



The Arthurian World

Edited by

Victoria Coldham-Fussell, Miriam Edlich-Muth and Renée Ward

THE ARTHURIAN WORLD

This collection provides an innovative and wide-ranging introduction to the world of Arthur by looking beyond the canonical texts and themes, taking instead a transversal perspective on the Arthurian narrative. Together, its thirty-four chapters explore the continuities that make the material recognizable from one century to another, as well as transformations specific to particular times and places, revealing the astonishing variety of adaptations that have made the Arthurian story popular in large parts of the world.

Divided into four parts—The World of Arthur in the British Isles, The European World of Arthur, The Material World of Arthur, and The Transversal World of Arthur—the volume tracks the legend’s movement across temporal, geographical, and material boundaries. Broadly chronological, each part views the unfolding Arthurian story through its own lens, while temporal and geographical overlaps between the sections underscore the proximity of these developments in the legend’s history.

Ranging from early Latin chronicles and Welsh poetry to twenty-first century anime and political conspiracies, this comprehensive and illuminating book will be of interest to anyone researching Arthurian literature or tracing the evolution of medievalism through literature, the visual arts, and popular culture.

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“And when they came to the sword that the hand held, King Arthur took it up,”
in Sidney Lanier’s *The Boy’s King Arthur* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922).

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and,
in memory of Alicia Mackenzie (1976-2022).



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kralja Artura ser Tomasa Malorija u tumačenjima savremene kritike (Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur in Contemporary Critical Interpretations*, 2003), *Politika, subverzija, moć: Novoistorijska tumačenja Šekspirovih velikih tragedija* (*Politics, Subversion, Power: New Historicist Readings of Shakespeare's Great Tragedies*, Beograd 2011), *Енглеска средњовековна артуријанска књижевност* (*The English Medieval Arthurian Literature*, 2017)—and a number of articles on the Arthurian romance and legend and on new historicist readings of Shakespeare's plays.

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INTRODUCTION



WHERE TO LOCATE THE ARTHURIAN WORLD?

The singular title of this collection elides a key reality of Arthuriana: the various versions of the legend of King Arthur, his court, knights, and queen across time, space, languages, and media, have created a tradition of plurality that could just as aptly demand the title of “Arthurian Worlds.” Arthur and his court were not only a source of enduring fascination to medieval artists and authors; they continue to constitute perhaps the most globally recognized medieval inheritance of the post-medieval world, particularly in the region that grew out of the medieval Latin West. But they appear elsewhere, too, sometimes in unexpected places from Belarus to Japan. The Arthurian legend is so prolific and diverse that Umberto Eco, in his famous essay “Dreaming of the Middle Ages,” could have included it as an example for each of his “ten little Middle Ages,” or methods by which the modern reimagines the medieval in order to understand itself.

Given the legend’s starting point in the medieval British Isles and the steady spread of Arthurian tales, images, and memes across Europe and different regions of the (mainly Western) world over the course of many centuries, a strictly chronological approach to this volume’s contents would be entirely possible. Certainly, other volumes on the subject have employed this method of organization, tracing Arthurian characters, settings, and themes from the early Welsh and Latin texts, through key players in the twelfth century—Geoffrey of Monmouth’s history and prophecies and Chrétien de Troyes’s romances in particular—to the critical text that marks the transition from the medieval to the post-medieval, Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, and then beyond, often focusing on influential nineteenth-century reimaginings in Britain and the United States by Alfred Lord Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelites, or Mark Twain, and moving into the modern period by considering how works by authors such as T. H. White reimagine the Arthurian world.

This volume, too, includes these beginnings, by exploring the world of Arthur in the medieval and early modern British Isles in Part I. However, chronology is only one of the organizing principles shaping this collection, as we have looked beyond the canonical British and French Arthurian traditions of the medieval period to include works that extend beyond the margins of the Arthurian mainstream based on their medium, their language, or the period in which they were written. As such, this is not a linear collection, but one that progresses from something like a linear

starting point toward a transversal perspective on how the idea of Arthur has shaped different cultures at different times. The many layers of resonance that have arisen out of this cross-period, transmedial, and transcultural approach reveal the world of Arthur to be a highly dialogic and intertextual cultural arena, a polyphonic universe in which constitutive elements speak to each other across time, space, and form, looking backward, glancing across, and gazing into the future.

The rich resonance of the Arthurian legend arises in part out of its engagement with the enduring themes of human idealism and failure. Thus, the world of Arthur has much to tell us about human desire—spiritual, political, romantic, and, ultimately, literary. Its stories grew out of, and continue to perpetuate, a series of compelling motifs: the heroic protector, the unified fellowship, the Holy Grail, and the messianic return. The Round Table, first mentioned in Wace’s *Roman de Brut* (1155), offers a potent symbol of unity and harmoniously centralized power, and its longevity as a political and visual trope is easily understood. According to one branch of the tradition (beginning with Robert de Boron’s *Merlin*), the Round Table sometimes has thirteen places, echoing the iconography of the Last Supper, and one of these places must remain vacant until the arrival of the knight who can symbolically reverse Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Christ and succeed in the Grail quest. The empty seat, like the sword in the stone, is a reassuringly tangible gauge of authenticity: only the best knight will be able to sit in it. While not all versions of the legend subscribe to this specific formulation, the key trope here—that of the chosen hero who must defy possibility and put wrongs to right, fulfilling the dual roles of warrior and social healer—recurs in wildly diverse contexts (and to equally diverse ends) within this volume: medieval verse, renaissance drama, nineteenth-century art, twentieth-century children’s books, Hollywood films, and interactive games.

If the Arthurian legend explores the highest of human ideals, it also, however, necessarily charts their outer limits. In the shadow of loyalty, prowess, and the quest for eternal truth, there lurks appetite, deceit, and violence. And indeed, another recurring trope concerning the Round Table is that Arthur had it made to avoid discord among his knights by ensuring that no seat at the table had precedence over another. In other words, the Round Table was intended to enforce rather than to reflect equality, suggesting that fallible human nature had a seat at this table, just as Judas did at the Last Supper. The fragility of human ideals is, from one point of view, *the* central subject of the Arthurian legend; and, for audiences over the past thousand years, the themes of failure and disenchantment have arguably been as compelling—as in need of compulsive revisiting and reworking—as has the theme of the spiritual quest. It is what obstructs and delays the fulfillment of that quest that commands our attention.

In the complex reality of the legend, Arthur is neither a static nor a stable figure, but the fantasy of “the best king” nevertheless remains central, even if unspoken; it offers a point of reference against which the permutations of his rule and his fortunes may be measured and interpreted, sometimes inviting a healthy dose of irony and even cynicism. In the legend’s earliest, pre-Galfridian sources, Arthur is the peerless warrior and protector of the land, vanquishing supernatural enemies with ease, and connecting the human realm with the Otherworld. In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*, circa 1136), Arthur becomes a more politically recognizable (though still fantastic) figure:

the vanquisher of human invaders and rivals—Saxons, Picts, Scots—and the ambitious ruler of an empire that ultimately spreads into northern and western Europe. However, these achievements come at great personal and political cost, and Arthur also gains notoriety as the over-reacher who imperils his kingdom and who is cuckolded, and finally killed, by his nephew Mordred. As the legend is developed and diversified in the contexts of early medieval romance, Arthur retains his prestige as a king, but he is also rendered more human and his death more ignominious (Mordred in many versions of the story, including that of Malory, becomes his illegitimate son—a seed sown, as it were, by the king himself). Moreover, Arthur’s role becomes markedly less central as the fortunes and adventures of his knights take center stage. From Chrétien de Troyes onward, the adulterous relationship of Lancelot and Queen Guinevere ensures that the myth of the ideal fellowship is undermined from within, the chivalric ideal of romantic fidelity—together with its dark flipside, political and spiritual infidelity—gradually taking over as the legend’s most iconic “problem.”

MYTH-BUSTING

As the chapters of this volume illustrate, the authors and artists reinterpreting Arthur over time were just as interested in myth-busting as they were in myth-making. Myth-busting is a spectrum, and its operations are as diverse as are those of nostalgic idealization. Arthur may be marginalized or subtly disempowered in one adaptation and dangerously self-absorbed in another. Likewise, the unity of the Round Table may be complicated by regional identities, ethnic affiliations, or family politics, and knights’ quests may be less than altruistic for reasons relating to desire or egotism. The outcome, for the audience, may be disturbing, entertaining, or both. The undoing of myths can be funny as well as tragic, with humor operating on a sliding scale from irony to burlesque. The “point” may be an iconoclastic comment on a present-day political situation, a satirical observation about human nature, social convention or gender dynamics, or a pragmatic assessment of the demands (even in Camelot) of realpolitik. In the case of T. H. White’s *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), the comic and fantastical portrayal of the young Arthur as the would-be squire “Wart” (whom Merlin turns into insects and animals, so that he might understand the world) serves not to undermine the future king so much as to testify to his humility and humanity. Chivalry and heroism are roundly mocked, only to be defined on new terms.

In other contexts, myth-busting—the process by which a reader is encouraged to recognize the operations of fantasy from some point of distance—has a reverse operation. The objective of many authors and editors over the centuries (from Caxton through eighteenth-century antiquaries to modern critics and now enthusiastic bloggers) has been to debunk elements of the myth only to reveal the legend’s foundations in historical fact. This endeavor may serve (in company with T. H. White, though taking another road) to undermine stories of heroic stature—not least by returning those stories back to very human beginnings and geographies—or it may seek to prove, vociferously, their reality once and for all. In either case, the focus is on stripping away myth to get at the truth.

It is easy to appreciate the contemporary myth-busting humor of spoofs such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), or the entertainment value of films which, using the time-traveling motif inaugurated by Twain’s novel *A Connecticut*

Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889), juxtapose heavily medievalized Camelots with modern-day conventions and ideas of social justice. But it is important to remember that the hallmarks of Arthurian romance—hyperbole, marvel, erotic intrigue—have attracted comic treatment since the Middle Ages. So too has the failure of high ideals; in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Lancelot “meddles” with his opponents on the battlefield, but he also “meddles” with the Queen (Coldham-Fussell 60). Moreover, the palpable distance between the “now” of the audience and the “then” of the story has always been a central ingredient of the legend, one that is conducive to nostalgia and idealization as well as to irony and pastiche (Coldham-Fussell 60–66). It has been the privilege of every generation of readers to know we have come a long way from giants, monsters, wizards, and the like. Speaking of the hero of *The Faerie Queene* (1590–96), Edmund Spenser insists on Arthur's irreproachability as a political figurehead (715–16); but, in order to make this claim, Spenser had to turn a resolute blind eye to contemporary scorn for the Arthurian stories, of which there was plenty.¹ In reality, as several chapters in this volume demonstrate, Spenser's engagement with the legend is as complex and politically equivocal as was its reputation during his lifetime. Or, to put it another way, myth-busting has proven to be as amenable to his moral project (and to many projects since) as has myth-making—these things being, from one perspective at least, two sides of the same coin. **For those readers of this collection who would like to navigate this volume on the basis of themes such as “Myth-Busting,” “Place,” “Identity Politics,” “Playing at War” and comparably cross-border, cross-period categories, we have created a Table of themes that groups chapters according to the thematic focal points discussed here and below (Table 0.1).**

PLACE, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND PLAYING AT WAR

While the story of King Arthur and his knights has been copied, bowdlerized, satirized, and reinterpreted in countless ways and for different purposes over the centuries, it remains the case that the earliest and most widely touted versions of the story revolve around powerful white men playing at war in mythologized settings across the British Isles. It is therefore unsurprising that questions of place and territory and the hailing and othering of different social and cultural identities play a central role in many of the works discussed in this volume, as does the threat or promise of armed conflict, be that in the form of ritualized tourneying or all-out slaughter.

The spatial turn of the past two decades has prompted a particularly enduring and fruitful engagement with place in the context of Arthurian studies, illustrated by recent works such as Albrecht Classen's analysis of spatial identity and conceptions of nationhood in canonical medieval German romances, David Wrisley's analysis of place names in medieval French romance, and the recent *Arthurian Studies* volume *Sacred Space and Place in Arthurian Romance*. These studies have crystallized what should perhaps always have been apparent, which is that the Arthurian stories people have told each other over the years are very often either explicitly or implicitly about places. Nor have those Arthurian places remained fixed in the realm of the storytelling; rather the stories themselves have gone on to shape real-world places, illustrating the reciprocal dynamics between imagined Arthurian histories and lived history.

Table 0.1 Table of themes

Myth-Busting	Place	Identity Politics	Playing at War
Massey and Ochtera	Flood	Blanton	Lynch
Harty	Hodges	Sterling-Hellenbrand	Martin and Mason
Carroll	Field	Risden	Risden
Crofts	Fulton	Narayanan	Massey and Ochtera
Dietl	Bateman	Swank	Field
Hadfield	Swank	Elliott	Hodges
Lynch	Sterling-Hellenbrand	Gruenbaum	McKenzie
Garner		Ward	Lodén
		Hodges	Carroll
Performance and Performativity	Text and Networks	Medievalisms	
Dietl	Stones	Ward	
Olk	Garner	Blanton	
Lupack	Fulton	Lodén	
Harty	Wade	Carroll	
Elliott	Spremić Končar	Lupack	
McKenzie	Martin and Mason	Harty	
Risden	Smelik	Elliott	
Massey and Ochtera	Gruenbaum	McKenzie	
Hadfield	Oehme	Hadfield	
Baldon	Morato	Lynch	
		Garner	
		Lindfield	

In its most obvious form, the Arthurian interest in place can be traced back to the chronicles of the early Middle Ages. Thus, the so-called Arthurian entries of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* aptly encapsulate, on the one hand, the geographical regions and political territories constituting “Britain” and, on the other, the “leaders and kings” whose reign Geoffrey presents as shaping the history of those territories. In this regard, the story of Arthur in both romance and chronicle traditions is one in which Arthur himself and the knights who surround him gain meaning as characters through their association with certain geographical regions and places, ranging from the concrete regions of Orkney or Cornwall to the mythical court at Camelot. In this sense, the place—be it a city, country, or lake—that they come from or rule can be seen to constitute a part of the character of many central Arthurian figures. Accordingly, the encounters and character constellations shaping the plotline of many Arthurian stories often draw on or conjure up territorial conflicts.

A second, and perhaps less obvious, aspect of the Arthurian engagement with place emerges from the interaction between tradition and innovation in those post-medieval Arthurian works that depart markedly from earlier templates. In these works, what remains recognizably “Arthurian” are often the names and constellations of characters, whose detachment from the traditional Arthurian locations becomes an opportunity for creativity and invention, thus illustrating by contrast the central role that place and geography play in shaping the traditional Arthurian story.

Taken together, both the traditional and the innovative Arthurian adaptations from across the centuries illustrate a wide range of narrative strategies for exploring and negotiating different regions and landscapes from across the British Isles and, increasingly, beyond. However, as the role of place in defining characters indicates, the relevance of these spatial points of reference is not purely geographical but also pertains to questions of personal and social identity. While the knights of the Arthurian Round Table may appear to modern readers to have been ethnically largely homogenous, there are many aspects of the early Arthurian narrative that point toward a great interest in intercultural encounters that ranged beyond warfare to encompass ethnic diversity and different forms of cultural negotiation and exchange.

The most famous examples of this include the “Saracen” knight Sir Palamedes and his brothers and the different versions of the black Arthurian knight Moriaen. At the same time, bearing in mind the ethnic plurality within the British Isles and Western France, the disparate geographical origins of the knights populating the Round Table in canonical works such as Malory’s *Morte Darthur* in themselves illustrate a strikingly diverse vision of an idealized Western European court. Thus, at least one version of the Arthurian world is one in which people of different ethnic groups and linguistic and cultural origins could sit around one table and be united, at least temporarily, by a common code of “chivalric” conduct.

In this regard, the representation of race, racism, and xenophobia in Arthurian works from different periods and regions is a double-edged sword, in that scholars must find a balance between doing justice to those aspects of the Arthurian tradition that offer positive representations of cultural and ethnic diversity and those examples and elements of the Arthurian world that cater to racist or xenophobia ideas, past and present. One helpful starting point for achieving this balance is to revisit earlier Arthurian texts and compare the relative ethnic, cultural, and linguistic variety they represent, albeit within the framework of the limited horizons of their authors, to the far more homogenous Round Table depicted by Arthurian scholars of the Victorian period. Comparisons such as these can serve two purposes: first, to complicate the idea of the Middle Ages as a time of ubiquitous racism, and second, to call into question the politically charged myth of a mono-racial British history of which Arthur is a representative. For this reason, we have requested that our contributors avoid using the problematically homogenizing term “Anglo-Saxon,” although in order to accommodate chapters from across a broad spectrum of different generations of Arthurian scholars we have left the ultimate decision about which terminology to use to our contributors.

Questions of gender in Arthurian texts offer similarly complex yet productive avenues of investigation. While women such as Guinevere and Morgan often act as catalysts and objects of desire in earlier Arthurian texts, this too has proven to be an area in which shifting or reversing gender norms has inspired great creativity in more modern Arthurian adaptations across a range of media and settings, running the gamut from plays to cartoons and video games. By creating strong Arthurian heroines, or indeed feminized male heroes, these newer works actively subvert the structural conventions of courtly literature, by which female figures help male protagonists to understand and execute the idealized twin roles of martial knights and courtly lovers. In doing so, they shed new light both on archetypal Arthurian women and on the male figures with whom their stories have been intertwined.

The Arthurian story, then, in its different iterations is marked by a consistent interest in representing cultural and social negotiations between different regions and cultural groups. And yet, it must be said that this interest is by its nature also one that builds on an enjoyment and celebration of armed conflict in all its forms. As such, no discussion of the world of Arthur would be complete should it fail to engage with the different forms of more or less ritualized violence in which the key, mostly masculine, players of the Arthurian world are engaged. As Kathryn Hume points out, “we are not surprised when a fantasy king conquers foreign lands” (619). Rather, such conquests are both familiar and expected, highlighting how Arthurian acts of violence do not take place in a cultural vacuum, but are instead inflected by a wide range of cultural norms that encompass the readerly and writerly expectations associated with the genres of epic, chronicle, and romance, as well as the demands of more interactive media, including theater plays, films, and video games. All of these formats are associated with their own sets of conventions concerning the representation and contextualization of violence and the role that violence can, and often must, play in shaping the plotlines Arthurian figures traverse, as well as the participatory experiences afforded by violent encounters.

Inevitably, this fictional violence remains performative rather than realistic, regardless of whether it is shown to take place on gritty battlefields or surrounded by the pomp of stylized tournaments. While the timing and results of real-world conflicts rarely slot neatly into coherent narratives, the battles Arthur and his knights engage in are usually shaped by their own narrative scaffolding, with a beginning, a middle, and a defined endpoint, and they thereby contribute to a sense of purpose associated with battle itself. Accordingly, despite the fact that Arthurian works can shift in moments from somber reflections on the social destruction of war to riotous celebration of the crafts of war, few Arthurian works depart fully from a worldview in which armed conflict is a central part of life.

PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

How readers, audiences, and consumers experience the violence and celebration inherent in the Arthurian worldview is predicated in part on the medial formats in which they engage with Arthurian stories, landscapes, and characters. Even the briefest survey of the Arthurian tradition reveals just how much the possibilities for immersing yourself in Arthurian worlds have evolved over time. Early, written versions of the Arthurian story invoke both private reading and the communal experience of oral delivery. The manuscripts in which they survive imply the body of a reader bent over text, parsing the signs on the folio to recreate in their own mind the images described there. At one remove, we can also imagine a communal audience of listeners enjoying these texts, drawn together by the narrating voice of a reader or performing poet. Imagining these listeners, then, draws us away from the page toward the real world of recitation, performance, and re-enactment. It draws us into a world in which an Italian performer might sing a ballad of Tristan or an English king might build on the visual images conjured up by Arthurian romance to re-enact the pomp of an Arthurian joust, thereby casting himself as a putative “Arthur.”

In light of this implied performative history, the staging of Arthurian stories in the real world represents less of a departure from medieval approaches to Arthur

than one might initially assume. The representation of Arthur and his court in the early modern German carnival plays and nineteenth-century stage performances is perhaps best understood as part of a long tradition of using Arthurian imagery and themes for the purpose of both celebrating and interrogating the ideals of courtliness and chivalry. Similarly, the participatory immersion that—pushed to its logical conclusion in the modern world—has come to be associated with the interactivity of gaming was perhaps first heralded when the Arthurian story arrived on a three-dimensional set with flesh and blood actors. Or, to put it another way, the technologies associated with performativity have perhaps evolved more than human nature has. The difference between reciting Arthurian poetry or songs and performing the role of an Arthurian knight echoes the difference between watching an Arthurian film unfold on a screen and steering the actions of an Arthurian character in a video game: in different settings and for different reasons people engaging with Arthurian themes have been given the opportunity to move from the role of passive consumers to that of performers and participants.

As the examples just mentioned reveal, these shifts from passive to active forms of engagement have often been facilitated by shifts in medium—from the page to the stage, from the stage to the screen, and from the television to the video game console. In this regard, the adaptation history of the Arthurian story can be regarded as one of expansion in terms of the different forms of performativity that have been fostered and developed across the centuries, leaving room for a wide range of visual representations and embodiments of what the Arthurian world might have been and how it relates to the world around us now.

TEXTS AND NETWORKS

As we have seen so far, Arthur, his court, and the spaces they occupy exist in myriad forms. As the opening to this volume suggests, any engagement with the Arthurian myth is an immediate engagement with multiplicity. Yet, the idea of a singular, authoritative text pervades the Arthurian corpus; references to writing and to books—the Gawain poet’s promise that he will recount his story “as hit is stad and stoken” (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1.33) or Chrétien’s reference to “son livre” (“his book”; *Lancelot* 185; *Le Chevalier* line 25)—are especially prevalent in the medieval texts. Authors construct their own authority by referencing the works of other well-known writers and give weight to their texts by identifying them as translations of existing, venerable works.

Geoffrey of Monmouth highlights such connections when he explains that his own undertaking of a history of the kings of Britain is inspired by the “de eis Gildas et Beda” (“works of Gildas and Bede”), telling readers that he has, however lacking his work may be, translated into Latin “Brittannici sermonis librum uetustissimum” (“a very old book in the British tongue”; Prologue 2.9–10; 4). He thus situates his work within an existing network of texts concerned with his subject, regardless of whether this tradition is real (Gildas and Bede) or imagined (the ancient text). Equally important to Geoffrey are social and political networks. He names the Archdeacon of Oxford as the individual who bestows upon him the ancient text, and he names Robert, Earl of Gloucester (the illegitimate son of Henry I), as a type

of patron, requesting that the Earl “opusculo . . . meo . . . faueas” (“look favorably on my little work”; Prologue 3.17–18; 4). Social networks give rise to texts, lend them authority, and establish or reinforce political relations between their creators and benefactors.

Malory likewise emphasizes texts and networks in the closing lines of his *Morte Darthur*. Like Geoffrey, he envisions “his book being read by the politically dominant class” (Field xix), here contemporary “jentylmen and jentylwymmen” (Malory 21.12.21). However, where Geoffrey identifies and draws authority from his source and inspirations, Malory eclipses his, presenting his collection of tales as a complete and unified narrative—as “the hoole book” (21.12.17)—and thus belying the diversity of his sources, which range from the Old French Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles to the Middle English Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. By referring to his collection as a cohesive whole, he also renders it, rather than other texts, the site of authority. As a volume that includes the entirety of the Arthurian world, it is vast, and its evoked materiality (again, the reference to the “hoole book”) bears a weight equal to that of the ancient volume given to Geoffrey.

The wide range of Malory’s sources demonstrates how pervasive Arthuriana was by the fifteenth century, especially in the medieval Latin West. By the end of the Middle Ages, it had tendrils in almost every aspect of culture: literature, visual and oral arts, architecture, even politics, governance, and martial practice. And these tendrils only spread as the centuries progress. We might even liken them to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, which “connects any point to any other point, . . . has neither beginning nor end, . . . operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots,” and is “acentred, nonhierarchical . . . all manner of ‘becomings’” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21; our translation).² These tendrils, as they spread, draw upon distinct medieval branches of the myth, such as works which adapt elements of Geoffrey’s text (the Galfridian tradition), or those that reinvent Malory (the Malorean tradition) as he reinvented others. Or they evolve into traditions of their own—blending old and new, Arthurian and non-Arthurian, shifting form, genre, language, and cultural associations as they do so. Arthuriana is indeed all manner of becomings.

Critical explorations of the corpus are likewise multiple. Frequently diachronic or synchronic, or even a combination of both, they track the myth’s various forms, and the relationships between these forms, across time and space. In some instances, examinations are concerned explicitly with hierarchies: how a series of later texts or variants derive from an earlier parent or urtext, how the variants differ from the original, how intermediary, or analogue texts influence variants, and how variants evolve and disseminate materially, linguistically, and generically. The pinnacle expression of this hierarchical approach is the implicit or explicit image of the stemma, a tree diagram that visualizes the family history, or genealogy, of a text and its descendants.

In other instances, like the texts themselves, the discussions branch out beyond hierarchical structures and genealogies to explore the tendrils of the myth as they spread, evolve, and multiply. Approaches that consider the rhizomatic nature of Arthuriana have grown exponentially in the last several decades, no doubt in part because the broader critical landscape has itself evolved.

MEDIEVALISMS

In particular, the development of medievalism as a recognized scholarly enterprise has slowly shifted attitudes from source texts to their afterlives, exploring the benefits and meanings of these afterlives as valuable artistic expressions unto themselves.³ Leslie J. Workman, a key founder of the International Society for the Study of Medievalism (ISSM), recognized the importance and influence of both artistic and scholarly endeavors in how we understand or perceive the medieval past in all its forms. Medievalism, he suggests, is “the study not of the Middle Ages themselves but of the scholars, artists, and writers who . . . constructed the idea of the Middle Ages that we inherited” (qtd. in Utz, “Speaking of Medievalism” 439). It encompasses the various reimaginings of the medieval in all of its forms as well as the specific cultural contexts that inform each iteration and each iteration’s relationship to the imaginings that precede it.

As the contents of this volume evidence, medievalism, like Arthuriana, is a world of multiplicity, and Arthurian medievalism is a long-standing practice. Malory, through his blending and adapting of earlier and contemporary sources, engages in medievalism, even if he would not have identified his process as such; Shakespeare, most obviously through his history plays but in other works, too, likewise draws upon medieval texts and history. As a site of cultural interest, the Middle Ages flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, evolving into a movement “variously known as the romantic, the gothic, or the medieval revival” (Williams x). Victorian writers such as Scott and Tennyson, or artists such as those of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, reimagined medieval art forms and culture extensively and their works continue to have a profound impact on how the medieval is understood and disseminated in the modern period.

As technology and media evolve, so too does the Arthurian world, appearing not just on the small and big screens, but in new forms, from digital games, anime, and manga to blogs and conspiracy theories connected to the political far-right. And Arthuriana is no longer the domain of the West. It has become transversal, spreading beyond Britain’s borders around the globe. The 2001 Special Edition DVD of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, for instance, includes in its special features sample scenes from the Japanese release with subtitles translated back into English. The famous flyting episode between Arthur and the French knights in the castle, known originally as the “French Taunters,” is renamed “The French Castle,” while Arthur and his knights now seek the “holy sake cup” (Disc 2, 0:01:27) rather than the Holy Grail. What are perhaps the most quoted lines of this exchange (one speaks from anecdotal evidence here only)—the French knight’s remark to Arthur, “your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries” (Disc 1, 0:27:57–0:28:02)—becomes a far less direct and personal remark: “I can almost guess how you’ve grown up, what type of parents you have. I can clearly see it when I’m looking at you” (Disc 2, 0:02:42–49). The Japanese interpretation thus reidentifies the quest object with reference specific to Japanese culture and downplays the emphasis on personal insults, especially those concerning family or lineage, in a manner that accords with its specific cultural context. The inclusion of these scenes on the DVD also provides insight to audiences on how Arthur continues to make meaning around the globe, and demonstrates how, as the myth moves back and forth, it becomes infused with these new meanings.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

What emerges most clearly from the Arthurian themes explored above is that the core narrative elements around which the Arthurian story appears to coalesce—the heroic figure of Arthur, the Round Table of knights, sexual desire, and betrayal—all emerge on closer examination to be anything but consistent in terms of how they are rendered and understood. Rather, Arthurian works are characterized by a multiplicity of narrative constellations and interpretations that range from adventure narratives centered on singular heroes to bawdy comedies with large casts. The contributions we have gathered here reflect that multiplicity both in terms of the cultural phenomena they discuss and in terms of the wide range of academic and linguistic backgrounds and methodologies they encompass.

Part I of this collection, “**The World of Arthur in the British Isles,**” opens with a consideration of the tantalizing possibility of a distant and indistinct historical Arthur whose fame planted the seed for the enduring legend of a medieval court in the British Isles. P. J. C. Field’s chapter “King Arthur: Hero or Legend?” examines the evidence of the sixth-century British monk Gildas’s polemic *De Excidio Britanniae* (On the Ruin of Britain) as well as anonymous Welsh elegies such as *Y Gododdin* (The Gododdin) and various twelfth-century saints’ lives to draw conclusions about a possible warrior called Arthur, the story of whose victory at the battle of Badon (circa 500) may have marked an early point of departure for the Arthurian story. While the broad association of the name Arthur with the image of a successful military leader neatly encapsulates the enduring core of the Arthurian story, the time and place of the battle of Badon create a specificity that stands in marked contrast to the broad geographical scope of the Arthurian stories that span large parts of the globe in the twenty-first century—many of which, as we have seen, are altogether unmoored from real-world places.

This broadening out from one fixed potential point of origin to a vaguer, more elusive landscape to which Arthur might be tied can already be seen to be taking place in Helen Fulton’s chapter “The Invention of Arthurian Britain: Arthur in the Early Welsh Literary Tradition.” Fulton traces the shadowy presence of Arthur as a figure who is named or alluded to across a range of early medieval Welsh texts and, in doing so, begins to outline the emergence of “Arthurian” as a literary tradition—an interconnected network of texts and poems. Thus, as Fulton points out, in many of the texts she discusses, “Arthur clearly resonates as a hero whose deeds were already well known” (37), implicitly integrating these texts into a longer-standing tradition of storytelling, in which the key characteristics of Arthur—his military prowess and, in some cases, his enmity with Mordred—form a recognizable thread. Audrey Martin and David Mason’s chapter “Arthur Among the Nine Worthies” takes up that thread where Fulton leaves off by pursuing the representation of King Arthur as a Christian icon through his integration into the medieval trope of the Nine Worthies—the historical, biblical, and mythical figureheads that epitomized the medieval ideal of chivalry. Martin and Mason’s focus is on the fascinating evolution of Arthur’s “worthiness” in British and European contexts between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. By examining how Arthur’s growing fame both benefitted from and contributed to the Nine Worthies tradition, their analysis reveals the different ways in which the figure of Arthur came to be inserted into new narrative contexts, taking on the emblematic role of “model king.”

It appears, then, that from its very beginnings the story of Arthur has been both an abstract and mobile constellation of characters and a mythologized conception of history that is tied to a landscape of particular places. This intersection between real places and the fictional worlds their names represent is further explored by the following two chapters of our collection. Victoria Flood's chapter "Prophecy and Place in the Arthurian Tradition" discusses the insular world imagined in texts ranging from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Prophetiae Merlini* (The Prophecies of Merlin) to anonymous Welsh works such as *Armes Prydein* (The Prophecy of Britain) and illuminates the ways in which place is used to anchor and shape the prophecies, punctuating the narrative flow and hermeneutic suspense of these works. Meanwhile, Kenneth Hodges's chapter "Spenser, Malory, and Regionalism in Arthurian Literature" examines the representation of real places in two fictional Arthurian texts from the heart of the English Arthurian canon: Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Shifting our focus far to the north of the British Isles, he explores the role the regions of Orkney and the Scottish Isles play in these works. In doing so, he also reveals the intertextual resonance of these two famous works, which transcends the artificial boundary between medieval and early modern even as it reveals some of the fault lines arising out of the century between Caxton's late medieval print publication of Malory (1485) and the publication of the Spenser's early modern masterpiece (1590–96).

The final five chapters of this part further expand on the trajectory by which the British adaptations and amalgamations of the Arthurian story were handed down from the Middle Ages into the early modern period and from there into the Victorian age and beyond. Andrew Lynch's chapter "The Postmedieval Arthur at War" traces the legacy of Malory and other medieval Arthurian authors well into the twentieth century, focusing in particular on the conflicts that shape the Arthurian storyline. Surveying this long fascination with warfare in the Arthurian world, Lynch concludes that "Arthur supposedly stands for just war—the sword of power in the right hands—but in practice his literary legacy has been one of action and reaction, of a persistence created by recurrent variety and contestation, in which the venerable is always also the vulnerable" (110).

Departing from the central reference point of Malory's *Morte Darthur* and the role of war at Arthur's court, Andrew Hadfield's chapter "The Arthurian Legends in the Sixteenth Century: *The Misfortunes of Arthur* and *The Faerie Queene*" engages with the shifting deployment of the Arthurian world revealed by the dynastic and historical concerns of two very different Elizabethan works, the one a lesser-known drama and the other a canonical epic. This ambivalent early modern fascination with Arthurian material that is both a source of satire and a negotiation with a historical political ideal is further borne out by Claudia Olk's chapter "'what's past is prologue': Early Modern Explorations of Arthurian Romance and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*." Olk continues Hadfield's engagement with the influence of the Arthurian tradition on the stage, this time drawing connections whose very subtlety testifies to that tradition's reach in the early seventeenth century. Focusing on Arthurian themes within Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, this chapter begins the work of tracing the afterlives of Arthurian topoi as they unfold within new genres, media, and frametales.

By contrast, Renée Ward's and Virginia Blanton's chapters conclude this part of the volume by considering the deployment of Arthur in the context of Victorian

medievalism. Thus, where Olk uncovers an engagement with Arthurian material that emphasizes a departure toward a post-medieval reimagining of Arthurian tales in radical new contexts, Ward's chapter "Victorian Medievalisms: Rehabilitating Arthur in E. L. Hervey's *The Feasts of Camelot*" reveals an attempt to actively uncover or reconstruct an idealized medieval view of Arthur. Hervey's strategy of reconstruction chimes with the nostalgia of nineteenth-century medievalism by repackaging the tales in a publication format squarely aimed at a potentially lucrative youthful readership. This work, too, is the first discussed in this collection known to have been written by a female author. In keeping with this shift toward female authorship, Hervey not only recombines material from both Arthurian and non-Arthurian sources, but also incorporates a unique female perspective on well-known tales such as *Tristan and Isolt* and the Griselda-story, retold here as the considerably more ambivalent tale of *Gwenelda of Wales*. That same critical engagement with the role of women in Arthurian narratives emerges out of Virginia Blanton's chapter "Staging Guenevere's Maternity in Richard Hovey's *The Marriage of Guenevere* and *The Birth of Galahad*," which analyzes the many incarnations of Guinevere on the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century stage. Focusing in particular on the plays of the American dramatist Richard Hovey, Blanton explores the agency these different dramatized Guineveres do or do not exert over their sexuality and fecundity, thereby revealing Hovey's pioneering role in imagining a more self-determined Arthurian queen.

Part II of this volume, "The European World of Arthur," begins by taking us backward in time to focus on the Arthurian traditions taking root in other regions of Europe in the later medieval period. As noted above, the path by which Arthurian tales spread across different regions of Europe, often on the basis of French source texts that were translated into different languages, has been well documented. Thus, scholars such as Sofia Lodén are continuing to uncover the great influence of the French Arthurian tradition upon the dissemination and adaptation of Arthurian material across Continental Europe and beyond. In this collection, however, we have shifted the focus away from a source-adaptation-based narrativization of the spread of Arthurian tales from France and Britain across Europe. Instead, Part II begins with three chapters that span the Arthurian traditions of medieval and early modern Europe starting from its eastern-, western-, and southernmost edges. Looking east, Milica Spremić Končar's chapter "*The Byelorussian Tristan*" discusses a distinctive adaptation of the French thirteenth-century Prose *Tristan*. As Spremić Končar notes, this prose romance illustrates the "long and intricate (and often hard to discern) path taken by Arthurian narrative from one end of Europe to the other" (183). At the same time, it reveals the marked omissions and strategies of sanitization that the anonymous adaptor clearly felt were necessary to adjust the scandalous love story of Tristan and Isolde to the tastes of a sixteenth-century Byelorussian readership. It is perhaps unsurprising that the geographically distant *Byelorussian Tristan* should be a text that actively negotiates the gap between the courtly literary interests and ideals of the Western European Tristan tradition and the more clean-cut local literary templates of military heroism. However, literary traditions can cross borders in unexpected ways, and geographical distance or proximity does not always translate into more or less closely aligned textual adaptations. A case in point is the Irish Arthurian tradition, which, despite the geographical proximity of Ireland to Wales and Britain,

remains clearly distinct from its source texts. Thus, as Bernadette Smelik points out in her chapter “Continuity and Discontinuity in the Irish Arthurian Romances,” there is little manuscript evidence of Arthurian source texts from “Britain” having been adapted into Irish before the fourteenth, or possibly even fifteenth, century. At this point, rather than offering faithful renditions of British source texts, the Irish adaptors reworked the conventions and style of British Arthurian texts to appeal to an audience more familiar with the conventions of Irish *eachtra* (adventures), which engage with adventures set in the Other World and contain distinctive formal features, including, among other things, the frequent alternation of prose and verse segments. Looking south toward Greece, the picture is surprisingly similar. As Thomas H. Crofts’s chapter “No Country for Young Men: The Challenge of the Medieval Greek *Old Knight*” shows, this singular Greek adaptation of Arthurian material brings to bear a “coldly satirical eye” that clearly sets it apart from the francophone source texts upon which it is broadly based. As a result, Crofts notes, “to read *The Old Knight*, in fact, is to see how far the matter of Tristan has come from its emergence in the twelfth-century poems of Béroul and Thomas of Britain” (211).

The following three chapters delve further into Arthurian traditions that are frequently sidelined by the focus on English and French language works by looking at Arthurian texts from central Europe. In this case, a particular point of interest is to consider the texts discussed alongside each other as examples of Arthuriana that was being produced in overlapping geographical regions but in different languages. The multilingual focus of this set of chapters is brought into focus by Caroline Gruenbaum’s chapter “A Not-So-Unique Text: *Melekh Artus* and Medieval Jewish Arthurian Romance,” which sheds light on the processes by which both Hebrew and Western Yiddish Arthurian texts not only draw on but themselves feed into concomitant German Arthurian tropes of the time, thereby illustrating the literary interaction between these two geographically contiguous cultures. Annegret Oehme’s chapter “*Viduwilt*: The Yiddish World of Arthur” further complicates this relationship of exchange by exploring those features of the Western Yiddish romance that mark it out as a distinctive tradition of courtly literature in its own right.

Interestingly, despite having survived in a far larger number of texts, the German Arthurian tradition of this period has been relatively neglected, with only Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* receiving sustained attention from outside German studies. This neglect is perhaps most striking with regard to later works from the early modern period, whose variety and continued popularity testifies to a longstanding and widespread interest in Arthurian themes among German readers and audiences well into the sixteenth century. This evolving interest and the shifting attitudes to the Arthurian ideals of kingship that works from this period reveal are explored by Cora Dietl’s chapter “No Knights, No England, No Arthur: Arthurian Theater in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Germany.” Dietl notes that by the early modern period “Arthur as the epitome of a ‘society of virtue’ seems to have outlived his purpose” (268), thereby recalling the shift toward satire and skepticism that Olk identifies as characteristic of early modern English Arthurian drama. Dietl reflects on the particular instrumentality of drama as a means of visually and verbally juxtaposing the idealized Arthurian court of the high medieval period with the world views of a more skeptical early modern audience.

The final two chapters in this part revisit two key French Arthurian texts from new perspectives. Nicola Morato's chapter "*Guiron le Courtois* Across Borders: The Life of a Prose Narrative Cycle" examines the processes by which the "*Guiron le Courtois*" tradition was integrated into the literary landscape "from Catalonia to Venice and from Sicily to Flanders" (274). This in-depth survey of the manuscript evidence for how a popular Arthurian text spread across the linguistic and cultural borders of medieval Europe relates to several other discussions in this collection by detailing the intricate processes by which medieval texts evolved and circulated. While many of the chapters in this collection privilege a synchronic view of the adaptation history shaping the European and global Arthurian tradition by showing different traditions alongside each other, Morato's chapter takes a diachronic view of the collaborative process of linguistic and material text adaptation. By contrast, Martha Baldon's chapter "Optical Illusion, Illusory Objects, and the Quest of the Holy Grail in the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* and *Perlesvaus*" reevaluates one of the best-known French Arthurian text traditions, that of the Grail quest, by placing a focus on the role that optical illusions play in shaping the readers' and the knights' experiences of the allegorical landscapes they traverse while seeking the Grail. In doing so, this chapter completes this part's trajectory from an Arthurian world of concrete places that are tied to an idea of history, to one in which an imagined world and what it represents is at the center of events. In this imagined world, neither the readers nor the Arthurian characters can rely on a recognizable reality but must, instead, navigate between competing images and representations of the world that may prove misleading.

Part III of this collection, entitled "**The Material World of Arthur,**" examines the material conditions under which Arthurian stories have been summoned or represented since the legend's inception. The survey encompassed by these chapters begins with the visual arts (manuscript illuminations, carvings and murals, architecture, and photography), moves through the material contexts of some key moments in the legend's print history, and concludes with one of the many excavations into local history and geography that have served, over the centuries, to convert legend into fact.

The part opens with "Making and Illustrating Arthurian Manuscripts," Alison Stones's detailed survey of Arthurian manuscripts made in Western Europe between the early thirteenth and the late fifteenth centuries. In addition to providing clues about the artists, scribes, and patrons responsible for their production, these manuscript illuminations offer opportunities for scholars to speculate about which books were most esteemed where, which topics interested a particular reader, or which narrative episodes seemed most relevant at a particular time. But, as Stones observes, they also played a role in determining the reception and transmission of these works at the time of production and thereafter. While illuminations are formally complementary to the text, they could also influence the degree to which a text was valued and engaged with, and even how it was interpreted, thus participating in the trajectories of literary tradition rather than simply operating in its margins. The Arthurian legend is, first and foremost, a textual tradition—a legacy of adaptations, borrowings, translations, and redactions—but that tradition has always been influenced by its visual expressions.

The next three chapters extend our understanding of the interactivity of images and texts. In very different contexts, each demonstrates how the visual arts can

operate independently of the textual tradition, complicating rather than merely correlating with the stories to which they refer. Tirumular (Drew) Narayanan's chapter, "Sir Palamedes, the Indelibly 'Saracen' Knight: Heraldry, Monstrosity, and Race in Fifteenth-Century Arthurian Romance Manuscripts," explores manuscripts that challenge the reader "to address conflicting messages" (338) between mediums. As Narayanan observes, the incongruity of a narrative that champions a Muslim knight's conversion to Christianity attended by images that persistently undermine that conversion is, in fact, wholly congruous from the point of view of historical anxieties regarding the Islamic other.

Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand's chapter "Minding the Gaps: Topology and Gender in the Remediation of Medieval German Arthurian Romance" takes us out of the manuscript and into the rooms of wealthy European residences to view a series of spectacular medieval murals. Bearing witness to a community's willingness to literally inhabit the stories of Arthurian romance, these artworks are not passive translations of text to image but rather dynamic retellings. As Sterling-Hellenbrand argues, murals that spread across walls and between rooms echo the way narratives utilize space and image, but they also do something that texts cannot. That is, they exploit spatial relations (within both the image and the room) and generate opportunities for these relations to shift, allowing for new interpretations of the iconic characters and relationships under scrutiny.

Exploring drawings, paintings, architecture, murals, and photographs, Peter N. Lindfield's chapter, "Arthurian Imagination in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Art," complicates the legend's place within the medieval revival. Enthusiasm for the art and architecture of the past and interest in the Arthurian legend are shown to correlate in fluctuating and nuanced ways over the course of a century. As Lindfield observes, artists (then and now) often represent Arthurian subjects according to an impressionistic medievalism, backgrounded by appropriate architectural forms. However, the "Gothic" entailed moral as well as aesthetic ideals, and thus William Dyce's carefully Romanesque Arthurian murals for the interior of the Palace of Westminster—which convert Arthurian knights into moral personifications—are very much expressive of Gothic ideals of nationalism and morality as promoted by the Victorians.

As the chapters of Katie Garner and James Wade remind us, the material world of Arthur pertains not only to the visual arts but also to the legend's transmission through manuscript and print. In Garner's chapter, "Finding Arthur in the Percy Folio," a seventeenth-century manuscript emerges as a compelling example of the way in which the Arthurian tradition emerges from, and is in turn influenced by, its material contexts. Thomas Percy's famous discovery of a bulky manuscript "lying dirty on the floor . . . being used by the Maids to light the fire" (Hales and Furnivall 1: lxxiv) marks the reduction of some unique medieval witnesses of the Arthurian legend to the crudest of materials—kindling. Quickly rescued and later preserved through a series of publications beginning with Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), the physical condition of the discovery proved significant for the future of the Arthurian legend in several respects. Initially reflecting its rough handling, the manuscript's distressed state came to epitomize the object's rarefied status as a "relic." The mystery engendered by the partially burned pages and the accompanying air of age and obscurity (traits artificially imposed on Spenser's own epic

a century and a half earlier) played into the central themes of the medieval legend itself, a point underlined by Tennyson's use of the anecdote in his "The Epic: Morte Darthur" (1842), a poem in which the story of Arthur's death is salvaged from a fire. Garner's focus is on the practical and creative responses of Percy to the physically incomplete pages, and the ways in which his editorial interventions engendered academic controversy as well as extraordinary commercial success; as she concisely observes: "Percy's editing practices remind us that the Romantics and Victorians inherited a legend molded by eighteenth-century tastes as much as the felicities of textual survival" (393).

Wade's chapter, "A History of Malory's *Morte Darthur* in Print," shares Garner's interest in what editorial trends can tell us about the reception of the Arthurian legend and its marketing to successive generations: each publication emerges as a palimpsest of textual as well as social history. Wade explains what changing editorial prerogatives over the centuries meant for how Malory's stories looked, what they cost, and who they were read by; he also identifies the editions loved by authors and artists who would themselves go on to play a role in the tradition as it evolved. His discussion of the huge importance of Malory to the Pre-Raphaelites centers, for example, on a single copy of Robert Southey's edition of *The Byrth, Lyf, and Actes of Kyng Arthur* (1817), which was perused in a bookshop by a young Edward Burne-Jones (who could not afford it), purchased by William Morris, and later borrowed by Ford Maddox Brown and A. C. Swinburne. Finally, in company with Garner, Wade reflects on the way the chance discovery of a dusty manuscript (in this case, an early copy of *Morte Darthur* in the Winchester College school library in 1934) can cause "the Arthurian world [to tilt] on its axis" (408), forcing a recalibration of prior knowledge and opening new avenues for readers as well as scholars.

Closing this part, Mary Bateman's chapter "A Grave Discovery? Guinevere's Death and Burial at Amesbury in Medieval and Early Modern Tradition" draws our attention to a very different sort of materiality: namely, the legend's associations with actual swathes of turf and bricks and mortar. Bateman considers one Arthurian location in particular, Amesbury, and deftly illustrates what we earlier termed "the reciprocal dynamics between imagined Arthurian histories and lived history." As one of the supposed burial places of Guinevere, Amesbury offers both an endpoint within the narrative world of Arthur and a starting point for the local mythologization of a fabled Arthurian history embodied by the elaborate tomb of an unknown noblewoman that was discovered there in the early seventeenth century. As Bateman shows, the efforts of the Earls of Hertford to expand upon the apparent Arthurian connections of their family and estate reveal how the preservation (or creation) of history within an Arthurian framework was one of the dynamics serving to legitimize Arthurian material well into the early modern period.

The chapters in **Part IV**, "**The Transversal World of Arthur**," demonstrate the continued reinvention of the myth as it spreads across time and space, with a particular focus on the modern period in Britain and the United States, but also with forays into Sweden, Japan, and, briefly, New Zealand. Collectively, the chapters demonstrate how fertile the Arthurian world is, especially when unmoored from its traditional texts and contexts. They explore how it can be democratized, politicized, and resignified, and how it operates as a space of both continued self-reflection and new enquiry.

Some chapters provide panoramas, broad views of Arthuriana within specific regions or genres. Alan Lupack, for instance, in “The Arthurian Legends in America,” outlines the importance of the myth as a social equalizer in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American texts and culture, where it becomes a site in which chivalrous behavior is divorced from its associations with rank and wealth. His discussion tracks the myth in the United States in its most popular forms, from Arthurian youth groups to Twain’s parodic endeavors and beyond. While he incorporates canonical texts, he also offers fresh perspectives on lesser-known and previously maligned narratives such as James Russell Lowell’s *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, “a strange blend of the medieval and the American” that teaches readers “about the true meaning of charity” (432). Other chapters provide focalized analyses of the myth’s implicit and explicit influences. Sofia Lodén’s chapter “*In the Ancient Days of Sagas: Astrid Lindgren and the Legacy of Arthurian Romance*” introduces readers to three detective fiction novels by Lindgren (author of the *Pippi Longstocking* series) that draw heavily upon settings—the castle and the forest—and motifs—the fight between good and evil—central to the Arthurian world even though Arthur and his court never appear within their pages. Her study reveals the extensive reach of the Arthurian rhizome and its silent presence in children’s literature, as well as the underlying connections between the myth and European fairy tales.

As medieval writers knew, the Arthurian world also has great potential for comedy, a point taken up by Jeff Massey and Tabitha Ochtera in “‘Hail to the king[s], baby’: Arthur vs *Army of Darkness*.” They demonstrate what happens when time-travel narratives and satire, the two main comedic trends traditionally associated with Arthuriana, combine. Reminding us that “comedy . . . holds the power to question the status quo, to destabilize authority, and to bring joy during hard times” (472), Massey and Ochtera offer up Sam Raimi’s horror-adventure-comedy franchise *Army of Darkness* as a self-conscious distortion of filmic medieval tropes, one that employs the Arthurian myth not just for escapism, but, more importantly, as a self-reflective critique of hyper-masculine heroism.

Like Lupack, Shiloh Carroll offers a panoramic view, this time with a focus on modern fantasy literature. As her chapter “Arthur in Modern Fantasy Literature” shows, the myth has directly shaped thematic content and structures of the genre, most obviously in the subgenre of historical fantasy. Following patterns seen elsewhere in this volume, especially in Victorian reimaginations, many fantasy writers construct redemptive narratives for characters such as Morgan le Faye and Mordred, or blend Arthuriana with other well-known mythologies. Carroll outlines key canonical texts, but then pays particular attention to more contemporary authors, including Meg Cabot, Maurice Broaddus, and Douglas Clegg, whose works attempt “to diversify a set of stories that are deeply heteronormative and androcentric and overwhelmingly white” (481), even if they are not always successful. Her chapter thus looks back, assesses the now, and gestures toward the shape of things to come.

The Arthurian nature of things not explicitly Arthurian noted by Lodén resurfaces in the chapters by Kevin J. Harty and Alicia McKenzie, although their discussions focus on film and the immersive world of digital gaming, respectively. In “Cinema Arthuriana and the Knights of the Not-So-Round Table,” Harty confirms how central film has been, since its earliest forms in the late nineteenth century, to Arthurian medievalism. He then turns to films often overlooked or dismissed because of their

random selections and integrations of Arthurian material, including recent examples such as George Miller’s gender-progressive *Mad Max: The Fury Road* (2015) and James Wan’s less successful *Aquaman* (2018). These films present Arthur in unexpected places and “may more truly attest to the enduring popularity of the multifaceted legend” (488) precisely because they are unmoored from convention. As such, he concludes, they deserve our consideration. McKenzie tackles the small screen of immersive gaming in “The Grail is in Another Castle: The World of Arthur in Digital Games,” tracing the evolution of the genre’s engagement with Arthuriana alongside the evolution of technology, as well as the heavily intertextual nature of games that also draw upon other modern adaptations, including Monty Python’s *Holy Grail* and Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*. The results range from unremarkable to comedic, but success (or believability), she argues, arises when game designers are innovative and unconventional in their use of the Arthurian world. Both chapters thus explore the surprising results of what happens when narratives, regardless of their form or genre, break free from what Norris J. Lacy calls “the tyranny of tradition,” the unspoken expectations that exist among artists and audiences concerning what the myth should or should not be.

E. L. Ridsen likewise considers the power of the myth once it moves outside of conventional forms. His chapter “Desire and the Flexible Grail: The Japanese *Fate* Franchise and Evolving Notions of Arthurian Power” follows the myth eastward, to the Japanese anime *Fate* series, in which Arthur is reimagined and regendered as “Arturia,” and the Holy Grail takes on a wish-granting capacity which leads to cycles of excessive violence. Generic and cultural shifts can thus be both progressive and problematic, although, as Ridsen shows, the series ultimately offers hope through its vision of a world in which communities “practice learning, sharing, public concern, and a life of appreciative quietude” (526). Not all modern Arthurianisms are successful reimaginings, however. As Kris Swank reveals, they can also perpetuate issues that abound in the medieval texts, which themselves can belie the historical evidence. Her chapter “‘Moor’ and ‘Saracen’ in Medieval and Contemporary Arthurian Texts” explores how the ever-changing critical landscape forces us to continually return to and reassess sources, examining specifically the presence and function of racialized characters in both medieval and modern versions of the Arthurian world. The paucity of progressive retellings demands that future iterations include greater diversity and representation, and Swank ends her chapter by challenging future storytellers to move beyond the “colonized and supernumerary figures” (543) that feature in many current adaptations.

The part, and thus the volume, closes with Andrew B. R. Elliott’s discussion of Arthur as national myth in film and online media in “Guy Ritchie, King Arthur, and the Great Conspiracy.” Here, right-wing politics, conspiracy theories, and nationalism take center stage. As Elliott notes, while such engagements with the myth are easy to deride and dismiss, the all-too-frequent alignment of these beliefs with public killing sprees or other forms of violence demands that we listen. His chapter provides a provocative examination of the meaning of community and of how Arthur makes meaning in those communities; he also highlights the problems of insular worlds, whether they be self-referential online forums or academic institutions, ultimately questioning who, if anyone, can really lay claim to ownership of the medieval past, real or imagined.

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NOTES

- 1 Spenser’s discussion of Arthur occurs in the context of his paratextual “Letter to Raleigh” (lines 11–40). On the early modern disrepute of the Arthurian legend, see also James Wade in this volume (400–01).
- 2 “[L]e rhizome connecte un point quelconque avec un autre point quelconque, . . . n’a pas de commencement ni de fin, . . . procède par variation, expansion, conquête, capture, piqûre. . . [L]e rhizome est un système acentré, non hiérarchique . . . toutes sortes de ‘devenirs’” (*Mille plateaux* 11).
- 3 Even now, in 2021, medievalism is not uniformly recognized as a worthy area of academic study. Richard Utz’s *Medievalism: A Manifesto*, although not the only text to do so, offers insight into this division and the ways in which the barriers between the fields, and the fields themselves, can become more inclusive.



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PART I

THE WORLD OF ARTHUR IN
THE BRITISH ISLES





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CHAPTER ONE

KING ARTHUR
HERO OR LEGEND?



P. J. C. Field

The Arthurian legend appeared in Britain during the fifth and sixth centuries AD, when the south and east of the former Roman province of Britannia was being taken over by Anglo-Saxon invaders, and over the following millennium and a half it grew to become the most successful non-religious story in the world.¹ The earliest stories, however, show little consistency in the events they speak of, or in the way they present those events. They are a good deal less coherent in both respects than (say) the equivalent classical Greek myths. There seems to be a central core of heroic achievement and a final tragedy, but some tell of impossibilities, and sometimes revel in them; others are more naturalistic but may include historical elements from different centuries. The best explanation seems to be that Arthur, the central figure of the legend, was either invented by the Britons to console themselves for repeated defeats in their eight-hundred-year-long war with the Anglo-Saxons or was the first and most successful of perhaps only three British war-leaders who might have turned the long war round in their favor. The Arthur we know from the legend will therefore be either a mythological character who has acquired some historical characteristics, or a historical figure whose story has attracted mythological and folktale elements.

Deciding that question may begin with the name *Arthur*, which derives from the Roman name *Artorius*, and the name of Arthur's earliest companion, *Cei* (later Malory's Sir Kay), which derives from the Roman *Caius* (Breeze). Next, there are limits to the inferences that can be built on any document bearing on this period, which is the most obscure in British history. Historical certainty depends mainly on corroboration between different pieces of evidence, but the post-Roman British evidence is rarely dense enough to allow that, and historical judgments usually have to rely on the intrinsic plausibility of individual records. Anything involving numbers, including dates, is particularly at risk. Nevertheless, a small group of documents may shed some light on a historical Arthur, and I suggest that three of them, taken together and analyzed carefully, can answer the question about his historicity (Field, "Arthur's Battles").

The earliest document is Gildas's *De Excidio Britanniae* (On the Ruin of Britain), a denunciation of the vices of five kings reigning in what are now Wales and the English West Country. *De Excidio* begins with a brief history of Britain, very inaccurate in its early years, for which Gildas clearly had no good sources, but when he speaks to his contemporaries about events within his and their knowledge, we must believe him. He says that in the year of his birth, forty-three years and one month before he wrote, the Battle of Badon was fought; that it was a siege—he calls it the *siege* of *Mount Badon* (or *Badon Hill*); that the Saxons were defeated with great slaughter; and that since then there had been a kind of peace between the two sides (Gildas, pars. 15.3, 18.2). Gildas's date of birth has been much disputed, but the most frequently suggested dates have been in the late 490s (Snyder 68–69; Woods). Gildas does not say where Badon was, and it might, like many places in modern Britain, have an Anglo-Saxon place-name now. It is most likely to have been to the east of the region he was most concerned with, probably in the south of that area, because a battle that stopped a war for forty-three years must have engaged the main body of the enemy, and the Anglo-Saxons were strongest in the south-east. Several hillfort sites in southern Britain have been proposed, but no evidence has yet been found to favor one more than the others.

A siege of a hill may be surprising, but in this period the western half of the former Roman Empire was being torn apart by barbarian invasions, and indigenous peoples were refurbishing ancient hillforts as refuges. Ditches were being re-excavated, palisades renewed, and fighting platforms constructed. The best-known British example is Cadbury Castle in Somerset, elaborately refortified by a local king at this time, and mistakenly identified as Arthur's Camelot by John Leland, the sixteenth-century antiquary (Alcock; Field, "Searching"). Refortification work no doubt took on a new urgency when the Britons heard that the warband of King Ælle of Sussex had captured Pevensey on the south coast despite its formidable stone walls, and slaughtered every man, woman, and child inside (Garmonsway 14–15).² Gildas does not say who were the attackers at Badon, but the Britons, who had made fortifications a major element in their defenses for generations, were probably the besieged, and the Anglo-Saxons, who typically relied on speed of movement and ferocity of attack in war, were probably the besiegers. They may have been defeated largely because their kind of warfare was unsuited to an assault on a major defended fortified site (Cooper 133–55). The large number of Anglo-Saxons casualties is consistent with credible reports reaching Greece about this time that Anglo-Saxons had left Britain for what they must have thought was relative safety in Continental Europe (Stenton 4–8).

Gildas does not name anyone involved in the battle, but other sources make it very likely that the Anglo-Saxon commander was King Ælle, and quite likely that he was among those killed (Field, "King Arthur's Enemy"). The British commander, whoever he was, had won the most important British victory in the long centuries of war against the Anglo-Saxons. It would be understandable if, in later years, as the Britons suffered reverse after reverse, they began to speak of the person who won that victory as superhuman.

The other two documents are both elegies in Welsh.³ *Y Gododdin* (The Gododdin) takes its name from the British kingdom round Edinburgh. It was a favored client tribe of the Romans, and in the post-Roman period a power in its own right in north

Britain. The poem laments the fate of an expeditionary force from that kingdom which was wiped out in an attack on Anglo-Saxon Northumbria about AD 600 (Coe and Young 152–54). One of the warriors is said to have glutted black ravens (i.e., killed large numbers of the enemy) on the ramparts of a fortress, “although he was not Arthur.” Elegies are normally discreet about their subjects’ limitations, but this poem implies that Arthur was so outstanding that it was real praise to say that the dead man was *not* Arthur’s equal. It is worth noting that the activity for which the two men are praised—bloody fighting on the ramparts of a fortress—will also have been central to the achievement of the victor of Badon. The second elegy, *Marwnad Cynddylan* (Lament for Cynddylan), mourns a mid-seventh-century King of Powys who fought the Anglo-Saxons in what was to become Mercia.⁴ It describes the king and his brothers as “whelps of the mighty Arthur,” implying that Arthur was outstanding as a war-leader.

Since references to persons in early Welsh heroic verse are exclusively to historical figures, whoever composed these poems must have believed Arthur was a real person, not a mythological or fictional one. In the years around AD 600, poets and audiences will have had a reasonable knowledge of the wars between the British and the Anglo-Saxons a century earlier, so if either allusion dates from soon after the death of its subject, we, too, must believe it. However, although both elegies will have been composed soon after the deaths that inspired them, a possibility exists that the Arthurian allusions were later additions. The earliest surviving manuscripts of the two poems are from the thirteenth and the seventeenth century respectively, so there was time for changes, deliberate or accidental. Nothing, however, suggests later allusion: the poems seem entirely independent of each other—well separated in time and place, and with no verbal similarities—and leading experts agree that both passages look early and authentic (Field, “Arthur’s Battles” 5).

A handful of twelfth-century saints’ lives that portray Arthur as the saint’s opponent may contribute something here (Ashe; Coe and Young 14–43; Tatlock). If they have been brought into the historicity debate, it has usually been to suggest that Arthur roused the enmity of the Church by heresy or taxing ecclesiastical property or the kind of behavior of which Gildas accuses his five kings. In these stories, however, Arthur is given the role of the Recalcitrant King, who must misbehave so that he can be humbled by the saint: his behavior is a plot requirement, not the product of history. However, to be cast as a Recalcitrant King, Arthur must have been thought of as the pre-eminent worldly power during the saint’s life, and, insofar as they can be dated, all the saints appear to have lived about AD 500. If Arthur were a mythological or fictional character, he should have prompted stories like this either across most of the first millennium, or not at all.

We can only disbelieve in a historical Arthur if the earliest storytellers were willing and able to replace mythological character-names with authentic Romano-British ones, if the saints’ lives imply a plausible date for a historical Arthur by chance, if the Arthurian references in both elegies are later interpolations, and if it is a coincidence that the *Gododdin* interpolation attributes to a mythological Arthur the military achievement that must have been the main claim to fame of the unnamed victor of Badon. Given that no worthwhile evidence for any of these assumptions exists, it seems perverse to endorse all of them. That being the case, the answer to the

question as to whether or not Arthur really existed is clearly neither yes or no, nor that we cannot tell, nor that it does not matter: the answer is probably.

* * *

If Arthur existed, it is hard to believe that he was not the victor of the Battle of Badon. Two documents not yet considered, however, may enable us to discover a little more about him than that. The earlier of them is Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* (History of the Britons), put together in Gwynedd in North Wales in the years 796–830.⁵ The Arthurian element of the book consists of a chapter about Arthur (chapter 56) and two short notes about Arthurian “marvels” (*mirabilia*) in chapter 73 (Nennius 35–36, 76).⁶

Chapter 56 is mainly a list of twelve battles that Arthur is said to have won, apparently based on a lost Welsh battle-listing poem (several of the battlefield names rhyme, and one is given in Welsh). The list has been said to be completely fictional (Field, “Arthur’s Battles” 6–11). To mid-twentieth-century scholars, the only battlefield that seemed readily identifiable was *urbs legionis* (“the city of the legion”), which was taken to be Chester; but it was so unlikely that the war was being fought as far north-west as Chester in the years round 500 that it was believed that Nennius had credited Arthur with a battle actually fought a century later. That caused suspicion of the other, less easily identifiable, place-names. Chester, however, cannot have been the city of the legion because it was not a city. In Roman Britain, of the three principal legionary bases, Chester and Caerleon-on-Usk were no more than that, but York was both the headquarters of the Sixth Legion and a real city, the administrative center of half of the province when the Romans divided Britannia into two. It was also a nexus for the Roman road system, which, for centuries after the empire, would still provide the fastest way for armies to cover long distances in Britain. York was therefore particularly likely to be fought over, and most of all when it was on the boundary between British and Anglo-Saxon territory. The historical record is too thin to say exactly when that happened, but the years around 500 are as likely as any. Nennius’s real *urbs legionis* is therefore a thoroughly plausible location for an Arthurian battle between Britons and Anglo-Saxons. That suggests that chapter 56 deserves careful reconsideration.

Chapter 56 is part of what is called Nennius’s “Northern History,” although some of what it says is about Kent. Two sentences about those areas, however, are abruptly followed by the most disputed sentence ever written about Arthur: “Then Arthur fought against them in those days together with the kings of the Britons, but he was their leader in battle” (*dux bellorum*). In that sentence, “them” is, of course, the Anglo-Saxons. The explanations suggested include that *dux bellorum* was the title of an official post like that of the *dux Britanniarum*, who commanded part of the Roman army in Britain; or like the mediaeval Welsh royal office of *pen teulu* (chief of the king’s warband); or an allusion to Joshua, the military leader of the Jews in the Old Testament. None of the theories, however, corresponds in detail with what Nennius says. In particular, none explains why the British kings have delegated their military authority to someone who, it is implied, is not a king. Historical examples of early monarchs delegating that authority to a war-leader are not uncommon, but there is no known example from this period of several kings doing so jointly. Nor

does the relationship between Arthur and the kings correspond to anything that is known of in Celtic mythology. Moreover, if there were some historical or mythological equivalent to that relationship, it is unlikely that a ninth-century Welsh monk who knew little about warfare would have heard of it. The best explanation is that, on this point at least, Nennius is reporting historical fact.

Nennius's battles are numbered, and the battlefield names, if authentic, have been modernized from Archaic Welsh of the period 600–800 into Old Welsh of the period 800–1200. No doubt Nennius did both these things: he liked numbers and said repeatedly that a battlefield “is called” such-and-such in passages otherwise written in a past tense. The order of the battles, however, is presumably that of the underlying poem, which was probably dictated by rhetoric rather than by history. Most of what is said is in a markedly spare style, but in two places briefly becomes so elaborate as to suggest material derived from another source. Those apparent interpolations might be less (or more) authentic than the battlefield names, so they need separate consideration.

The first battle is located at the mouth of the River *Glein*. There are rivers called *Glen* in Northumberland and Lincolnshire now. Both have confluences rather than estuaries, but Nennius's Welsh source might have spoken of a confluence (an *oper*), and Nennius, whose Latin was limited, may have thought Latin *ostium* (river-mouth) was a true equivalent of that. Other rivers in Britain, however, might have been called *Glen* in the ninth century. The next four battles are located on the River *Dubglas* (Douglas) in the region of Lindsey (Lindsey in Lincolnshire). There is nothing improbable about multiple battles in one place, and about AD 500 Lindsey provided ideal conditions for a set. There had been Anglo-Saxon settlement there from an early date, and fourth-century flooding had made the district almost an island, easy to defend but well-placed for expansion across its defining rivers at the beginning of each campaigning season into the most promising of the surrounding British territories. The number of fords was limited, and armies were (and are) vulnerable when crossing rivers, so any competent British war-leader would have tried to catch the Anglo-Saxon warband at a ford. None of the rivers in or around Lindsey is known ever to have been called Douglas, but perhaps that word, which means “blue-black,” was a poetic by-name.

The River *Bassas*, site of the sixth battlefield, is completely unknown. The Caledonian Forest, however, site of the seventh battlefield, is readily identifiable: it was between Carlisle and Glasgow. It is an unlikely place for a battle against Anglo-Saxons, but other battle-listing poems include battles against non-Saxon enemies. The eighth battle is said to have been at Guinnion Fort, which implies a Roman fortified site. That site will be Binchester in County Durham, where the main Roman road from London to the north crossed the River Wear; in the post-Roman period it became a locally important center for manufacturing iron, making it a place worth defending (Ferris). Unfortunately, the plausibility of the site has been overshadowed by Nennius's emphatic attribution of the victory there to the Virgin Mary.

The ninth battle is located in the *urbs legionis*, which, as we have seen, will be York, and the tenth on the banks of the River *Tryfrwyd*, an unknown place mentioned in several Welsh poems in The Black Book of Caermarthen. One of them implies that the “strands of Tribut” were tidal. Taken with Nennius's wording, that suggests a tidal estuary, of which Britain has a great many. The eleventh battle is

said to have been fought on Mount Agned. The place is unknown, apart from an eleventh-century manuscript of the *Historia* in which an apparently well-informed scribe glossed the name as what is now High Rochester in Northumberland. High Rochester was the Roman military camp at the northern end of the main Roman road north from London, from which there would have been communication further north to the tribal centers of the Gododdin. The twelfth battlefield, at Badon Hill, will (as we have seen) be somewhere in southern Britain. The incredible number of the enemy that Arthur is said to have killed in that battle has caused skepticism about Nennius's whole chapter, but the different style of that statement suggests it does not come from his main source. Nennius then adds, perhaps paraphrasing the last line of his poem, that Arthur was victorious in all his battles. Here too, he may be reporting historical fact: never having lost a battle explains Arthur's later fame better than a single victory, no matter how tremendous. After this, the last two sentences of chapter 56 return abruptly to the "Northern History."

Of the ten possibly identifiable battlefields, eight are in what is now north-east England, with an outlier in south-west Scotland and another in southern England. There is nothing implausible about the location of the main cluster or the spread of the whole set (warfare in this period could be very mobile). Eight of the battlefield sites (Lindsey, York, Binchester, High Rochester, and the River Glen) are located on or near the strategically important Roman road that ran from south to north in Britain east of the Pennines. It may be worth adding that the only plausible location for Camelot is somewhere near a little fort (long derelict and uninhabited in AD 500) called Camulodunum, near modern Huddersfield, on the main Roman road from York to Chester (Field, "Searching for Camelot"). However, once the great Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria had swallowed up the Gododdin, and Lindsey had become a mere district disputed between Northumbria and Mercia, it is unlikely that any ninth-, eighth-, or seventh-century inventor of specious battles would have known of the existence of High Rochester, Binchester, Lindsey, and the River Glen, or of the road system that connected them, particularly if that inventor was a monk in the far west of Britain. There might be mistakes in Nennius's battlefield names, but the only implausible elements are the two apparent interpolations, which are on subjects unrelated to the locations of battlefields.

* * *

The two apparent interpolations in Nennius's account of Arthur are best considered alongside our final document, the *Annales Cambriae* (Annals of Wales), a set of monastic annals running from the middle of the fifth century to the middle of the tenth. Annals like these were kept for working out the date of Easter, and required a memorable event, with its date, to be recorded every three years or so. These dated events should constitute reliable historical evidence, and the accuracy of some verifiable early entries in the *Annales Cambriae* suggests that it was in this case. Even in reliable annals, however, entries may be miscopied or contaminated with unreliable material, so individual entries should always be checked as far as possible.

Two of the annals name Arthur (Nennius 45, 85). One, when converted from the *Annales'* dating system, says he fought in the Battle of Badon in AD 516, the other that he and Medraut (who must be Modred) were killed at the Battle of Camlann in

AD 537. Everything about the second annal looks authentic, and traditional story supports it: early Welsh literature often speaks of Camlann as the archetype of military disaster. The annal does not, however, say whether Arthur and Medraut were fighting each other or were on the same side, nor does it locate Camlann. The place-name will derive from British *Cambolanda* (crooked enclosure) or *Camboglanna* (crooked bank), but Britain has many crooked enclosures and crooked banks. Given the number of annals concerned with north Britain, the place may well be there. The Roman fort called Camboglanna on Hadrian's Wall—once thought to be Birdoswald, but now identified as Castlesteads—is often said to be Camlann; it certainly fits the criteria.

The Badon annal is more problematic. First, its date disagrees with the median date deduced from Gildas by nineteen years. The latter is only an approximation, but it has prompted suggestions that the Arthurian annals are ninth- or tenth-century inventions, valueless as historical evidence. If so, however, it becomes hard to explain why the discrepancy is so small. Gildas, writing before the Anglo-Saxon invasions had their full effect, misdated the building of Hadrian's Wall by over 250 years. A tenth-century writer trying to place Arthurian battles within the *Annales* could only have dated them accurately to within nineteen years by using something like a parallel set of annals, which would give the Arthurian entries back their contested evidentiary weight.

Second, both texts appear to contain supplementary material. At first sight, it might be thought that this material was written during fits of delusion in which each author momentarily completely lost touch with reality. Closer examination, however, suggests that neither author fully understood what his sources had given him, but both seem to have tried to transmit faithfully what they thought their sources said. The only exception seems to be Nennius's attribution of one of Arthur's victories to the Virgin Mary. Given that he shows no interest in the Virgin elsewhere, his attribution was probably prompted by someone in the circle of his master, Archbishop Elvodugus. In itself, Nennius's attribution casts no more doubt on the rest of what he says about the battles than the official ascription of the naval victory at Lepanto in 1571 to Our Lady of Victories casts doubt on the surviving records of that battle.

The most striking example of uncomprehending fidelity to a source is Arthur going into battle carrying something on his shoulders both in the Badon annal and in Nennius's battle at Guinnion Fort. The "shoulders" must be an error for "shield," the Welsh words for those things being almost identical, and what is "on" the shield must be an image of some kind. When two documents both exhibit such an extraordinary error, it must be attributed to a common source, in this case a lost Latin document based on traditional Welsh oral poetry. What Nennius says about the casualties at Badon probably comes from a similar—perhaps the same—source: "long hundreds" (multiples of 120) are characteristic of early Welsh poetry. Nennius and the annalist, however, differ about the image on Arthur's shield: Nennius says it was of the Virgin Mary, the annalist that it was of Christ's cross. Although the annal is the later text, it is the plausible one. A fifth-century British war-leader could well have borne the cross on his shield as a tribute to the Roman Emperor Constantine, who had the cross put on his soldiers' shields before the battle that won him the empire, whereas the Nennius passage is the first evidence for the cult of the Virgin Mary in Britain: it cannot be authentic to AD 500. It seems likely that adding extra

wording about the Virgin Mary required copying the revised passage into the margin of Nennius's manuscript, where it was ambiguously placed, so that the final fair copy of the *Historia* accidentally moved the passage from Badon to Guinnion. The annalist had no such problems, and kept the shield where it belonged, at Badon.

Nennius's claim that Arthur alone killed 960 of the enemy at Badon is also obviously incredible. His emphatic "alone" may even be a sign that he himself found it hard to believe it. Throughout history, however, the names of commanders have been used as shorthand for their armies, and 960 is a not implausible body-count for the personal following of a victorious war-leader in a decisive battle in this period. (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* routinely claims larger numbers.) The wording Nennius was trying to summarize may have been saying, in a mode of expression that Nennius did not understand, that the slaughter was achieved by Arthur's own warband rather than the kings of the Britons and their men. It may be our good fortune that, instead of rationalizing away what he did not understand, Nennius reproduced it faithfully.

The annalist's assertion that the Battle of Badon lasted for three days and three nights also sounds like fantasy: no battle in this period would have lasted that long. Gildas, however, says the battle was a siege, and a three-day siege is entirely plausible. Even the "and three nights" may be accurate—in war, the classic time for a decisive attack is dawn.

To sum up: what Nennius says about the Virgin Mary seems to be the only deliberate distortion of the information that these two texts are trying to convey. If we set that aside and we correct manifest errors like the shoulder/shield confusion, allow for the authors' ignorance of warfare, and read the superficially incredible supplementary material as if it were oral heroic poetry, everything Nennius and the *Annales* say about Arthur looks plausible and fits in well with the rest of our scanty evidence.

* * *

The early evidence, then, suggests that Arthur was a real person, but one who had little in common with the Arthur of later legend. In the high Middle Ages, the most important thing about Arthur, from his mysterious conception to his ambiguous death and possible future return, is his kingship. As we have seen, however, if there was a historical Arthur, he appears not to have been a king. His title was presumably invented by storytellers who knew Arthur was great, who knew very little else about him, but who thought that such greatness could only belong to a king. A great king should have a splendid principal castle, which it came to be agreed was called Camelot. The original Camelot, however, seems to have been an improvised military base so insignificant that it did not have a name, but had to borrow one from a nearby Roman ruin. Far from being a splendid castle, it may have contained no permanent buildings at all. A great king's castle will be full of retainers eager to please him. Before knights and knighthood were even invented, the author of *Culhwch and Olwen* has a retainer say to Arthur, "Lord, get thee home. Thou canst not proceed with thy host to seek things so petty as these" (*The Mabinogion* 123). So, in the developed legend, it is Arthur's knights who go to seek things, while he typically remains in Camelot to assign honor or shame when they return. The early Arthur, however, gluts his own ravens. In the developed legend, Arthur and his knights quest and joust and do battle on horseback. "What is a knight," says one of Malory's

favorite characters, “except when he is on horseback?” (Malory 1:528.6). That is nostalgia on Malory’s part—cavalry no longer ruled the battlefields on which he fought—but it had been true in previous centuries. The historical Arthur’s warband, however, may have fought on foot, as the Anglo-Saxons always did. That question deserves further investigation, as do other many questions about the man who seems to have come nearest to reversing the tide of history in fifth-century Britain.

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NOTES

- 1 This chapter is based on three published essays and a lecture of mine noted in the list of works cited above. The essays contain fuller versions of parts of the present argument; references given in the essays are not duplicated here.
- 2 The *Chronicle* entry for 491.
- 3 See Jarman, especially pp. 3–4.
- 4 The relevant passages from both elegies are given in Welsh with English translations and a color image of the MS of *Y Gododdin* in Snyder (94).
- 5 Nennius's authorship has been disputed, in my view unreasonably. See Field, "Nennius."
- 6 Snyder gives an image of the relevant page of the oldest manuscript of the *Historia* (72).

CHAPTER TWO

THE INVENTION OF ARTHURIAN BRITAIN ARTHUR IN THE EARLY WELSH LITERARY TRADITION



Helen Fulton

In the earliest written reference to Arthur which can be securely dated, Arthur is described as “dux bellorum” (“leader of battles”), who fought against the Saxons “cum regibus Brittonum” (“with kings of the Britons”). This is how he is described in *Historia Brittonum* (The History of the Britons), a Latin compilation of history and genealogy claimed by, and very likely made by, a monk in north Wales, Nennius, in 829/30 (Guy, “The Origins”). From at least the ninth century, then, and presumably much earlier than that, since Nennius was bringing together a disparate variety of materials from different sources, including oral legends, Arthur was associated with the fortunes of Britain.

The concept of “Arthurian Britain” was politicized by the Normans as part of the ideological project associated with their imperial expansion into the island of Britain after 1066. Largely the invention of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the twelfth-century cleric whose *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*) first appeared in circa 1136, the pre-history of Britain and its greatest king, Arthur, was designed as a prequel to the founding of the Norman dynasty of kings. Writing at a time when the succession of the crown was precarious, Geoffrey dedicated his history to Robert, Earl of Gloucester, the natural son of Henry I, with the aim of showing that the Norman kings had inherited a kingdom that was now called England but once covered the whole island of Britain. Having defended their homeland against the hated Saxons and built a Continental empire under Arthur, the Britons finally succumbed to fate and lost their sovereignty over the island of Britain. It was, implied Geoffrey’s *Historia*, the rightful destiny of the Normans to revive this sovereignty, symbolized by the figure of Arthur as the King of Arthurian Britain.

The Welsh, however, understood the history of Britain somewhat differently. They saw themselves, and not the Normans, as the true inheritors of the sovereignty of

Britain by virtue of their descent from the earliest British people. The Welsh memory of Arthur, embedded in Latin and vernacular writing from the ninth century, was a memory of an autochthonous ethnicity and a political autonomy brutally shattered by the Saxons.

ARTHUR BEFORE GEOFFREY'S *HISTORIA*: THE EARLY POETRY IN WELSH

Among his sources, Geoffrey drew on the earlier work by Nennius and on what was clearly a storehouse of legendary material about British history, the links between Cornwall, Wales, and the “old north” (what is now the north of England and the lowlands of Scotland), and the rulers and warriors who fought to retain their independence in the face of the Saxon threat. Among heroes such as Urien of Rheged and his son Owain (from the old north), Gereint son of Erbin (from Cornwall), and Gwalchmai son of Gwyar (from Wales), the figure of Arthur stands out as a leader of men, the “dux bellorum” of Nennius.

References to Arthur by Latin writers of the tenth to twelfth centuries indicate that he was already a well-known figure from the past, even before Geoffrey's wildly popular history brought him to international prominence. Indeed, Geoffrey's evident partiality for Arthur, to whom he gives far more space than any other of the British kings, furnishing him with an almost complete biography, suggests that he knew of existing stories about Arthur which he found intriguing and which he decided to elaborate. The tenth-century *Annales Cambriae* contain two entries dated (not accurately) to the years 516 and 537. In the first, Arthur is said to have fought at the battle of Badon, and in the second he is said to have died at the battle of Camlan, along with “Medraut” (Higham, “The Chroniclers” 19–20). While the battle of Badon is mentioned by Nennius, one of the sources used by the chronicler of the *Annales Cambriae*, the place-name Camlan and the personal name Medraut, developed by Geoffrey into Arthur's enemy Mordred, have no known source outside the *Annales* themselves. A collection of tenth-century Welsh genealogies in the same manuscript as the *Annales* name an ancestor of Owain, king of the south-Welsh province of Dyfed from about 954–88, as “Arthur map Petr” (“Arthur son of Peter”), and this prestigious role as royal ancestor was perhaps behind the respectful references to Arthur in the *Annales* (Higham, “Early Latin Sources 38).

Another example of Arthur's widespread fame before Geoffrey's *Historia* is found in a Latin narrative by Herman of Laon, *De Miraculis Sanctae Mariae Laudunensis* (Of the Miracles of St Mary of Laon, 1145). Herman happens to mention Arthur in an account of the visit by a group of canons of Laon to the south-west of Britain in 1113 (Tatlock 204). One of the canons nearly caused an international incident when he suggested that the famous British king Arthur was safely dead and buried, and not waiting to return, as many supposed (Bullock-Davies). This anecdote confirms that knowledge of a legendary Arthur expected to return at any time to save the British people was known in the south west at least as early as 1113 and probably even earlier. This was the kind of legend which Geoffrey of Monmouth embellished in his *Historia* with his fanciful invention of Avalon as the place to which the wounded Arthur was transported after the battle of Camlan.

Other pre-Geoffrey references to Arthur are similarly fleeting but significant in their assumption that Arthur was a well-known figure associated with early British history. The series of elegies to fallen heroes that form a long poem known as *Y Gododdin* (The [Men of] Gododdin) describe a battle at Catraeth (modern Catterick in north Yorkshire) between armies of British and Saxon allies in the early sixth century, when the Saxons were expanding into British territories in the north. Unusually, the author is known to us, as his name, Aneirin, appears in the only surviving manuscript. It is possible that the poem first took shape around the time of the battle itself, though the manuscript, *Llyfr Aneirin* (The Book of Aneirin), is dated to about 1260, and the language, much of which is archaic, represents layers of copying that have been dated from the seventh to the early twelfth century (Koch lxxiii).¹ Each stanza of the poem is dedicated to one or a group of specific warriors who fell at Catraeth, whose names are revealed at the end of each stanza following praise of their exploits. One of the warriors, Gwawrddur, was so mighty in battle and so generous to his men—two of the key virtues of a noble warrior—that he is compared to the greatest battle-leader of all, Arthur:

Ef guant tra trigant echassaf,
ef ladhei a [per]uet ac eithaf,
oid guiu e mlaen llu llaryhaf,
godolei o heit meirch e gayaf.
Gochore[i] brein du ar uur
caer ceni bei-ef Arthur.
Rug ciuin uerthi ig [cl]isur
ig kynnor guernor Guaur[dur]. (Jones 65, 1–8)

He thrust beyond three hundred of the boldest,
he would mow down centre and wing.
He was worthy, in the van of the most bountiful war-band;
He'd bestow horses from his herd in winter.
He would sate black crows on the fortress wall,
though he was not Arthur.
He did mighty deeds in combat,
a rampart in the front line, Gwawrddur. (Clancy 75)

The name of Arthur provides a convenient rhyme with the name of the warrior, Gwawrddur, but Arthur clearly resonates as a hero whose deeds were already well known. The same pairing of names, Arthur and Gwawrddur, is also found in a poem known as “Canu y Meirch” (The Song of the Horses), which is one of a number of early poems surviving in *Llyfr Taliesin* (The Book of Taliesin, mid-fourteenth century), that reference Arthur briefly among many other British and Welsh heroes (Jones 123).

While *Y Gododdin* associates Arthur with the “old north” of Britain, the ancient territories of Strathclyde, Gododdin, and Rheged which were inexorably taken by the Saxons during the sixth and seventh centuries, other references, like that of Herman of Laon, associate Arthur with the south-west (Cornwall and Devon). The eulogy known as “Gereint fil’ Erbin” (Geraint the Son of Erbin), found in the *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (The Black Book of Carmarthen, circa 1260), celebrates the deeds of Geraint, chieftain of Dumnonia, and his men against the Saxons. The historical

context seems to be the late sixth or early seventh century, but the poem was likely to have been composed in a later period and may commemorate a known historical king of Dumnonia in the early eighth century (Jones 18). Taking up the voice of an eyewitness to the battles, the poet describes Arthur fighting alongside Geraint at Llongborth (modern Langport in Somerset):

En llogporth y gueleis e arwev
guir. a guyar in dinev.
a gvydi gaur garv atnev.
En llogporth y gueleis e. y arthur
guir deur kymynint a dur.
ameraudur llywiaudir llawur. (*Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* 48)

At Llongborth I saw arms
and men, and blood gushing,
and after the shouting, a bitter burying.
At Llongborth I saw with Arthur
courageous men who hacked with steel,
an emperor, master of battle. (my trans.)²

The description of Arthur as “ameraudur” (“emperor”), a borrowing from Latin *imperator*, signifies something more like “commander,” though it foreshadows his imperial role in Geoffrey’s *Historia* (*Llyfr* 106). It suggests that Arthur was known as the kind of battle-leader, or “dux bellorum,” described by Nennius, who traveled round British territories defending them against the Saxons.

Arthur is mentioned fleetingly in “Englynion y Beddau” (Stanzas of the Graves), a series of seventy-three verses, also from the Black Book of Carmarthen, which list the locations of the graves of heroes (*Llyfr* 35–44).³ Most of the names refer to British legendary and/or historical heroes from the sixth to ninth centuries and the stanzas may be as old as the ninth or tenth century (Jones 8–10). These are, for the most part, heroes known from other early Welsh texts who belong to the oldest stratum of Welsh legend. There are names from the *Gododdin*, such as Cynon, whose grave is in Llanbadarn; a name from the sixth-century historical poetry of Taliesin, Owain ab Urien, buried “dan gverid llan morvael” (“beneath the earth of Llanforfael”); names from Nennius’s *Historia Brittonum*, such as Gwallawg, a northern British king who fought alongside Urien of Rheged and is buried at Carrog, and Rhydderch, buried at Abererch. There are also names associated in some texts with Arthur, heroes such as Bedwyr (later Bedivere), March (King Mark of the Tristan legend, and associated with Tristan and Arthur in one of the Triads), and, as its earliest recorded reference, Gwalchmai, the Welsh hero often depicted as one of Arthur’s closest allies and who corresponds to the French Gauvain and the English Gawain.⁴

The locations of the burial sites, most of them in Wales, occupy a variety of topographical sites such as coastlines, mountains, and rivers, suggesting “a vision of monuments that serves to connect the contemporary landscape to a perceived, mythical past” (Petts 164). This was a past in which British heroes defended their territories against Saxon invaders, and their gravesites thus map the history of a war that was ultimately lost. One of the warriors, the son of Osfran, is said to have