

The Development of Arthurian Legends

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King Arthur is a well known character of literature and film, and any person on the street could probably recall many aspects of his story. However, the story that so many people know and love is the result of hundreds of years of transformation and manipulation of a legend. It did not begin with much grandiosity or with very much background information. Arthur began as a man mentioned briefly in the history of Britain. The legends culminated with the most well known version, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

With the death of King Uther, Britain is left without a leader, and Uther's advisor, Merlin, announces that God has established a test to identify the chosen successor. Before the cathedral, there will be a great stone topped by an anvil in which a sword is embedded. No one other than the intended king will be able to draw that sword. Many try and fail, but Arthur sees the sword in the stone and easily draws it. With Merlin as his advisor, Arthur reigns as king. He valiantly meets Britain's enemies in battle, and his conquests are made easier because of his sword, Excalibur. He received the sword from a hand that emerged from a lake. Arthur rules his land from Camelot and marries a beautiful young woman named Guinevere.

During a period of peace, Arthur founds a fellowship of knights known as the Round Table. One of the finest knights is Sir Lancelot. He quickly becomes one of Arthur's favorites, but he also falls in love with Guinevere. Their love affair is one of the major causes for the eventual destruction of Arthur's kingdom, but Arthur's own flaws contribute to his downfall as well. Despite his valor and wisdom, he fathers a son named Mordred with his half sister Margawse.

Most of Arthur's knights embark on the quest for the Holy Grail. Many of his best knights die in the quest, some of them even killing one another. Lancelot's son, Galahad, is entirely free

of sin and weakness, and thus he alone is ultimately qualified to complete the quest and find the Holy Grail. Once the quest ends, peace does not last.

When Arthur discovers Lancelot and Guinevere's love affair, justice requires that Guinevere be arrested and condemned to death. Lancelot flees but then returns to rescue her. Arthur's absence from court while waging war and pursuing Lancelot offers Mordred the opportunity to seize the throne. The king learns of Mordred's treason and returns to regain control. During a great battle on Salisbury Plain, Arthur kills Mordred, but before dying, the young man strikes Arthur a grievous blow. A group of women take him away to the island of Avalon. There, his wounds heal, and he eventually returns to Britain.

The topic of Arthurian legends in medieval Europe is fascinating because all of the legends reflect influence from the major changes in both politics and culture. This relationship can help others understand the constant connections between different regions and kingdoms of medieval Europe, especially those that were constantly in battles of supremacy like the different British and Frankish kingdoms. This relationship has nothing to do with the debate over whether Arthur existed or was a pure figment of legend. Whether or not he existed, he was still written about extensively. His stories persist through to the modern day. The constant exchanges of power, first within England itself, and then between England and the Frankish kingdom, caused political and cultural fluctuation that influenced the development of the Arthurian legends both in plot and style.

The events surrounding the alleged "historic" Arthur are important in creating a baseline for the additions that would appear later in the Arthurian legends. If Arthur had existed, he would have been born into a newly independent Britain, which less than a century before had belonged to the Roman Empire. The independence of Roman Britain was not gained by a "Roman

evacuation of Britain” or a “withdrawal of the legions” and was never intended to be permanent.¹ Instead, it was the professed inability of the Roman government to aid its province when needed. The diocese, an intermediate level of government that governed the four provinces of Britain, had originally proclaimed Britain as an ally of the usurper Constantine III, but in 410 they returned their allegiance to Honorius.² Honorius was an emperor constantly plighted by barbarian invasions, including the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410, and revolts. In switching their allegiance, Britain lost the authorities established by Constantine, including prefects, vicars, and governors.³ It was the duty of the emperor, Honorius, to instate new authorities for the British. Britain also requested men and funds from Rome to defend its borders and coasts.⁴ Unintentionally, the emperor created a problem that would prove to be insoluble. In a letter to the British *civitates*, Honorius told the states of Britain to “look to their own defenses” and remained inactive.⁵ No longer overseen by governors appointed by the emperor, the British now had to agree upon leaders without guidance or the authority of the empire. While Honorius did not instruct the troops in Britain to be removed, they were most likely weak in numbers. Most of the troops that could have been withdrawn had already crossed back to the continent under the orders of previous emperors and their generals, like Maximus, Theodosius, Stilicho, and Constantine III.⁶ With their newly granted independence, it was the responsibility of the British government to maintain and increase these troops.

Medieval historians seem ignorant of these events in their writing. Gildas (500-70) proposed that the “Romans therefore informed our country that they could not go on being

¹ John Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 30.

² *Ibid.*, 29

³ *Ibid.*, 29

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30

bothered with such troublesome expeditions; the Roman standards, that great and splendid army, could not be worn out by land and sea for the sake of wandering thieves who had no taste for war,” and he taught the British to defend themselves with walls and forts before they “said goodbye, meaning never to return.”⁷ However, all of this history is based beyond the threshold of human memory. It was only about one hundred years before Gildas that the history becomes more real.

By the fifth century, the population of the British Isles had seen the overthrow of the Roman division of Britannia and the rise of four peoples—the Britons, Scots, Picts, and Saxons—who all played a part in altering its social, economic, and political structure. As told by Gildas and Bede, another medieval historian who lived from 673-735, the native Britons faced the onslaught of the northern barbarian group, the Picts. Without the aid of the Roman Empire, the Britons then turned to the barbarians of Eastern Europe, the Saxons, for their allegiance against the Picts.

Around 442, the Saxons increased their numbers and revolted, physically destroying the civilization on the island and pushing the Britons either overseas or so far west that there were almost no Britons left in Eastern England by 460.⁸ Gildas describes the uprising as a “fire of righteous vengeance, kindled by the sins of the past” and describes the inhabitants being “laid low... as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled.”⁹ This expulsion was halted in the late fifth to early sixth century as a result of a rallied force of those left and a victory at Badon, circa 495.¹⁰ After the battle of Badon, the government of Britain was primarily interested

⁷ Gildas, *the Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. Michael Winterbottom, trans. Michael Winterbottom (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), 22-23.

⁸ Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, 38-39.

⁹ Gildas, *the Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, 27.

¹⁰ Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain: History and Archaeology* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971).

in reuniting the original diocese of Roman Britain, protecting itself against both its new and old enemies, and trying to maintain peace.

From this chaos, Arthur emerged. But it was not a static evolution, and he is not mentioned by name for another century. The Arthurian legends are split into the Pre-Galfridian texts, written before Geoffrey of Monmouth's work, and the Post-Galfridian texts, which are under the influence of Geoffrey's text. The Pre-Galfridian texts begin with Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae*, translated *The Ruin of Britain*, written around 540. The Welsh contributed with Aneirin's *Y Gododdin*, around 600, Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*, translated *The History of Britain*, near 830, and the *Annales Cambriae*, or *Welsh Annales*, compiled in approximately 970. The various lives of saints are also recorded by the Welsh around 1090, and some mention Arthur and his exploits. All of these texts offer brief, fleeting glimpses of Arthur. He is not always a king, and they do not tell us anything about his life. Rather, they may detail military conquests or lessons learned, such as always love God or the value of kinship.

Then, in 1136, Geoffrey of Monmouth finished his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, translated *A History of the Kings of Britain*. It is on this text that the legend of King Arthur has fed and thrived. There are a few texts that are either very rare, or lost completely to scholars now. These include a letter dating to 1139 from Henry of Huntingdon to Warinus, describing Arthur's final battle, as well as Geoffrey Gaimar's French translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Estoire des Angles*, written circa 1145. In 1155, Robert Wace crafted a French version of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* entitled *Roman de Brut*, which would be one of the first French versions of the legend available. Marie de France's *Lais*, composed around 1160-80, contain Arthurian characters, notably in "Chevrefueil" and "Lanval," and Gerald of Wales details the alleged exhumation of

Arthur and Guinever's bodies in 1192's *Liber de Principis Instructione*, translated *The Book of the Instruction of Princes*, and 1216's *Speculum Ecclesiae*, or *Mirror of the Church*.

The true Arthurian romances begin with Chrétien de Troyes. From approximately 1160-90, he contributed "Eric et Enide," "Cliges," "Le Chevalier de la Charette," "Yvain" (or "Le Chevalier au Lion"), "Lancelot," and "Perceval." These influenced Wolfram von Eschenbach's German expansion of Chrétien's "Perceval," entitled "Parzifal," in 1200-10. The *Mabinogion*, another Welsh contribution, was compiled in 1250 after a lengthy silence from that region of Britain, and the legend finally comes full circle with Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, 1370-90, where the tales of the Squire and Wife of Bath mentioning Arthurian themes or characters.

The final text, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, 1469-70, from which the opening story came from, pushes the temporal boundaries of the legends studied in this paper. Malory is no longer a medieval writer, but instead hovers on the edge of the Renaissance and pulls the medieval legend along with him. However, Malory is the culmination of all the centuries of development covered, and so deserves the honor of serving as the well-known destination in the journey of Arthurian legends.

When looking at the Arthurian legends, many scholars have focused on utilizing them to prove whether or not Arthur existed. Other authors have studied the environment that surrounded the writer of a particular legend. Both types of research were important to the question of political and social changes that influenced the legends. J.S.P. Tatlock published *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and Its Early Vernacular Versions* near the end of his life.¹¹ In his work, he demonstrates that Geoffrey's work was greatly

¹¹ J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 545.

influenced by everything in his environment, from war to politics to mythology to geography and more. He also looks at the possible earlier, vernacular versions of Geoffrey's work and whether or not those versions were altered in any way for the final, literary Latin version. His main primary source is Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written in 1136, but he also uses various other Arthurian texts, like the *Annales Cambriae*, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Wace's *Roman de Brut*, and others, to put the information from Geoffrey's work into a literary perspective. Using his fifteen years of research, Tatlock breaks down Geoffrey's work into the topics that he believes influenced the story's plot line or characters.

The purpose of John Morris's book *The Age of Arthur* is to put Arthur into a manageable historical context.¹² The section of most interest to the movement of Arthurian legend would be any historical evidence of foreign relations or military movement abroad. The section entitled "The Empire of Arthur" summarizes the military battles that led up to the supposed reign of Arthur, as well as the details of the economy, wars, and government of the period that followed. He uses innumerable primary sources, beyond the usual Bede, Gildas, Nennius, and Geoffrey of Monmouth. In the condensed bibliography, there are over two hundred primary sources including charters, law codes, annals, lives of Saints, and more. He does lack a record of secondary sources, but with his reliance on primary source and piecing together their translations, he forms a fluid history. However, it would have been helpful to see what works of other scholars helped him to arrive at this culmination of his research. Morris's methodology is mainly political, analyzing the wars and actions of the British rulers during the post-Roman period. The main flaw in Morris's work is that he writes as though the character of Arthur is a

¹² Morris, *The Age of Arthur*, 665.

factual and fully developed historical figure. His is the only book that puts so much credibility behind Arthur as a king.

Thomas Charles-Edwards, argues that Arthur developed out of legend rather than historical fact in “The Arthur of History.”¹³ Charles-Edwards seeks to show that the Arthurian legends developed out of just that—legend. His evidence lies in that the oldest text used to prove Arthur’s existence, Gildas’ *De Excidio Britonum*, never mentions Arthur by name, and the histories and annals that follow attempt to fill in the events of the past retroactively or based on one another. While Charles-Edwards does use texts like Gildas’ and the *Annales Cambriae*, his main focus is on the text attributed to Nennius, the *Historia Brittonum*. He mainly approaches his argument using culture, with some political methodology mixed in especially when discussing the possible confusion of Arthur and Ambrosius Aurelianus. What Charles-Edwards fails to consider is the possibility that Arthur was not truly worth mention in Gildas’ work because it was focused on the history of the British Church. Because his work is so focused on disproving the existence of the Arthur of legend, Charles-Edwards is blind to the notion of the small kernel of truth that may have started the legends themselves.

Patrick Sims-Williams, in “The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems” is concerned with how the variety of Welsh Arthurian poems is tied more to Nennius’ *Historia Brittonum* rather than the more realistic *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth.¹⁴ While the work focuses more on themes of the poems themselves, Sims-Williams does ties them directly back to at least the earlier history by Nennius. The influence of the *De Excidio Britonum* is also brought to light.

¹³ Thomas Charles-Edwards, "The Arthur of History," in *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature*, eds. Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman and Brynley F. Roberts (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales, 1991), 15-29.

¹⁴ Patrick Sims-Williams, "The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems," in *The Arthur of the Welsh: Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature*, eds. Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman and Brynley F. Roberts (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales, 1991), 33-61.

This is seen especially in the ties to British religion in the poems. Sims-Williams's main primary sources are, of course, the Welsh poems from ninth to twelfth centuries. He acknowledges that there had been no new discoveries in Welsh Arthurian poetry since 1959, and that there are probably many poems that have been lost over the ages. It would be interesting to see if there has been any development in the collection of Welsh Arthurian poetry since 1991. Sims-Williams succeeds in making some very good preliminary connections between some of the earliest Arthurian legends, without addressing the reasons for why those connections were made. He never looked deeper to see what caused the Welsh poems to be influenced by Nennius and Bede.

Christopher Snyder's section of *A History of Arthurian Scholarship*, entitled "Arthurian Origins," encompasses the development of the Arthur, from Geoffrey of Monmouth's interpretation of him through to the modern scholarly analysis of Arthur as a historical figure.¹⁵ Snyder looks at original texts, such as those from Gerald of Wales. He also analyzes the main question that scholars have sought to prove using early texts concerning Arthur, namely questioning whether or not Arthur truly existed. He urges scholars today to move past that question to analyze, using aspects of culture like religion, writing style, and language, the history that surrounds the Arthurian legends. Snyder presents how this new analysis will impact the study of Arthurian legend, with the only flaw in his work being that he does not go into much detail about what he perceives as that cultural history.

A common theme of discussion between all of these works includes the existence of Arthur. Tatlock focuses just on the text of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, without every really delving into the realm of the reality of Arthur. Similarly, Sims-Williams also avoids that question and mainly focuses on the texts he is analyzing. Charles-Edwards and Morris, blatantly disagree,

¹⁵ Christopher Snyder, "Arthurian Origins," in *A History of Arthurian Scholarship*, ed. Norris J. Lacy (Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 1-18.

with the latter blindly substantiating Arthur's existence and the former arguing against that belief. Both have a very distinct flaw in their arguments, namely being their disregard for textual evidence. Morris does not mention the contradicting textual evidence concerning Arthur, like Gildas not mentioning him at all by name, while Charles-Edwards ignores even the mere possibility of a kernel of truth in the Arthurian legends. It is Snyder's work that stands out; however, since he poses the challenge that scholars move past it because more important questions exist in scholarship today. By looking beyond the mundane "Did Arthur exist?", scholars can focus on why Arthur was so popular all over Europe and in literature, or at the different merits of each text.

Also, all of the authors touch on the relationship between the British and the Welsh Arthurian legends. But they never look at why or how the legend spread from Gildas to the Welsh stories and then back to Geoffrey of Monmouth. All of the authors, including Sims-Williams who actually uses the connection as part of his argument, just accept the movement with no further inquiry. Snyder also briefly addresses this issue, but with the purpose of inspiring other scholars to do the actual research. He is also the only author who goes beyond just the legends of the British Isles and shows that they spread into other parts of Europe, especially into areas of modern day France.

The broadness of the research of these five authors opens up various avenues of potential research. The main avenue is to follow Snyder's approach and look at the cultural history that influenced the Arthurian legends. Beyond that, to look at the cultural and political history that influenced the movement of those legends. While Sims-Williams started to connect together some of the texts that mention Arthur, he does not go into detail. That is where further research is needed. Beyond the casual exchange of ideas and materials through trade, the constant

exchanges of power, first within Britain itself, and then between England and the Frankish kingdom, caused political and cultural fluctuation that influenced the development of Arthurian legends both in plot and style.

The first text that can be connected to Arthur is Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae*. In it, he describes the Battle of Badon, for which he praises the rebel leader Ambrosius.¹⁶ He goes on to describe the government that follows, which others have attributed to Arthur. He lived only a few generations away from the nightmare that was the Saxon uprising, and even fewer from the Battle of Badon itself. Yet he does not refer to Arthur.

The eastern kingdoms of Wales, especially Powys, were under the most British influence. There was constant pressure from Cheshire, Shropshire, and Herefordshire. However, while occasionally acknowledging the power of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, Wales managed to remain independent until the Norman Conquest of 1066.

Welsh legends are the first to mention Arthur in any detail. Aneirin's *Y Gododdin* mentions him in passing:

“He fed black ravens on the rampart of a fortress,

Though he was no Arthur,

Among the powerful ones in battle

In the front rank, Gwawrddur was a palisade.”¹⁷

Arthur was obviously a recognized figure, well-known to the Welsh, since he served as a comparison in the poem. They knew that he was someone to be feared in battle, a man that no one wanted to come across as an enemy. But the real meat comes from Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*. Nennius wrote, “Then it was, that the magnanimous Arthur with all the kings and

¹⁶ Gildas, *the Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, 27-28.

¹⁷ "Y Gododdin: Britain's Oldest Heroic Poem," in *The Welsh Classics*, ed. A. O. H. Jarman, Vol. 3 (Wales: Gomer Press, 1988), 64.

military forces of Britain, fought against the Saxons... he was twelve times chosen their commander.”¹⁸ Arthur fought first at the river Glein, and then four more times at the river Dubglas.¹⁹ The sixth battle is at the river Bassas, the seventh in the Caledonian Wood, the eighth at Fort Guinnion, the ninth in the City of the Legion, the tenth by the river Tribruit, the eleventh on Agned hill, and the final being the battle of Badon where Arthur personally slew 940 men.²⁰ Nennius gives him military prowess, but this never translates over into political power. He never calls him a king.

Not much is known about Nennius, but scholars believe he comes from the kingdom of Powys in Wales. Due to the English influence, the history covers all of Britain rather than just Wales. Nennius even admits that he “lispily put together this history from various sources” including Roman chronicles, and the chronicles of “sacred fathers” which includes Welsh and English holy men.²¹ Because the regions are constantly at war, the cultures can never be kept completely separate from each other. Isolation would have been impossible.

In 970, the *Annales Cambriae* were compiled. This text was attached to Nennius’ *Historia* and recounts many of the same events, including the Battle of Badon. However, its title indicates that it only covers the history of Wales. This implies a connection between Wales and England, where both histories are closely intertwined. Arthur is first mentioned “shouldering the cross” during the battle of Badon.²² The *Annales Cambriae* also describes the death of Arthur occurring at the Battle of Camlann, twenty one years after the battle of Badon.²³

¹⁸ Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, 796), 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-31

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5

²² *Annales Cambriae*, ed. John Williams, trans. John Williams (London: Longmans, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4

It is about this time that the political and cultural fluctuations of Britain were dealt a difficult blow. Even before William the Conqueror invaded England, the Normans had extended their rule and power across from the continent. In 1002, King Ethelred married Emma, daughter of Duke Richard I of Normandy.²⁴ Their son, Edward the Confessor, was exiled to the Norman court of his uncle, Duke Richard II, before being made king of England.²⁵ When William the Conqueror won the Battle of Hastings, his army was a mixed body of recruits, not just Normans but Anglo-Saxons and others too. By 1087, William had established “Norman barons as custodians of the Marches of Wales,” assuring, for a time, Welsh cooperation and subservience.²⁶ A need to feel a sense of “belonging” to the new country and peoples inspires investigations into their traditions and histories. These investigations on Wales led to the creation and compilation of numerous sources, including the various lives of saints that mentioned Arthur and his exploits.

Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, translated *A History of the Kings of Britain*, is a work written in the early twelfth century, around 1138. In it, he pushes the concept of his work being brought from either Brittany or Wales—depending on the translation—by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, and that it is an accurate history chronicled over the ages. However, it is fairly clear and accepted that Geoffrey wrote it himself. Within the *Historia*, Arthur changes from a briefly mentioned historical figure, to a fully developed character with a story. Because of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia* being one of the most important and transitional Arthurian legends, scholars classify all texts based on whether they were written before or after.

²⁴ Rachel Bromwich, "First Transmission to England and France," in *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature*, eds. Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman and Brynley F. Roberts (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales, 1991), 273.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 273

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 274

Within the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Geoffrey covers a whole line of kings beginning with Silvius and Brutus, Trojan heroes who were believed to have founded Britain, and spanning almost nineteen centuries. During the late fifth century, Arthur, merely one king out of his massive list, alone occupies over a quarter of the work.²⁷ It is assumed that Geoffrey gleaned the basis for Arthur's story out of the lives of Welsh saints, where there is an Arthur mentioned who at first persecutes, then submits to the saints like any other king depicted in the tales.²⁸ Bede and Nennius mention an Arthur, or an Arturus and there may have been an oral tradition that told the tales of an Arthur, but there is no proof of that.²⁹ What we do know is that Geoffrey was the first to craft such a full history about this great king that would go on to inspire romances and further tales of Arthur and his knights. Geoffrey was born about 1100, but not much is known about where he was born or what his parentage was. Before his actual works were published, he first appeared in history as a witness to the foundation charter of Osney Abbey around 1129. He was ordained into the priesthood in February of 1152 by Archbishop Theobald, and consecrated as the Bishop of Asaph.

The Arthurian portion of Geoffrey's history tells of Arthur's conquests on the continent, his slaying of the giant of St. Michael's Mount. Gawain plays a prominent role in the Roman wars, and with his help Arthur slays Emperor Lucius. The story goes on to include the treachery of Mordred, whose sexual advances forces Guinevere to enter the nunnery, and the final battle between Mordred, who is killed, and Arthur, who is borne to the Isle of Avalon for the healing of his wounds.³⁰ In Geoffrey's story of Arthur, Arthur is first identified as the son of the British

²⁷ Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions*, 178.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 228

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 229

³⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, "Historia Regum Britanniae," in , trans. Robert Ellis Jones (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1929), 426-525.

king Uther Pendragon, and his counselor Merlin is introduced.³¹ The *Historia* also mentions the isle of Avalon, where Arthur went to recover from wounds after his last battle.³² It also begins the legend of Guinevere's infidelity and the rebellion instigated by Arthur's nephew, Mordred, after he took her to bed.³³ None of these facets have anything to do with Arthur mentioned before Geoffrey of Monmouth's work. All the story lines were crafted by Geoffrey for a purpose.

Certain pieces of information show that what was occurring in Geoffrey's world strongly affected his writing. In the *Historia*, there is a commonality of sieges. The besieged send out daring messengers and their countrymen come to their aide. The besiegers dig under a wall, dry the moat, starve the people out, or breach the walls.³⁴ This mode of warfare was common in the twelfth century. In order to seize the duchy of Normandy, Geoffrey the Plantagenet besieged Montreuil Bellay and other fortified cities. An example within the work is the attack on Sparatinum, where *Grecus ignis*—Greek fire—is poured by Trojan defenders onto the besiegers.³⁵ Greek fire was unknown in the west before the first crusade, circa the eleventh century, after which it came into use especially in saving Constantinople from the Saracens.³⁶ France and England both participated in the first crusade, at least in a minor way.

Geoffrey lived during the reign of Henry I. Henry was the fourth son of William the Conqueror, who succeeded his brother and became the sole ruler England. The regime was generally stable during his reign, with only minor incidences, like the death of his son. However, with Henry's death in 1135 came the end of that peaceful stability. Henry's chosen successor, his

³¹ *Ibid.*, 426

³² *Ibid.*, 501

³³ *Ibid.*, 496-502

³⁴ Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions*, 322.

³⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, 229.

³⁶ Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions*, 229.

daughter Matilda, had her rule usurped by her cousin Stephen, and Stephen spent the majority of his reign defending his throne. This period became known as the “Anarchy,” coming to a close when the son of Matilda, Henry II, took the throne in 1154. As well as ruling England, with his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine, and various conquests on the continent, Henry II ruled the western half of France.

These political themes from his period are prevalent as well. The *Historia* has four good and able queens who reign well over the centuries of the work. This could have been used to show a precedent and partisanship for the empress Matilda. There is also a prevalence of treason within the work. Modred, Arthur’s nephew, is new to Geoffrey’s work which highlights that part of Arthur’s story. The tie here is to Stephen supplanting the daughter of his uncle, the king, and taking the kingdom for his own. Modred is one of Arthur’s important enemies, and in later romances, would go on to seize Arthur’s throne and wife.³⁷ While not identical to the contemporary political drama, enough parallels can be drawn to get across that it is a reference to Stephen.

Geoffrey was also influenced by the need to give his kingdom the historical presence and splendor held by the other powerful peoples of the day. There is a cultural significance that goes hand in hand with a written and expansive history. All culturally progressive countries had a written history—the Normans had Dudo of St. Quentin, Ordericus Vitalis, and William of Jumieges (most dedicated to William the Conqueror), while the French had Hugh of Fleury’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the *Liber Modernorum Francorum Regum*. With Geoffrey’s newly written history, Britain got to stand with these peoples and be counted as a proud and long existing European nation. The rulers were now tied inexplicably to the rulers of the past, whether pseudo-historical or real, and with that all the glory and splendor of their conquests and

³⁷ John Darrach, *Paganism in Arthurian Romance* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994), 203.

accomplishments. The Capetian Kingdom of France had Charlemagne. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthurian "history" also competes with the histories of the overlords of England—the French. William the Conqueror, duke of Normandy, inexplicably and irrevocably tied France and England together forever when he invaded in 1066. The French had innumerable histories on him and Charlemagne. Being under the control of a people with a rich culture like that would definitely influence Geoffrey of Monmouth to write an equally impressive history, and quite possibly stretch the truth where he felt more impressiveness was needed.

The Post-Galfridian texts are plentiful, and include references to other texts that the author claims was the original source of the legend. However, in some cases, those "original" sources are rare or near impossible to find. A letter from Henry of Huntingdon to Warinus is probably locked in the musty stacks of a European library; Geoffrey Gaimar's French translation of Monmouth, *Estoire des Angles*, was lost long ago. Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut* survives, however, and provides interesting additions to the story.

Wace was born on the island of Jersey, part of Normandy. His version of the Arthurian legend is important as it is one of the first works to introduce Celtic lore into the French vernacular. It is important to note that *Roman de Brut* is a version, not French translation, of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, in which Wace edited the story for his own purposes. In the *Roman de Brut*, Arthur is depicted as a warrior on an epic scale, and the story of his magic sword Excalibur, which only he could extract from a rock, is included for the first time.³⁸ Instead of merely adding facets to the legend, Wace also made cuts, omitting some minor characters and more violent scenes from Geoffrey's version, like Arthur torturing the Picts and Scots.

³⁸ Robert Wace, *Roman De Brut*, trans. Eugene Mason (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1962), 47.

Wace presented the *Roman de Brut* to King Henry II and his queen, Eleanor, in order to please them and gain favor.³⁹ Again, there is evidence of this tangible tie between the French and English, as a Norman poet presents his work to the English royals. By pleasing the king of England, he gained favor for his area of Normandy. Also, Eleanor was the previous queen of France. The court of England probably would not have met the same level of elegance as the court of France that she had been used to. By this time, French was the tongue of the English court.⁴⁰ A movement toward patronizing the arts, including literature, shows a shift in the English court toward the elegance of the French. Henry II was also known to enjoy literature and had an interest in Arthur as well. He visited the alleged tomb of King Arthur in Glastonbury.⁴¹ Given that the English court was utilizing French as its language of choice, it is possible that Marie de France, a relatively mysterious female poet, may have composed her *Lais* there. Her *Lais* include the poems “Chevrefueil” (Lay of the Honeysuckle)⁴² and “Lanval,”⁴³ which both contain Arthurian characters. Marie de France is the only female medieval writer of the Arthurian legend. Her place of birth and even the period during which she lived are uncertain, intriguingly paralleling the lack of dates and hard facts in her writing.⁴⁴

The popularity of the Arthurian legends in French writing peaked with Chrétien de Troyes’ Arthurian romances. These stories focus more on the characters surrounding Arthur, rather than Arthur himself. One introduces Lancelot, Arthur's chief knight and the rival for

³⁹ Gwyn Jones, "Introduction," in *Wace and Layamon*, trans. Eugene Mason (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1962), viii.

⁴⁰ Eugene Mason, "Introduction," in *Lays of Marie De France and Other French Legends* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1966), viii.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, x

⁴² Marie de France, *Lays of Marie De France and Other French Legends*, trans. Eugene Mason (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1966), 102-104.; *Ibid.*, 102-104

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 61-76

⁴⁴ Mason, *Introduction*, viii-ix.

Guinevere's love;⁴⁵ another poem about Perceval is the earliest story containing the quest for the Holy Grail.⁴⁶ For Perceval, it was simply a holy object, rather than the chalice from which Jesus Christ drank at the Last Supper. Hereafter, the Grail is incorporated into the legend. He emphasized chivalric adventure, although he certainly made clear that chivalric attitudes were limited to the aristocracy and not a privilege of the middle to lower classes.⁴⁷ Chrétien's two major innovations—the love between Lancelot and Guinevere and the quest for the Grail—became the core of the Vulgate Cycle. The Vulgate Cycle shows the shift from Arthurian prose, like Geoffrey of Monmouth's writing, to Arthurian verse. This cycle of five romances depicts the history of the Grail going as far back as the biblical figures of David, Solomon, and Joseph of Arimathea before telling of Merlin, Arthur, the quest for the Holy Grail, and the destruction of the Round Table fellowship.

Chrétien's work had great influence on later Arthurian romance, particularly early German versions, such as the twelfth century "Erec and Iwein" by Hartmann von Aue, and the epic "Parzifal" (c. 1210), by Wolfram von Eschenbach. Chrétien was tied to the French court. He composed his verse for Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter, the Countess Marie de Champagne.⁴⁸ Again, there is the tie to both France and England. Eleanor was the ex-wife of the French king Louis VII, and already the patron of other literary figures like Robert Wace. As was common with literature of the French court, Chrétien's Arthurian romances had an added level of indelicacy suited to readers whose pastimes included "jousting, hunting, and making love."⁴⁹ He invokes the social ideals of the French aristocracy, while drawing on the Celtic lore of England,

⁴⁵ Chretien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. W. W. Comfort (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1967), 270-359.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ W. W. Comfort, "Introduction," in *Arthurian Romances* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1967), vii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, vi

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ix

where Christian standards are present but irreconcilable to courtly love. Moving away from the typical epic poems that told the stories of great heroes, this new Arthurian verse replaced “God-fearing men and a few self-effacing ladies” with an “elegant and seductive” world.⁵⁰

Gerald of Wales’ *Liber de Principis Instructione* and his later *Speculum Ecclesiae* both recount the exhuming of the bodies and contents of the alleged tombs of Arthur and Guinevere. To witness these events would not have been possible without the cultural shift in attitude caused by the comingling of the Normans and the English. The desire of the French to learn about the history and traditions of the British inspired action, and this exhumation was but one more way for the Arthur of “history” to be studied.

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, small regions of Wales slowly began submitting to the Norman kings of England. With the defeat of Llewlyn the Last, Wales was fully conquered by 1282. The Saxon ties were then exploited by the kings to unite the peoples of all kingdoms, especially through the popularizing of Welsh legends. The *Mabinogion*, a series of Welsh stories, was most likely a part of this effort to unite the regions.

The second branch of these Welsh tales is most interesting to Arthurian legend. It tells the story of Bendigeidfran, son of Llŷr, meaning “Blessed Bran.”⁵¹ Scholars link this back to the Fisher King Bron from the Vulgate cycle of Arthurian romances, due to his being wounded in the foot with a poisoned spear.⁵² The addition of the Vulgate cycle, a French invention begun by Chrétien de Troyes, to Welsh tales brings the movement of the Arthurian legends full circle. Many pieces of continental French literature was circulating around England at this time, and the increased integration, both economic and social, of Wales and England would have increased

⁵⁰ Ibid., xiv

⁵¹ *The Mabinogion*, trans. Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 232.

⁵² Ibid.

access of Welsh writers to the French texts.⁵³ Our first occurrence of Arthur, by name, was Welsh, with the *Y Gododdin*, and the first accounts of his military exploits came from the Welsh Nennius' history. In those first appearances, Arthur appeared to be at the very least rooted in some historical figure. He was just another leader in the history of Britain who, without the text explicitly referring to him as Arthur, would most likely have escaped notice until Geoffrey of Monmouth. Yet around 500 years later, there are a plethora of branches to his story and they can be recognized without the presence of his name.

The later tales involving Arthur include Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and, of course, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. The *Morte d'Arthur* is the perfect ending to the development of Arthurian legend. It is the culmination of all the back-and-forth from the continent to England. There were constant connections between different regions and kingdoms of medieval Europe, especially England and France. Their histories were cemented by shared rulers, constant land changing hands, court languages, and finally literature. It is impossible to look at the more contemporary retellings of the legends of King Arthur without seeing both the English and the French. At its very core, Arthur is English since he came out of the histories of the people of Britain and his military prowess stems from the Welsh, but all the drapery and personality really come from the French.

And the legends of King Arthur were not contained within just England and France. The Germans had "Parzifal," but there also existed Spanish, Hebrew, and Italian versions, to name a few. There was no lack of writing or arts to be found in medieval Europe, nor was it a place that bred isolation or darkness. Instead, the movement of thoughts and ideas flowed as steadily as any

⁵³ Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, "Breuddwyd Rhonabwy and Later Arthurian Literature," in *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature*, eds. Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman and Brynley F. Roberts (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales, 1991), 194.

river in Europe, and spread equally as well in times of war and peace. The legends of King Arthur are just an indicator of growth both politically and culturally in this era.

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