

ARTHUR (early 6th century?), one of the leaders of the Britons against their enemies

Name: Arthur
Spouse: Gwenhwyfar
Child: Anir
Gender: Male
Occupation: one of the leaders of the Britons against their enemies
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Military
Author: Thomas Jones

He became in later ages the chief figure of the Arthurian cycle of tales. Nothing definite is known about him as a historical character, although his existence can no longer be denied, nor can he be explained, as he was by [Sir John Rhys](#) and others, as a purely legendary figure.

He is not mentioned by [Gildas](#), c. 540, in his reference to the victory of the Britons at 'Badon Hill' ('Mons Badonicus'), a battle in which, according to [Nennius](#), pupil of [Elfoddw](#) (died 809), Arthur was victorious, and which is recorded in *Ann. C., s.a., 518*. In *Ann. C., s.a., 539*, is also mentioned the battle of Camlan, 'in which Arthur and Medrod fell.' It appears that it is this last entry that brings us closest to the Arthur of history.

Judging by his name (? Lat. 'Artorius') and by the general conditions in Britain at the end of the 5th century and the beginning of the 6th, it is not unlikely that he came from a family which had come under Roman influences, and that he held some military post in the arrangements for defending the island after the departure of the Roman legionaries. By the time of [Nennius](#), Arthur had become a heroic figure, and many folk-tales had been associated with his name. In the *Hist. Britt.* he is described as 'a leader of battles' ('dux bellorum') who defeated the Saxons in twelve battles; and in the section on the 'Marvels of Britain' mention is made of his son Anir' and of his dog 'Cafall' with which he hunted the Twrch Trwyth - a story which is related more fully in 'Kulhwch and Olwen.' He is a legendary figure also in the references made to him in fairly early Welsh poems: of these the most important are 'Preiddieu Annwfn' (The Spoils of Hades) (*Facsimile and Text of the Book of Taliesin*, 54), the *englyn* (*The Black Book of Carmarthen*, 67) which states that 'a marvel until Doomsday will be a grave for Arthur' - a testimony to the belief that Arthur had not died - and the dialogue between Arthur and the porter Glewlwyd Gafaelfawr (*The Black Book of Carmarthen*, 94), where are named many of the well-known heroes (Kay, Bedivere, etc.) who are associated with Arthur in the Welsh tales and in the general corpus of Arthurian legends. In 'Kulhwch and Olwen,' where he is called 'the sovereign prince of this Island,' and in 'The Dream of Rhonabwy,' in which he figures as 'emperor' - a title which suggests the influence of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of [Geoffrey of Monmouth](#) - his court is at Celli-wig in Cornwall.

In [Geoffrey's](#) *Historia*, c. 1136, a prominent place is given to the 'history' of Arthur: he is crowned by [archbishop Dubricius or Dyfrig](#), he establishes his court at Caerleon-on-Usk, he defeats the Saxons in a series of battles, and then turns against the Picts and the Scots. Having pacified the island, he marries Guinevere and then conquers Ireland and Iceland, and receives the homage of the kings of Gothland and the Orkney Islands. There is peace for twelve years and all brave warriors flock to Arthur's court. He undertakes the conquest of the whole of Europe and refuses to pay tribute to Rome. When he has subdued Gaul and is preparing to attack Italy, he learns of Medrod's treachery in Britain, is forced to return, and is 'mortally wounded' in a battle on the banks of the river Camel ('Cambula') in Cornwall, and is borne to the island of Avalon to be healed of his wounds. Much of [Geoffrey's](#) 'History' is based upon entries in the *Hist. Britt.*, but they have been expanded from all kinds of other sources, written and oral, and from imagination.

[Geoffrey's](#) 'History' had great influence in the propagation and development of the tales concerning Arthur, although it was not the only source for later writers: there were several translations of it into Welsh and many 'Bruts' - in prose and verse - in the vernacular languages were based upon it. The authenticity of [Geoffrey's](#) story was questioned by William of Newburgh and [Giraldus Cambrensis](#), but they were exceptions. In successive works (by Wace, Chrétien de Troyes, the unknown authors of 'Lancelot' and 'Mort Artu,' Thomas Malory, etc.), Arthur's court, with the Company of the Round Table, became a mirror of the chivalry of the Middle Ages and the starting point of every adventure; and the tales became more and more complicated, particularly by being combined with the tales about the Holy Grail. Finally, from being a hero of the Britons, Arthur became a hero of the British, and the tales concerning him developed into a curious amalgam of oral traditions about the wounded king who would one day return to liberate his fellow-countrymen (and there is contemporary evidence that this belief was current in Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany in the 12th century), pseudo-historical records and creations of the imagination of one author after another. Thus was formed one of the richest romantic cycles of all times.

Author

Professor Thomas Jones

Sources

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Further Reading

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The Black Book of Carmarthen, Peniarth MS 1 at National Library of Wales

The Book of Taliesin, Peniarth MS 2 at National Library of Wales

Wikipedia Article: [King Arthur](#)

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