

Arthurian Romance

A Short Introduction

Derek Pearsall

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Arthurian Romance

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Preface

This book is a study of Arthurian romance, principally in English, from the beginnings to modern times. It is designed to accommodate the interests of new readers and old readers, of Arthurian enthusiasts and sceptics alike. It will consist chiefly of readings of the great works of Arthurian romance, from Chrétien de Troyes and Gottfried von Strassburg through Malory to Tennyson and beyond, the non-English works being treated in English translation. The representation of Arthurian themes in the pictorial arts and in other forms of visual medium will be part of the story. The readings will trace the fortunes of Arthur, Guenevere and Lancelot, and of Gawain, Tristan and the other knights of the Round Table, at the hands of different writers and artists throughout their life in literature and art. The attempt will be to show how the story has been the embodiment at different times of chivalric idealism, patriotic nationalism, spiritual aspiration, the idealization of romantic sexual love, and the fear of sexuality – and the critical and ironic questioning of all those forms of value; how romance was founded in epic and was at times metamorphosed in ballad, drama, elegy, satire and burlesque; how the Arthurian story, in all its manifestations, has provided a medium through which different cultures could express their deepest hopes and aspirations and contain and circumscribe their deepest fears and anxieties.

The book will begin with the early British treatments of the whole Arthurian story, in Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace and Layamon, and pass on to the development of European Arthurian romance in the narratives (in French, German and English) of the lives, loves and exploits of Lancelot, Gawain, Tristan and Perceval, and the climax of

these developments in the *Morte D'Arthur* of Sir Thomas Malory. It will continue with the breaking of the long 'Arthurian sleep' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the Romantic Revival and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and conclude with the anti-Arthurian reaction of Mark Twain and the continuing extraordinary popularity of Arthurian romance and legend in modern fantasy-historical novels and children's literature, and in films, comics and television adaptations. The question, always, will be, how did the imagined exploits of such a remotely historical figure and his totally fictitious knights come to achieve such a command of European narrative, how did such a story retain its power to accommodate so many different sentiments and systems of belief, and why does Arthurian romance continue to exert such fascination?

But throughout, the main emphasis will be not on 'explaining' Arthurian romance or providing a historical or cultural context for it, but on awakening or reawakening the interest that these writings once had and still, once read, command. There will be some deliberate attention to the rehearsing of the stories of the most important works, as a preparation for or a reminder of the experience of reading. There is a great gulf between the act of reading and the act of talking about what we have read – the one linear, temporal, emotionally engaged, subtle in its multiple responses, the other compositional, abstract, dispassionate, atemporal, and capable only of distilling out a few discussable topics from the complex experience of reading. Though it is to the latter that anyone writing a book about Arthurian romance has inevitably to be committed, it is the former, and the enhancement of it, that I want always to have in mind.

The Early Arthur

What is the Historical Evidence of a 'Real' Arthur?

A leader, though not one called Arthur, had long been associated with the brave but unavailing defence of the Britons, that is, the Romanized and Christianized Celtic inhabitants of Britain, against the pagan Anglo-Saxon invaders in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. The most authentic historical story is that told by Bede (673–735), monk of Wearmouth and Jarrow, in his Latin *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ('Ecclesiastical History of the English People'), completed in 731, and supported by fairly reliable continental sources and by archaeological finds. It tells of a power vacuum that followed the Roman evacuation of Britain (which was the northernmost province of the empire) in 410, and of resistance to the various continental marauders who were sucked into this vacuum to plunder the rich counties of southern and eastern England and who eventually settled there.

But there was a need for something more dramatic and decisive than this, more intelligible as an explanation of the causes of historical events, whether in the form of a satisfying narrative of general moral sloth punished by military defeat, or in the form of a heroic story of battles bravely won and lost. The retrospect of history needs decisive battles, where a brave warrior can act as the leader of the defeated people so that his final and inevitable defeat in battle can mark the transfer of power to the victors, the *translatio imperii*.

Gildas, a British (that is, Celtic) monk of the mid-sixth century (d. 570), is the earliest witness for the story of a concerted British

resistance, under a named leader, against the Anglo-Saxon invaders. His account of events was known to Bede, and appears in his ranting tract *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* ('Concerning the Destruction and Conquest of Britain'), probably written after he had departed for Brittany. Gildas is not interested, at this early date, in foundation myths of legitimation. For him the Anglo-Saxon conquest is a punishment visited by God upon an erring people – an explanation that was always available to medieval monkish writers to deal with disasters of all kinds, from earthquakes and plagues to a succession of particularly disreputable popes.

The lack of evidence for Arthur's existence in Gildas is startling, given that he is a datable witness, writing near the time when Arthur is supposed to have existed, and about the battles in which he is supposed to have played a prominent part. Gildas does mention a British leader who around the year 500 fought a great battle against the Anglo-Saxons at Mount Badon (Mons Badonicus, probably on Salisbury Plain, where the Saxons were indeed for a time halted), but the name he gives him is not Arthur but Ambrosius Aurelianus, clearly representative of that old Romano-Christian-British civilization whose passing Gildas laments with such gloomy relish. 'A gentleman', he calls him, 'who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm: certainly his parents, who had worn the purple, were slain in it. His descendants in our day have become greatly inferior to their grandfather's excellence' (25.3, p. 28).

The absence of early written evidence for Arthur is, as I say, startling, but it does not in itself mean that Arthur did not exist. In the absence of written records of any kind, other than the tainted witness of a writer like Gildas, much will be lost, and some will be lost absolutely, and the two centuries after the departure of the Romans are an exceptionally blank period. An instructive comparison is made by the historian Gerald Hammond in a review of a book on early Mayan history. He writes:

Only in the 1970s did Mayan history begin to emerge, as the dynasties of Tikal, Palenque and Copan and other great cities of the first millennium A.D. were transformed from simple lists of kings to a chronicle of their martial and marital exploits on thousands of carved stelae, door-lintels and other media. Kings such as Jasaw Chan K'awiil I of Tikal and K'inich Janaab' Pakal I of Palenque left such elaborate and

explicit records that we know more about both of them than we know about King Arthur.¹

Scholars of King Arthur would give anything for a single one of those thousands of inscriptions, whether on a pillar, a post, a lintel, a stone, or any other kind of durable material. In the absence of such writing, we know next to nothing of King Arthur. The best we have is an ancient slab, still to be found on the banks of the River Camel, near Camelford, in Cornwall, near the supposed site of the legendary 'last battle' at Camlann, where Arthur and Mordred died. It has Ogham script as well as Latin and can be dated to the sixth century. The Latin inscription, so far as it can be made out, reads 'LATINI IACIT FILIUS MA. . . RI'. Arthurian enthusiasts since the early seventeenth century have hoped that this could refer to Arthur, and a small Arthurian theme-park, opened in 2000 near the site, celebrates 'King Arthur's Stone', as well as much else of Arthurian legend, though it also displays clearly the almost conclusive evidence against any Arthurian association.

But there was an 'Arthur' floating about in Welsh legend. He is first recorded in the *Gododdin*, a commemoration of British heroes who fell at Caerthyr (Catterick) about 600 AD, written by Aneirin, a Welsh poet who is presumed to have flourished in the seventh century but whose writings are preserved only in manuscripts from the thirteenth. Aneirin offers superlative praise of the hero Gwawrddur, 'but', he adds, 'he was not Arthur'. That is the first we hear of him: he was already a pre-eminent hero (and his name provided a convenient rhyme). In later Welsh legend, Arthur has the reputation of a warrior of superhuman powers, not particularly virtuous, in fact not virtuous at all, and certainly not a Christian – a winner of giant cauldrons, a killer of monstrous cats, and the stealer of the comb and scissors from between the ears of Twrch Trwyth, the terrible Chief Boar of the Island of Britain. It seems to have been in the *Historia Brittonum*, a collection of historical notes attributed, probably wrongly, to an early ninth-century monk called Nennius, that Arthur first appeared as a great patriotic Christian national leader (*dux bellorum*, 'leader of battles', not king) killed in the triumphant and decisive last charge at Mount Badon (516). His name in Nennius is 'Arthur', which was derived from the well-attested Roman name Artorius, and which had some unprecedented currency among the Celts of Britain in the sixth

century. A similar story is alluded to in the *Annales Cambriae*, a collection of historical notes surviving in a Latin manuscript of c.1100 but deriving from much earlier Celtic legends, of a battle at Badon in 516 where Arthur carried the cross of Jesus for three days on his shoulder and the British were the victors. There is also here a reference to a battle at Camlann in 539 in which Arthur and Medraut (Mordred) perished. So, from the ninth century, the battle-leader of Mount Badon, now for the first time named as Arthur, became a great hero, around whom began to accrete legends associated with the 'Arthur' of Celtic folklore, who may or may not be the same person (if there ever was one).

There is, it is clear, no simple answer, indeed no answer at all, to the question, 'Was there a real Arthur?' Faced with total frustration in trying to answer a question so simple, it is interesting to wonder if it was necessary to ask it in the first place. The desire to ask it, and the determination to arrive at a positive answer, has always been strong, as is evident in the account of the disinterment of the supposed Arthur's skeletal remains at Glastonbury in 1191 or in Caxton's determination to prove Arthur historical in his Preface to Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (1485) by offering evidence on the present whereabouts of Lancelot's sword, Gawain's skull and the Round Table. On these occasions there were, it is true, particular reasons for trying to prove that Arthur was a real person: the abbey of Glastonbury was eager to use Arthur to establish its special venerable antiquity and with that its exemption from episcopal visitation, while Caxton was making the usual publisher's claim to have the full, true and authentic story. But even when there are no such practical reasons, the desire for a real Arthur still remains strong, as can be seen from the caravans of TV cameramen and newshounds and assorted well-wishers who have accompanied every supposed archaeological sighting of Arthur, such as that at Cadbury Camp in Somerset in 1966, and who remain on the alert for every Arthurian promotional stunt. It is not very different from the publicity that is given to UFOs.

In a larger sense, the desire to find a historical Arthur can be understood as part of the yearning for 'great men' or heroes, a desire that is powerfully fed by both the idea of the individual and the idea of the subordination of the individual to the will of the leader or to the state. Belief in the power of individuals to change things is writ large in the belief that 'great men', whether dark-age kings or

modern presidents and prime ministers, are individuals who can change everything. In this way, attention can be distracted from the painful and intractable realities of social and economic circumstance. The desire to seek a historical Arthur is part of this 'cult of personality', of belief in a great king who changed the course of history. Of course, even in the mythical story, Arthur did not change anything for long, but then he has a further great claim on us as a great man, that is, the attraction of the tragic hero, the survivor of a great civilization fighting a desperate rearguard action against barbarians – even if those barbarians, in the end, are *us*, the English, and even if the process was actually one of prolonged and messy integration rather than a doomed heroic last stand. Many British people stayed and mixed peaceably with the Anglo-Saxons, and many of the battles that were fought were not between nation and nation but between one local faction and another. At the battle of Catterick, around 600, in Welsh poetry a famous heroic battle against the invaders, there were British and Anglo-Saxons fighting on both sides. It is a not uncommon kind of national myth-making: the tangle of events in eighth-century Spain, when the Frankish armies, withdrawing after unsuccessfully encountering the Moorish conquerors of the peninsula, were set upon in the Pyrenees by hostile local groups, had to be simplified for the sake of the narrative of French nationhood into the story of a hero and a villain and of the doomed last stand of the hero Roland at Roncesvalles against the overwhelming might of the infidel.

Winston Churchill, whose *History of the English-speaking Peoples* fits well the idea of history as what 'ought' to have happened, speaks thus of the desire and need for Arthur's historicity:

It is all true, or ought to be; and more and better besides. And wherever men are fighting against barbarism, tyranny and massacre, for freedom, law and honour, let them remember that the fame of their deeds, even though they themselves be exterminated, may perhaps be celebrated as long as the world rolls round. Let us then declare that King Arthur and his noble knights, guarding the Sacred Flame of Christianity and the theme of a world order, sustained by valour, physical strength, and good horses and armour, slaughtered innumerable hosts of foul barbarians and set decent folk an example for all time.²

So Arthur, whether he existed or not, in any form that we might recognize, had to be invented (or found) to fill a vacuum in history

and to fulfil a need for a national hero. The nature of his existence as what is supplied is what has made him always so malleably contemporary. He is a vacuum, waiting to be filled with signification, a floating signifier, or, as it is put in the Introduction to the book of essays edited by Shichtmann and Carley – which has much more of this kind of jargon – the legend is ‘a set of unstable signs appropriated by differing cultural groups to advance differing ideological agendas’.³ For this use, Roland was less effective. Though he seems to have been expanded from very modest historical beginnings in order to provide a suitable national Christian hero at the time of the First Crusade in 1099, and though he survived to be transmogrified into romance by the Italian poet Ariosto, his role was too well defined for him to survive in the way Arthur has.

At a deeper level than the cult of the hero, there is also the desire for the narrative of historical inevitability, in which the ‘causes’ of history will become transparent, and the death of the hero will mark the transfer of power. So, as with Arthur, the American myth of ‘manifest destiny’ found inevitability and legitimation for the American spread westward in stories of brave and temporarily successful but ultimately doomed defensive actions led by famous Indian warriors. Sitting Bull and Geronimo are the modern equivalents of Arthur in this account: it is interesting that Sitting Bull is also associated with legends of a second coming, when buffaloes will once more roam the prairies.

Beyond this, there is the simple desire for historical certainty. Renaissance scholars like Milton, having first been enchanted by the Arthurian legends, found disenchantment in scornful rejection of their claims to veracity. This attitude has come to be regarded as scientific and objective, but proving that Arthur did not exist is just as impossible as proving that he did. On this matter, like others, it is good to think of the desire for certainty as the pursuit of an illusion.

Geoffrey of Monmouth

By the early twelfth century Arthur already had a long career, as we have seen, in Celtic legend, most of it oral, and surviving in written form only in later copies from no earlier than the thirteenth century. He appears frequently in the collection of Welsh prose tales known as

the *Mabinogion*, and presumed to date from the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. He is often associated with other warriors who have a permanent place in the later Arthurian tradition, and particularly with Cei (Kay) and Bedwyr (Bedivere). He first appears as the king of a well-known court in a tale from this collection called *Culhwch and Olwen*, perhaps to be dated as early as 1100. That his fame had spread beyond Celtic-speaking lands is evident from the remarkable survival in Italy of a semi-circular sculpted stone frieze over the north doorway of Modena cathedral. It shows 'Artus de Bretania' and others fighting, named in carved labels, and is usually dated not later than about 1120.⁴ But even allowing for this enigmatic fragment of evidence, and for the persistence of Arthur in Celtic legend, it seems that Arthur would probably have gone the way of Cuchulainn and other Celtic heroes, into a more narrowly circumscribed cultural history, if it had not been for Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1154), whose Latin prose *Historia regum Britanniae* ('History of the Kings of Britain'), written between 1130 and 1136, is one of the most influential books ever written. The *Historia* is not itself a romance – in fact it masquerades as a meticulously exact account of British history, with details of the reigns of kings who never existed and of the numbers killed in battles that never took place – but it was the pseudo-historical basis on which the whole story of Arthur was erected.

Geoffrey studied and taught at Oxford, and spent much of his life there as a professional cleric, though he held ecclesiastical offices elsewhere, such as that of archdeacon of Llandaff. He had close associations with the aristocracy, especially Robert, earl of Gloucester (d. 1147), one of the most powerful men in the kingdom and one of the dedicatees of the *Historia*. Geoffrey was consecrated bishop of St Asaph in 1152 (a week after being ordained priest), but he never visited his see, and died in 1154.

Over two hundred manuscripts of the Latin text of the *Historia* are extant, a quite staggering number, given the probable survival rates of manuscripts of a non-religious text from such an early period, and suggestive of thousands that have perished. It was further disseminated in French and English translations. Not only is the *Historia* the primary and direct source for the whole central supposedly historical story of Arthur, it is also the only source for stories such as those of King Lear and Cymbeline (both of them the subject of plays by Shakespeare), and the lesser-known King Lud, who gave his name to

London, and King Bladud, who met his death over London in an early attempt to fly. Geoffrey begins with Brutus, an otherwise unknown great-grandson of Aeneas, who gathered the remnants of the Trojan race after the destruction of Troy and sailed to the distant isle of Albion, which he renamed Britain, after himself. There he founded the city of Troynovant, or New Troy (a rationalization of Trinovantes, which Geoffrey had come across as the name of a historical British tribe that lived east and north of London in pre-Roman times), later called London, after King Lud, of course. Geoffrey carries the history of Britain down to the death of Cadwallader (d. 689), an actual historical person and the last 'British', that is, Welsh, king with serious claims to dominion in England. In between, he alternates fairly rapid series of kings with more developed narratives of Leir, of Belinus and Brennius and their conquest of Gaul and Rome, of the Roman invasions of Britain, and of Uther Pendragon and Arthur.

Geoffrey used Gildas, Bede and Nennius, and took much from traditional Welsh legend, of which he had an extensive knowledge, and from Breton legend. Some of it would have been oral, but some too would have been written: the fact that the Welsh material he used is known to us now only in copies made after his death does not mean that he did not use earlier written sources which have since disappeared. But he also unquestionably invented a great deal too, especially in the early part of his narrative, his purpose being to supply England with the national history, the myth of national emergence, that it lacked. The Romans traced their ancestry to the Trojan hero Aeneas, in the story told by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, and other peoples claimed Trojan heroes as their eponymous ancestors, the Lombards, for instance, claiming Langobardus and the Franks Francus. Virgil was the great model for emulation, and because of him the Trojans were generally the heroes of the Trojan war in the medieval view, the Greeks being regarded as a shifty and treacherous race. Geoffrey's purpose was to claim descent for Britain from Troy, and also to create a great national hero, in whom the nation would be symbolized, in the person of Arthur. Geoffrey alleges that he derived the new parts of his work, the stories so far untold, from 'a certain very ancient book, written in the British language' (*britannici sermonis librum vetustissimum*), owned by his friend Walter, the well-attested archdeacon of Oxford, and originating in Brittany (which would conveniently explain why no one in England had seen it before). The book had

unfortunately disappeared since he had used it. He warns rival historians that they have no chance of competing with him on early British history. He has scooped the pool. Contemporary historians of a more sober cast of mind, such as William Newburgh, were scornful of his 'History', but Geoffrey was by now working, so to speak, in a different genre.

It is an amazing feat of invention. Probably half of Geoffrey's ninety-nine kings between Brutus and Cadwallader are totally made up, though one could not tell this from the plausible-sounding names he invents for them: nothing sounds more improbable than Rud Hud Hudibras, Dunvallo Molmutius or Gurguit Barbtruc, but these are all names Geoffrey could have found in old Welsh genealogies. Geoffrey's inventions are dressed up as perfectly sober matter-of-fact history, with synchronized dating references to Old Testament history, and a particular fondness for explaining the derivation of place-names. His battle-descriptions are detailed and circumstantial, full of military tactics and replete with statistics of the size of the armies and the numbers killed. Sometimes the numbers don't quite add up, which of course suggests that they are drawn from much older sources that may be confused about such things – for clearly, someone who was making them up would get them right.

These inventions force us to ask an odd question: Did Geoffrey know the difference between what was believed to be historically true and what he knew he had made up? There are two possible answers, or rather two more questions. One is, Are narrative historians always sure they know the difference between the two? The second, In what ways does it matter? There was a Carolingian hagiographer or writer of saints' lives of the eighth century who acknowledged that he had no information on certain of the saints whose lives he had written. In such cases, he says, he had made up lives for them of an appropriate kind, knowing that God would guide his pen just as he had guided their lives.⁵ In other words, they are portrayed as living the edifying lives they must have lived, and those lives are in that sense more true and, even, more real than the lives they might have lived in actuality, if that actuality were known about, or if indeed they had actually existed. To deduce, from this, that the Middle Ages had no understanding of the difference between fact and fiction is to imply that the difference modern people wish to make is the best or only one there is. The 'very ancient book in the British language'