

King Arthur – man or myth?

The man

Few people could write 1500 years ago so nothing is known of Arthur from contemporary writers. Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote in 1138 that Arthur was the son of Uther Pendragon, King of Britain, and was a great warrior. However, this was over 500 years after the legendary Arthur is thought to have lived.

The myth

Stories from the past were often passed down the generations by word of mouth and were only written down hundreds of years after they were created. Over time, details often changed. Some aspects of the story were embellished and magical elements were included, and some were left out and forgotten about. No accounts or stories of King Arthur were written down at the time he supposedly lived.



The first recorded evidence of Arthur is thought to have been written by a monk named Nennius, in the 9th century, who claimed Arthur fought in 12 great battles. However, historians say that the distance and time between these battles would have made it impossible for Arthur to have taken part in all of them.

The following authors wrote about King Arthur, hundreds of years after his (possible) existence.

Nennius, *The History of the Britons*, AD 828

Nennius was a Welsh monk who referred to Arthur as a commander, not a king. The monk details Arthur's victory at the well-known battle of Badon Hill.

'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 often conqueror...'

The twelfth battle was a most severe contest, when Arthur penetrated to the hill of Badon. In this engagement, nine hundred and forty fell by his hand alone, no one but the Lord affording him assistance. In all these engagements the Britons were successful.'

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 1136

Geoffrey of Monmouth used myths and legends in his imaginative account of Arthur, appearing to include both facts and fiction. He wrote about Arthur's full life and claimed all of his stories were true.

'Uther Pendragon being dead, the nobility from several provinces assembled together... and proposed to the archbishop that he should consecrate Arthur, Uther's son, to be their king. For they were now in great straits, because, upon hearing of the king's death, the Saxons had invited over their countrymen from Germany, and were attempting to exterminate the whole British race...'



'Therefore, grieving for the calamities of his country, they set the crown upon Arthur's head. Arthur was then fifteen years old, but a youth of such unparalleled courage and generosity, joined with that sweetness of temper and innate goodness, as gained him universal love.'

Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, 1470

Thomas Malory used French and English tales in his work which translates as 'The Death of Arthur'. His writing includes the tale of *The Sword in the Stone* and he writes about Merlin the magician and the Knights of the Round Table.

'Whosoever pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England...'

The truth?

Historians are still trying to prove the existence of King Arthur after centuries of research and debate. So, was King Arthur a real warrior or is he a mythical king, created from the imaginations of great writers over the centuries? Whatever the truth, the legends of King Arthur have been a source of entertainment, guidance and inspiration for millions of people for almost 1000 years. What a legend!