44.
[137] Jackson, "Once Again," 44.
[138] Most scholars who have written a book on Arthur's identity discuss these battles and propose locations; other works in this discussion include W. F. Skene's *The Four Ancient Books of Wales*, A. Anscombe's "Local Names in the 'Arthuriana' in the 'Historia Brittonum,'" W. G. Collingwood's "Arthur's Battles," P.

perhaps historians could make a more educated guess as to Arthur's identity based on which Dark Age kingdom he was active in. If all the battles were in the north, then it would seem as if Arthur hailed from those regions, as his presence in bardic poetry might suggest. Conversely, since there are so many Arthurian locations—Glastonbury, Cadbury, Tintagel—that are in the southwestern portion of the island, it would also make sense for the twelve battles to be concentrated in the south. There are very few locations which are proposed in a confident manner, and fewer still upon which multiple scholars can agree.

While Geoffrey of Monmouth did include a sequence of battles directly after Arthur receives power on the event of Uther's death, he did not simply copy Nennius' list. While in Geoffrey's text there are not specifically twelve battles to match up with the ones in Nennius' *Historia*, Nennius' text is nevertheless obvious as a source for this section of Geoffrey's work. He interprets some of Nennius' locations as best he can. He also adds some locations, combining and expanding the battles to create epic and dramatic conflicts. For example, Geoffrey places one of Arthur's battles at another place-name from the *Historia Brittonum*, the City of Legions, writing that at this battle Arthur carried a shield "on which there was painted a likeness of the Blessed Mary."[139] In contrast, in the *Historia Brittonum*, Nennius records that Arthur "bore the image of the Holy Virgin, mother of God, upon his shoulders" at the eighth battle, which was near Guinnion Castle.[140] Geoffrey pairs this shield with an event from a different battle on the list. Nowhere in the sequence of battles does Geoffrey mention a Guinnion Castle,

---

K. Johnstone's "The victories of Arthur," and O. G. S. Crawford's "Arthur and his battles," as cited by Jackson, in "Once Again," 45.

[139] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History*, 217.

[140] Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, 32.

suggesting that perhaps even he did not know the location. The inconsistencies between Geoffrey and Nennius could be explained simply as Geoffrey's infamous poetic license; another explanation is that Geoffrey replaced locations from Nennius' list that he did not recognize with locations with which he was familiar.

The place-names which Nennius gives for these battles are simply not enough to trace their current locations, nor do any of the proposed locations seem to indicate a definitive area of activity for Arthur's military campaigns. While scholars are able to group all twelve battles in certain regions, it is this very ability to place them in different areas which undermines these locations. The most certain locations, the City of Legions and Coit Celidon, may not be what they at first seem—Caerleon in Wales and the Caledonian forest in Scotland. If these are indeed the true locations, then it would seem that Arthur's twelve battles are spread out over a large part of the island, making the task of confining Arthur to any specific region impossible.

Badon: the Introduction of Arthur

Despite the difficulty in assigning a specific location to it, the battle of Badon, the twelfth and final battle in Nennius' list, is probably the most significant of all Arthur's battles. It is with this battle that the British defeated the Saxons so soundly that the island was supposedly left in peace for about twenty years. Badon is the first of the two Arthurian dates in the *Annales Cambriae*, a source generally considered to be reputable, making it an event whose existence even the most conservative are loath to deny. As the earliest event in Arthur's life, this battle also serves as a sort of introduction to the scene of history for Arthur. The *Annales Cambriae* assign Badon the date of 516; besides this,

they give us little information other than to say Arthur was the victor.[141] While it is

generally accepted that the early dates in the *Annales* were filled in by memory or copied

from another source, they are also assumed to be only a few centuries removed from the

actual events.

Some question the Arthurian entries and suggest that they were added much later

than it was first assumed, even suggesting that they were additions from after the time of

Geoffrey of Monmouth and the legends' subsequent growth.[142] In the one manuscript of

the *Annales Cambriae*, *MS. Cotton Domitian A. 1*, the annalist records the battle of

Camlann, "in which the illustrious King Arthur of Britain and Modred his traitor,

wounded each other to death," demonstrating the extent of the influence of Geoffrey's

portrayal of Arthur.[143] However, the majority of scholars consider the entries to be as

accurate as they can be and, thus, worth consideration.

Like most of Arthur's battles, the location of Badon is not known. It can be

assumed that the battle of Badon took place somewhere in the southern part of the island,

since the enemy was without a doubt the Saxons.[144] Some suggest that Bath is Badon.

Bath is named for the Roman-era baths that are still present in the town today. Nennius

refers to Badon specifically as the battle of *Mount* Badon, alternately translated as "the

hill of Badon."[145] There are several hills surrounding the town of Bath, accounting for

---

[141] *Annales Cambriae*, 156.

[142] Interestingly, Geoffrey of Monmouth does not mention Badon in his narrative of Arthur's life, perhaps because his unnamed source did not mention it.

[143] Remfry, *Annales Cambriae*, 203.

[144] Badon is recorded by Gildas as being fought against the Saxons, and Gildas is generally considered to be a reliable source, although it cannot be denied that he has his biases. Nennius is considered to be less reliable, and, thuss, this assumption cannot be made with the other eleven battles. Although the enemy is said to have been the Saxons, it could also have been the Scots or the Picts, especially those battles appearing to be in northern locations.

[145] Nennius, *History of the Britons*, 32.

Nennius' addition which is not present in the *Annales.* In fact, Gildas refers to Badon as *Bath-hill*, further supporting this idea.[146] Despite this slight continuity among medieval sources which tend to be more apt to disagree, not all scholars are fully satisfied with the battle's location at Bath, and there have been other proposed locations. Kenneth Jackson identifies Nennius' *monte badonis* as coming from the Old Welsh word *badon* with the Latin termination of *–is*, but the word *badon* does not translate to anything, and the stem cannot be identified.[147] Since there are no other suggested locations to be extracted from the root *badon*, Gildas' location of *Bath-hill* in southwest England seems like a plausible location for the battle, particularly since he wrote his record shortly after the battle took place.

Though both the *Annales* and Nennius name Arthur as the victor of the battle of Badon, Gildas, the eminent sixth-century British chronicler does not. Instead, in his book, *De Excidio Britanniae*, Gildas is unclear concerning the identity of the leader of the Britons at the battle of Badon. He seems to suggest that a man named Aurelianus Ambrosius was in command. Ambrosius' name is obviously Latinized, and Gildas describes him, saying he was "a modest man, who of all the Roman nation was then alone…by chance left live."[148] He even ascribes him to the nobility, writing that Ambrosius' parents "were adorned with the purple" of the imperial class.[149] Some suggest that Ambrosius was the "historical Arthur" of Badon. This idea can also be supported by the fact that Gildas writes of Ambrosius' involvement in the battles against the Saxons but makes no mention of Arthur. According to Gildas, it was under the

---

[146] Gildas, *De Excidio*, 30.
[147] Jackson, "Once Again," 55-56.
[148] Gildas, *De Excidio*, 30.
[149] Gildas, *De Excidio*, 30.

command of Ambrosius that the British armies rallied and overcame the Saxon aggressors. A fairly popular explanation of this apparent omission of Arthur on Gildas' part is to say that Ambrosius was the over-all commander of the united forces of the Britons fighting the Saxons at Badon and that Arthur was a lesser commander under him and answering to him. Despite Arthur's absence in Gildas' writing, Badon is still accepted by many scholars as one of the most significant Arthurian events.

Tintagel: the Birth of a Legend

The battle of Badon is really the first time that Arthur appears on the historical scene. Nothing is known about where he came from before Badon, and the circumstances of Arthur's birth are as hazy as those of his death. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Arthur was born in Cornwall at Tintagel, a castle which still stands today. For centuries, Geoffrey's narrative of Arthur's birth—the only narrative in existence—had been discounted. Tintagel castle only dates from c. 1141 when Reginald, the illegitimate son of Henry I, was made earl of Cornwall. Reginald built a castle for himself in his newly obtained lands, but it was abandoned soon after his death. In 1236, Richard, the younger brother of Henry III, took up residence in the castle and modernized some of the defenses.[150] This was believed to be the extent of Tintagel's occupation.

Excavations done in the middle of the twentieth century by Ralegh Radford revealed that Tintagel had been occupied far earlier than the twelfth-century castle. Roman milestones dating from the mid-third and early fourth centuries in the general area of the castle demonstrate that the area was populated during the time of the Roman occupation of the island.[151] At the actual castle site, traces of a monastic settlement were

---

[150] Radford, in Ashe, *The Quest*, 63.
[151] Radford, in Ashe, *The Quest*, 64.

discovered. The foundations date from the fifth-century, and fragments of pottery found at several of the dig sites confirm this date.[152] One of the two types of pottery, Tintagel B, was also found at Cadbury hill-fort during the 1966 excavations. Optimistically, this suggests that the occupants of Tintagel also occupied Cadbury; stretching this interpretation would lead to a hypothesis concerning Arthur's family, since both sites are linked to him. At the least, the presence of pottery in both locations demonstrates that the occupants of Tintagel and Cadbury were likely of a similar wealthy status and possibly were partners in trade, if not more closely tied.

While the possible connections introduced by the site at Tintagel are interesting, it is doubtful that this location is the birthplace of Arthur. However, the monastic community and artifacts discovered at the Tintagel site strongly suggest that the area was occupied during Arthur's lifetime. Perhaps Geoffrey of Monmouth based this part of the *Historia* on a prior traditional association of Arthur with Tintagel and was not completely inaccurate when he linked the two. However, without any more conclusive evidence, it is impossible to connect Tintagel and Arthur. Although the site at Tintagel is intriguing and merits further exploration, it does not shed any significant amount of light on Arthurian questions.

Solving the Matter of Britain

After examining the main elements of the Arthurian legends and evaluating the historicity of each, it seems that there are several unknown factors about the historical Arthur which might contribute greatly to his becoming a clearer figure in history if they were determined: his lineage, the area in which he was militarily active, and the

---

[152] Radford, in Ashe, *The Quest*, 70.

approximate dates that his life spanned. These questions are intertwined: if we determined his family, then we would likely have insight to the region that he was from; if we knew without a doubt the dates between which he lived, then we might be able to identify his family. If we were to receive even a little clarification concerning any one of these three categories, the whole subject of Arthur's existence would be greatly illuminated.

The historical context into which Arthur fits is very important when attempting to place him. It is important to place him at a time between two Saxon incursions, the first of which resulted in the battle of Badon and the second following the battle of Camlann, supposedly taking advantage of a destabilized Britain in the wake of Arthur's death. These two battles should be about twenty years apart in order to accommodate the twenty years of peace that seems to be a common theme in the Arthurian story. Using these parameters should help to approximate a timeframe for Arthur's life. Unfortunately, the dates given for these battles in the *Annales Cambriae*, a source usually deemed reliable, do not frame a peaceful period, requiring us to look elsewhere for information.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* keeps a record of the invasion of Britain by these two people groups—the Angles and the Saxons—including successful battles and, generally, not mentioning any losses. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not include the battles of Badon and Camlann in its entries, but that is consistent with the pattern of only recognizing Saxon victories. Since the Saxons were supposed to have been soundly beaten at the battle of Badon and since the battle of Camlann might not even have concerned them if it was indeed fought between the armies of Arthur and Mordred—two Britons—it does not seem extremely unusual that these two battles are not present in the

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The absence of the battles of Badon and Camlann in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* requires a deeper examination of what is recorded in the *Chronicle*—and what is not.

The supposed years of peace were, according to the *Welsh Annals*, between the years of 516 and 537. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, these years appear to be some of the most successful and combative years of the Saxon's campaigns. Furthermore, the *Welsh Annals* record Camlann in 537—with an implied resurgence of the Saxons directly following this. However, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not list any victories after the year 534. In fact, there is a silence of eighteen years, from 534-552, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* on the subject of battles. The only entries during these years discuss peaceful matters; they make no mention of Saxon interaction with the Britons. The *Welsh Annals* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* seem to contradict each other at first glance. Since the dates given in the *Welsh Annals* do not place Arthur in the correct context based on information from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it is necessary to explore the other possible dates for Arthur that are extrapolated from the various Anglo-Saxon incursions.

Despite the lack of entries concerning the battles of Badon and Camlann, the *Anglo-Saxon* Chronicle can be helpful in establishing parameters that are useful for narrowing down the dates framing Arthur's life. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records several important early Anglo-Saxon arrivals on the island of Britain: Hengest and Horsa in 449, Aelle and his sons in 477, and Cerdic and Cynric in 495.[153] According to the Dark Age chronicler Gildas, the battle of Badon occurred 44 years after the Saxons

---

[153] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 12-14. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* also records Hengist and Horsa being invited to Britain by Vortigern as mercenaries in the same year.

arrived, a year which Gildas is not likely to confuse since he writes that he was born in

the same year, but he is not clear concerning which arrival he is referring to. If these 44

years are added to the arrival of Hengest and Horsa in 449, the battle is put in 493, and

would not usher in a peaceful period for the Britons. If the 44 years are added to the

arrival of Aelle in 477, Badon would have occurred in 521, relatively close to the date

given in the *Welsh Annals*. Again, however, this date does not precede twenty years of

peace. If the 44 years are added to the third arrival, that of Cerdic and Cynric in 495, the

resulting date is 539. This date roughly corresponds with 534, the beginning of

approximately twenty years of relative silence in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* during

which no victories are recorded. Based on the following brief analysis of waves of

Anglo-Saxon expansion and aggression, it would seem that Gildas is referring to the

invasion of Cerdic and Cynric, placing the battle of Badon in the year 539.

Different scholars have researched these various dates by selectively trying to

reconcile the various and often contradictory primary sources, although sometimes they

arrive at them through different avenues of research. The first incursion, that of Hengest

and Horsa, results in dates that line up with the work of several scholars. Using the dates

from the *Annales Cambriae*, eminent Arthurian scholar Leslie Alcock alters the dates of

Badon and Camlann to account for the Easter Cycle-Anno Domini discrepancy.[154]

Alcock concludes that "we cannot know [Arthur's] dates with complete certainty; he may

---

[154] In 457 CE, Victorius of Aquitaine, developed what is known as the Easter cycle, a method of dating which begins with the year of Christ's death (what is known today as 28 AD). Less than a century later in 525 CE, the currently used system, Anno Domini, was introduced, and the years began to be counted from Christ's birth. This calendar change means that there is a possible error margin of 28 years depending on which cycle was being used when the dates of Badon and Camlann were first added to the *Annals*, besides the fact that the dates given in the *Welsh Annals* are a little questionable in the first place.

have died in 539, or more probably in 511."[155] He then places the battle of Badon in the

year 490.[156] Mike Ashley also gives Badon an earlier date, placing it between the years

of 491 and 503. Both of these scholars' dates encompass the possible date of Badon in

493, which is achieved when adding 44 years to the first Anglo-Saxon arrival led by

Hengist and Horsa. However, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the arrival of another

two groups of Saxons in 495 and 501, shortly after these proposed dates for Badon, with

a series of successful battles and sieges for the Saxons in the following years.[157] If, as

these scholars suggest, Badon was fought between the years of 490 and 503, it did not

precede a period of peace, directly contradicting this important theme of the Arthurian

tradition.

The second Anglo-Saxon incursion is examined in the research of Rodney

Castleden. In his book, Castleden, looking at the dates for Arthur's death at Camlann—

537 in Bede, 539 in the *Annales Cambriae*, and 542 in *Historia Regum Britanniae*—

hypothesizes that Arthur indeed died somewhere around these dates since they are all

relatively close together.[158] Castleden places Arthur's birthdate in 475, making him 41 at

Badon and 62 at Camlann. Castleden supports these dates for Arthur by suggesting that

Gildas was writing about the arrival of the second group of Saxons led by Aelle. If Aelle

did indeed arrive in 477 as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records, then Badon would have

been fought 43 years later, in the year 520, a date that is relatively close to the date given

for Badon in the *Annales Cambriae*, 518. Castleden's ideas are admirable in that he

---

[155] Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, xv. In this book, Alcock, among other things, promotes the idea that Arthur was "the leader of the combined forces of the small kingdoms into which sub-Roman Britain had dissolved," 359.
[156] Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, 55.
[157] *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 15.
[158] Castleden, *Behind the Legend*, 107.

reconciles sources thought by many to be disparate. However, the original dates of the *Welsh Annals* do not frame a period of relative peace in Britain and, therefore, do not place Arthur in the correct context.

The third and final Saxon incursion to explore, that of Cerdic and his son, Cynric, allows both the textual sources of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Gildas to be reconciled with the necessary period of peace that is associated with Arthur's reign, providing the most plausible timeframe for Arthur. Cerdic and Cynric arrived on the island of Britain in 495. If Gildas' 44 years are added to this date, the battle of Badon is placed in 539, a date that roughly corresponds with the beginning of approximately twenty years of relative silence in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Although the years do not line up exactly, the five-year discrepancy between the dates could be explained by Anglo-Saxon record-keeping habits of not recording losses. At the start of the period of silence in the year 534, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the death of Cerdic, but does not give any details on how Cerdic's death occurred, indicating that it was possibly the result of a British victory over the Anglo-Saxon forces.

In regards to the British defense, Gildas records that Ambrosius Aurelianus led the first successful battle against the Saxons. It is possible that the battle recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in which Cerdic died and Ambrosius Aurelianus' victorious battle recorded by Gildas are the same event, since Gildas does not give a name or location for this battle and the chronicler gives no details for Cerdic's death. Gildas continues on in his narrative to write that "after this, sometimes our countrymen, sometimes the enemy, won the field. . .until the year of the siege of Bath-hill," or

Badon.[159] Again, this lack of specific detail allows for the possibility of aligning Gildas

with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*—as well as with Nennius. Gildas does not specify how

much time passed between Aurelius Ambrosius' victory and the battle of Badon, but the

way in which he phrases it does not make it sound like Badon followed Ambrosius' battle

immediately, supporting Nennius' twelve-battle campaign culminating in Badon. This

campaign could very well have lasted five years, beginning in 354 and ending with

Badon in 539. The Saxons would not have recorded this losing streak of battles and,

thus, the silence in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* would have begun with Ambrosius'

victory—placed in 534—and there would be no record of the battle of Badon in which

the Saxons were finally, soundly defeated five years later in 539. Thus, Gildas, Nennius,

and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* can be harmonized when the date for Badon is calculated

from the third Saxon incursion.

Based on the date of the arrival of Cerdic and Cynric, and the corroborating texts

of Gildas, Nennius, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, if the battle of Badon was indeed

fought in 539 and followed by approximately twenty years during which the Britains

were not troubled overly much by the Saxons, then the battle of Camlann would have

taken place around the year 559, soon after which one would expect to find a resurgence

in Anglo-Saxon aggression. The sources recording the battle of Camlann do not make it

clear whether or not the battle of Camlann was fought between the Britons and the

Saxons. However, if the Saxons were indeed the opponents, then the *Anglo-Saxon*

Chronicle could be of some use in locating the battle of Camlann and, by extension,

Arthur's sphere of military activity. When the 539 date is used for Badon, the events in

---

[159] Gildas, *De Excidio*, 30.

the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* seem to naturally fall into place for Camlann. Following

Cerdic's death in 534, the next Saxon military endeavor recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon*

Chronicle is the victory of Cynric, Cerdic's son, in 552, eighteen years after Cerdic's

death in 534. This gap of eighteen years—in which the Anglo-Saxons do not seem to

make any progress in expanding their control in Britain—roughly parallels the period of

peace that is a common traditional feature of Arthur's reign. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

resumes its record of events with Cynric's victory in 552, which was followed by a

resurgence of Anglo-Saxon aggression.

If this battle was indeed Camlann, in which Arthur was mortally wounded, then

Arthur's sphere of military activity could be guessed at based on further information

given in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records this victory as

taking place at Salisbury, a location that is very close to several rumored Arthurian

locations, including Cadbury hill-fort and Glastonbury. If this Anglo-Saxon victory

under the command of Cynric was indeed the battle of Camlann, Arthur could have easily

marched his army from his possible base at Cadbury to Salisbury Plain and after being

wounded in battle could have been quickly taken to Glastonbury, a location that surely

would have had a healer of some sort on hand. After Arthur's death at the battle of

Camlann and burial at Glastonbury, the Britons would have lost a strong and wealthy

military leader (as the chief of Cadbury would have been), and the Saxons would have

taken advantage of that loss, as the subsequent series of successful battles recorded in the

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle seem to indicate. Beyond this supposition based on traditional

Arthurian sites and entries from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, there is little evidence to

place Arthur in the south-west of England. Without certainty that the *Anglo-Saxon*

Chronicle battle at Salisbury was Camlann (or at least part of the same Anglo-Saxon campaign), the region of Britain in which Arthur lived cannot be determined unless additional of evidence is discovered.

Pinning the identity of Arthur on a specific historical individual has proved nearly impossible, and it is equally difficult to attempt to identify Arthur's family. Acknowledged by many scholars as the leading expert on Welsh genealogies, P. C. Bartrum has reconstructed many of the royal lines of the kingdoms in Dark Age Wales, many with approximate dates. Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish any dates with certainty, and few of the genealogies predate 600 CE. A noteworthy aspect of Bartrum's work is the appearance of variations of the name *Arthur* in the different genealogies. While it is not as common a name in the northern kingdoms, there were both an Athrwys and an Arthuael in the line of Gwent, a southern kingdom of Wales, in the eighth century. These two "Arthurs" would seem to have gotten their name from their ancestor Arthrwys (Arthur of Gwent), who might have lived around 600.[160] Arthur of Gwent, however, lived too late to be the Arthur who fought at Badon and Camlann in 538 and 552. Another historical figure possessing an early form of the name *Arthur* is the great-great-grandson of Coel Hen (c. 385-415)—better known as Old King Cole—who was called Arthwys (also known as Arthur of the Pennines). Arthur of the Pennines lived from about 460-520.[161] There was also an Arthur of Dyfed, who lived from about 550-620; this Arthur is the grandson of Vortipor (470-540), one of the kings criticized by Gildas.[162]

---

[160] The dates for Athrwys, known commonly as Arthur of Gwent, are debated; Mike Ashley gives him the dates of 610-680, in *A Brief History of King Arthur: The Man and the Legend Revealed* (United Kingdom: Robinson, 2005, 4.

[161] Ashley, *A Brief History*, 4.

[162] Ashley, *A Brief History*, 4.

If trying to find an Arthur who would have died c. 552, it would seem that he would have had to live precisely between these two Arthurs. Based on the genealogies, there seems to be a concentration of Arthur-names in Wales, particularly in the kingdoms of Gwent and Dyfed. There were, of course, a few other Arthurs scattered around in the northern parts of Britain. It remains impossible to determine whether any of these Arthurs is the historical Arthur.

In *Historia Brittonum*, Nennius does not refer to Arthur as 'king,' saying only that he fought "with all the kings and military force of Britain" and served as a *dux bellorum*.[163] This phrase has been translated as *duke of war*.[164] The idea communicated in this phrase is that of a military leader or commander, and not a king. The fact that Arthur is not given the title of king—Nennius specifically states that "there were many more noble than [Arthur]"—often is used by Arthurian historians in support of the theory that Arthur was not a Dark Age king, but actually he was something more akin to a clan chieftain. If this is the case, then neither Arthur nor Uther would appear in the Dark Age royal genealogies. If Arthur was not of royal birth and was, in fact, a local warlord, perhaps one whose base was Cadbury hill-fort, then it would be impossible to find him in the genealogical records of the Dark Age kingdoms. He could have been some other yet-to-be-discovered Arthur, a common soldier from whom an epic tradition sprang.

Conclusion

It is difficult to pin Arthur's identity to a historical figure who is already known, although scholars have tried extensively to do just that. Arthur's family, his military

---

[163] Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, 32.

[164] This translation is relatively common despite the fact that the title of "duke" was not introduced as a word in England until the Norman Conquest of 1066.

sphere of activity, and the dates of his significant battles are three basic—yet important—details which, if determined, would help to identify him, yet these elements prove very difficult to define with certainty.

Much of Arthur's life remains obscured in the fog of lost history. The only events in his life that could be considered historically certain are the battles of Badon and Camlann—the start and the close of his military career—and even these two events are a bit tentative. However, a close examination of the historical veracity of various elements textual sources indicates dates for Badon and Camlann that are more plausible than the dates traditionally associated with these battles. By working with a combination of traditional elements of the Arthurian legends and several textual sources, the dates of 539 CE and 552 CE can be proposed as possible dates for the battles of Badon and Camlann respectively.

Although these dates give a more specific timeframe to Arthur, his location in Britain and genealogical background remain undetermined, making it impossible to identify him as any one person in history, based on the research presented in this paper. While it is immensely helpful to have more specific dates for these two important battles, the remainder of Arthur's life—his birth, reign, and death—increasingly continues to become the material of myth, relegated to legend. Without further research and scholarship, Arthur, the once and future king of Britain, will disappear into the hazy mists of mythology and remain a hero in legend only.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Translated by Michael Swanton. New York: Routledge,
    1998.

Annales Cambriae. Translated by Paul Martin Remfry. United Kingdom: Castle Studies
    Research & Publishing, 2007.

Bede. *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Translated Leo Sherley-Price.
    London: Penguin Books, 1990.

Bromwich, Rachel, ed. *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain*.
    Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006.

Gildas. *On the Ruin of Britain*. Translated by J. A. Giles. Dodo Press.

Geoffrey of Monmouth. *History of the Kings of Britain*. Translated by Lewis Thorpe.
    London: Penguin Books, 1966.

The Mabinogion. Translated by Jeffrey Gantz. London: Penguin Books, 1976.

Nennius. *History of the Britons*. Translated by J. A. Giles. United States.

Secondary Sources:

Alcock, Leslie. *Arthur's Britain*. United States: The Penguin Press, 1971.

Arnold, John H. *What is Medieval History?* Great Britain: Polity Press, 2008.

Ashe, Geoffrey. "'A Certain Very Ancient Book': Traces of an Arthurian Source in
    Geoffrey of Monmouth's History." *Speculum* 56, no. 2 (1981): 301-323.
    http://www.jstor.org/stable/2846937.

---. *The Discovery of King Arthur*. 2nd ed. Great Britain: The History Press, 2010.

---. *King Arthur's Avalon: The Story of Glastonbury*. England: Sutton Publishing, 1957.

Ashley, Mike. *A Brief History of King Arthur: The Man and the Legend Revealed*. Great
    Britain: Robinson, 2005.

Chambers, E. K. *Arthur of Britain*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964.

Davidson, H. R. Ellis. "Folklore and Man's Past." *Folklore* 74, no. 4 (1965): 527-544.
    http://www.jstor.org/stable/1258734.

Gerould, G. H. "King Arthur and Politics." *Speculum* 2, no. 1 (1927): 33-51.

Goffart, Walter A. *The narrators of barbarian history (A.D. 550-800) Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*. Princeton: Princeton University Presss, 1988.

Haug, Eldbjørg. "The Icelandic Annals as Historical Sources." *Scandinavian Journal of History* 22, no. 4 (1997): 263 — 274.

Head, Thomas. "Hagiography." *The ORB: The On-line Reference Book for Medieval Studies*. College of Staten Island, City University of New York. Edited by Kathryn Talarico. http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/religion/hagiography /hagio.htm

Jackson, Kenneth. "Once Again Arthur's Battles." *Modern Philology* 43, no. 1 (1945): 44-57. http://www.jstor.org/stable/434392.

King Arthur in Legend and History, edited by Richard White. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Littleton, C. Scott. "Were Sarmatians the source of Arthurian legend?" *Archaeology* 50, no. 1 (1997): 48.

Littleton, C. Scott, and Ann C. Thomas. "The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origin of the Arthurian and Holy Grail Legends." *The Journal of American Folklore* 91, no. 359 (1978): 512-527. http://www.jstor.org/stable/539571.

Loomis, Roger Sherman. ""Geoffrey of Monmouth and Arthurian Origins." *Speculum* 3, no. 1 (1928): 16-33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2848118.

Matthews, John. *Merlin: Shaman, Prophet, Magician*. London: Mitchell Beazley, 2004.

Morris, John. *The age of Arthur: a history of the British Isles from 350-650*. New York: Scribner, 1973.

Parry, John J. "Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Paternity of Arthur." *Speculum* 13, no. 3 (1938): 271-277. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3038944.

Pearce, Susan M. "The Cornish Elements in the Arthurian Tradition." *Folklore* 85, no. 3 (1974): 145-163. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1260070.

The Quest for Arthur's Britain, edited by Geoffrey Ashe. Great Britain: The Pall Mall Press Ltd, 1968.

Skene, William F. *The Four Ancient Books of Wales*. Forgotten Books, 2007.

Stirling, Simon Andrew. *The King Arthur Conspiracy: How a Scottish Prince Became a Mythical Hero*. Great Britain: The History Press, 2012.

Tolstoy, Nikolai. *The Quest for Merlin*. London: Hamilton: 1985.

Wadge, Richard. "King Arthur: A British or Sarmatian Tradition?" *Folklore* 98, no. 2 (1987): 204-215. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1259982.

Woolf, D. R. "The 'Common Voice': History, Folklore, and Oral Tradition in Early Modern England." *Past and Present* no. 120 (1988): 26-52. http://www.jstor.org/stable/650921.