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And at the feste of Pentecost alle maner of men assayed to pulle at the swerde that wold assay; but none myghte prevaille but Arthur, and pullit it ote afore all the lordes and comyns that were there - wherefore alle the comyns cryed at ones, 'We wille have Arthur unto our kynge. We wille put hym no more in delay, for we all see that it is Goddes wille that he shalle be our kyng - and who that holdeth ageynst it, we wille slee hym.' And therwithall they knelyd at ones, both ryche and poure, and cryed Arthur mercy bycause they had delayed hym so longe. And Arthur foryeaf hem, and took the swerd bitwene both his handes and offred it upon the aulter where the Archebisshop was; and so was he made knyghte of the best man that was there.

—Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte d'Arthur

Much ink (and blood) has been spilled over the truth of the Arthurian saga, and though debates over the centuries have moved away from Breton streets and into journals, a conclusive stance has yet to be reached. The traditional view since the Middle Ages favored a historical Arthur, though primarily for political motivations by the English monarchy, and it was not until the nineteenth-century that Arthur came under the eye of modern historians. For a time, most scholars advocated the existence of the historical Arthur, but the scorn of the deconstructionist revisionism took its toll, and Arthur was discarded from history with all legends as “rank forgery.” The historical deconstruction of the latter half
of the twentieth-century claims that nothing can be drawn from texts beyond the existence of the text itself, so any attempt to find meaning is nothing more than impressing the reader’s own meaning where there is none. Indeed, it is true that when we read or observe anything it is unavoidable to view it through our own perspectives and prejudices. But rather than choosing to reject all that we have discovered as meaningless, instead we should acknowledge our biases, so that we might see how our perspective diverges from the author’s perspective, thus altering the text, in order to better understand the text, the author, and the culture whence it came.

St. Gildas Sapiens’ history of the collapse of Roman Britain was once rejected as fictitious due to its nature as a mythic history and Gildas was labeled a confused and misinformed man. However, recent archaeological evidence has suggested that his writings might be more accurate than we had previously believed, and that he was, in fact, a well-educated man whose writing hints at access to a large body of now-lost sources. Indeed, the traditional views of Post-Roman Britain are being revisited by historian and archaeologist alike, and much of what was thought to be true, such as an illiterate majority, is now being reevaluated. With archaeological and historical reinterpretation restoring new meaning to these once discarded texts, and maintaining a more developed form of cultural awareness – both of our own and of the past – the time has come to revisit these histories and the nature of Arthur.

Never has any secular character in the West gained such great literary renown as the legendary King Arthur; the tales of him and his court have had a resounding impact on Western literature and culture. In Mediaeval times, a writer had a choice of three major sources of inspiration: the Matter of France, Rome, and Britain. Out of these, only the Matter of Britain – the Matter of Arthur – has endured. Something about this man and his companions struck deep in the hearts of the Europeans, so the question arises: where could such a man come from? Surely no real man could have been born through magical trickery, been gifted with an enchanted blade to protect England against man and monster, only to ultimately fall in battle to the offspring of an incestuous coupling with his sister. And yet, by the same token, how could a man, who has so touched the souls of people more than a millennium after his presumed life, be created merely by the imagination? Many scholars and amateur enthusiasts have argued one way or another, and much of the debate has centered on the reliability of the so-called “historical” sources, such as the much-lambasted Historia Brittonum. But while I acknowledge the criticisms of the accuracies of these sources, I would argue that, in light of recent archaeo-
logical interpretation, the body of early Mediaeval literature – both historical and fictitious – nevertheless provides solid evidence for the existence of Arthur as a unique historical figure.

One of the primary reasons that the historical deconstructionists reject Arthur’s existence lies in the questionable veracity of sources such as the Historia Brittonum, a ninth-century Latin text from Wales that has played a crucial role in the development of the Arthurian persona. One of the most outspoken opponents of Arthur, David Dumville, argues that we cannot rely on the Mediaeval sources for any material of value due to their lack of a sufficient “concept of history”:

In general, our ignorance of the political history of the British fifth century is almost total; in my view, it is not legitimate to seek to lighten this darkness by the use of unhistorical sources offered by a writer whose ignorance was complete and whose concept of history did not require him to distinguish between certain types of evidence, as we must do.\(^{11}\)

In another article, he goes even further:

I think we can dispose of him [Arthur] quite briefly. He owes his place in our history books to a ‘no smoke without fire’ school of thought. What evidence is there for his existence?... The totality of the evidence, and it is remarkably slight until a very late date, shows Arthur as a figure of legend... The fact of the matter is that there is no historical evidence about Arthur; we must reject him from our histories and, above all, from the titles of our books.\(^{12}\)

While caution concerning such sources is to be expected – and essential – I believe that such assertions cross the line both in stating that there is an absolute lack of evidence in support of an historical Arthur and the suggestion of his unimportance in history. Recent studies have found that the theory of a largely illiterate Dark Ages Britain is a shaky claim at best, and there is evidence that writing was not reserved solely for the church and formalities, nor were extensive libraries as uncommon as previously thought, though a majority of the works that would have been in them is now sadly lost\(^{13}\). Many of the sources I shall be referring to allude to a greater body of texts on Arthur, which calls into question the theory of a “remarkably slight” amount of evidence concerning the man.

### i. Historical Sources

The most logical starting point for our investigation is the work of Gildas, a Welsh monk who wrote *De Excidio Britanniae* (“On the Ruin of Britain”) somewhere around 540\(^{14}\), which would make him a contemporary of Arthur. Though Gildas’ primary purpose was a jeremiad-like con-
demnation of the contemporary kings and priests, he begins with a brief historical introduction. In this, he provides a vague account of the fall of Britain to the Saxons, but does mention a successful time of resistance, including a battle at Badon Hill in the year of his birth."15 He also mentions a Roman-British general named Ambrosius Aurelianus, who helped rally the Britons and oppose the invaders: *duce Ambrosio Aureliano viro modesto... vires capessunt, victores provocantes ad proelium*6 (“led by Ambrosius Aurelianus, a temperate man, the men rallied and challenged the conquerors to battle”). Many scholars have tried to equate Ambrosius with the historical Arthur, citing Gildas as evidence, stating that it seems odd that Gildas would leave out an important a character as Arthur17. However, Gildas rarely mentions names in his historical introduction, favoring titles instead, and so Ambrosius’ lack of any title and description as but a man is striking. While it is debatable whether Arthur was a high or petty king, there is little doubt that, if he existed, he was a ruler of some kind. Furthermore, most sources name Ambrosius as a rival to Vortigern, the tyrant who is said to have brought the Saxons to Briton as mercenar-ies18, which would place him at the onset of the Saxon invasion nearly half a century before Badon19. Also, the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* make Ambrosius a distinctly different character from Arthur, though the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* mentions the two men fighting alongside one another20.

Concerning Badon itself, Gildas describes it as happening after a long conflict with the Saxons, in which neither force gained the upper-hand. No leader is named for the Britons at Badon, so it is often assumed that Gildas implies that Ambrosius was the leader, though this clashes with the later accounts. This is not to say that Gildas names Arthur as the leader at Badon Hill, but rather that he does not give a concrete name at all. What is important that we take from Gildas is that there was a battle at Badon Hill that aligns with the same battle mentioned in the later sources. So, while it is possible that Ambrosius may have been assimilated into the growing Arthur of legend, Gildas’ account provides no firm evidence that Ambrosius was the historical Arthur21.

One thing we do know about Arthur is that as he developed into a legendary figure, his nature became very political. Arthur came to be a symbol – both historical and literary – representing the Briton resistance, and so he was bound to become tangled in the culture clash between the Anglo-Saxons and Welsh, as seen in the writings of St. Bede and the pro-Briton response to it, the *Historia Brittonum*. St. Bede, an early eighth-century English monk, wrote a history of the church in England, entitled the *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (“History of the Church of the
English”). He made no secret of his distaste for the Britons (especially their church), and described the conquest of Britain by the Saxons as a swift and direct affair, in which the Britons failed to put up any serious resistance. Though he does not mention Arthur (or any other resistance, for that matter), Bede’s importance concerning the Arthurian history is in relation to the response to his work, the Historia Brittonum, which was written in Gwynedd, Wales, in the early ninth-century, the date of compilation being 829 or 830. Just as the anti-Briton Historia Ecclesiastica described an utter lack of resistance by the Britons, the Historia Brittonum described a most successful resistance led by Arthur:

Tunc belliger Arthur, cum multibus Britanniae atque regibus, contra illos pugnabat. Et, licet multi ipso nobiliores essent, ipse tamen duodecies dux belli fuit victorque bellorum. Primum bellum contra illos iniit iuxta ostium fluminis quod dicitur Glein; secundum et tertium quartumque ac quintum super aliam annem qua nominatur britannice Duglas, quae est in regione Linius; sextum bellum super flumen quod uocatur Bassas. Septimum contra illos iniit bellum in silua Celidonis quod britannice cat coit Celidon nominatur. Octauum contra barbaros egit bellum iuxta castellum Guinion, in quo idem Arthur portuait imaginem sanctae Mariae, Dei genitricis semperque virginis, super humeros suos; et tota illa die Saxones, per uirtutem domini nostra Iesu Christi et sanctae Mariae matris eius, in fugam uersi sunt et magna cede multi ex eis perierunt. Nonum egit bellum in urbe Leogis quae britannice Cair Lion dicitur. Decimum uero gessit bellum in littore fluminis, quod nos uocamus Traht Treuroit; undecimum in monte qui nominatur Breguin ubi illos in fugam uertit, quem nos cat Bregion appellamus. Duodecimum contra Saxones durissime Arthur bellum in monte Badonis penetrait in quo corruerunt impetu illius una die nongenti quadraginta uiri, nullo sibi Brittonum in adiutorium adherente preter ipsum solum, Domino se confortante. In omnibus autem supradictus bellis protestantur semper eum fuisse victorem, sicut fuerunt et alii perplures Britones. Sed nulla fortitudo uel consilium contra Dei voluntatem: quanto magis uero Saxones prosternebantur in bellis, tanto magis a Germania et ab alis augebantur Saxonibus sine intermissione; atque reges et duces cum multis milibus ab omnibus pene prouintiis ad se inuitabant. Et hoc egere usque ad tempus quo Ida regnauit — qui filius fuit Eobba; ipse primus rex fuit, in Bernech et in Cair Affrauc, de genere Saxonum.

*The text reads: “Then the militant Arthur, with the people and kings of Britain, fought against the Saxons. And though there were many nobler than he, it was he that was twelve times the leader and victor of battle. The first battle he entered into against the Saxons was near the mouth of the river that is called Gleni. The second, third, fourth, and fifth were on another river which is called Duglas by the Britons, in the region of Linius. The sixth battle was on the river called Bassas. The seventh battle against the Saxons that
The controversial of this work can be seen even in this fragment, which describes Arthur felling 940 enemies in a single battle (though a later work, William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Regum Anglorum* in the early twelfth-century gives the number at 900\(^{25}\)). The author of the text\(^{26}\) confesses to have compiled this history from a variety of sources\(^{27}\). Some scholars have accused the author of considerably changing the stories to better suit his tastes, but they also portray him as a man of great “ignorance and stupidity”\(^{28}\), which makes it difficult to believe that “this dolt’s uncritical heap”\(^{29}\) is his own fabrication; if he was so dull-witted, the author would have simply lacked the genius and literary skill to create such a story. Rather, we should accept the possibility of other (now lost) sources apart from Gildas and Bede, be they accurate or not. So while it may have little value on its own, in conjunction with other sources, the *Historia Brittonum* can still be of value to us.

In 970, in Dyfed, Wales, a similar source, the *Annales Cambriae* was compiled, described by its author as “a sober historical document using good sources”\(^{30}\). The *Annales Cambriae* is a chronicle of Welsh history in the years 447 A.D. to 954, listing a series of important events and the years they occurred in, including a pair of entries on Arthur:


XCIII Annu. Gueith Camlann, in qua Arthur et Medraut corruere; et mortalitas in Britannia et in Hibernia fuit.\(^{31}\)

Arthur engaged in was in the forest of Celidon, which is called Cat Coit Celidon by the Britons. The eighth battle against the foreigners was near the castle Guinion, and there Arthur carried the likeness of holy Mary, the mother of God and eternal virgin, on his shoulders. And that day all the Saxons, by the virtue of our Lord Jesus Christ and his holy mother Mary, were routed and during the retreat many of their number perished. The ninth battle was fought in the city Legion, which is called Cair Lion by the Britons. The tenth battle was on the shore of the river we call Trat Treuroit. The eleventh was on the mountain called Breguoin, which we call Cat Bregion, and there Arthur put the Saxons to flight. In the twelfth battle against the Saxons, Arthur drove harshly to the hill of Badon, and on that day 940 men fell to his onslaught, with none of the Britons staying at his side to aid him but with God alone giving him strength. And in all these battles he was the victor, and the Britons with him. For indeed there is neither strength nor plan that can oppose the will of the Lord. The more Saxons that fell in battle, the more they were increased in numbers from Germania and other Saxons without pause; and they summoned the kings and leaders with many soldiers from nearly every province. And this was continued until the time Ida son of Eoppa was king, and he was of the Saxon race and the first king in Bernicia at Cair Eubrac.”

\(^{*}\) The text reads: “516 AD. The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur bore the cross of our Lord
As N.J. Higham notes, there are few entries in the first century of the *Annales Cambriæ*, and some of the dates are questionable in relation to other sources. However, the *Annales Cambriæ* drew on more than simply the *Historia Brittonum* for its composition, so again we find the implication of more sources on Arthur which gives us two independent sources (from an era when much of the literature is now lost) that explicitly describe the existence of Arthur as a historical figure as well as an additional, possible, pair of allusions to him from a contemporary source.

We turn now to our final historian of Arthur: Geoffrey of Monmouth, a twelfth-century Welsh cleric who was very sympathetic to the old Briton people (contemporarily embodied in the Welsh and Bretons), and the primary intent of his writing was to give them a racial history. He wrote three major works on the Arthurian material: first the *Prophtiae Merlinii* ("Prophecies of Merlin"), next his magnum opus the *Historia Regum Britanniae* ("History of the Kings of Britain"), and finally the *Vita Merlini* ("Life of Merlin"). The pair of works on Merlin discuss his life and prophecies that were, allegedly, made by him about the future struggle with the Normans, but it is the *Historia Regum Britanniae* that we are primarily concerned with. In this, he describes Arthur, Modred, Silva Calidonis, Merlinus, Thelgesinus, Guennolous, Perederus, and others, as well as new deeds and campaigns, in addition to the standard array. While much seems to be taken from the *Historia Brittonum* and *De Excidio Britanniæ*, there is also a large amount of material that we have not seen before. Geoffrey claims that Walter, the Archdeacon of Oxford, gave him a “very old book in the old British tongue," and it is from this that he gained a majority of his material. As an educated man in Wales, it is entirely possible (and, indeed, likely) that he would know the old Briton language, and while much of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* is apocryphal – Geoffrey does not hide the sensationalism of his work – the assertion of the existence of such a book could be considered further evidence to the presence of more sources that we do not know about. E.K. Chambers said that history neither proves nor disproves the existence of Arthur, which remains the safest claim to make, though additional sources might allow for more.

**ii. Literary Sources**

Although we have little historical record of sixth-century Britain,
we do have a sizeable amount of material from Middle Welsh literature concerning Arthur. While such things as poetry and fiction may not seem like useful aids for determining the existence of a historical Arthur, when contextualized, they can become valuable resources. Out of the five great poets of the Britons mentioned in the Historia Brittonum, the works attributed to two mention Arthur: Aneirin (Neirin) and Taliesin, both sixth-century contemporaries, or near contemporaries, of Arthur. In the case of the former, it is in Y Gododdin – a series of elegies to the fallen warriors of Gododdin who fought bravely against the Saxons despite overwhelming odds – that we find an allusion to Arthur. In one of the elegies he mentions that the fallen warrior was a great fighter “though he was no Arthur.” While this may not seem to be concrete evidence at first, an early Welsh poet would not have used Arthur for such a comparison if he believed him to be a fictional character (in the modern sense). Aneirin must have believed him to be a historical figure. A poem attributed to Taliesin mentions Arthur as the “chief giver of feasts” as well as linking him to the battle at Badon Hill. “Chief giver of feasts” suggests some kind of title of superiority over “giver of feasts”, and it is reasonable to suppose that a “giver of feasts” is another title for king or chieftain, so this passage alludes to Arthur being not just a petty ruler, but rather a king among kings. Most Arthurian scholars place the first mention of Arthur as being a high king in the early twelfth-century Welsh hagiography Auchedd Cadog (“Life of St. Cadoc”), but it is possible that this piece, if indeed by Taliesin himself, could be a much earlier (and, indeed, near contemporary) reference to such a title.

The greatest challenge when dealing with works like those attributed to Aneirin and Taliesin is the matter of dating. We do not have any of the original copies by the poets, but rather copies made in the ninth-century of Y Gododdin and in the early fourteenth-century of the works of Taliesin. It is from this time, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, that comes a majority of the surviving literary references to Arthur in Welsh material, including the Black Book of Camarthen, the White Book of Rydderch, and the Red Book of Hergest. Like the works of the poets, the three “color” books are all transcripts of earlier material. Though it may seem difficult to accept the value of such sources, linguists have shown that the style of writing is of a much earlier form of language than the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were times of great change in Wales, including a unified Wales for the first time, as well as Edward I’s conquering of Wales in 1282. So these transcripts were probably part of a native effort to hold on to their heritage in the face of the encroaching English. For the Welsh, Arthur’s resistance
against the Saxons was a reflection of their own struggle against the English, so the remembrance of their greatest hero – even after England’s victory and claiming of Arthur as their own – was important. Now that we have established the potential value of such sources – in their references to both Arthur and other works – let us look at what exactly they contain.

The Black Book of Carmarthen is the oldest of the three “colored” books, with the earliest known version written somewhere around the turn of the thirteenth-century\(^{48}\). In it is the “Verses on the Graves of Heroes”, which mentions the “eternal wonder [that] is Arthur’s grave”, alluding to the belief in Arthur living on in Avalon waiting for his return\(^{49}\). There is also a short poem that has become known by its opening line, “Pa gur yv y porthaur” (“What man is the gatekeeper?”). This undated poem\(^{50}\) features Arthur, as well as Bedwyr and Cei, and is a dialogue between Arthur and a porter, in which Arthur describes the deeds of himself and his companions. It is a strange piece, not only for its vivid recall of deeds, but its connection to the better-known tale of Culhwch ac Olwen\(^{51}\). The earliest copy of Culhwch ac Olwen we have was written at the turn of the twelfth-century, a transcription of a tale from the eleventh-century or even earlier\(^{52}\), and is later found in The Mabinogion, which was compiled from the Red Book and White Book. It is the first prose story featuring Arthur as a great king, as well as some of his earliest companions:

Chaletuwelch uyg cledyf…a Gwenhyvuar uyg g wreic… Asswynaw y gyuarw orhonaw ar Gei a Bedwyr… Gwalchmei mab Gwyar.\(^{53}\)

What is interesting about “Pa gur” and Culhwch ac Olwen is that there seems to be some link between them as they both tell of similar exploits at times, and it might seem that one drew from the other, yet there is much more described or alluded to in both works, which suggests that there was more material that both authors drew on of which we are ignorant. So it seems that both authors, as well as their contemporary Geoffrey of Monmouth, were all working independently – at least in part – of one another and with different sources\(^{54}\).

The White Book of Rhydderch and the Red Book of Hergest are not as useful to us in our search for Arthurian references. Apart from the story of Culhwch ac Olwen, the references are, for the most part, sparse\(^{55}\). However, the Red Book of Hergest does contain a pair of prophecies by Merlin: Cyfoesi Myrddin a Gwenddydd ei Chwaer (“Dialogue Between Merlin and his Sister Gwenddydd”), and Gwasgargerdd Fyrddin yn y Bedd (“The Imprisonment of Merlin in the Grave”), complementing the trio of pieces by Merlin (two prophecies and a non-prophetic piece) in

\(^{*}\)The text reads: “Caledfweh my sword...and Gwenhwyfar my wife...He invoked his boon from him on Kei and Bedwyr...and Gwalchmei son of Gwyar.”
the *Black Book of Camarthen*. These coincide at times with Geoffrey’s *Vita Merlini* (from roughly the same time), yet also possess more material, again hinting at more missing material. The exact historical connection between Arthur and Merlin is complex and worthy of study and debate on its own, but it is worth mentioning their combined presence in many of the same texts.

The *White Book* and *Red Book* also contain transcriptions of some of the Triads, texts listing groups of threes by some title, most likely to help the cyfarwyddiaid (which can translate as “storytellers” or “lore-masters”, see below) learn and remember the lore of the land. Since the ninth-century, the cyfarwyddiaid had been the primary source of knowledge in Wales, and because they were the keepers of both the stories and the histories, the two often overlapped. In the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (“The Triads of the Island of Britain”), there are a number of allusions to Arthur, often making his presence and role as high king of the land very clear, not only by his part in many of the trios, but also his inclusion as a fourth member to some. They paint Arthur as a powerful ruler, generous to his friends yet a fearsome enemy. There are also links to *Culhwch ac Olwen* as well as the *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, including his betrayal by his own kin at Camlan and the mystery of his death or departure. In addition to all this, Arthur also appears in hagiographies written by the Mediaeval Welsh clergy, playing a variety of (often negative) roles.

### iii. Forming the Arthurian Persona

So clearly Arthur held a crucial role in Welsh literature and society as a cultural – and historical – hero, as is seen in the efforts to transcribe earlier texts about him during the rise and fall of the unified, independent Wales, and in the allusions to a larger body of missing works. As Arthur was used more and more to symbolize the native heritage he was undoubtedly romanticized and his tale expanded. But this does not diminish the existence – or importance – of the origin of the legend. A modern comparison could be the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. Though the story of the cherry tree was the invention of an overzealous biographer, no one uses it to dispute the existence of George Washington. We have a variety of sources which describe Arthur in a pseudo-historical sense, but in the context of an oral-tradition culture in which story-tellers and historians were essentially the same. As M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij wrote, “modern man’s conceptions of truth...are characterized by duality, division, [and] absence of unity”; we divide what we see in earlier texts into the “historical” and “artistic” truths, that is the direct recounting of what the
author believes to have happened and what the author has created out of the “truth”, though not entirely “true” in the way we perceive it, with aesthetics rather than “facts” as the primary aspect of the work.

To a Mediaeval author, to add to and embellish history would not have been regarded as inaccurate, as it would be in more modern times. But the key here is “add to and embellish”, the story-tellers were embellishers, not fabricators. The people of the culture assumed a reality to begin with that all these authors from the author of the Historia Brittonum to Geoffrey of Monmouth to the authors of the Triads drew upon. There are no sixth-century encyclopedias that we can use to look up specific dates and facts; the key to unlocking the mystery of Arthur is through the hints and scraps we are given and an awareness of the cultural context. For example, there was a sudden explosion of the use of the name Arthur in royal dynasties in Britain and Ireland around the turn of the seventh-century, followed by a recession. Children are usually named after their ancestors, saints or other religious figures, or possibly popular figures at the time. The occurrence of a single person named Arthur would not be enough to make a case, but the several known occurrences in royalty alone – where the name had not been in use before and uncommon after – is difficult to dismiss as coincidental. Something most likely occurred in the sixth-century to make the name Arthur (previously almost unheard of) suddenly very popular.

As if there was not mystery enough surrounding Arthur, there is a strange lack of knowledge about the character of the man. Even if we accept the embellished histories as true, we still know little more than his name and a few of his deeds. In the earliest sources, he is not Arthur son of Uther Pendragon or father of Llachau and his court is only vaguely alluded to at best; there is nothing and no one to tie him to any place or person, he is simply “Arthur”. As a result, many have tried to connect him to some other better known figure, as noted. The Ambrosius Aurelianus theory (discussed earlier) is perhaps the most convincing, but it still seems insufficient. Likewise with the theory of Lucius Artorius Castus, a Roman-British praefectus castrorum, who was sent to stamp out a rebellion in Armorica. His name is convenient, but the fact of the matter is that Artorius lived in the second-century, which matches up to no other source, as well as the fact that the pre-Geoffrey Arthur is never said to have had any continental adventures. This is the same reason that we can reject the theory concerning the mysterious fifth-century king of the Britons Riothamus – which may have been a title (“supreme king”) rather than a person – who was supposedly betrayed and mortally wounded in Gaul at Bourges in 469-470, and disappears into Aballone (Gallic town in
Burgundy, possibly connected to Avalon)\textsuperscript{64}. It is also worth noting that the Latin writers never use the name “Artorius”, but rather “Arturus” or “Arturius”, which suggests that the Britonic name “Arthur” came first, followed by the Latinized version\textsuperscript{65}.

While I will willingly concede the possibility (and likelihood) of many deeds and exploits being added to Arthur’s portfolio, including those of other historical figures, I would still insist that the evidence points to there being yet another figure that is not Artorius, Riothamus, Ambrosius Aurelianus, or any other. If we remove what we think to be impossible from the stylized histories, we are left with very basic sketch of who he was: “In the early sixth-century, there was a Roman-British leader named Arthur who led a successful, and decisive, campaign against the Saxons, culminating in the Battle of Badon Hill, where he soundly defeated them and was able to reestablish Britonic control over Britain. Some years later, he was killed at Camlann by Medraut.” Not much, but it is an assertion that Arthur existed as his own person. If we take what seems believable and agreed upon in multiple sources, we can add a bit more: “In the first half of the sixth-century, a Roman-British \textit{dux bellorum} (war leader) rose to prominence by leading the defense against the Saxons. At the Battle of Badon Hill (c. 517) he led the Britons to a successful victory, defeated the Saxons, and gave Britain back to the Britons. For 18 years he ruled as a lord over the Britons, and was followed by a group of knights (possibly Roman cavalry), his most loyal companions. At the end of this rule, his lieutenant (possibly related to him by blood) betrayed him and the two fought and killed one another at the Battle of Camlann (c. 535). After that, plague broke out and Britain fell into ruin and soon into the hands of the Saxons.” If we were telling this story to an audience, we might want to make it sound better by adding a bit of polish, a few new companions, a wondrous sword, and perhaps even a touch of magic. And thus is legend born of history.

\textit{iv. The Significance of Arthur}

I opened this paper with a quote about the fictional Arthur. From there we have come full circle: taking the fictional we have attempted to recover the historical, and from there we have once again begun the process of creating fiction. So it is easy to see the process of embellishment that would lead to the later stories. Just as the line between history and fiction was blurred in the Britain of old, so too is the line between the historical and fictional Arthur. So the question that remains is: what is it about this man that is of such great cultural import? Despite the musings of some scholars, the fact remains that there are a variety of sources that
point to Arthur’s importance, and many of these sources hint at a larger body of work on the man that has now been lost. But even with these losses, the study of Arthur is no less important. From a cultural perspective, he not only played a role in preserving Roman-Briton culture, but he is also a metonym for all that a king should be and the nostalgic remembrance of his rule as a Golden Age when everything was better. In the opening of *Yvain, le Chevalier du lion*, Chrétien de Troyes writes:

Arthur le bon roi de Bretagne dont la vaillance nous enseigne à être preux et courtois, tenait une très riche cour en la fête de la Pentecôte. C’était à Carduel, en Galles. Après manger, dedans les salles les chevaliers s’assemblèrent là où les avaient appelés les dames et les demoiselles. Les uns contenaient des nouvelles, les autres parlaiet de l’amour, de ses angoisses et ses douleurs et des grands biens que reçurent souvent les disciples de son ordre qui était alors riche and doux. Mais presque tout l’ont délaissé et Amour en fut abaissé car ceux qui aimaient voulaient être appelés courois et preux, hommes généreux, hommes d’honneur. Aujourd’hui Amor est tourné en fable: ceux qui l’ignorent dissent qu’ils aiment mais ils mentent. Ils se vantent d’être amoureux mais ce droit-là ils ne l’ont point car ce n’est que fable et mensonge.

Parlons des hommes d’autrefois, cela vaut mieux. Oui, m’est avis qu’homme courtois mort vaut mieux que villain en vie!  

Recent historiographers have had an aversion to searching for – or even believing in – meaning in history due to the events of the twentieth-century, and prefer to avoid all “speculation”. One historiographer, Aviezer Tucker, goes so far as to state that we must disregard any “[problem] that cannot be decided by an examination of historiography, such as the logical structure of explanation and the relation between language and reality.” Recently, scholars have noted the political entanglement that is the Arthurian legend, for many cultures

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*The text reads: “Arthur, the good king of Britain whose gallantry teaches us to be fearless and courteous, held a very rich court on the feast of Pentecost at Carduel in Wales. After the meal, the knights assembled in the rooms where they were called by the ladies and damsels. Some spoke of news, others spoke of love and their anguishes and sorrows, and of the great blessings that were often received by the followers of his order which was then rich and fortunate. But nearly all have forsaken it and Love is degraded for those who loved wished to be called courteous and brave, men of generosity, men of honor. Today Love has been turned into a fable: those who are ignorant of it say that they love but they lie. They boast of being amorous but they have no right to, for love is neither a fairy tale nor a lie. It is better to speak of men of another time. Indeed, it is my opinion that a courteous dead man is more worthy than a villain who lives!”*
have sought to make him their own\textsuperscript{71}, and some have deemed the study of a historical Arthur consequently useless. Yet the evolution of the Arthurian persona is illuminating in its own right to all the cultures that Arthur has touched, be he the powerful war leader of the Britons, the generous king of the Welsh, or the chivalric knight of the Norman courts. What each culture has added to the legend tells us about their beliefs and values.

But with respect to the historical man what is important is not whether he killed 940 men in a single battle, whether he was a petty or imperial ruler, or the shape of the table his knights sat at. What is important is that he did exist and continues to exist – recreated through the centuries – as a reminder of a post-Roman history that truly was and that had real impacts. He proved to play such a central role in Western history as the man who guarded the Briton culture – and the Roman through it – against the invaders, thus preserving a culture (which, in turn, preserved him) that might have been entirely lost. It is not Nennius and Geoffrey that are the Matter of Britain, it is Arthur himself who provided the original content through his deeds, however obscure they may be. The deconstructionists brought Arthurian study to a near standstill; but now, with the aid of revisionist archaeology and a better awareness of the nature of history and legend, there is an opportunity to revive interest and awareness about the historicity of Arthur. To quote William Skene, “there is always some substratum of truth on which the wildest legends are based”\textsuperscript{72}. Perhaps it is time we cease focusing on what is not there, and instead concentrate on what is.

\textbf{Notes}

2 The Bretons were known to strongly defend the belief in Arthur’s return, even to the point of brawls: cf. R.S. Loomis, “The Oral Diffusion of the Arthurian Legend”, \textit{Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages} (Oxford, 1959), 53-54.
4 David Dumville quoted in a private correspondence by Michael Costen, \textit{The Origins of Somerset} (Manchester, 1992), 78.
5 Ken Dark, \textit{Britain and the End of the Roman Empire} (Charleston, SC, 2000), 35.
7 Ken Dark, \textit{Britain and the End of the Roman Empire} (Charleston, SC,
2000), 35-37.
8 For more on literacy and cultural continuity in Post-Roman Britain, see below or Ken Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (Charleston, SC, 2000), 37.
18 cf. *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (731), the *Historia Brittonum* (830), and *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (1136). Gildas does not mention Vortigern by name, but does refer to a ‘proud tyrant’ (*superbo tyranno*) in chapter 23 as bringing the Saxons into Briton as mercenaries, which we can assume to be Vortigern.
21 It should also be noted that there is another possible allusion to Arthur in *De Excidio Britonum*, 32, in which Gildas condemns the tyrant Cuneglasus, whom he describes as having been the charioteer of the bear. The name Arthur is linked to the bear both in Welsh (ur th gwy, “bear man”) and Latin (ursus vir, “bear man”), and he is frequently referred to as a bear in both historical and fictional works.
23 N. J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History* (NY, 2002), 6-
9.


26 The actual nature of the author/editor Nennius is debatable, whether he was indeed the original author (linking him to the Nennius described in the *Annales Cambriæ*) or a later reviser, as Professor Dumville would have it: see Thomas Charles-Edwards, “The Arthur of History”, *The Arthur of the Welsh*, (Cardiff, 1991), 16-17.


33 There is an arguable case that he was, in fact, of Bretonic origins: see Brynley F. Roberts “Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae* and *Brut Y Brenhinedd*. *The Arthur of the Welsh* (Cardiff, 1991) 97-98.


35 cf. “silva Celidonis” in the *Historia Brittonum*.


39 Looking to “fiction” for facts is made possible by recent scholarship showing a greater continuity of Roman-Briton culture in western Britain than was previously thought; cf. Ken Dark, *Britain and the End of the Roman Empire* (Charleston, SC, 2000).


42. Perceptions of the truth and its depiction are not the same now as they were in the Mediaeval Age, cf. M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij. *The Saga Mind*, trans. Kenneth H. Ober (Odense, Denmark, 1973), and below.


47. Ibid.


50. Like the rest of the *Black Book of Camarthen*, it seems to be a copy of an earlier text which could predate the known version of the *Black Book* by centuries; cf notes 41 and 47.


55. Ibid.


59. Ibid.


61. Ibid.

62. There are four, possibly five, documented accounts of the use of the name Arthur amongst the royalty around this time (Rachel Bromwich,
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 For more on metonyms and history, see Eelco Runia, “Presence”. History and Theory, 45 (February 2006, Wesleyan University).
67 Chrétien de Troyes, “Yvain, le Chevalier du lion”, Romans de la Table Ronde, ed. Jean-Pierre Foucher (France, 1970), 251. Chrétien de Troyes’ romances became Arthurian staples, and were very popular both then and now.
68 A parallel may be drawn with the Dadaist movement in art formed during World War I, which fled from reason and rationality in the face of the horrors of war.
70 Ibid. Concerning the nature of “language and reality”, I would refer skeptics to the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose two primary works (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and Philosophical Investigations) deal extensively – albeit densely – with the “problems” of the connection of language to reality.

Bibliography


