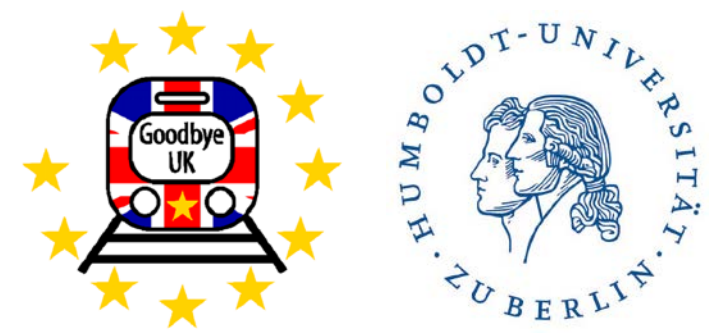


# WAS KING ARTHUR WELSH?

By Ana Ornelas



## THE LEGEND OF KING ARTHUR

A predestined king, tutored by a powerful wizard, who was able to retrieve a magical sword from a stone, and defend Britain with the help of the noble knights of the roundtable, including the handsome Lancelot. After enjoying a time of peace, is murdered by his own son and is taken to the mysterious island of Avalon, where he finally rested in peace. A story you probably heard at some point – you might even have a different version to tell.

It has been retold countless times. In literature, film, television, cartoons, graphic novels. Pop culture's fascination with King Arthur is a curious topic.

We must acknowledge the power of King Arthur to stay alive in the collective imaginary until the modern day. The idea of a messianic King who is predestined to lead a nation is not exclusive to the Arthurian legend; such beliefs can be encountered in a series of different societies. In b.C. Persia, with zoroatrism, and also in medieval Portugal with Sebastianism (Manini 2013). What sets the Arthurian legend apart might be subject of argument. Could it be the aura of mysticism, linked to ancient Welsh paganism? Could it be the recounting of Arthur's bravery and his amazing acts of strength and nobleness? Or even the fact that the Arthurian legend is intimately connected to the idea of a British identity? After all, the UK takes pride in being the home of such a powerful myth (Jones 2016).

Perhaps there is no right answer to this question. Most likely, pop culture's courtship of the Arthurian legend is a combination of factors. A story that keeps being rewritten and retold, regardless of historical evidence of it being real (Kelly 2011). Maybe that is the answer: Everyone wants to show the world their own version of King Arthur.

## WHAT IS IN IT FOR WALES, THEN?

First of all, there is a matter of national identity. The Celtic culture is immensely important to the idea of a Welsh character, as well as the Welsh language. And both can be found abundantly in the Arthurian legend. Of course, such a well-known figure inside and outside the UK brings a sense of pride to Wales, and that is one of the reasons there is such an active effort to keep the legend alive and well.

However, the reasons to maintain the legend of Arthur connected to Wales are also economic. It is no secret that film and even book induced tourism is a powerful tool to attract investments and visitors (Beeton 1990), and the world's fascination with King Arthur can be very lucrative.

Many official tourism websites offer various activities to tourists traveling to Wales seeking King Arthur. With the great popularity he has, and the attention he is constantly receiving from Hollywood, it is not hard to understand why Wales is constantly reminding everyone that King Arthur maybe, probably, possibly – was Welsh.

## SO, DID KING ARTHUR REALLY EXIST?

This is a very controversial topic. According to the myth, King Arthur was a predestined king who defended Britain against the invasion of the Saxons in the 5th century. His name comes up in many different literary sources, however, the closest version to the modern Arthurian legend first appeared on *Historia Regum Britanniae*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth. *Historia* was written in the mid 12th century, and there is no telling how much of it was a product of Monmouth's imagination or inspired by previous tales (Loomis 178). In this book, one is able to find the vast majority of characters and places usually associated with the legend of King Arthur, such as the wizard Merlin, the queen, Guinevere, the Excalibur sword, his death in Avalon. However, since Monmouth's *Historia*, the legend has been reproduced countless times, and several features were added. There is no right way of telling King Arthur's story.

It's important to note King Arthur is believed to have been alive around the 5th century, so Monmouth writing about him more than five centuries later can make the thesis of him being a real person harder to support. Many historians advocate he has no place in factual historical research:

“ think we can dispose of him quite briefly. He owes his place in our history books to a 'no smoke without fire' school of thought ... The fact of the matter is that there is no historical evidence about

Arthur; we must reject him from our histories and, above all, from the titles of our books.” (Dumville, 187-88)

Prior to Monmouth's *Historia*, there are some ascriptions of Arthur as a British soldier, but no evidence to support it. So if we are talking about a very likely unreal figure, how can it be connected to a real place?

## WHAT ABOUT WALES?

There is no doubt King Arthur's story is connected to British identity, but this bond is even stronger in Wales. Even if it is hard to affirm the nationality of a historical figure whose origins have never been proven, the farther southwest you travel in the UK, the more are the locations claimed to have been the home of many important passages of the Arthurian legend.

This connection makes sense. After all, the Celtic mythology – ever present in the Arthurian legend, is a Welsh heritage (Carradice 2011). Not to mention that even if the precise origins of the name Arthur are arguable, there seems to be little discussion to it being Welsh (Malone, 367-74). Furthermore, it's important to notice the first records of King Arthur were written in ancient Welsh. However, back in “Arthurian” times, Britain was not the Britain we know today, and Wales did not exist as a country – so the affirmation that Arthur was Welsh might be a little bit of a stretch.

However, as we mentioned, we are not making this statement – Wales is. There is a vast variety of scholars, websites, books – dedicated to the connection between Wales and King Arthur. The Wales National Museum holds an entire session on its website dedicated to it, as the main portal for tourism in Wales, visitwales.com. Tourists come from all over to visit attractions directly connected to King Arthur – a hero Wales takes pride in (Carradice 2011).

## Representations of King Arthur through History



A representation of King Arthur and his knights around the round-table, from around 1470.



Statue of King Arthur by Albrecht Dürer and cast by Peter Vischer the Elder, around the 1520s.



King Arthur being murdered by Mordred, by H. J. Ford, 1902.



Arthur and Morgana are portrayed going to Avalon in Frank William Warwick Topham's *The voyage of King Arthur and Morgan le Fay to the Isle of Avalon*, 1888.

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