

King Arthur **What the Historians Say About Him**

Gildas - "On the Ruin of Britain" (De Excidio Britanniae, 25-6; c. 540)

"...that they might not be brought to utter destruction, took arms under the conduct of Ambrosius Aurelianus, a modest man, who of all the Roman nation was then alone in the confusion of this troubled period by chance left alive. His parents, who for their merit were adorned with the purple, kind been slain in these same broils, and now his progeny in these our days, although shamefully degenerated from the worthiness of their ancestors, provoke to battle their cruel conquerors, and by the goodness of our Lord obtain the victory. After this, sometimes our countrymen, sometimes the enemy, won the field, to the end that our Lord might this land try after his accustomed manner these his Israelites, whether they loved him or not, until the year of the siege of Bath-hill, when took place also the last almost, though not the least slaughter of our cruel foes, which was (as I am sure) forty-four years and one month after the landing of the Saxons, and also the time of my own nativity."

Aneirin - "Y Gododdin, Stanza 98" (c. 600.)

He thrust beyond three hundred, most bold, he cut down the centre and far wing.
He proved worthy, leading noble men; he gave from his herd steeds for winter.
He brought black crows to a fort's wall, **though he was not Arthur**.
He made his strength a refuge, the front line's bulwark, Gwawrddur.

Bede, the Venerable - "Ecclesiastical History" (Historia Ecclesiae, 731)

"They had at that time for their leader, Ambrosius Aurelianus, a man of worth, who alone, by chance, of the Roman nation had survived the storm, in which his parents, who were of the royal race, had perished. Under him the Britons revived, and offering battle to the victors, by the help of God, gained the victory. From that day, sometimes the natives, and sometimes their enemies, prevailed, till the year of the siege of Badon-hill, when they made no small slaughter of those enemies, about forty-four years after their arrival in England. But of this hereafter. "

Nennius - "History of the Britons" (Historia Brittonum, c. 829-30)

"Then it was, that the magnanimous Arthur, with all the kings and military force of Britain, fought against the Saxons. And though there were many more noble than himself, yet he was twelve times chosen their commander, and was as often conqueror."

Unknown chronicler/compiler - "Annals of Wales" (Annales Cambriae; c. late 10th C.)

Entry for year 516 - The Battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights on his shoulders and the Britons were the victors. Entry for year 537 - The Battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell: and there was plague in Britain and Ireland.

William, Chaplain to Bishop Eudo of Leon - "Legend of St. Goznovius, preface" (c. 1019)

"In the course of time, the usurping king Vortigern, to buttress the defence of the kingdom of Great Britain which he unrighteously held, summoned warlike men from the land of Saxony and made them his allies in the kingdom. Since they were pagans and of devilish character, lusting by their nature to shed human blood, they drew many evils upon the Britons. Presently their pride was checked for a while through the great Arthur, king of the Britons. They were largely cleared

from the island and reduced to subjection. But when this same Arthur, after many victories which he won gloriously in Britain and in Gaul, was summoned at last from human activity, the way was open for the Saxons to go again into the islane, and there was great oppression of the Britons, destruction of churches and persecution of saints. This persecution went on through the times of many kings, Saxons and Britons striving back and forth. In those days, many holy men gave themselves up to martyrdom; others, in conformity to the Gsopel, left the greater Britain which is now the Saxon's homeland, and sailed across to the lesser Britain [*Brittany*]."

William of Malmesbury - "The Deeds of the Kings of England (De Gestis Regum Anglorum)" (c. 1125)

"When he [Vortigern's son, Vortimer] died the strength of the Britons diminished and all hope left them. They would soon have been altogether destroyed if Ambrosius, the sole survivor of the Romans who became king after Vortigern, had not defeated the presumptuous barbarians with the powerful aid of the warlike Arthur. This is that Arthur of whom the trifling of the Britons talks such nonsense even today; a man clearly worthy not to be dreamed of in fallacious fables, but to be proclaimed in veracious histories, as one who long sustained his tottering country, and gave the shattered minds of his fellow citizens an edge for war."

Henry of Huntingdon - "History of the English" (Historia Anglorum, c. 1130)

"The valiant Arthur, who was at that time the commander of the soldiers and kings of Britain, fought against [the invaders] invincibly. Twelve times he led in battle. Twelve times was he victorious in battle. The twelfth and hardest battle that Arthur fought against the Saxons was on Mount Badon, where 440 of his men died in the attack that day, and no Briton stayed to support him, the Lord alone strengthening him."

Geoffrey of Monmouth - "History of the Kings of Britain" (Historia Regum Britanniae; c. 1136)

"And even the renowned king Arthur himself was mortally wounded; and being carried thence to the isle of Avalon to be cured of his wounds, he gave up the crown of Britain to his kinsman Constantine, the son of Cador, duke of Cornwall, in the five hundred and forty-second year of our Lord's incarnation."

Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis) - "On the Instruction of a Prince" (De principis instructione, c. 1193)

"The memory of King Arthur, that most renowned King of the Britons, will endure for ever...In our own lifetime, Arthur's body was discovered at Glastonbury, although the legends had always encouraged us to believe that there was something otherworldly about his ending, that he had resisted death and had been spirited away to some far-distant spot."

Alain de Lille - (12th C.)

"Whither has not the flying fame spread and familiarized the name of Arthur the Briton, even as far as the empire of Christendom extends? Who, I say, does not speak of Arthur the Briton, since he is almost better known to the peoples of Asia than to the Britanni, as our palmers returning from the East inform us? The Eastern peoples speak of him, as do the Western, though separated by the width of the whole earth . . . Rome, queen of cities, sings his deeds, nor are Arthur's wars unknown to her former rival Carthage, Antioch, Armenia, Palestine celebrate his acts."

William of Newburgh - "History of English Affairs" (Historia rerum Anglicarum, c. 1198)

"For the purpose of washing out those stains from the character of the Britons, a writer in our times has started up and invented the most ridiculous fictions concerning them, and with unblushing effrontery, extols them far above the Macedonians and Romans. He is called Geoffrey, surnamed Arthur, from having given, in a Latin version, the fabulous exploits of Arthur, drawn from the traditional fictions of the Britons, with additions of his own, and endeavored to dignify them with the name of authentic history."

Gervase of Tilbury - "Imperial Leisure" (Otia Imperialia, c. 1211)

"Arthur was mortally wounded, although he had destroyed all his enemies. After this, according to a popular British tradition, he was carried off to the Isle of Avalon to be healed of his wounds, which break open again every year, by Morgan the fairy's restorative cure. The British foolishly believe that he will return to his kingdom after a period of time."

Monk of Malmesbury - "Life of Edward II" (Vita Edwardi Secundi, c. 1325)

"Entry for 1315 - Furthermore, on account of Merlin's prophecy [*History of the Kings of Britain, Book VII*], the Welsh believe that they will recover England. This is a frequent cause of their rebellion, since they wish to fulfill the prophecy; however, since they are ignorant of the right time, they are often deceived, and labour in vain."

[*This is a fascinating look at how seriously the Middle Ages took these literary prophecies. The Welsh still believed in Arthur's return even after his grave had been discovered at Glastonbury in 1190 and, apparently, so did the chronicler who only took the Welsh to task for their mistaken timing, not their belief in the prophecy.*]

Adam of Murimuth - "Chronicle" (c. 1340)

"At Windsor Castle...the lord king made a solemn vow on sacred relics that he would, within a certain time, if his health lasted, establish a Round Table on the model and according to the custom and rule which the Lord Arthur, once King of England, had set down."

Jean le Bel - "Chronique" (c. 1350)

"When he had returned to England, he decided out of the nobleness of his heart to restore the castle of Windsor, which King Arthur had built, and where he had originally established the Round Table."

Ranulf Higden (monk of Chester) - "Polychronicon" (c. 1352)

"Many men wonder about this Arthur, whom Geoffrey extols so much singly, how the things that are said of him could be true, for, as Geoffrey repeats, he conquered thirty realms. If he subdued the king of France to him, and did slay Lucius the Procurator of Rome, Italy, then it is astonishing that the chronicles of Rome, of France, and of the Saxons should not have spoken of so noble a prince in their stories, which mentioned little things about men of low degree. Geoffrey says that Arthur overcame Frolo, King of France, but there is no record of such a name among men of France. Also, he says that Arthur slew Lucius Hiberius, Procurator of the city of Rome in the time of Leo the Emperor, yet according to all the stories of the Romans Lucius did not govern, in that timeÑnor was Arthur born, nor did he live then, but in the time of Justinian, who was the fifth emperor after Leo. Geoffrey says that he has marveled that Gildas and Bede

make no mention of Arthur in their writings; however, I suppose it is rather to be marveled why Geoffrey praises him so much, whom old authors, true and famous writers of stories, leave untouched. But perhaps it is the custom of every nation to extol some of their blood-relations excessively, as the Greeks great Alexander, the Romans Octavian, Englishmen King Richard, Frenchmen Charles; and so the Britons extolled Arthur. Which thing happens, as Josephus says, either for fairness of the story, or for the delectation of the readers, or for exaltation of their own blood."

Froissart - "Chronicles" (c. 1380, Penguin edition, 1968)

"At that time King Edward of England conceived the idea of altering and rebuilding the great castle of Windsor, originally built by King Arthur, and where had first been established the noble Round Table, from which so many fine men and brave knights had gone forth and performed great deeds throughout the world."

John Capgrave - "The Chronicle of England" (c. 1450, Henry Longman, 1858)

"In these dayes was Arthure Kyng of Bretayn, that with his manhod conqwered Flaunders, Frauns, Norway, and Denmark; and, aftir he was gretely wounded, he went into a ylde cleped Avallone, and there deyed. The olde Britones suppose that his is o lyve."

William Caxton - "The Description of Britain" (1480)

"Saint Amphibalus, who taught Saint Alban, was born in Caerleon. The messengers from Rome came to the great King Arthur there, if it is permissible to believe that*. John Trevisa [*the translator into English of Ranulph Higden's latin chronicle, "Polychronicon"*] observes that if Gerald of Wales was doubtful whether or not it was permissible to believe this, it was scarcely a prudent course to record it in his books, for as some people would point out, it is a remarkable delusion to write a long history to record things permanently for posterity, whilst still remaining uncertain whether one's belief is misplaced."

[About this time, the almost universal belief that Geoffrey of Monmouth's "History of the Kings of Britain" was true history was beginning to break down. In the 15th and early 16th centuries, more and more scholars would begin to voice their doubts and Caxton' indicates his awareness of this attitude of academic skepticism. If we read his preface to Malory's "Morte d'Arthur", it would appear that Caxton is, indeed, a true believer. Conversely, as an astute businessman, he may have wanted to create the impression that he believed in Arthur's historical reality for the purpose of not hindering sales of one of his first books to be printed in English.]