King Arthur Through the Ages

Whether or not you have an interest in Arthurian literature, you won't have to think long to realize that Arthurian memorabilia is still popular, even prevalent, today. In fact, if you chose this class because of its focus on Arthur, it is probably the contemporary version of Arthur that attracted you in the first place. You will learn this semester that the contemporary King Arthur of gaming and movies is a far cry from the medieval Arthur. You will also discover that our modern interpretations of Arthur are, nonetheless, of some value. They have much to tell us about who we are today and where we have been as we adopt and rework this old but never worn-out legend. This course begins with medieval versions of Arthurian legend and moves through Arthuriana today.

Let's begin with an obvious and impossible question, one which scholars still struggle to solve: Did King Arthur ever really exist?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

The Middle Ages were from 449-1500 (in England)

4 groups of important people:

1. CELTS
1500BC- 500BC: the Age corresponds to the coming of the Celts. Merlin was a folk character who actually pre-dates tales of Arthur.

2. ROMANS
55BC: 1st attempt of Roman Empire to invade England; Romans asked Celts for tribute, which was never paid.

42AD: Claudiues conquers Celts in England with army of 40,000. Several campaigns complete the conquest,

75-85AD: Romanization of Celts complete; they become Christianized and thoroughly Romanized.

410: Roman withdrawal: why? Trouble elsewhere in Empire? Romans saw ultimate futility of fighting invaders on Saxon Shore?

3. ANGLO-SAXONS 449-1066
449AD: (dates known by such "historical" treatises as Bede's *EC*) ; marks Anglo-Saxon invasions. ARTHUR, if he existed, may have been a successful (temporarily) ruler against these invaders. The Anglo-Saxons, however, do not

include Arthur in their own body of literature; after all, Arthur emerged from the folklore of the Celts, whom they had displaced.

4. NORMANS: 1066-1500 (Arthur reemerges)
1066: William, duke of Normandy, conquers England and displaces Anglo-Saxon nobility and ecclesiastics. French culture is infused into England.

IMPORTANT MEDIEVAL KINGS and HISTORICAL EVENTS:

HENRY II: 1154-1189
Henry married Eleanor of Aquitaine, former wife of the French king Louis VII. Eleanor, along with her daughter, was a patroness of the arts. Both Chretien de Troyes, the "creator of Arthurian romance," and Andreas Capallanus, the creator of "courtly love" dedicated works to Marie.

1204: Separation between England and France escalates. King John Lackland loses Normandy, but French influence continues. "Father of Arthurian romance," Geoffrey of Monmouth writes in the 12th century under Norman influence but with sympathy for Celts because of his own Welsh background.

Late 14th century England: separation between England and France complete; Paris, not Normandy, is now the center of French culture, giving a stigma to Anglo-Norman. The author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* "reclaims" Arthur as an English hero

15th century: Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* assembles myriad stories about Arthur, questions courtly love, and adds novel-like interest to the legend.

Early References to Arthur

Y GODODDIN: probably originally 6th century (Old Welsh); one of the warriors in it is compared to Arthur: 'he fed black ravens on the wall, although he was no Arthur'

GILDAS: perhaps Arthur's contemporary, or at least near contemporary; 6th-century author of *De Excidio Britannia* (On the Ruin of Britain); mentions Badon Hill as a single victory for

the Celts, and this battle is later associated with Arthur, but not Arthur. His purpose was "to castigate the native British of his time in general…for their sins" (Hutton in Archibald and Putter's *Companion* 24).

BEDE: 8th-century author of *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (The Ecclesiastical History of the English People); borrows from Gildas; mentions Vortigern, but not Arthur. Bede's purpose was to give credence to the Anglo-Saxons as the rightful heirs of Roman occupation. Thus, Gildas's work served him well!

 Later, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* also relate the tale of Vortigern.

NENNIUS: a Welshman whose name is on the preface of some editions of the 9th-century *Historia Brittonum* (The History of the Britons). This work mentions Arthur by name and refers to his twelve battles in which he fought, including against the Saxons. One of these battles was at Badon Hill.

ANNALES CAMBRIA (Annals of Wales): 10th-century anonymous; mentions Arthur and Mordred (as Medraut)

 Mabinogion: 11th-century collection of Welsh tales which includes an Arthurian tale, *Culhwch and Olwen*. It is "a sophisticated and elaborate work from the world of high medieval Welsh letters" (Ronald Hutton in Archibald and Putter's *Companion* 24).

▣ Welsh Saint's Lives: most collected in the 11th and 12th centuries. Written in Latin, these works are filled with legend and include some references to Arthur.

▣*Life of St. Goeznovius*: Breton work with spurious date of 1019. The author, William, has Arthur travel to Gaul, leaving some scholars to speculate a link between Arthur and a man who was dubbed King of the Britons, Riothamus (or supreme ruler), who campaigned in Gaul around 460.

▣WILLIAM OF MALMSESBURY: author of *Gesta Regnum Anglorum* (Chronicles of the Kings of England), written in 1125. William mentions Arthur and the battle of Badon Hill. He also mentions Arthur's mysterious gravesite.

▣GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH: 12-century author of *Historia Regnum Britannie* (History of the Kings of England). He is credited with giving Arthur a life story.

▣WACE: 12th-century author of *Roman de Brut*. Wace draws on and "romanticizes" Geoffrey's work. He introduces the Round Table and represents the transition from chronicle to romance.

▣LAYAMON: 12th-century author of the alliterative *Brut*. Layamon draws heavily on Wace. His work is the first in English to mention Arthur.

There is some historical evidence for an actual Arthur, who was most likely a Romanized Celt. According to annals, a Celtic leader named Artorius, for a brief period in the fifth century A. D., enjoyed some success against invading Anglo-Saxons, Germanic tribes who ultimately displaced the Celts of England. A sixth-century monk named Gildas, in his *On the Ruin of Britain*, and the Venerable Bede

in his eighth-century *Ecclesiastical History*, describe the fate of the Celts. Gildas and Bede both mention Badon Hill, a battle site later associated with Arthur, but neither make explicit reference to Arthur. It is not until the ninth century that a writer sometimes referred to as Nennius, who dubbed himself "historiographer of the Britons," first mentions Arthur. Already the stuff of legend, Nennius's Arthur is credited with single-handedly slaying 940 Saxons at Badon Hill. Such exaggerations are common in medieval histories, which were more concerned with implicit truths than facts. So, from the earliest accounts, Arthur is attributed with larger-than-life heroic qualities. Because the Celts and the early Anglo-Saxons were oral cultures, stories about Arthur spread quickly and acquired new meaning with new generations. And so the actual Arthur, if he ever existed, is dwarfed by the legend, which became the vogue about 700 years after the "real" Arthur would have lived.

In the twelfth-century, historian Geoffrey of Monmouth recorded, some say invented, the legend of Arthur as it has been subsequently handed down. Among his sources were Bede, Gildas, Nennius, and, primarily, "a very ancient book" which has never been recovered and which some doubt ever existed. Geoffrey is the first to mention Merlin, Uther, Ygraine, Tintagel, and Avalon. Geoffrey's work is filled with flight and fancy, sprinkled with fights involving giants and numerous magical occurrences. Geoffrey's Arthur is so powerful, so exaggerated, that he comes close to defeating the Roman Empire itself. The *History* was criticized in Geoffey's life, and it came under serious attack in 1198 by William of Newburgh, who called it a "fable" and a "fiction." Nonetheless, Geoffrey's work was influential on subsequent chronicles and was only completely debunked in the sixteenth-century by the Italian writer Polydore Vergil. The Arthur in these works is transformed through time and literature, rendering his actual existence impossible to determine definitively.

Works Consulted

Archibald, Elizabeth and Ad Putter. *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Lacy, Norris J. et al. *The Arthurian Handbook*. 2nd edition. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997.

Archeologists have joined in attempts to prove Arthur's existence by locating Camelot and by unearthing the king's tomb. Cadbury Hill, obviously the site of a

large fortress, would have been occupied during the approximate years of the "historical" Arthur's reign and is sometimes identified as Camelot. At Glastonbury Abbey, a stone slab with an inscription that read "Artorius" was unearthed in the twelfth century and a body was exhumed. In the fourteenth century, this body was again exhumed and, in the process, badly damaged and subsequently lost. Could this be our Arthur? Again, there is no substantial evidence. More recent attempts have also been made, some more serious than others. Consider, for example, this 1993 edition of the *Sun*, with a headline reading "Grave Discovery: King Arthur's Tomb is Found in Nevada."

Perhaps Arthur's historical existence is, in the end, a moot point. Regardless of his actual existence, his literary presence was profound.