

Arthur of Britain:  
Legend, Myth, or Historical Figure  
By  
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The debate regarding Arthur of Britain's position as a legend, myth, or actual historical king continues today. Was Arthur a powerful, just ruler of Britain in the time following the Roman retreat? Did Arthur purge the Saxons in the decisive Battle of Badon in the late fifth century? Many historians debate the factuality of Arthur's accomplishments and question his actual existence. A large portion of this debate centers on the dating in which historians place Arthur and his battles. This dating controversy places Arthur in the Battle of Badon as over one hundred years old. Recent evidence casts light on this dating problem. The exploits of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Arthur may not have been those of only one man. The combination of two separate but factual Arthurs may contribute to the mythical figure Geoffrey introduced into legend.

One of the earliest champions chronicling Arthur's exploits was Geoffrey. To put the stories written by Geoffrey into context, one must face reality when considering his writings as historical fact. Historians of today do not consider Geoffrey of Monmouth a factual source of information concerning Arthur. The stories written by him are just that. He embellishes narratives in order to enhance the story itself. Geoffrey had no intention to relay a factual accounting of Arthur's life, but to tell a good story.<sup>1</sup>

The sources Geoffrey used to relate his stories brought together bits and pieces of genuine history along with Celtic tales and myths.<sup>2</sup> Some of the information Geoffrey based his stories probably came from sources with a historical foundation. In some events, he added to the

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, "The Origins of the Arthurian Legend," *Arthuriana* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 9.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis J. O'Brien, "The Land and King are One: King Arthur in Southern Britain," *The Upsilonionian* 5 (Summer 1993): 1, accessed June 26, 2015, <https://www.ucumberlands.edu/downloads/academics/history/vol5/DennisOBrien93.html>.

accomplishments and exploits of Arthur to move the story in fantastic directions. The question is what information tended to be real and what part did Geoffrey fabricate?<sup>3</sup>

As with other figures whose reputation evolved over time, Arthur case is no exception. His reputation, it has been debated, inflated over time. However, the growth of one's reputation in writings should not detract from a factual historical basis. Humans tend to place figures that are revered on a higher level than occupied by the masses. As the gap widens between the lifetime of the figure and the current generation, people often see only the exaggerated positive aspects. As we examine the factual basis of the Arthurian Legend, we must be careful that this does not influence our findings.<sup>4</sup>

The answer to the question regarding the actual historical accuracy in whether Arthur existed rests in how one views the question. Is the Arthur sought the character of literature? Alternatively, is the research directed at finding the actual historical figure? The viewpoint in which we take will ultimately influence the way the researcher views information presented. This paper's focus will rest with notion that Arthur, or Arthurs, actually lived and fought in Britain.<sup>5</sup>

The account of Nennius, who first writes about Arthur, penned his writings at least three centuries after Arthur's time. His sources were from Welsh records that he sometimes understood and often did not.<sup>6</sup> That in itself pierces the heart of the problem when inquiring into the historical validity of the Arthurian Legend. Those who pieced together information often misunderstood the ancient Welsh language. Aspiring historians focusing in the search for the historically factual Arthur must first learn the languages of the Welsh.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, "The Origins of the Arthurian Legend," *Arthuriana* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 14.

<sup>4</sup> P.J.C. Field, "Arthur's Battles," *Arthuriana* 18, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 5.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, "The Origins of the Arthurian Legend," *Arthuriana* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 1.

<sup>6</sup> John Jay Parry, "The Historical Arthur," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 58, no. 3 (July 1959): 370.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 366.

The divergence of truth and legend occur several times concerning the life of Britain's Arthur. A couple instances of this diversion are found in King Edward I and his grandson King Edward III. Both of these kings used the Arthurian Legend to further their claims on the whole of the British Isle. The inclusion of Arthur into their bloodline would enhance their claim upon Wales.<sup>8</sup>

Edward I wanted to use the story of Arthur to enhance his position in his rivalry with Llewellyn, the leading Prince of Wales. If Edward I could trace his lineage back to the Welsh Arthur, it would establish a foundation for him to establish authority over Wales and Scotland. He and Edward III were among the first to include Arthur into British history. Arthur became a king of England as well as a figure of Welsh history.<sup>9</sup>

This brings us to the question of whether Arthur was a real historical figure and if so when did he live and were his accomplishments that of legend or fact. Arthur does not appear often as a name in the early-recorded history of the Celts. The name is rooted in the Roman name Artorius. The general acceptance is the Arthurian Legend's roots lie in the Roman occupation of Britain. The Arthur of legend is supposed to have been part of the last Roman legions occupying the island, but he also is credited with stopping the Saxon invasion at Badon. The large gap in the timing of these events explanation lies simply with one idea. There was not an Arthur of legend. There were actually two Arthurs combined into one legendary figure, and enhanced with the exploits of others.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis J. O'Brien, "The Land and King are One: King Arthur in Southern Britain," *The Upsilonian* 5 (Summer 1993): 3, accessed June 26, 2015, <https://www.ucumberlands.edu/downloads/academics/history/vol5/DennisOBrien93.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Gilbert, Alan Wilson, and Baram Blackett, *The Holy Kingdom: The Quest for the Real King Arthur* (Montpelier: Invisible Cities Press, 2002), 181.

<sup>10</sup> E.K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain* (Cambridge: Speculum Historiale, 1927), 169.

The Arthur of legend was not one person but actually two. Arthur I lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. Arthur II lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. Arthur II was actually of the same family lineage and an ancestor of Arthur I.<sup>11</sup> Early stories involving Arthur date his reign lasting an extraordinarily long amount of time.<sup>12</sup> Arthur's year of death is generally accepted somewhere around 542. This would make Arthur one of the oldest known people in recorded history. If the dating is accurate, and there was only one King Arthur, he fought this battle after he attained the age of one hundred. Geoffrey compressed the event's dating to make the story feasible. The idea of two Arthurs, of the same family line, separated by a few generations, allows the factual Arthurs to exist without compressing the timeline.<sup>13</sup>

Arthurian historians recently associated the supposed exploits of Guy of Warwick with those of the Arthur of legend. Warwick fought against the Roman Emperor Constantine. In *The Holy Kingdom* written by Adrian Gilbert, he asserts that the actions of Arthur I were at some point in history erroneously attributed to Warwick. Not only did the legend grow from time to time, but also apparently lost some factual basis to other historical figures. It is in this we see that early historical records and writings are not always accurate. The adventures of historical characters either dissolved into the exploits of many or blended to form the legends in which we read about today. The case for two Arthurs begins with this realization.<sup>14</sup>

The search for Arthur I begins with the historical figure Magnus Maximus. The life and story of Maximus is critical into the historical factuality of Arthur I and consequently Arthur II. In the actuality of Maximus being an ancestor of Constantine the Great, he would provide a

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<sup>11</sup> Adrian Gilbert, Alan Wilson, and Baram Blackett, *The Holy Kingdom: The Quest for the Real King Arthur* (Montpelier: Invisible Cities Press, 2002), 178-179.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, "The Origins of the Arthurian Legend," *Arthuriana* 5, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Gilbert, Alan Wilson, and Baram Blackett, *The Holy Kingdom: The Quest for the Real King Arthur* (Montpelier: Invisible Cities Press, 2002), 193.

bloodline path for Arthur I's ascendance to kingship. The family of Maximus would not only contain Roman roots, but also contain Celtic heritage through Constantine's mother Empress Helen.<sup>15</sup>

Magnus Maximus fathered who we know to be Arthur I. This has basis in three different sources. These sources are not all-inclusive, but allow a researcher to form a very educated guess in their historical accuracy. One source that provides a sound basis is the Harleian 3859 collection of manuscripts telling of a lineage including Arthur I and Maximus as father and son. The Brecon Manuscripts, which date back more than a thousand years, also support this assertion. These very old writings are not the only evidence that substantiates the claim that Maximus fathered Arthur I. It is also written in stone.<sup>16</sup>

The Hartshill Nature Preserve located in Wales provides another bit of evidence that Arthur I's father was in fact Magnus Maximus. A stone located in this preserve provides further evidence in the matter. The stone is broken and very old, but some of its words are discernable. Inscribed in the stone are the words "Artoriu.....Iacit In.....Maci...." These fragmented words translate roughly into "Artorius...Cast down.....Maximus." It is speculation that "Maci" actually could be an archaic spelling of Maximus. In the search for the real Arthur, speculation often takes the place of firm evidence due to the distance into the past we must peer and the lack of concrete evidence provided.<sup>17</sup>

A third bit of evidence that supports Maximus and Arthur I' relationship is not as firm as those previously stated. The story in which Arthur I killed an Irish leader named Reuth lends a bit of credibility. Arthur I supposedly killed this Irishman around the date of 367. As Arthur I is

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 171-172.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 196-198.

suspected of being Maximus' oldest son, this would lend the story credence. This would date Arthur I's birth around 345, as he would be aged about in his twenties at the time of the battle. This would in turn age Maximus in his forties during this period. The timelines of Arthur I, Maximus, and the future Arthur II seem to be aligning with this information.<sup>18</sup>

Other accounts of historical significance take place much later. Arthur appears again in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century as a king who fights and halts the Saxon invasion. The great leap in time allows a determination that this Arthur and the son of Magnus Maximus cannot be the same individual. The Llandaff Charters contains information dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Entries made in relation to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century recall a King named Meurig, his Queen Onbrawst, and a prince named Arthwys. Arthur is an anglicized spelling of this name. This Arthur should be referred to as Arthur II. Arthur II contributes the most famous portions of the Arthurian Legend. The Knights of the Roundtable and Camelot are associated with him as well as his victory in the Battle of Badon.<sup>19</sup>

The records contained in the Llandaff Charters concerning Arthur II align with information ascertained from other important artifacts, royal family histories, and various literary works. These writings provide a sound basis for the historical authenticity of a King Arthur if one views it from the perspective of there being two separate Arthurs. Geoffrey of Monmouth could not understand how the bits and pieces of information fit together to make a convincing timeline for his accounting of Arthur. The melding of the two actual historical figures resulted in historical accuracy morphing into the Arthurian Legend of today.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 50.

Another historical artifact that assists in the corroboration of the historical accuracy of the two Arthurs is the Samson Stone. This discovery of this stone occurred in 1793. The Samson Stone dates to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century and has important information inscribed into its face. There are the names of two kings inscribed into the stone. The first name is in fact Arthmael. Arthmael is another spelling of the name Arthwys, which we know to be Arthur. This stone, along with the Llandaff Charters are two of the most important relics that enable modern historians to place the actual King Arthur into factual historical terms.<sup>21</sup>

These two sources are not the only ones to solidify the existence of Arthur II. The Ogmere Stone bears inscription with evidence of his existence. Inscribed upon its face is bequests of land to others by Arthmail. Arthmail is yet another spelling of Arthur. With the variation in the spelling of Arthur, it is easy to see just how these early historians became confused. This confusion led to the two men becoming one.<sup>22</sup>

One must ask the question as to why this version of the Arthurian Legend escaped historians and researchers of the past. The authors of *The Holy Kingdom: The Quest for the Real King Arthur* propose the answer lies in the prejudice against Wales by the early English researchers and historians. They state that a conspiracy has taken place in regards to the legend. Most writings today involving Wales and the Dark Ages simply paint the region as backwards and not on par with their English counterparts. In addition, records in Latin are far more highly respected than those written in ancient Welsh. The language itself almost became extinct, as the English did not want it taught in Welsh schools. According to this book, if one views the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., picture page 11.



evidence presented in the Welsh documents as on par with other Latin records, no other conclusion other than the blended Arthur can be ascertained.<sup>23</sup>

It must be noted that not everyone accepts the translations on the stones researched by Alan Wilson and Baram Blackett that assisted Adrian Gilbert in writing *The Holy Kingdom*. Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews, Archaeology Officer for North Hertfordshire District Council Museum Service<sup>24</sup>, writes that the translations made by Wilson and Blackett are erroneous. In addition, he asserts the stones themselves are in fact forgeries.<sup>25</sup>

The odds are very long that historians will ever unlock the full mystery surrounding the legend of King Arthur. The answer to the question of whether Arthur actually lived will probably go unanswered. The most we, as modern researchers into the legend, will be able to conclude is the Arthur of Legend did not exist. However, evidence suggests there were at least two kings named Arthur that history blended. Arthur's exploits were more than likely those of these two men and those of others that writers added to further the legend. Arthur I and his descendant Arthur II lived very separate lives but their legend will live together for the duration of time. Geoffrey of Monmouth created a legend from his limited understanding of past events and the language from which he gathered his story. Whether Arthur lived or whether he was completely fabricated matter little. King Arthur of Britain lives on in the hearts and minds of people the world over.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 29-31.

<sup>24</sup> Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews, "About Bad Archeology," *Bad Archeology*, accessed July 8, 2015, <https://badarchaeology.wordpress.com/author/keithfm/>.

<sup>25</sup> Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews, "The Archeology of Arthur," *Bad Archeology*, accessed July 8, 2015, <http://www.badarchaeology.com/controversies/looking-for-king-arthur/the-archaeology-of-arthur/>.

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