

Was there an historical Arthur?

Adapted from “The Historicity and Historicisation of Arthur” by Thomas Green

There are many different theories about Arthur’s identity. These theories are all interesting, but none of them fully answer the question, “Was there an historical post-Roman Arthur?” Many assume that has to be, but this assumption is unjustified. Those who are familiar with medieval literature know that it is not uncommon for fictional characters to be inserted into historical events. This is called historicisation. A great example of this are Hengest and Horsa, Kentish horse gods who were historicized to have played an important role in the conquest of eastern Britain. There are other examples as well, such as Merlin, whose name is derived from a place, and Siegfried who is a Norse demi-God. Considering these examples no assumptions should be made about Arthur’s historicity (historical authenticity). Arthur is either an historical person who has been given mythological standing or is a mythological character that we inserted into historic events. However, one cannot assume either of these conditions being true. They must be proven or disproved by looking at all the available data, which this essay seeks to do.

One of the most important sources to look at for this kind of study is archaeology. However, archaeology usually only tells us when a site was occupied, and not who occupied it, unless it is accompanied by an inscription. The Glastonbury cross claims names Arthur the occupant of the grave. However, it has been discovered that this cross is a fraud and therefore of no use in the search for an historical Arthur. The inscription at Tintagel also does not refer to Arthur. There are no other sites worth considering; therefore, any conclusions must be drawn from textual references, not archaeology.

The King Arthur of the late medieval era, who people are the most familiar with, is not the Arthur of earlier works. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, finished in 1138 A.D. is the first work that added a mythic element to King Arthur, so scholars searching for Arthur’s historic origins must look at texts that predate this (Pre-Galfridian texts).

While some scholars have looked for evidence of Arthur’s historicity in any text that mentions him, this is poor research because many of these texts are not historically reliable themselves. Therefore, to find evidence of Arthur’s historicity we need only look to four sources: *Annales Cambriae*, *Historia Brittonum*, *Y Gododdin*, and four or five other occurrences in 6th and 7th century contexts.

Let’s look at the last source first; four or five occurrences of Arthur’s name in sixth century Wales and Scotland. The argument is that these names show commemoration of an earlier historical figure. However, this form of commemoration would be unprecedented and therefore this evidence is inconclusive. It is also interesting to note that it was the Irish settlers in the area who used this name, perhaps because they did not hold it with as much reverence or awe as the British settlers. If Arthur was a legend, the British would likely not use his name, out of respect.

In *Y Gododdin* an historic king is said to be “no Arthur.” While *Y Gododdin* was written hundreds of years before Monmouth, the reference to Arthur is only found in the second edition of the work, written after Monmouth. Any evidence derived from this text is inconclusive. Furthermore, we only have proof of the historicity of some of the characters in *Y Gododdin*. The others could have existed or could have been fictional. It is also interesting to note that no reference to Arthur’s actions is made. In fact, he is presented as the pinnacle of valor through the comparison. This makes using him as a comparison like comparing someone real to a legend.

The case for Arthur’s historicity, then, relies entirely on two sources: *Historia Brittonum* and *Annales Cambriae*, both of which seem to have information about Arthur that is historical. The *Historia* is an anonymous work written in a sophisticated Biblical style. Considering the style, we have to wonder how much the author adapted

his sources to suit his stylistic purpose. Can we trust the author of *Historia*? The author's methods do not encourage us to be confident about recovering reliable information. His sources are often of similar date to itself and also suspect. *Historia* also includes characters that are clearly mythic in origin, but presents them as historical. In fact, the style is similar to medieval Irish pseudo-histories, which were written for political ends.

The final source, *Annales Cambriae* is thought to have good evidence for Arthur's historicity. It mentions the battle of Badon where Arthur carried the cross of Jesus for three days to ensure the Britons victory. It also mentions the battle of Camlann in which Arthur and Medraut (Mordred) fell. The details of this text indicate that it drew some inspiration from *Historia*. This does not entirely disprove the *Annales*, but it means that it cannot independently prove anything. We need to look at both of these texts together for answers.

Both *Annales* and *Historia* mention the Badon, and it is assumed that this is same battle mentioned in yet another book, *De Excidio Britanniae*. The fact that *De Excidio* does not mention Arthur is thought, by some, to prove that Arthur could not be historical. However, others argue that Gildas, the author of *De Excidio* intentionally left Arthur out of his text because he did not approve of him. However, Gildas doesn't simply omit the name of the British leader at Badon, he names the leader Ambrosius Aurelianus. There exist other traditions about Badon that also don't include Arthur, further suggesting that he was not present. This tendency to replace other leaders with Arthur is also true for the 7th, 9th, and 11th battles mentioned in *Historia*. The other battles mentioned are either unidentifiable or clearly of mythic origin.

What then for the case of Arthur's historicity? Even when we restrict ourselves to the best sources no solid conclusions can be drawn. The best we can say is that by the ninth century there existed a concept of Arthur as an historical figure. Against this we have to look at the evidence for Arthur as a legendary figure. Looking at the sources the case for Arthur as a mythical hero predates the concept of Arthur as an historical figure. However, one cannot assume either side being correct without proof. It is just as likely that a historical figure became a legend as a legendary figure was historicized. So, the best answer to the question, "Was there an historical Arthur?", is only "perhaps, maybe." No one can say, "no there wasn't," nor "yes there was."

One of the reasons we have a problem answering the question definitively comes from poor methodology. We only looked at a few sources that might prove Arthur's historicity. However, these works are a part of a larger body and must be considered in their context. The preconceived notion should not force the data to conform to it, rather the evidence should lead to its own conclusion. Looking at the Pre-Galfridian texts in order to prove Arthur's historicity is unavoidably biased and forces the investigator to ignore the majority of available early evidence.

We should ask, what is the nature of Arthur in the whole of Pre-Galfridian texts. Where does the majority of the material lead us to believe? When the sources are approached without assumptions we find some interesting results. Arthur is portrayed as "the leader of a band of heroes who live outside of society, whose main world is one of magical animals, giants, and other wonderful happenings, located in the wild parts of the landscape. Arthur is portrayed as a figure of pan-Brittonic folklore and mythology, associated with the otherworld, supernatural enemies, and superhuman deeds, not history." This concept of Arthur occurs in the earliest sources, is consistent in the majority of sources, and predates the concept of an historical Arthur. It is also interesting to note that most of these sources never associate Arthur with the battle of Badon, despite the fact that most assert this battle to be the reason for his fame. When the body of material is viewed as a whole the possibility of "maybe" shrinks. The vast majority of early material portrays Arthur as entirely legendary. There is no reason to think that Arthur was historical, indeed, the "maybe" only appears because it is forced to by divorcing a few pieces from their context. The legendary Arthur is the original; the historic Arthur, the secondary development.

Arthur is a composite figure. Through the centuries the concept of Arthur did not stay the same. There is no

standard Arthurian legend as this legend is the result of deeds and characteristics of other tales and characters. In light of this it can be valuable to determine which historical figures parts of Arthurian legend may be based on. Ambrosius, mentioned earlier, is certainly the earliest person Arthur may have drawn from. Another character, Lucius Artorius Castus, is thought to be Arthur as his personal namee, Artorius, would have been adapted to Arthur by the Welsh. However, it is hard to believe that an historical figure who predates the legend of Arthur was turned into a legend and then slowly historicized as a different person. In 1994 Littleton and Malcor argued that the Arthurian legend could be Scythian in origin. In the second century a group of Sarmatians (Scythians) were brought to Northern Britain as cavalry by Lucius Artorius Castus. The authors argue that the major elements of Arthurian legend, sword in the stone, the Holy Grail, and the return of Arthur's sword to the lake) were transmitted through Europe by two groups from Scythia, the Sarmatians and the Alans, and are based on the Scythian legend of Batraz. The main problem with this theory is that it requires 1000 years of silent transmission before the elements all appear in Morte dArthur.

Another theory suggests that Arthur is derived a legend originating from the meaning of the word "Arthur," bear-man. This is supported in texts that describe Arthur as a "bear of men," "bear of the host," etc. It is also worth noting that the Celts had bear cults which included gods like Artio (bear goddess), Andarta (the powerful bear), Artgenos (son of the bear god), and Artaios (bearlike). These characters, like Arthur, are associated with forests. It is possible that Arthur's origins may be as a Celtic god.