

King Arthur: Man or Myth?

“If King Arthur did not live, he should have.” Sir Winston Churchill



- Was Arthur a real man, a king, warlord, soldier, defender of his people? Or was he the stuff of legend, a mythic hero from the ‘Celtic twilight’ that haunts us through the centuries as a romantic ideal for which we can not achieve?
- Regardless, Arthur and his companions were not from the age of Chivalry with armored knights & jousting which was from the 12th-15th centuries. The saga of Arthur is from the Dark Ages, approximately 450-600AD.

King Arthur: Man or Myth? ²

- There are several theories regarding a 'historical' Arthur
- Ancient Deity
- In Welsh, the modern language perhaps closest to the Celtic tongue spoken by the inhabitants of southern Britain in the era of the Saxon invasions, the word '*arth*' means 'bear.'
 - In pre-Christian Celtic religions there are several 'bear gods' with a name similar to *arth*, *arthos*, & *artos*.
 - Over the centuries the legends of this 'god' or demi-god may have been adapted and fit to contemporary facts and survived in the form of a legend of a great man as a way in which pagan religions became intertwined & adapted into early Christianity.
 - It is possible there was a warrior during the 5th-6th centuries that used a bear as his standard or battle flag.

King Arthur: Man or Myth? ³

Lucius Artorius Castus

- In 1924 historian Kemp Malone suggested that the Arthur was Lucius Artorius Castus, a Roman general sent to guard Hadrian's Wall in 181AD.
- Lucius Artorius Castus' banner was a red dragon. The King Arthur of lore, Arthur Pendragon, was said to carry a banner with a red dragon on it.
- 183AD, Castus led the defense of Britannia when Picts swarmed over the wall.
- Castus' force was a cohort of 5,500 Sarmatian cavalry. The Sarmatians were from the Black Sea region. Sarmatians were mounted horsemen. Their religion practiced worship on alters of a sword in a stone, and archeological evidence from Britain shows that Sarmatian warriors were buried with the hilts of their swords protruding from the ground. It is *possible* this led to the legend of Arthur's knights.



King Arthur: Man or Myth?

4

Riothamus

- Some historians, such as Geoffrey Ashe, believe the legends of King Arthur derive from an actual 5th century British king who held the title '*Riothamus*' which means 'highest leader' or ruler.
- His name is lost to us, but this *Riothamus* was alive during the reign of Roman Emperor Anthemius 467-472AD & may have been a king, or supreme war leader of the people of Brittany or in Britain.
- *Riothamus*, while serving in the armies of Emperor Anthemius is last seen in history retreating after being defeated by a Visigoth army somewhere around the Burgundian town of **Avallon** in 472AD.
- We have a letter written in 470AD by a Roman Bishop, Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius, addressed to "*Riothamus, king of the Brittones.*"
- The cross-channel activities of *Riothamus* may give credit to Geoffrey of Monmouth

King Arthur: Man or Myth?

- Riothamus (also spelled Riotimus, Rigothamus, Rigotamos), was a military leader, active circa 470, called "King of the Brittones" by Jordanes, who stated in *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*
- "(XLV.237) Now Euric, king of the Visigoths, perceived the frequent change of Roman Emperors and strove to hold Gaul by his own right. The Emperor Anthemius heard of it and asked the Brittones for aid. Their King Riotimus came with twelve thousand men into the state of the Bituriges by the way of Ocean, and was received as he disembarked from his ships. (238) Euric, king of the Visigoths, came against them with an innumerable army, and after a long fight he routed Riotimus, king of the Brittones, before the Romans could join him. So when he had lost a great part of his army, he fled with all the men he could gather together, and came to the Burgundians, a neighboring tribe then allied to the Romans. But Euric, king of the Visigoths, seized the Gallic city of Arverna for the Emperor Anthemius was now dead.



**Anthemius-Last able
Emperor of the West**

King Arthur: Man or Myth? ⁵

Ambrosius Aurelianus

- Sometimes called 'Last of the Romans.'
- Ambrosius Aurelianus was a Romano-British warlord who may have come to power sometime between 470-500AD
- It has been speculated that his father had been a Roman official or legion commander, & his mother was a Celt, perhaps of a royal family, but this can not be proven. Some ancient sources claim Ambrosius was the son of the Emperor Constantine II, but this is unlikely. In Welsh legend he is known as an emperor.
- Evidence does exist that Ambrosius opposed Vortigern, and the two men fought for control of Britain after the Roman withdrawal.
- Further evidence suggests that Ambrosius was for a time successful at uniting some of the Celtic tribes & kingdoms, keeping an army of different tribes together, maintained the Roman roads, and offering some sort of civilization in the crumbling 5th century.

King Arthur: Man or Myth? ⁶

- Gildas, in his *De Excidio Britanniae*, wrote of Ambrosius, "*The remnants (of the British)...take up arms, and challenge their victors to battle under Ambrosius Aurelianus. He was a man of unassuming character, who, alone of the Roman race, chanced to survive the storm in which his parents, people undoubtedly clad in the purple, had been killed. Their offspring in our days have greatly degenerated from their ancestral nobleness. From that time the citizens were sometimes victorious, sometimes the enemy...up to the year of the Siege of Mons Badonicus.*"
- Gildas was a near contemporary of Ambrosius, so his references *may be* reliable.
- Archeological evidence does suggest that a battle was fought, called Mons Badonicus, 'Mt. Badon' around 496 AD where Celtic and Romano-British forces heavily defeated a Saxon army led by Cerdic, & for a time pushed the Saxons back to the eastern. Saxon Shore
- In the 900s Ninnius attributed the victory at Mt. Badon to 'Arthur'

King Arthur: Man or Myth? ⁶

Ambrosius to Arthur?

- Ambrosius vanishes from history in 515AD. (*Arthur vanishing to Avalon...?*)
- If Gildas, Bede, & Ninnius are accurate, Ambrosius would have been around 75 years old at Badon. Some suggest that Ambrosius was the "the great king among all the kings of the British nation," mentioned by the chroniclers, but that the actual army was led by a younger Celtic or Romano-British warlord, perhaps named Artorius, Artos, Arthus, etc. After 515AD this 'Arthur' may have succeeded Ambrosius.
- Ninnius listed 12 great battles fought by Arthur all across Britain between 496-500, with Badon listed as the last and greatest victory over the Saxons as well as Arthur's death at *Camlan*. If true, this would mean Arthur commanded a very swift cavalry force. Birth of the legend of Arthur's kni...



King Arthur: Man or Myth?

Sources:

- John Matthews, King Arthur Dark Age Warrior & Mythic Hero. (New York: Random House Publishing) 2004.
- Norma Lorre Goodrich, King Arthur. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers) 1986.
- John Davies, A History of Wales. (London, Penguin Press) 1993.
- Wikipedia, 'Historical King Arthur.' Found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_King_Arthur
- 'Arthurian Resources on Britannia.' Found at: www.britannia.com/history/artpage.html