



Arthur and the mysteries of Britain
By Nigel Blair

For many years Arthur has been considered a myth in the sense that he wasn't real and the academic establishment in Britain is not sympathetic to the concept of his existence at all. In the United States it is a quite different story. Arthur was made popular in the 12th century by a man called Geoffery of Monmouth, who taught at one of the schools in Oxford around 1120 AD just before the university was formed. He portrays Arthur as a great warrior and ruler, reigning in the period directly after the Romans left Britain.

Britain declared a sort of unilateral declaration of independence from Rome in the year 410 AD because Rome was under such pressure from the barbarians that all the legions had to leave Britain in order to defend the continental parts of the empire. Britain being an island was a little less prone to being devastated by these barbarians. The Romans left by an amicable agreement whereby we were allowed to defend ourselves and I think that that they left some legions initially to help defend the isle and we were allowed to set up our own authority. It is not always realised that Britain became an independent, unified and highly civilised country under a high king and the first one was called Vortigern and another was called Vortimer and there was a third one who reigned around 430 to 470 AD who is usually known as Rigo Tamus which is actually a title which simply means "high king". What hasn't been realised is firstly how much of a unified state Britain was at this time and how conscious it was of its own identity.

We have very little documentary evidence for that period but it is often overlooked as to how well governed Britain was as a country during this time, maintaining the Roman level of civilisation for a period of around seventy to a hundred years after they had left. It was unlike almost all of the rest of the Roman Empire. We didn't start being devastated until the Saxons came during the second half of the fifth century and even that was only sporadic and in small amounts, the Saxons didn't come arrive in a big way until the next century and by the time they came in between 600 and 700 AD a lot of them had been Christianised so that they were a much more civilised people. So at the time when the Saxons were "barbarians" they were not arriving in very large numbers.

We had therefore a sort of afterglow of Rome and it is just being realised by some historians how important a period this actually was. Arthur it has almost certainly been realised belongs to this period rather than the sixth century. We have some information on the person that was Rigo Tamus. He was a high king, he went to the continent and campaigned and he actually defeated armies on the continent and he probably ruled a good part of Northern and North-Western France and the Low

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Countries. He had created a small empire and he was really a major figure. There is documentation about him and there is a letter to him from the then Pope which we have in the form of a very old manuscript copy. We know that he went to the continent and we know that his name was Artorius. It is only recently that this has been discovered through a Breton poem which at first sight appears to be nothing to do with Arthur but in fact at one point it gives an account of Arthur of this Artorius figure and how he kept back the Saxon invasions. Through the work of Geoffrey Ashe and some American professors, we know that this Artorius figure and this Breton poem are one and the same thing with the famous Arthur. Arthur campaigned on the continent and he was defeated and mortally wounded and taken to Avalon in France and from there his remains may have been taken back to the Avalon in England which is widely believed to be Glastonbury in Somerset. We know that he was a very major figure and that he established a period of good government, he had a band of knights who were dedicated to this cause of just and fair government and they certainly were on horseback because the late Roman period saw the introduction of cavalry with chain-mail armour as it is now known and this was certainly a part of that. We do know that there is real basis for belief in the myth of Arthur, the other evidence that we have is the excavations conducted at Cadbury castle also in South Somerset. There they did excavations in the late sixties and some people say that nothing much was found but Geoffrey Ashe was the secretary of the dig there and he said that fortifications were found there which were made with stone and timber. It is a very large site, over 18 acres and quite large enough for a regional king to have a court and it was highly fortified and they have found the remains of great gate towers at each end and it looked rather like the big fortified gateways of the Roman forts and we know from pottery found there that there was a considerable community up there and it was refortified in the late fifth century. The remains of an enormous timber hall and so we do have the evidence that Arthur was there.

At the time of the Rigo Tamus figure there was Roman emperor called Marcian who ruled in Constantinople or the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. He was pictured as a Restitutor Orbis or "world restorer". We don't have any carvings depicting Rigo Tamus but we do have some carvings from the period which give us an idea of how he would have been portrayed. The Roman empire had nearly been destroyed several times and it was in some degree of chaos by the 450's 460's and the big event of the time was the collapse of the Roman empire and everybody was looking for the figure that would come and restore it and bring law and order again. Everybody thinks of course that in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of Avalon that it means Glastonbury but we now think that it means this town in France. We are beginning to realise that Monmouth's accounts are more accurate than was initially thought, his "History of the Kings of Britain", is completely fantastic but over half his account of Arthur is taken with his conquests on the continent. We are now beginning to suspect that if he is one and the same with Rigo Tamus that in fact he did undertake a lot of conquests on the continent and that he was something of an emperor. Brittany which was then known as "Lesser Britain" and was under the sway of the British high king and Arthur could easily have operated from Brittany.

There is an ancient Welsh poem which has rather been overlooked in the past, and it depicts the history of a Welsh King whose name was Dereint. In one line it has an interesting reference; it gives the story of a battle against the Saxons at place called Longborth which is almost certainly Porchester Castle because it was one of the bases

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from which the British fleet fought against the Saxons. It says in one line that Arthur's men fought there valiantly in this siege of Longborth. The interesting thing is that it doesn't say Arthur but only refers to Arthur's men. Now one of the big problems with Arthur being put back into the 460's and the 470's is that he must have been getting on a bit by the time of his great battle of Baydon which was supposed to have been his greatest victory which was dated by Menius at 518 AD, and he would have been between the ages of 80 or 90 by this time. Obviously if Mount Baydon was fought in 518 or even 500 AD it wasn't Arthur himself who fought it. In those days there was a tradition that when a great commander had passed on or retired the men went on fighting in his name and in this Welsh poem we have the direct evidence that Arthur's men fought so in other words when Menius says that one of Arthur's battles was Baydon in 518 BC what he probably meant was that it was one of the battles of Arthur's men, the group that went on after Arthur had died or retired from fighting. It doesn't rule out the whole Arthur legend and it is possible that there may have been more than one Arthur figure, he may have even had a son named Arthur or there may have been another military leader who decided to name himself after the original Arthur. Menius lists twelve of Arthur's great battles and Baydon is in fact the last on the list.

By the legend of King Arthur we are lead to believe that Uther Pendragon is turned into the exact likeness of Igraines husband. According to the legend Arthur was conceived by this magical piece of deception orchestrated by Merlin by turning Uther Pendragon into the exact likeness of Igraine's husband and conveniently her husband was killed in battle straight after this. Arthur was born as a result of this and he was then brought up by Merlin. As for a Merlin figure we do know that there was a least one Merlin figure in reality and this was a Sixth century bard who lived in the lowlands of Scotland and a fair amount of research has been done on this notably by Nikoli Tolstoy on this originating figure of Merlin. He didn't seem to concede that there was another Merlin figure of the fifth century who was probably Welsh which is the belief that Geoffery Ashe and I share. This Merlin probably did know Arthur and was in the position of a wide seer or adviser to him. Anyway according to the legend which was popularised by T. H. White who wrote "The Once and Future King", and he more or less lived and breathed Arthur and Merlin. He popularised this legend of Merlin bringing up Arthur in his book "The Sword in the Stone". It is mainly fiction but the story goes that there was some kind of festivities and Arthur was supposed to be taking part in the tournament and he had forgotten to bring his sword and somebody said "Go back and get your sword" and on the way back he saw this sword sticking up out of a stone and drew it out and returned to the tournament. They of course were all very excited because no one else had been able to draw it from the stone and so the legend goes. What truth there is in this legend nobody knows, there may well have been a sword that was very much revered and regarded as having magical properties and this would have been very much in keeping with the Celtic beliefs. They did believe that some of their weapons had magical properties and you can see this in some of the weapons that turned up at the Sutton Hoo burial which is roughly contemporary with Arthur in East Anglia with all the magnificent things that were unearthed there in the 1930's. It probably originated in the magical properties of a sword and the fact that Arthur was particularly skilled in using that sword or something like that. The legend goes then that Arthur was brought up to be this great king with this round table. I am not sure where the round table originated, I don't think that it was in Geoffery of Monmouth and it may have originated later in the

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medieval period with Thomas Mallory. The actual literal round table was in fact a medieval invention I think. What it symbolises is that all the knights were equal and the fact that none of them were at the head. There is a stone at Tintagel in the form of a pillar of a cross which commemorates the Welsh King Eliseg tracing his ancestry back to the Roman Emperor Maximus and Arthur's predecessor Vortigern. We do therefore have an actual stone monument that mentions Arthur's predecessor that shows that he existed.

With Arthur is associated the legend of the Holy Grail and this is something which has fascinated people from that day to this. It has parallels in other parts of the world. I once gave a talk on the Gayzar of Ling and he was a similar kind of heroic king to Arthur to the Tibetans and Mongolians and he lived a little later than Arthur in the 7th to 8th century. A lot of his exploits are rather similar to Arthur and one of the quests that those Eastern Knights had to follow was the quest for a sacred stone and it was very similar. In the Arthurian legends the quest was for a chalice or a cup and of course this has been Christianised into the Chalice of the Last Supper although it is very unlikely that any such cup would have found its way to Britain but nevertheless the legends go that Joseph of Arimathea brought it to Glastonbury between 40 and 65 AD following the crucifixion of Jesus it being supposed that Joseph was Jesus's uncle or was related to him in some way and that he founded Christianity in Britain. The grail was part of this and there are still people that believe that the cup was brought to Britain and that it is in Lantios in Wales. What almost certainly happened was that this was a Christianisation of an ancient British set of myths about the quest for some sacred relic possibly a cauldron although nobody quite knows what it was. What happened was that this got tacked on to Arthur and the Christianised version shaped it into a Christian myth in the middle Ages. In any case what it probably signifies is that Arthur and his knights who are referred to in some of the Welsh legends "The Mabinogian" and you can actually identify some of the medieval names of some of Arthur's knights and you can tie them up with people sighted in the Mabinogion. So almost certainly Arthur did have knights which were based on mythical names of the ancient British. One must not forget that Arthur was not just British but Romano British and he inherited all the ancient religious beliefs and traditions although he was probably a Christianised Roman Britton, nevertheless the Roman Christianity of those days incorporated all the ancient mythology and was very much more tolerant than it was on the continent because we had had very little persecution of the ancient myths by the Christians in this country because it came to this country relatively late in its history whereas in Europe and in the Middle East there had been fanatical and very brutal persecution by Christians of all the ancient myths and witchcraft and Druidism, there was very little of that in this country. Although the Romans had persecuted the Druids when they had invaded there had been very little Christian persecution of the Druids, so that in other words the ancient legends and the Christianised Romans managed to live quite easily together. In fact Geoffery Ashe says "The stories of the grail are mystical and symbolic and do not present the grail like it was simply a holy relic like the many relics enshrined in churches as a matter of fact no one during the middle ages seems to have claimed seriously to have possessed the cup of the last supper. When relics were enormously popular and far fetched claims were made freely this silence is curious it hints that there may have been a real mystery, the misconception that the grail was simply a relic has inspired modern fantasies identifying it as a some particular vessel." Then he goes on to consider the grail as a mythical thing based on the ancient Britons, then he gives a picture of a remarkable

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cross that was found in about 1190 and it was dug up in the grounds of Glastonbury Abbey and it reads "Here lies buried the renown King Arthur in the Isle of Avalon". If that really is true that this was dug up by the monks of Glastonbury Abbey in 1190 AD that seems to be proof because they then dug down another seven feet or so and they then found a sort of hollowed out tree trunk with two figures in it, one was very large and thought to be that of a man and the other was a great deal small and was assumed to be Guinevere. The remains were dug up and transferred to another part of Glastonbury Abbey and then at the time of the reformation, like most other things of this type were destroyed and the remains have disappeared. This cross however survived and the last mention that we have of it is in the eighteenth century. There are two schools of thought regarding this cross, some people think that the whole excavation and the discovery of the grave was sheer invention because Glastonbury Abbey had fallen on hard times during that period and it was having hard times attempting to survive during that period, they had just had a disastrous fire and they had to rebuild the Abbey and some people think that they invented the whole thing in order to get money. I don't personally think that and nor does Geoffery Ashe, we think that it was genuine; the question then arises as to whether it really means that it was Arthur. It is pretty likely that Arthur would have been buried in Glastonbury because that was the place certainly by Arthur's period where heroes were buried and we do know that by this time Glastonbury was a major holy place. We know that St Patrick went there about that time and we certainly know that even if Joseph didn't get there some very early Christians did and it was certainly a cradle for Christianity in this country. It certainly would have been the place where a great Christian and warrior would have been buried.

The Round Table which has been associated with Arthur is certainly not from his era, it is thought to be medieval and connected with Edward the Third who was very keen on Arthur and wanted to found an order of Knights of the Round Table. He renamed it "Knights of the Garter", which is the Knighthood which we still have today, but nevertheless it was very much inspired by Arthur so that you could say that anyone that is knighted today is named in honour of an Arthurian inspiration. The Round Table which is currently exhibited in the Great Hall in Winchester has been attributed to Edward the First and although it is very old again dates from after Arthur's time. Henry the Seventh was very much inspired by Arthur and it is often not realised how much influence the Arthurian legends had upon the Kings of this country throughout history and how much influence it had in attempts to unify this country. After the bloodletting of the Wars of the Roses in the second half of the fifteenth century, Henry the Seventh who came to the throne in 1485 AD consciously thought of himself of being in the tradition of Arthur and he named his eldest son Arthur who unfortunately died leaving his second son Henry to succeed him who later became Henry the Eighth.

In the Grail legends it was Sir Galahad who eventually found the Holy Grail, he was the purist of the Knights, some people think that he was some kind of "cardboard" character as he didn't seem to have any kind of human weaknesses at all; he was completely above any kind of human temptation. He went to Jerusalem within a ship that sailed itself and when he got there he found the Grail and was immediately transported to heaven. That was the medieval monk's interpretation of the Grail story. I'm inclined to believe that he was either talking about Arthur's men as I said earlier and that some later copier of Menius' work decided to write Arthur in the place of

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Arthur's men which I am told is very easily done particularly in Welsh. In fact there is one reference in a Welsh poem about the battle Porchester or Longborth as it was known then, where it does say Arthur's men but some modern translators say that it ought to be Arthur and his men, so that if they can dispute that even today then they could certainly have done it in those days. It is possible therefore that Menius meant Arthur's men or Arthur and his men. In any case that was supposed to be the great victory, we do know that following about 510 and 520 AD there was a large lull in the Saxon invasions. The Saxons didn't try anything for about another half a century before there was any really serious conquest on behalf of the Saxons after that. There really was some major setback and the Saxons were relatively small in numbers compared to the Britons in that time. When they did finally invade after the Mid-century was largely due to a plague which apparently affected the Britons much worse than the Saxons because they were immune to it. The Britons died like flees and the Saxons of course survived much better. Then the legend says that Arthur fought his last battle of Camland which is sometimes associated to a place in Cornwall, Camelford. At the battle of Camland, Arthur was finally defeated but according to the legend he fought his last battle with Mordred, where they both ultimately killed each other. This maybe a battle on the continent near Avalon in France where Rigo Tamus was killed but the accounts of Rigo Tamus do talk about him being betrayed. This could have been the origin of the legend or if you don't identify Arthur with Rigo-Tamus then perhaps it was a battle later on in Britain. If you say that it was Arthur's men that were defeated in Camland then this solves the problem completely. Which ever way you take it there was a great defeat somewhere around 550 AD and after that the Saxons started coming in larger and larger numbers. It is not true to say that Arthur's work was therefore of no account or no value because what had happened was that the Saxons had been hailed off fro about three quarters of a century and during this time the Saxons had become relatively civilised and when they did finally defeat the Britons they were civilised. So in Wessex in 665 AD Wessex was finally taken King Sinagils was a Christian, so by the time that Glastonbury was occupied by the Saxons we know from records that it was occupied relatively peacefully and the two groups of Christians came and worked together in peace. Geoffery Ashe even goes as far as to say that Glastonbury was the beginning of the concept of a United Kingdom. That was the end of Arthur but it was the beginning of the legend and of course the legend built up and Arthur was quoted by poets and bards and he became a symbol of archetype of good government, chivalry, fairness and originator of the law of chivalry that was written up by Cretian de Toi on the continent and Maory in 1485. This was a masterpiece of timing because Henry the Seventh came to the throne immediately after Malory and the first printer was around at this time so that it was printed into a book and Henry the Seventh came to the throne claiming that he was the successor to the throne of Arthur so Malory was put around as the official justification from the Tudors. This was "Morte D'Arthur" by Thomas Mallory which was mainly written in prison because he was a bit of a rogue. Geoffery was undoubtedly one of the greatest English historical novelists, and The History of the Kings of Britain is a great work, it is rather like a historical novel today. That is to say that it is not exact history but rather based and written around history. The conventions then were rather different and one was not expected to be completely historically accurate, there were a few like William of Marmsbury who were very deliberate and carefully historically accurate. People at that time were expected to have the discrimination to see what was history and what wasn't and they weren't

expected to take it literally and this is where many of the criticisms of Monmouth's works arise from.

We do have various things that have been discovered from that time of Arthur and we can build a fairly accurate picture of what Arthur and his warriors would have looked like. Most Kings of the period had a wise man or counsellor and although the Druids were officially wiped out by the Romans we now know that remnants of this order survived and it is very likely that Arthur was counselled by a Druid.

