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Arthur Before the Romances: Exploring Arthur's Evolution as a Literary Figure

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Exploring Arthur's Evolution as a Literary Figure

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Abstract

In 411 CE, the Roman legions left the island of Britain, never to return. This led to the slow decline of the Romano-Britons until their ultimate defeat at the hands of the Anglo-Saxons invaders. The Anglo-Saxons would remain on the island slowly supplanting the native Celtic language and culture until the Old English emerged. Out of this era emerged stories of a Celtic hero that would drive out the foreign invaders and reclaim Britain for the Celtic Britons. This story would later become very popular on the continent of Europe and the Celtic legend of Arthur would change. Using a literary lens I have analyzed the famous accounts of this era written before the continental expansion of Arthur's lore to analyze how Arthur changed from a post-Roman warlord. My research began with a desire to understand how Celtic Arthur developed and how he was portrayed.

In this essay I argue that King Arthur represents the hope for Welsh sovereignty and a desire to expel the non-Celtic peoples on the island. Understanding how Arthur changed from a post-Roman warlord to a Briton king can help us understand how the Celtic Britons saw themselves and their struggle for sovereignty against the English.

Introduction

After the Roman legions left Britain for the final time, the Romano-British population was left to fend for itself. For a time they succeeded, but when it became clear that the legions were not returning, the enemies of the Romano-British moved in to fill the power vacuum. The Picts and the Scots raided the Romano-British. These battles were not going well for the Romano-British, but the situation turned even more dire. The Anglo-Saxons invaded the island and the Romano-British were forced to fight them as well. This war did not go well for the Romano-British and they were conquered by the Anglo-Saxons. Over time the Romano-British turned either to their Celtic roots or to the new Anglo-Saxon culture. After several centuries, the English had established themselves and the Celtic Britons were not able to contest them. In this period, the legend of Arthur arose. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a new genre of literature became popular on the continent: romantic literature. A romance told a story, but the main focus was on quests, chivalry, and the popular idea of courtly love. In this period of literature the story of Arthur would expand to his more modern state.

Many scholars have considerable and often more significant research into Arthur. However, historical research into Arthur has been dominated by debates on his historicity stretching back from the late nineteenth century and continuing today. Some studies do examine Arthur as a literary figure, but the discussion is usually dominated by the later romances and legends. Much of the scholarship has been dominated by theories on Arthur's origins or by the continental authors. However, examining the pre-romantic Arthur as a literary figure can tell us just as much about the Celtic Britons as romantic Arthur can about high medieval society. In the pre-Romance Arthurian literature, Arthur emerged as a post-Roman warlord defeating the Anglo-Saxons, but in the subsequent stories he became conflated with other Celtic legends and

morphed into a Celtic king of Britain that revealed the Welsh dream of sovereignty over the island of Britain.

Methodology

My methodological lens is looking at Arthur as a literary figure. I am analyzing how the King Arthur legend grew and changed in English literature between the writings of Nennius in 823 and Geoffrey of Monmouth in 1136. Because of the narrow focus of this research there are rather few actual mentions of King Arthur. The first mention of Arthur, with a date we can confirm, is Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*. *Historia Brittonum* was written around 828 C and is attributed to the monk Nennius. Nennius was a Welsh monk who lived and wrote in the 9th century CE. Nennius states that he was a student of St. Elbotus (St. Elfodd) who helped establish the current calculation for Easter. In his prologue, he states that he compiled this text from the chronicles of the Romans and the works of Isidore, Hieronymus, Prosper, Eusebius, and from the histories from the Scots and Saxons.[1] This work was written around 828 CE and serves as a chronicle of British history from the biblical creation story to the sixth century. The translation of this was published in the book "Old English Chronicles", translated by J. A. Giles.

The story of *Culhwch and Olwen* comes to us from a collection of Welsh poems written in the 12th and 13th centuries called *The Mabinogion*. However, some historians suggest that the story Culhwch and Olwen is much older. Doris Edel suggests that the written poem comes from the 11th century whereas the actual poem itself is from the 10th century, predating the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth.[2] The poem *Culhwch and Olwen* is about the titular prince Culhwch and

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[1] Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, trans. J. A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848): 383, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Six_Old_English_Chronicles.

[2] Doris Edel, "The Arthur of 'Culhwch and Olwen' as a figure of epic-heroic tradition," *Reading Medieval Studies* IX (1983): 3, https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/85043/.

his attempt to woo the daughter of a giant, Olwen. While the story is nominally about Culhwch attempting to woo Olwen, the story mostly follows Culhwch's cousin Arthur. I will be using a copy of *The Mabinogion* that was translated by Lady Charlotte Guest in 1838.

Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote a *Historia Regum Britanniae* around 1136. His story added a lot to the story of Arthur and helped to create the later romances of Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth was a part of the secular clergy and lived most of his life at Oxford. While he was there, he penned *Historia Regum Britanniae*.[3] *Historia Regum Britanniae* is a history of the kings of Britain from the Trojan Wars to the sixth century. This work is very similar to the work of Gildas, Bede, and Nennius in both story and composition, however, much of Geoffrey's history is believed to be fictitious. The translation I used is J. A. Giles' *Six Old English Tales*.

The *Annales Cambriae* contains another old mention of Arthur. The *Annales Cambriae* was originally written in the 10th century, however the manuscripts that we have are from the 12th century, As Geoffrey of Monmouth was writing in the same century, he would be contemporary to this text. This text is a chronicle of mostly Welsh events, but also covers Britain, Ireland, Cornwall and Scotland. The translation is formatted as a series of dates laid out in a timeline, though the original text does not have dates, rather a series of the Latin word *annus*, meaning 'year'. The passages that mention Arthur come from the A-text of the Harlean manuscript. This was translated by James Ingram in 1912.

The other two sources that I am consulting are both histories of Britain, one by Gildas and the other by Venerable Bede. Gildas wrote *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* in the sixth century and was a contemporary to some of the events he describes, and Bede wrote *Historia*

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[3] John Edward Lloyd, "Geoffrey of Monmouth," *The English Historical Review* 57, no. 228 (1942): 464, http://www.jstor.org/stable/554371.

Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum in the eighth century partially using Gildas as a source. *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* covers the history of Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries, with a large focus on British religion. *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* is a history of the Christian church in Britain and covers the times from the Roman conquests to the eighth century. Their accounts of the Anglo-Saxon invasion and war mirror each other. Because of this I analyzed them together. Neither of these mention Arthur, but they do mention events that Arthur allegedly took part in. The translation of Gildas was found in "Old English Chronicles" and the translation of Bede was done by A. M. Stellar in 1907.

Literature Review

King Arthur as a topic of research has centuries of scholarship relating to it. Since the nineteenth century, many scholars have attempted to answer the questions surrounding Arthur as a literary figure, as a legendary figure, and as a historical figure. Unfortunately, in these centuries, there has been no true scholarly consensus on Arthur. Some scholars see him as a literary figure, some a historical king, while others feel that we will simply never know. Scholars of the past seemed more likely to feel that Arthur was a real person that was ascribed legendary traits. However, scholars of today are more mixed in their view. While some still see Arthur as a historical person, some scholars argue that he and the legend surrounding him represents the Welsh dream of independence from foreign invaders.

N. J. Higham offers a look at the prominent theories surrounding the historicity of King Arthur in his 2018 book *King Arthur: The Making of the Legend*. Higham's main argument is that, while there are many theories on King Arthur's origin, none of them are correct as Arthur is entirely fictitious.[4] To support his claim, he looks at the prominent theories. He analyzes the

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[4] Nicholas Higham, "Fire, Smoke, and Highland Mist", in *King Arthur: The Making of the Legend*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018), 275, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7cjvt7.14.

Lucius Artorius Castus theory, the Sarmatian and the Nart Sagas, a Greek connection to the

name, a theory that Arthur was a deity, and finally, what the *Historia Brittonum* and *Historia*

Regum Britanniae say. After analyzing the various theories on Arthur's origins, Higham argues

that Arthur's origin was in the Middle Ages with *Historia Brittonum* and *Historia Regum*

Britanniae and that only Gildas and Bede can be seen as authoritative[5]. Further, he argues that

Arthur as he appears in Nennius and Geoffrey's writing is a hope that the Britons would unite

and defeat the invaders.[6] This analysis is rather helpful toward understanding the evolution of the

Arthurian Legend by showing where the idea of Arthur came from. By providing not only a

critical analysis of the prominent theories, but also supplying the evidence for said theories and

providing context for them, Higham allows us to better understand Arthurian Legend.

      In his 2000 essay, "A Famous Arthur in the Sixth Century? Reconsidering the Origins of

the Arthurian Legend," Ken Dark argues that there must have been a historical Arthur that

inspired the legend, and that this Arthur must have been one of the six royal Arthurs that were

born from c. 550 to c. 650 CE.[7] Dark starts his essay with passages of *Y Godaddin*, *Historia*

Brittonum, *Annales Cambriae*, and the works of Gildas that mention events and material culture

in sixth and seventh century Wales and compares them to archeological evidence gathered. He

then talks about the six historical Arthurs, where they were from, their birth and death years, and

their connections with the surrounding kingdoms. He briefly discusses Lucius Artorius Castus

and the idea that Arthur was a British deity; he concludes that both theories are incorrect. Dark

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[5] Higham, *King Arthur: The Making of the Legend*, 276.

[6] Ibid., 277.

[7] Ken Dark, "A Famous Arthur in the Sixth Century? Reconsidering the Origins of the Arthurian Legend," *Reading Medieval Studies* XXVI (2000): 81-83, https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84001/.

believes that the historical Arthur must have been Arthur, son of Pedr/Retheoir as he was born at the right time, had enough prestige, ruled an important kingdom, and was in a location in which his fame could have spread far.[8] This essay provides a rather solid argument for a historical Arthur. Dark argues against the idea that Arthur was a Roman or a deity and provides ample archaeological and cultural evidence to support his claim.

Doris Edel, in her 1983 article, "The Arthur of 'Culhwch and Olwen' as a Figure of Epic-Heroic Tradition," analyzes the story of 'Culhwch and Olwen' as an Arthurian legend. Edel makes the claim that Arthur as he appears in 'Culhwch and Olwen' is an example of Celtic heroic tradition, and further, that he is the focal point and nucleus of the story.[9] She first compares the storytelling tradition of Ireland to that of Wales, noting that the *fili*, an elite class of poets in Ireland and Scotland, were able to preserve more Celtic traditions than the *bardd*, or bards, the poets of Wales.[10] Edel's interpretation of *Culhwch and Olwen* is that it is a series of independent Arthurian adventures, most of which stem from native traditions that were brought together in later additions within the framework of Culhwch wooing Olwen. This article gives us a glimpse of Celtic Britain through the story of *Culhwch and Olwen* and states that this part of the Arthurian legend is a frozen piece of Celtic culture in Britain, a culture that was largely lost to time.

Brynley Roberts makes the claim that Monmouth's work was steeped in native British tradition in his 1976 essay, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Welsh Historical Tradition." Roberts

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[8] Dark, "A Famous Arthur", 92.

[9] Doris Edel, "The Arthur of 'Culhwch and Olwen' as a Figure of Epic-Heroic Tradition," *Reading Medieval Studies* IX (1983): 6, https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/85043/.

[10] Ibid., 4-5.

begins with talking about the poets of Wales, stating that, "the conserving of historical tradition has always been one of the poet's functions in Wales, as in other courtly settings[11]." The poets were the historians of Wales and were often depicted as such.[12] Roberts argues that one of the most important themes in Welsh poetic tradition was the theme of loss. Roberts moves on to talk about how political prophecy became very popular in poems and that the theme of loss was replaced by a general hope of a return to sovereignty by the ninth century. Many poems were written to foreshadow the Britons regaining their sovereignty over Britain.[13] This in-depth look into Welsh poetic tradition and examples of it within Geoffrey of Monmouth's work show that Monmouth understood, at least superficially, popular Welsh ideals.

Surprisingly little is known about Geoffrey of Monmouth. John Edward Lloyd tackled this question in his 1942 essay, "Geoffrey of Monmouth" published in *The English Historical Review*. Lloyd first brings up what we knew about Geoffrey of Monmouth at the time. Geoffrey was part of the secular clergy and was therefore not a part of any monastic order. Lloyd suggests that Geoffrey did not necessarily have any connection to the town of Monmouth and that the current, for the time artifacts linked to Geoffrey in the Monmouth priory were actually from the fifteenth century[14]. Lloyd states that Geoffrey spent most of his time in Oxford and rarely left, even when he was given a seat at the See of St. Asaph. This essay, written mere decades after the discovery of a massive forgery, sought to compile what we knew about Geoffrey of Monmouth.

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[11] Brynley F. Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and Welsh Historical Tradition," *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies* 20 (1976): 30.

[12] Roberts, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", 30.

[13] Ibid., 35–36.

[14] John Edward Lloyd, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", *English Historical Review* 57, No. 228 (1942): 461, http://www.jstor.org/stable/554371.

Mary Williams offers an analysis of the 'death of Arthur' motif. In her 1962 article in the journal *Folklore*, "King Arthur in History and Legend," Mary Williams offers a summary of the evolution of the 'Death of Arthur' motif, from his connection to the Otherworld, a sort of underworld or realm where magic and heroes exist, to how the story of his death and beyond evolved. First starting with the historicity of Arthur, Williams claims that Arthur was a real person, rather than a deity, and that his name most probably was based on Lucius Artorius Castus.[15] Williams then talks about Wace's contributions to the Legend and the connections to Welsh folklore. She then discusses the similarities and differences between the legend of the French Romances and *Culhwch and Olwen*. Williams offers summaries of the original stories that Arthur's death and connection to the Otherworld appears in. Interestingly, the focus of early Arthurian legend seems to be on Arthur, whereas the French romances that expand the legend greatly focus on the Knights and Arthur takes a more passive approach.[16]

Gildas and Bede

Gildas and Bede both wrote histories of Britain. Even though neither of them mention Arthur, they were included in this essay to give some context to the events surrounding the Anglo-Saxon migration and invasion of Britain. Gildas wrote within his work that he was born the same year as the Battle of Bath-Hill. This makes Gildas' work as close to contemporary to the Anglo-Saxon invasions as we get. Bede wrote his history two hundred years later, well within the rule of the Anglo-Saxons. Both works are more concerned with British ecclesiastical history, rather than the invasions themselves, but they do give historical context to the events.

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[15] Mary Williams, "King Arthur in History and Legend", *Folklore* 73, No. 2 (1962): 73, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1258608.

[16] Ibid, 79–80.

In section twenty-three of his book, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, Gildas states that the British king Gurthrigern, or Vortigern, invited the Saxons to help battle the Picts and the Scots.[17] The Saxons broke their deal and started to plunder Britain, forcing the Britons to fight them and the Picts and Scots. The Britons eventually fled their cities and towns or gave into the Saxons. After some time many started to turn to Ambrosius Aurelianus. Ambrosius was, Gildas states, the child of Romans "who for their merit were adorned with the purple."[18] Purple has long been associated with royalty due to how expensive it was to make. Therefore, Gildas is stating in this passage that Ambrosius Aurelianus' parents were the last of the Roman rulers of Britain.[19]

Under Ambrosius, the Britons were victorious by the grace of God. Gildas briefly mentions the siege of Bath-hill in section 26. He states:

> After this, sometimes our countrymen, sometimes the enemy, won the field, to the end that our Lord might in this land try after his accustomed manner these his Israelites, whether they loved him or not, until the year of the siege of Bath-hill, when took place also the last almost, though not the least slaughter of our cruel foes, which was (as I am sure) forty-four years and one month after the landing of the Saxons, and also the time of my own nativity.[20]

Gildas' siege of Bath-hill is the same as the siege of Badon-hill in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.[21] Gildas states that the siege took place forty-four years after the arrival of the Saxons in Britain. We see this in Bede's work as well, in fact, the passages are nearly identical,

> From that day, sometimes the natives, and sometimes their enemies, prevailed, till the year of the siege of Badon-hill, when they made no small slaughter of those enemies, about forty-four years after their arrival in England.[22]

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[17] Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, trans. J. A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 310, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Six_Old_English_Chronicles.

[18] Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, 312.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 313.

[21] Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, trans. A. M. Sellar (Project Gutenberg, last updated June 17, 2020): 32, https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/38326.

[22] Ibid.

It can be stated that Bede used Gildas as a reference for this above passage. Bede references

Gildas' work in Book I, Chapter XXII, of *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.[23] The

translator also makes notes of several points where Bede uses Gildas as a source.

Gildas' work lays the basis for parts of Bede's work, Nennius' work, and even Geoffrey

of Monmouth's work. As Gildas was contemporary to the Anglo-Saxon invasions, he gives us

much needed historical context for the invasions that Arthur's story is based on.

Within *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, Bede gives us the history of the Britons

from ancient times to 731 CE. Bede talks at length about the Roman conquest and occupation of

Britain before moving onto the Anglo-Saxon migration and invasions.

Bede, or the translators of the sources, gives dates for many of the chapters. Chapter XV

starts the story of the Saxon migrations. In this chapter is the story of how the Britons invited the

Saxons to Britain to help them fight their enemies, the Picts, but were betrayed by the Saxons

and instead had to fight them. Chapter XV starts in the year 449 with the ascension of Marcian as

emperor with Valentinian, although the translators correct this to 450.[24] It is not stated if these

emperors are ruling from Rome or Constantinople. The chapter states that King Vortigern invited

the Saxons to help fight the Picts, however, they soon made war against the Saxons, Angles, and

Jutes.[25] This is very similar to what we find in Gildas' *De Excidio*.

The next chapter details the Britons first victories against the Germanic invaders. Titled

"How the Britons obtained their first victory over the Angles, under the command of Ambrosius,

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[23] Ibid., 42.

[24] Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum, 29.*

[25] Ibid., 31.

a Roman." In this chapter, Ambrosius Aurelianus leads the Britons against the Anglo-Saxons.

Bede does not list Ambrosius Aurelianus as a king, rather he is stated to be a Roman or

descended from the Roman rulers of Britain. Bede states that "sometimes the natives, and

sometimes their enemies, prevailed, till the year of the siege of Badon-hill…"[26]

With this, we can get the historical context of the events laid out in Arthur's story and

perhaps events that are closer to reality. Vortigern was fighting the Picts and invited the Saxons

for military help. This backfired and the Saxons started coming en masse. The Britons then had

to about-face and fight the Saxons. They started to lose, but invoked the powers of God and

eventually claimed victory in the Battle of Badon. The leader of the armies against the Saxons

was Ambrosius Aurelianus, rather than Arthur.

Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*

Historia Brittonum gives a history of the British Isles from the biblical Adam to St.

Patrick in the fifth century CE. The history starts with a count from the creation of man to the

fifth year of Edmond, king of the Angles. The text is a broad history of the Britons and as such,

is largely concerned with the actions of the Britons. Nennius claims that the Britons descend

from the biblical lost tribe of Japheth.[27] He then goes on to describe the Roman conquest of

Britain and lists the Romans Emperors and what they did in Britain. From here the text gets more

detailed into how the Anglo-Saxons came to be a threat to the native Britons. Nennius claims

that the Anglo-Saxons were invited into Britain by the Briton king Vortigern.[28] Sections 31

through 39 of the text are mostly concerned with St. Germanus', a fifth century Christian bishop,

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[26] Ibid., 32.
[27] Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, trans. J. A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 391-392,
https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Six_Old_English_Chronicles.

[28] Ibid., 397.

attempting to convert Vortigern and Vortigern's struggle with the Anglo-Saxons. Here we see a similar story to Gildas and Bede's work. Vortigern invited the Anglo-Saxons to Britain and was betrayed and started to lose a war with them.

In sections 40, 41, and 42 Nennius pauses and details the acquisition of Ambrose. At this point in the history, Vortigern was losing to the Anglo-Saxons. Vortigern attempted to build a fortress in the frontiers, which ended up being Guined in North Wales. Vortigern's supplies kept disappearing before the citadel could be built, so he called upon his wise men to figure out how to stop the problem. They instructed him "You must find a child born without a father, put him to death, and sprinkle with his blood the ground on which the citadel is to be built, or you will never accomplish your purpose."[29] The child, Ambrose, was born without a father and his sacrifice was supposed to save Vortigern. However, upon collecting the boy, Ambrose makes a fool out of the wise men by offering a counter prophecy.[30]

Ambrose instructs Vortigern to look into a pool. Eventually Vortigern does and spies a tent, and within the tent are two serpents, one red, the other white, both of which are struggling against each other. At first it seems like the stronger white serpent is winning their struggle, however the weaker red serpent eventually wins. Ambrose states that the two serpents are dragons, the red dragon represents the Britons and the white dragon represents the Saxons. The prophecy is clear. The weaker Britons will eventually defeat the Saxons.

From here, Nennius' narrative continues, and the Britons struggle against the Saxons. Vortigern dies and is succeeded by his son and the leader of the Saxons dies and is succeeded by his. It is in section 50 where we get the first direct mention of Arthur.

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[29] Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*., 402.

[30] Ibid., 402–403.

> Then it was, that the magnanimous Arthur, with all the kings and military force of Britain, fought against the Saxons. And though there were many more noble than himself, yet he was twelve times chosen their commander, and was as often conqueror.[31]

Interestingly, Arthur himself is not mentioned to be a king in this source, rather he is a commander. In fact, the 'great king amongst all the kings of Britain' was a man named Ambrosius.[32] Arthur in *Historia Brittonum* seems to have taken the role that Ambrosius Aurelianus played in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*; he is presented as a military leader defeating the Anglo-Saxons. Though Nennius is more specific about when Arhtur lived, he wrote later than Bede. Nennius mentions that Ambrosius was the great king of the Britons, but he does not mention him further. Nennius notes that there were men more noble than Arthur, perhaps this meant that Arthur was not a Royal at all during this time.[33] He may have been a local noble or even a commoner, though this is just speculation.

Section 50, or 56 in the original manuscript, lists twelve battles that Arthur leads. Two battles are notable within this list. The eighth battle near Gurnion castle, perhaps near the Roman station of Garionenum near Yarmouth in Norfolk as the translator states, and the twelfth battle, the battle of Badon.[34] The Eighth battle is notable as it is stated that Arthur bore the image of the Virgin Mary upon his shoulders and was victorious because of it.[35] Arthur is said to have routed the Saxons at this battle and pursued them an entire day due to the powers of God.[36] The Battle

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[31] Ibid., 408.

[32] Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, 407.

[33] Ibid., 408.

[34] Ibid., 408-409.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

of Badon is notable because Gildas and Bede both note this battle to be a great victory for the Britons. Nennius states that Arthur felled 940 Saxons only with the assistance of God. He also states that this was a "most severe contest."[37] This battle is portrayed in the sources as the biggest and most important fought against the Saxons.

The other ten battles were noted to have taken place all over Britain. All of the locations were given by text, but contextualized by the translator in the notes of this section. Most of these battles take place in Northern England with a few taking place in Southern England. These battles more than likely made up the border between Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Britain. Arthur is not mentioned beyond this section.

Historia Britonum is perhaps the first written mention of Arthur and as such it gives a great baseline for the Arthurian mythos. In Nennius' telling, Arthur is not a king, rather he is shown as a military leader of sorts leading the Celtic Britons armies against the Anglo-Saxons in a series of 12 battles. The last battle mentioned is the Battle of Badon, which was a resounding success for the Britons.

Culhwch and Olwen

The poem *Culhwch and Olwen* is about the titular prince Culhwch (Spelled Kilhwch in the text) and his attempt to woo Olwen, the daughter of the giant Yspaddaden Penkawr. Through this poem we can see the introjection of Celtic legends into Arthur's story. While the story is nominally about Culhwch attempting to woo Olwen, the story mostly follows Arthur and his warriors. Culhwch takes a background role to Arthur and his warriors about halfway through the story and only briefly appears. This poem is uniquely interesting because, as Doris Edel states, it preserves a piece of Celtic Britain culture that has since been lost.[38]

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Edel, "The Arthur of Culhwch and Olwen", 4-5.

Culhwch is unable to woo Olwen on his own, so he calls upon Arthur to help him. It is in this part of the story where we get more information about Arthur. When Culhwch asks for a boon, Arthur gives an interesting bit of information,

> Since thou wilt not remain here, chieftain, thou shalt receive the boon whatsoever thy tongue may name, as far as the wind dries, and the rain moistens, and the sun revolves, and the sea encircles, and the earth extends; save only my ship; and my mantle; and Caledvwlch, my sword; and Rhongomyant, my lance; and Wynebgwrthucher, my shield; and Carnwenhau, my dagger; and Gwenhwyvar, my wife. By the truth of Heaven, thou shalt have it cheerfully, name what thou wilt.[39]

This dialog from Arthur sets up a number of items that Arthur has at his disposal. It names Arthur's famous sword for the first time, Caledvwlch. This sword would be known as Caliburn in Geoffrey's history, and later it would become known as Excalibur. This passage also sets up Arthur's famous ship, though it does not name it until later, the Pridwin.[40] Arthur's shield is named Wynebgwrthucher, Arthur's spear is called Rhongomyant, and Arthur's dagger, which he uses to kill a witch, is called Carnwenhau. Another addition to Arthur's legend that this passage mentions is Arthur's wife, Gwenhwyvar.[41]

Arthur agrees to help Culhwch and calls upon some of his fighters to help. We are introduced to the warriors that accompany Arthur for the rest of the story, Kai, Bedwyr, Kynddelig, Gwrhyr Gwalstawt Leithoedd, Gwalchmai the son of Gwyar, Menw the son of Teirgwaedd.[42] Each of them has special attributes that make them stand out. Kai, for example, could hold his breath for nine days underwater, stay awake for nine days, inflict unhealable

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[39] Lady Charlotte Guest, "Kilhwch and Olwen," in *The Mabinogion* (Project Gutenberg, last updated October 4, 2021), https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5160.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

wounds upon his enemies, grow as tall as 'the highest tree in the forest', and he was so warm by nature that he would remain dry in a rainstorm and could light fires without a spark. Another, Bedwyr, was the fastest on the island behind Arthur and his spear would produce nine wounds when removed. Kynddelig could never get lost, Gwrhyr Gwalstawt Ieithoedd knew every language, Menw the son of Teirgwaedd knew some form of magic and could cast charms, and Gwalchmai the son of Gwyar could never fail a quest. Gwalchmai was also a kinsman of Arthur, his nephew by his sister and cousin.[43] Arthur's sister would be expanded upon in Geoffrey's history, but this is the only mention of her in this text. Menw is also worth noting as he has a form of magic that is not divine by nature. All of these warriors possess magical abilities, and yet they are not mentioned to be from God, although they are still Christian.

The first part of the story greatly expands on Arthur's legend, while the second part is devoted to the quest. The beginning of this story adds much to Arthur's legend. He is the king of all of the Island of Britain, has a great deal of fame, a number of magic items and a wife named Gwenhwyvar, and warriors with magic powers that go on quests with him.

Arthur and his company travel to the lands of the giant Yspaddaden Penkawr, a magical castle that is nearly impossible to reach. Arthur and company assault the castle and are attacked by Yspaddaden. He attempts to kill Culhwch three times with poison darts but is outsmarted by Bedwyr, Menw, and Culhwch. Yspaddaden relents and gives Culhwch a series of tasks, all of which are framed as impossible. Culhwch agrees and Arthur and his warriors set out on the tasks and complete them. One of the tasks has Arthur and his warriors to Ireland where he has to hunt a magical boar. Another task requires Arthur to acquire the "blood of the jet-black sorceress, the

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[43] Guest, "Culhwch and Olwen".

daughter of the pure white sorceress, from Pen Nant Govid, on the confines of Hell."[44] They complete these tasks with little trouble and return to Yspaddaden who relents to Culhwch, Arthur kills Yspaddaden anyway. Culhwch and Olwen get married and the story ends.

The poem *Culhwch and Olwen* expands the lore of Arthur quite a bit. In *Historia Brittonum* Arthur is simply a leader of an army that fights the Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxons are not mentioned anywhere in Culhwch and Olwen, however. Beyond this, Arthur is stated to be the king of the island with a great deal of fame and kings under him. He also has family, Culhwch, his cousin, Gwalchmai the son of Gwyar, his nephew, and an unnamed sister and cousin, the parents of Gwalchmai. Arthur's sister is later expanded upon in Geoffrey's history. Beyond kin, Gwenhwyvar, Arthur's wife, makes her first appearance; she is not mentioned in Geoffrey's history. Arthur himself also possesses a number of unique items: the Prydwen, Arthur's ship, Caledfwlch, later Caliburn and Excalibur; Arthur's shield, renamed in Geoffrey's history; Rhongomyant, Arthur's spear; and Carnwenhau, Arthur's dagger. All of these items make their first appearance in this poem. The fact that Geoffrey was familiar with this poem and that some of these tropes would be used in the later romances shows that this poem, and by extension Arthur, was rather popular when it was written down.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*

The Arthurian story occurs later in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, starting in the later parts of Book VI. It is here where Merlin's character is first introduced into the lore. We also see the addition of Uther Pendragon as Arthur's father. Beyond this, Arthur's items take on their more popular names, e.g. the renaming of Caliburn and Pridwen.

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[44] Ibid.

While an Ambrose Merlin was first identified in *Historia Brittonum* (called simply Ambrose in that text), here Merlin takes his more well-known role as a magician and an advisor to the king. Ambrose Merlin's story is roughly the same as it appeared in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum*: King Vortigern was looking for ways to build his fortress so that it would not be sacked by the Anglo-Saxons. To this end, his magicians told him to sacrifice a boy born without a father. A minor difference is that in Monmouth's telling, Merlin's mother states that she was visited by a beautiful man many times and in one of those visits Ambrose Merlin was conceived.[45] Merlin was taken to Vortigern and he then convicts the magicians of lying and delivered a prophecy.[46] This first prophecy is mostly unchanged from *Historia Brittonum*; however, Book VII is dedicated to a much longer prophecy. Within the first prophecy is the same dragon struggle, while the second prophecy is about Arthur's coming victory, but also his death.[47] In Book VII, Merlin then goes on to list major events in British history, but in prophetic prose.[48] Merlin later tells Vortigern that he would die by the hands of the brothers, Aurelius Ambrosius and Uther Pendragon in Book VIII.[49] Merlin later takes a lesser role in the story becoming an advisor to Aurelius Ambrosius and Arthur during his kingship. It is also claimed that Merlin built Stonehenge.[50]

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[45] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, trans. J. A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 193, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Six_Old_English_Chronicles.

[46] Ibid., 383.

[47] Ibid., 196.

[48] Ibid, 194–206.

[49] Ibid., 207.

[50] Ibid., 215–218.

After the prophecies, Vortigern is killed by the aforementioned brothers. The Anglo-Saxons are defeated and their leaders killed by Aurelius Ambrosius. This contradicts Nennius' account of the events, but it does agree with Gildas' and Bede' accounts of the events. The key difference here is that Geoffrey claims that the Anglo-Saxons were driven from the island.

In Book VIII we see the kingships of the brothers who were descended from the Romans through their mother, though this information is stated in Book VI, chapter V.[51] This parallels Aurelius Ambrosius' origins in Gildas' and Bede's works. Ambrosius is later assassinated by a Saxon, a detail that differs from *Historia Brittonum* which claims that Arthur and Ambrosius lived at the same time.[52] In Montmouth's work, Arthur was not born yet and his father, Uther Pendragon, was not yet married.[53] The story then goes into Uther Pendragon's Rule. Uther falls for the wife of the duke of Cornwall, Igerna. With the help of Merlin, Uther transforms into the Duke and sleeps with Igerna. After this, Uther kills the duke and defeats his army.[54] This passage is notable because it gives Merlin magic. Merlin was special in Nennius' work, but not magical. Guest sees this episode as an insert from the story of *Culhwch and Olwen* as the character Menw was able to cast a spell on a giant mastiff and transform into a bird to steal 'the precious things' from a giant boar.[55] This passage from *Culhwch and Olwen* along with Arthur's special items from the same story, implies that Geoffrey of Monmouth may have been familiar with Culhwch and Olwen and further shows the conflagration of legend and Arthur.

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[51] Ibid., 178–179.

[52] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, 219

[53] Ibid., 226

[54] Ibid., 255.

[55] Guest, "Kilhwch and Olwen".

Shortly after Arthur and his sister, Anne, are born, Uther dies and is buried in Stonehenge. Finally, Arthur is crowned king at 15. It is here where we get the leadership of Arthur as seen in Nennius. Chapters I-IV in book IX deal with Arthur's battles that were identified in the *Historia Brittonum*. Just before the final battle with the Saxons we get an interesting section,

> …and on his shoulders his shield called Priwen; upon which the picture of the blessed Mary, mother of God, was painted, in order to put him frequently in mind of her. Then girding on his Caliburn, which was an excellent sword made in the isle of Avallon, he graced his right hand with his lance, named Ron, which was hard, broad, and fit for slaughter.[56]

Though the names are changed, the shield Wynebgwrthucher becomes Priwen, the sword Caledfwlch becomes Caliburn, and Rhongomyant becomes Ron, items that Arthur owned in *Culhwch and Olwen*, appear in Monmouth's account. Even though the copies of the Mabinogion that we have were made after *Historia Regum Britanniae*, this portion of the text shows that people were at least knowledgeable in the story. This gives us a clear evolution from *Culhwch and Olwen* to *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Caliburn is also said to have been made in Avalon, the first mention of this mystical realm in the text.

The next battle that is mentioned is the Battle of Badon, or the siege of Bath-hill in Gildas, that Nennius mentions. Though Nennius states that Arthur killed nine hundred forty Saxons by his own hand and the will of God, Geoffrey only states that four hundred seventy Saxons were killed by Caliburn and the will of God.[57] Though Geoffrey only makes note of deaths by that sword alone.[58] From here the story deviates. After this battle Arthur subdues the

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[56] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, 234.

[57] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, 234.

[58] Ibid.

Scots and Picts.[59] Then he subdues Ireland, Iceland, the Orkneys, and a place referred to as

Gothland, though it is unclear where this is referring to.[60] There is peace for twelve years before

Arthur attacks Norway and installs his brother-in-law to the throne of Norway. He then defeats

the Gallic king in a duel and adds Gaul to his domain and holds court in Paris after this he

subjugates Aquitaine.[61] The Romans hear of these actions and send a letter demanding Arthur

pay tribute to Rome. This is rather interesting as Rome would have been under the control of the

Ostrogoths, otherwise Geoffrey could be speaking about the Eastern Roman Empire. The

demand is denied and is instead reversed. Arthur's court agrees on this course of action.[62] This is

one of the imaginary additions that Geoffrey added. He later states that the domain of the

Romans included the Medes and Parthians, though this could be a literary device to call back to

Roman times or a further reference to the Eastern Roman Empire.

      In chapters XVII, XVIII, and XIX, in Book IX, Arthur's entourage gives their opinions

on whether or not to go to war with Rome. Hoel, the king of Armorica, and Augusel, the king of

Albania (Scotland), give their support.[63] In Augusel's speech is the statement,

> But now, since we are at liberty to encounter them, I am overwhelmed with joy and eagerness of
> desire, to see a battle with them, when the blood of those cruel oppressors will be no less acceptable
> to me than a spring of water is to one who is parched with thirst… Nay, how sweet will be even
> death itself, when suffered in revenging the injuries done to our ancestors, in defending our liberties,
> and in promoting the glory of our king![64]

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[59] Ibid., 236.

[60] Ibid., 238.

[61] Ibid., 239-241.

[62] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, 246-250.

[63] Ibid., 248–250

[64] Ibid., 249.

This passage calls the Romans 'oppressors' and makes reference to the conquest of Britain. Augusel states that he would be overjoyed at bringing defeat to the Romans, who he sees as cruel oppressors. This marks Arthur's final transformation into a sort of freedom fighter against the foreign invaders. As with Hoel's speech, Augusel sees the war with Rome as a good thing and a necessity.

Book X is dedicated to the war between Rome and Arthur. In chapter II we see that Arthur's nephew Modred and Queen Guanhumara are given control of the government while Arthur is fighting the war.[65] This is the first time we see Modred in the legend. Modred is the son of Arthur's sister Anne, who was married to the king of Norway to secure their alliance. This is also the first time we see Arthur's wife in this story. We can see that Arthur's wife Gwenhwyvar [sic] from Culhwch and Olwen has now become Guanhumara. The war wages with some back and forth between the Romans and Arthur's forces. In Chapter XI, Arthur takes up Caliburn and wins the battle. In Book X, chapter XI, Arthur gives a rousing speech to rally his troops and takes up Caliburn. "With these expostulations, he rushed upon the enemy, made terrible havoc among them, and not a man did he meet but at one blow he laid either him or his horse dead upon the ground."[66] This is another description of Caliburn's extreme power. The war is won by Arthur and he returns home only to find that Modred has become a tyrant and Guanhumara has married him in violation of her first wedding vows.[67] The idea of Arthur's wife being unfaithful to him would be expanded upon in the later romances. It is possible that this is the section that inspired that.

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[65] Ibid., 251.

[66] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, 266.

[67] Ibid., 268.

Arthur's role in *Historia Regum Britanniae* ends in Chapter XI. Modred calls the Anglo-Saxons back to Britain and they fight Arthur in two final battles. In the first battle Arthur is victorious, but at a great cost, "...joining battle with him, made a very great slaughter of his men." In the end, however, "they paid back the slaughter, and put Modred and his army to flight."[68] Arthur is also victorious in the second battle with Modred. Modred is killed, but Arthur is mortally wounded. The location given by Geoffrey of this battle is Cornwall on the river Cambula.[69] The final line in this section is noteworthy,

> And even the renowned king Arthur himself was mortally wounded; and being carried thence to the isle of Avallon to be cured of his wounds, he gave up the crown of Britain to his kinsman Constantine, the son of Cador, duke of Cornwall, in the five hundred and forty-second year of our Lord's incarnation.[70]

This is the premise of the later story The Death of Arthur, though the location differs, The *Annales Cambriae* identify this the battle of Camlann, and give the year as 537.[71] In this section is another naming of the mystical isle of Avallon. The same land that made the magical Caliburn is also the mystical isle to cure Arthur of his wounds. What's more is that there is no mention of God when referring to Avallon. This place is capable of curing mortal wounds and making magical swords, but there is no mention of God producing the magic used.

The *Annales Cambriae*

There are only two passages within this text that mentions Arthur within the *Annales Cambriae*. The first is in the year 516 and states, "The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried

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[68] Ibid., 269.

[69] Ibid., 270.

[70] Ibid., 271.

[71] *Annales Cambriae*, trans. James Ingram, (1912), https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Six_Old_English_Chronicles.

the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights upon his shoulders and the Britons were the victors."[72] This quick summary of the Battle of Badon does not name Arthur as a king. Being written so close to *Historia Regum Britanniae* and not naming Arthur as a king is strange. Historian N. J. Higham argues that either the author of this section also wrote the Battle of Badon section in *Historia Brittonum* or that they simply used *Historia Brittonum* as a source.[73] The second entry is in 537 and reads, "The battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell: and there was plague in Britain and Ireland."[74] This refers to the previously mentioned final battle between Arthur and Modred in *Historia Regum Britanniae*. The dates of both of these events do not line up with any source. While Geoffrey of Monmouth does not mention the date of the Battle of Badon, Gildas mentions that he was born in the same year as the battle, 473. Gildas, Bede, and Nennius do not mention the final battle of Arthur, while Geoffrey of Monmouth and the *Annales Cambriae* both disagree on the date; Geoffrey of Monmouth dates it ten years after the *Annales Cambriae* does. This discrepancy can be added up to the event in question being a fable added into the Arthurian mythos later than the Battle of Badon.

Conclusion

As we saw, Arthur first emerged as a post-Roman warlord defeating the Anglo-Saxons in *Historia Brittonum*. Gildas and Bede give us historical context for the invasions. He then gets conflated with legends and slowly morphs into a Celtic king of Britain in *Culhwch and Olwen*. The Magic of Arthur's warriors shows the mixing of myth and legend into Arthur's story. In *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Arthur's legend gains more of its familiar pieces and Arthur

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[72] Ibid.

[73] Higham, Nicholas J, "A british Arthur: Starting the Tradition," in *King Arthur: The Making of the Legend*, (Yale University Press, 2018), 223-224, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7cjvt7.13.

[74] *Annales Cambriae*.

becomes a unifying king who is ultimately defeated by the Saxons and is spirited away to heal. Arthur's conquests and rivalry of Rome shows the Welsh dream of sovereignty and a desire to punish those that stole their homeland. The Welsh dragon prophecy provided by Merlin further shows the desire to defeat the invaders of their island.

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