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A COMPANION TO
ARTHURIAN LITERATURE
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Irish Literature* (2000), *Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages*, with Karen Jankulak
(2007), and *St David of Wales*, with J. Wyn Evans (2007).
Introduction: Theories and Debates

*Helen Fulton*

Since the name and shape of Arthur began to emerge in manuscripts of the twelfth century, the set of legends and characters associated with him, along with the persona of Arthur himself, have been in a constant state of reproduction, reinvention, and, to anticipate Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman’s concept in chapter 32, remediation.

If the essays in this volume teach us one thing, it is that there is no “original” Arthur and no originary or authentic Arthurian legend. There are, however, ideas — of leadership, kingship, empire, nation, social identity, religion, power — which, in order to be represented, require corporeal form and have, at various times and in different combinations, realized themselves through Arthurian characters. This volume, then, is not simply about Arthur or the characters associated with him. It is about representation and the processes of signification, the ways in which meaningful uses can be made of characters and legends embodying cultural beliefs and ideologies.

Drawing on the postmodern theory of Jean Baudrillard, it is possible to interpret Arthur as a simulacrum — that is, as a copy which has no original. The textual Arthurs that survive are reformatted copies of earlier ideas of Arthur, referring always to each other but never to an originary Arthur, since such a person cannot be identified or retrieved. The weight of this constant reinvention and copying causes lacunae in the legend, periods of time when the Arthurian legend falls out of fashion, when the baggage attached to the multiple Arthurs becomes too unwieldy for yet another reinterpretation. These are the moments when negative views of Arthur are inserted into the tradition, such as the Latin saints’ lives mentioned by Nicholas Higham (chapter 2) or the satires and parodies popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as discussed by Alan Lupack (chapter 23) and David Matthews (chapter 24).

From the variety of Arthurian representations discussed in this volume, amid the whirl of floating signifiers and unstable meanings it is possible to isolate some central issues and debates that provide moments of coherence and stability. From the vantage point of these platforms, we can see that Arthurian literature of all ages and in all forms is effectively a site of ideological struggle, a place where competing viewpoints
engage in complex dialectics, interrogating contemporary concerns. However far in the past the literature is situated, it inevitably inscribes within itself the anxieties of the present. It is those moments of “the present in the past,” explicitly identified by most of the authors in this volume, that help us to read Arthurian texts as coherent and meaningful documents.

The Question of Historicity

In a recent review for the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, Jonathan Powell wrote: “Scholarship, especially where the evidential base is limited, comes in two kinds: the constructive kind, which extrapolates the whole statue of Hercules from his foot, and the demolitionist kind, which asserts that all we really have is the foot and our own imagination” (January 4, 2008: 21). On the face of it, this seems an appropriate summation of the history of Arthurian scholarship, preoccupied as it has been with the big question of whether “Arthur” existed as a historical person. While some scholars, such as archaeologist Leslie Alcock, promoted a “constructivist” approach, reconstructing an authentic Arthur and his historical context from small amounts of surviving evidence, others, including David Dumville, have gone for the “demolitionist” approach, and in the first chapter of this volume Alan Lane charts the debate between these methodologies.

From a more theoretical perspective, however, the binary opposition of the two approaches collapses into a single act of imagination, which can be both constructive and iconoclastic. In the digital age, for example, film uses imagination not to demolish but to create a “real” – because fully realized – Arthur. This collapse of a binary opposition applies to the big question of Arthur’s historicity as well, still a question to which people return, though – as many of the chapters in this volume assert or imply – it is a question unlikely ever to be answered definitively.

In part this is because it is the wrong question to ask. Was Arthur a historical person or not? This apparently simple binary elides a number of ideological issues now comprehensively interrogated by poststructuralist and postmodern theory. The first issue is to do with individual identity and the extent to which it is stable, distinctive, and retrievable. A “real” Arthur implies that all individuals possess an intrinsic authenticity, an absolute meaning, which pre-exists the social formation and can be retrieved in exactly the same form at any point in time. Yet identity itself is plural, unstable, and adaptive to different situations. If we find it hard to identify “the real me” from the plurality of our social selves, how can we identify “the real Arthur”?

The second issue is that of representation. What connection might there be between a living, breathing “historical” Arthur and the many textual representations of Arthur that still survive? In literature, history, and iconography – all the material covered in this volume, in fact – there are plural Arthurs, constructed in many different forms and identities. Even when a “real” Arthur has been detected in the historical or
archaeological evidence (as a Romano-British chieftain, for example, as Tom Shippey describes in chapter 30), this version has no greater claim to authenticity or “reality” than any other of the textual versions.

This problem of multiple versions is connected with a third ideological viewpoint, which is the privileging of “history” over other forms of textual representation. The main reason why there has been a constant search for the “real” Arthur is because his name appears in some early documents, particularly the Annales Cambriae, which, despite recognized difficulties of authorship and date, are regarded as part of the historical record of early medieval Britain. The first two chapters in this volume, by Alan Lane and Nicholas Higham, deal admirably with the pitfalls and difficulties posed by this empirical evidence as a means of reconstructing a historical Arthur. The question has been whether the Arthur named in these chronicles refers to a “real” Arthur or to an already legendary figure from fiction. But this is the wrong question, because it sets up a false binary. What we should be assessing is the function of these chronicles as acts of imaginative reconstruction, something which Karen Jankulak and Jonathan Wooding attempt in chapter 5, in relation to the early historical context.

The big Arthurian question of historicity, then, is an example of “the present in the past”: it reveals more about twentieth-century preoccupations with identity, empiricism, historicity, celebrity, and authenticity than it does about the figure of Arthur, a floating signifier, empty of meaning until attached to a particular context in a specific period of time. Many film versions of Arthur have attempted to authenticate him by locating him in an identified historical period, whether the Dark Ages or the Middle Ages, and Nickolas Haydock gives an astute analysis of this historicizing impulse in his chapter on the film King Arthur (chapter 35). It is only with the rise of fantasy texts, written and digital, that a postmodern Arthur begins to emerge, one whose historicity and “reality” are less important than the qualities and cultural beliefs attached to him. Jan Shaw’s well-theorized chapter on the ideologies of Marion Zimmer Bradley’s novel The Mists of Avalon (chapter 31) and Susan Aronstein’s illuminating analysis of a number of Arthurian films in relation to contemporary political concerns (chapter 33) are exemplary studies of the post-historical Arthur.

**Chronicle, Romance, Fantasy**

Relatively unconcerned about questions of historicity, literary scholars have traditionally focused on the kinds of texts in which Arthur appears as a literary character. These can be grouped together under the generic headings of chronicle, romance, and fantasy, which can be regarded as types of discourse rather than as separate genres. Malory’s Morte Darthur contains examples of all three discursive styles but is conventionally described as a “romance.” I have suggested (in chapter 6) that the dominant mode of Welsh Arthurian material is fantasy, though the discourses of chronicle and romance are also found in Welsh.
The chronicle style claims for itself the empirical status of written history and therefore a high "truth value" compared to either romance or fantasy. A major reason for the long debate about Arthur’s historicity is that his story first “went global,” as it were, via the medium of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s twelfth-century chronicle, *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Despite the misgivings about Geoffrey’s truth value, voiced in his own time and again in the modern period (as described by Lister Matheson in chapter 4 and Alan Lupack in chapter 23), Arthur’s placement in a purportedly historical chronicle endowed him with the status, however mythologized, of a historical figure, a populist reading that has outlasted all the scholarly attempts at “demolition.”

Yet we should not underestimate the impact of Geoffrey’s chronicle as the main conduit of Arthurian literature throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. I have argued in chapter 3 that the basic framework of the Arthurian legend was put into place by Geoffrey and transmitted through multiple versions of the text in a variety of translations. As a consequence of the rich transmission history of Geoffrey’s *Historia*, writers as various as Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, and Shakespeare were influenced by the very different versions that were available in their own times. As Julia Marvin shows in chapter 15, the development of the Brut tradition based on Geoffrey’s British history was central to the self-fashioning of English identity after the Norman conquest. We can add that this Galfridian version of English nationhood based on a British (rather than a Norman) past persisted right through the Renaissance and formed the bedrock of Shakespearean history and Tudor prestige. The political appeal of Galfridian chronicle is manifold: its authority is derived from the privileging of history as a form of documentary record, it foregrounds absolute kingship, and it invented a specifically British tradition of epic heroism located in its monarchy.

The historiographical tradition of Arthur begun by Geoffrey of Monmouth was equally salient for the Welsh, Cornish, and Scottish nations overshadowed by English rule. For the Welsh, Geoffrey’s account of British history authoritatively established the sovereignty of the British (ancestors of the Welsh) before the coming of the Saxons, a right to rule over the whole Island of Britain, which was claimed by successive generations of Welsh poets right up until the triumph of Henry VII, the first Tudor king, in 1485. To the Welsh, then, it was particularly important that Arthur was a “real” king, one of a line of legitimate British kings displaced by the Saxons. Juliette Wood has shown (in chapter 7) that Cornwall and Scotland made their own claims to the “original” Arthur and that, intriguingly, Scottish chronicles interpreted Geoffrey’s account of Arthur’s rule in a negative light, criticizing Arthur’s dubious birth and supporting Mordred as the legitimate ruler of Britain.

Largely thanks to Geoffrey of Monmouth, the British Arthurian tradition was essentially a chronicle tradition, based in history, however loosely defined, and concerned with the politics of kingship and the building of nationhood. The more familiar Arthurian world of Lancelot and Guinevere, tournaments, knightly adventure, and the Grail quest was the world imagined by French writers, inspired in part by the work of Geoffrey but also by tales told by singers and storytellers who amalgamated themes from Britain, Brittany, and France. In a rich and wide-ranging account of the
Tristan romance (chapter 10), Joan Tasker Grimbert traces the dissemination of the “matter of Britain” – Arthurian tales, many of Breton origin – throughout France, Italy, and Spain, showing how the assimilation of history and fantasy worked to create a far-reaching tradition of popular romance in Europe, one which fed back into medieval English literature in productive and powerful ways.

In the creation of Arthurian romance, the twelfth-century French poet Chrétien de Troyes plays as significant a role as Geoffrey of Monmouth did in the formation of the chronicle tradition. Elizabeth Archibald suggests (chapter 21) that the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, unknown in the chronicle tradition, was invented by Chrétien, whose narrative poem *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (“The Knight of the Cart”) records Lancelot’s first appearance in literature. Similarly, as Edward Donald Kennedy has shown in his detailed and scholarly piece on the Grail story (chapter 14), the first Grail quest was composed by Chrétien, with later additions by Robert de Boron, which became part of the great French Vulgate Cycle in prose, source of much of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. Roberta L. Krueger’s lucid chapter on Chrétien (chapter 11), tracing some of his sources and outlining his innovations, clearly sets out the extent of Chrétien’s contribution to modern notions of Arthurian romance. His impact on medieval writers was just as significant, with imitations and analogues of his work found in Wales, in the so-called “Welsh romances” discussed by Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan in chapter 9; in Germany, where, as Will Hasty argues in chapter 12, Arthurian romance had a particular political significance; and in Scandinavia, whose appropriation of Arthurian romance has been the subject of modern scholarly debate, as outlined by Geraldine Barnes in chapter 13. Ireland, which had its own Arthurian tradition cognate with that of Wales though extending much further into the Middle Ages and beyond, is notable for its relative lack of interest in the French Arthurian tradition; as Joseph Falaky Nagy tells us in chapter 8, the earliest Arthurian romance translated into Irish dates from the fifteenth century and is likely to have had an English source.

The French tradition of Arthurian romance is responsible, virtually single-handedly, for the popularity of Arthurian themes in medieval English literature. Yet the English Arthurian texts are not slavish copies of Chrétien or of the Vulgate Cycle but rather local interpretations of popular texts which circulated in oral versions as well as (or instead of) written versions. The English language was emerging as a literary language only in the fourteenth century, and many of the French Arthurian texts would have been enjoyed in French by noble families living in England. But a growing audience for courtly texts in English also resulted in new Arthurian works such as the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, part of the *Brut* tradition, and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, based on the Vulgate *Mort Artu*, elegiac works about the death of Arthur which seemed to voice English concerns about the decline of kingship at the end of the fourteenth century.

At the same time, popular versions of Arthurian romance were circulating in English as part of an oral tradition of English-language culture, alongside more courtly inventions addressed to local nobilities and wealthy urban merchants. As Ad
Putter describes in chapter 16, the English romance of *Sir Percyvell of Gales* is clearly related to Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal* but based on a memory of it rather than a written text. *Sir Launfal* is one of a number of texts in English based on the French *lais* by Marie de France, which had a wide circulation in France and England. The cycle of stories associated with Tristan and Isolde, found widely dispersed throughout Europe in written texts, oral variants, and artistic representations (the latter described by Jeanne Fox-Friedman in chapter 26), also had a representative in Middle English, *Sir Tristrem*. Tony Davenport points out in chapter 19 that the English version, a simplified retelling of a French original, has its own particular angle, which is to make the story into the kind of hero-tale familiar to English audiences. Most English romances, with their origins in Anglo-Norman and French narratives, are characterized by an emphasis on the courtly hero who performs deeds of arms and makes conquests in love, heroes such as Bevis of Hamtoun, Havelok, and Guy of Warwick. In this framework, the English Tristrem, like *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Percyvell*, is portrayed as less of a lover and more of a knightly hero.

This emphasis on the individual hero overcoming obstacles to win a noble reputation is particularly demonstrated in the set of English Gawain romances that formed a considerable part of the corpus of Arthurian works in Middle English. Roger Dallymple lists some of these poems in chapter 18 and identifies a variety of ways in which Gawain is depicted, from warrior knight to flawed hero to paragon of courtly virtue. It is in this latter role that he is the subject of one of the most famous texts in Middle English, the fourteenth-century romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Apart from its accomplished language and style, making it a clearly literary composition, designed to be read aloud rather than recited or sung from memory, *Sir Gawain* is distinguished by its originality. Carolyne Larrington observes in her finely drawn analysis of the poem (chapter 17) that there is no known source and the anonymous author has combined traditional Arthurian motifs with new themes to create a unique text.

The Arthurian romance tradition, then, in both French and English, shares some basic objectives with the romance genre in total, which celebrates the ideals of knighthood rather than kingship, the value of knights in peace as well as in war, and the contribution of the nobility to the maintenance of the Christian empire during and after the Crusades. Though the romances often describe the love between knight and noblewoman, secular love is consistently subordinated to spiritual commitment. In Arthurian romance, knights and king have specific identities that can be used to further the ideological goals of the genre. The Arthurian knights set for themselves the highest standards of religious virtue, and judge each other according to these ideals. Arthur himself, as the product of an all-too-secular liaison, is placed in the background as a symbol of kingship which is implicitly inadequate for the power it enjoys, needing the support of the knights to achieve any kind of success or redemption.

A feature of romance as a type of discourse is the prominence of magic and supernatural motifs, which are used to make implicit moral judgments on the behavior of
specific characters. This is the element of “fantasy” which characterizes Arthurian literature from its earliest beginnings in Welsh legend, when the Arthur of *Culhwch ac Olwen* (“Culhwch and Olwen”) is served by warriors who can speak the languages of animals or turn themselves into birds or make themselves invisible. In the French tradition of Arthurian romance, the fantasy element is either minimized, as in the secular poems of Chrétien de Troyes, which aim for something approaching realism, or directed toward a specifically Christian and mystical agenda, as in the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal*, where monks and hermits interpret supernatural events. The “magic naturalism” of the early Welsh texts (which I have described briefly in chapter 6), replicated in much of the Vulgate Cycle, where events simply unfold without obvious authorial mediation, is balanced by the “magic realism” of clearly authored texts such as those of Chrétien, where the narrative voice has greater power to determine the action than any supernatural force.

The return of fantasy in modern fiction and film, through the modes of both realism and magic realism, has reinvigorated the Arthurian legend. T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, the harbinger of the new fashion for Arthurian fantasy, shows what the naturalistic violence – almost a “cartoon” violence – of the medieval Arthurian legend looks like when viewed from a realist perspective as actual violence. As Andrew Hadfield argues (chapter 28), it is not a pretty sight, reinforcing White’s pacifist agenda and his pessimism about the power of the state and state-sanctioned violence during and after World War II. In a chapter on Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon* (chapter 31), Jan Shaw connects the mode of fantasy with a feminist politics which needs to find a space beyond the real world in order to represent female agency. Contemporary Arthurian films that make use of special effects to achieve both realistic and supernatural events, such as Eric Rohmer’s *Perceval le Gallois* (discussed by Lesley Coote in chapter 34), blur the boundaries between the two, making anything seem possible and therefore reinstalling a medieval viewpoint. At the same time, fantasy in modern fiction and film is often an expression of nostalgia for an imagined past when science had not yet destroyed the endless possibilities of mythic belief.

The medieval discourses of chronicle, romance, and fantasy unite most evidently, as I have suggested, in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. Andrew Lynch points out (chapter 20) that Malory drew attention to the historicity of his account of Arthur’s life and achievements, constantly stressing his reliance on authorized sources, whether chronicle or romance. In Elizabeth Archibald’s discussion of Malory (chapter 21), she suggests that the love affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, a staple element of the French Arthurian tradition but less prominent in English literature before Malory, provides an important means of illustrating aspects of Lancelot’s nobility and prowess. The fantasy element is most pronounced in Malory’s account of the Grail quest, where, as Raluca Radulescu argues (chapter 22), Malory uses Lancelot as the penitent sinner who acts as witness to supernatural and mystical events. We can perhaps infer from the explicitly Christian nature of these events in the Grail quest that other supernatural events throughout the whole *Morte* have a similarly Christian origin and significance, unless otherwise attributed.
In the transition from the medieval to the modern era, the Arthurian legend became a site of competing ideologies which charted the development of modern attitudes toward what was perceived as medieval. The immediate post-medieval period, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, rejected medieval literature as part of a worldview that was seen as superstitious, unscientific, and, in the wake of the Reformation, altogether too Catholic in its religious beliefs. As Alan Lupack shows (in chapter 23), the historicity of Arthur was endorsed as part of royal politics in the sixteenth century. While the Tudor kings relied on Geoffrey of Monmouth’s account of British history to authenticate their claims to the throne, and Henry VII named his first son Arthur, the medieval tradition of Arthurian romance undermined Arthur’s historical presence in the royal genealogy. The high culture of courtly and noble society and the increasingly liberated urban culture of the growing towns and cities competed to appropriate Arthur as a symbol of their particular values. Dismissed as old-fashioned, Arthurian romance was reimagined through the courtly discourses of heroic epic (as in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*) and court masque, while taking on a growing presence in popular culture. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Arthurian characters and themes became increasingly embedded in urban culture, through popular drama and romance, ballads and almanacs, satires and parodies.

The restoration of Arthur as a politically significant symbol coincided with the rise of empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. National history based on unbroken lines of power and a ruling class legitimized by common values were foundational aspects of empire, and both could be reinforced by analogy with the Arthurian world. David Matthews emphasizes, in chapter 24, the importance of the reappearance of Malory’s *Morte Darthur* in two new editions of 1816 after nearly two centuries out of print. Not only did Malory’s work provide a locus for political and imperial concerns, but it stimulated an antiquarian interest in other medieval texts. A peculiarly nineteenth-century version of medievalism, derived largely from Malory and other English romances and slanted toward the Romantic values of anti-industrialism, Celticity, and the natural world, was used to support ideals of a new chivalry practiced by the same aristocratic class that ran the empire. Tennyson was the chief poet of the new chivalry, as the Pre-Raphaelites were its artists. Inga Bryden comments (in chapter 25) on the link between Arthurian romance, British history, and nostalgia for a coherent and fully realized past which could be used to explain the present, in particular the perceived cultural and racial superiority of Englishness which lay at the heart of imperialism.

The imperial Arthur survived into the twentieth century, as Tom Shippey recounts in chapter 30, with a return to the argument – more in hope than belief – that Arthur had been a “real” historical character. But the tension at the heart of the Malorian version of Arthur, the glory of the Round Table and its terrible destruc-
tion, was taken seriously by early-twentieth-century writers who tried to reconcile, as Shippey argues, an imperialism which harked back to Geoffrey of Monmouth and the reality of the “fall of empire” manifested all too clearly in World Wars I and II. T. H. White’s series of novels, published under the single title *The Once and Future King*, is perhaps the most overtly political work of the post-imperial Arthurian tradition, with references to fascism, the Irish Republican Army, and the dangers of nationalism. As Andrew Hadfield points out (chapter 28), White uses the Arthurian world to exemplify high ideals that ultimately fail to counteract the abuse of power and what he sees as an innate human drive towards violence. More indirect but just as politically charged are the modernist Arthurian texts by Welsh writers described by Geraint Evans in chapter 29. In a genuinely post-imperial and post-colonial movement, these texts reclaim Arthur for the Welsh as a symbol of autonomy and sovereignty, refashioning him as a key element in Welsh, rather than English, national identity.

The theme of national and cultural identities is particularly pronounced in American versions of Arthurian material, in both novel and film. Key ideas are those of heroism in a barbaric society (the opening up of the American West), the uses of the past to explain the present (the collision between old and new worlds), and the quest for the Grail (the “American dream”). Robert Paul Lamb, in his illuminating chapter on Mark Twain (chapter 27), contextualizes Twain’s vision of the Arthurian past in a late-nineteenth-century American present when myths of white cultural supremacy and an unproblematic model of (white) masculinity were stretched to breaking point. Like imperial Britain in the nineteenth century, America looked back to the medieval past as a glowing reminder of the values that now seemed to be under threat from capitalism, industrialization, and a cultural heterogeneity represented by colonialism in Britain and by immigration in America.

More recently, in the twentieth century, film adaptations of the Arthurian legends have used aspects of “round table” medievalism to explore contemporary concerns and concepts of utopia. Drawing on earlier studies of “cinema Arthuriana,” Susan Aronstein outlines (in chapter 33) a taxonomy of different kinds of American Arthurian film, locating them in particular cultural contexts, including the Depression, Cold War nervousness, and the “war on terror.” Both Aronstein and Lamb emphasize the importance of American myths about its place in the world – particularly its self-belief as a nation destined to lead – as a fertile ground for the reception and appropriation of Arthurian legends. While America’s technological superiority and staunch democratic principles enable the “Connecticut Yankee” (appearing in a range of guises from Twain’s hero through to SpongeBob SquarePants) to outsmart medieval feudalism, fears of a social chaos never far beneath the surface of national greatness are articulated through Arthurian chronicles of heroic rescue, decline and renewal, and the defeat of forces of darkness by the positive power of community and nationhood. In the mythic context of America as a democratic utopia, the Grail is referenced as a symbol of a pluralistic and unifying faith in eternal unchanging values.
Remediations of Arthur

Returning to Finke and Shichtman’s application of the concept of remediation, it is clear from their chapter (chapter 32) that with the digital age we are seeing new possibilities for multimodal versions of the Arthurian legends, in audiovisual and written texts, in theatre and musicals, in merchandizing and accessories. Finke and Shichtman argue that the media themselves shape the texts in particular ways – form determines content – with key ideas and characters translated into the discourses of new media. They use the example of the Round Table, a logical impossibility in T. H. White’s *Once and Future King*, which becomes a cumbersome stage prop in the stage musical *Camelot* only to be realized as a vast symbolic presence in Joshua Logan’s film of *Camelot*, built to fit Hollywood conventions and the new technology of Cinemascope. Here is a perfect example of hyperreality: a table too large to fit into any space smaller than a Hollywood soundstage is convincingly passed off as the “real” Round Table, dwarfing its knights and speaking more about technology than about chivalric values.

In a sense this whole volume is about remediation, the translation of Arthurian legends from one medium into another with each version shaped by the discourses, technologies, and ideologies of its own context, and by those of earlier forms. This returns me to the point where I began: just as there is no “original” Arthur, so there is no original legend. The legends of Arthur and Merlin which were appropriate to the Welsh tradition – concerned with the loss of British sovereignty under the Saxons – were remediated by Geoffrey of Monmouth into the prestige discourses of chronicle and national history, claiming a truth value that was more a product of those discourses than of empirical fact. In the Middle Ages, Breton and French storytellers had their own myths of nobility through which to interpret the matter of Britain, while the hegemonic discourses of imperialism, in both Britain and America, appropriated and reconfigured the Arthurian legends throughout the modern age.

Now, in the digital age, computer graphics are translating narrative into special effects, creating hyperreal Arthurian knights whose digitally enhanced capabilities turn myths of superhuman powers into realities. Yet the development of the Arthurian legend is not always linear; it is sometimes circular, returning to pre-existing templates remediated through new technologies. In the hyperreality of digital performance, we can trace a return to the magic naturalism of medieval myth, a postmodern refusal of authorial mediation, which leaves the Arthur of the *King Arthur* computer game staring back empty-eyed toward the equally unknowable Arthur of *Culhwch ac Olwen*.

A Note on Spelling and Translations

In the course of editing this book, I have necessarily had to negotiate many different spellings of the principal Arthurian characters, particularly Lancelot, Guinevere,
Merlin, Tristan and Isolde. Rather than impose a single spelling throughout, I have tried to follow the forms used by different texts and authors as they are cited. This means that the spelling of names is not consistent throughout the book, and is often not consistent within a chapter, as authors range over a number of different texts, each using a different spelling. Readers can be assured that all spellings used in this book are attested in one text or another.

All texts in languages other than English have been translated. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are the authors' own.
Part I

The Arthur of History
The End of Roman Britain and the Coming of the Saxons: An Archaeological Context for Arthur?

Alan Lane

The last time an archaeologist seriously engaged with the matter of Arthur was in 1971 with the publication of Leslie Alcock's book *Arthur's Britain*. Subtitled *History and Archaeology AD 367–634*, this was a rigorous academic attempt to put the historical evidence for Arthur alongside the archaeology for the period in which he might have existed. It was written in the context of the late Professor Alcock's excavations between 1966 and 1973 at Cadbury Castle, Somerset, where he had investigated the major Iron Age hill fort identified by Leland as the alleged site of Camelot (Alcock 1972). Alcock's work was a detailed account of the archaeology, framed by a critical discussion of the early historical evidence for the period and the few sparse "early" references to Arthur. Aimed at both students and an interested public, it ranged over both Anglo-Saxon and Celtic evidence throughout the British Isles.

*Arthur's Britain* offered an analysis of the supposed Arthurian evidence but was perhaps unfortunate in coinciding with an upsurge in Arthurian iconoclasm whereby most historians decided Arthur was either a myth or at best unknowable. Alcock concluded that one reference – that to Arthur in the *Annales Cambriae* ("Welsh Annals") for 537, "The battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell" – was "the irreducible minimum of historical fact" and that this assured us “that Arthur was an authentic person” (Alcock 1971: 88). However, in 1977 David Dumville published a trenchant review paper in the journal *History*, which rejected the claim that any of the references to Arthur, including those in the Welsh annals, were contemporary and concluded: "This is not the stuff of which history can be made. 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" (1977: 188).

This view that there is no reliable historical evidence for Arthur is one held by all serious historians of the period. Thus in 1991 Thomas Charles-Edwards’ discussion of the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* concluded that: “At this stage of the enquiry,
one can only say there may well have been an historical Arthur,” but “the historian can as yet say nothing of value about him” (1991: 29). The skepticism of historians about Arthur was matched by a general rejection of the fifth- and sixth-century historical sources for Britain as a whole. Previous credibility given to Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle has now been replaced by a conclusion that little historical material pre-600 can be relied upon, and Dumville’s view that a “historical horizon” of credibility begins sometime in the mid- to late sixth century for some Irish, English, and British sources seems to be widely accepted (1977: 189–92; Yorke 1993; see also chapter 2, this volume).

But if historians cannot agree on evidence for a historical Arthur, what can archaeology say? Since Dumville’s 1977 paper, no serious archaeologist has tried to combine archaeology and Arthur. There is of course an archaeology of Arthurian folklore and fakes – the numerous Arthur’s Stones (often megalithic tombs, such as Arthur’s Stone on the Gower peninsula in south Wales); other Arthurian place names in the landscape (Higham 2002: figs 16 and 18); and fakes ranging from the twelfth-century “discovery” of Arthur’s body at Glastonbury (Barber 1972: 59–65) to the more recent claims often expressed on the internet and in popular books (Higham 2002: 34–5) as well as in otherwise reputable daily newspapers (see for example the Sunday Telegraph newspaper of October 16, 1994). Indeed, Oliver Padel has argued that the earliest references to Arthur in the ninth century indicate that he was already a mythical figure attached to dramatic features of the landscape and that, by analogy with the Fionn cycle in Ireland, no historical Arthur ever existed (1994).

However, if we wanted to portray an archaeological context for a notional Arthur, where and when would that be? Barber has pointed to four genuine historical figures called Arthur who appear in reliable sources. These are all associated with Irish/Scottish colonies and show that the name was current in Dál Riata and Dyfed in the later sixth and seventh centuries. Barber suggests that Arthur, son of Áedán mac Gabráin, the late-sixth-century king of Dál Riata who was killed fighting the Picts in the 590s, may be the original historical figure to whom subsequent legends were attached (1972: 29–38). However, the attachment of Arthur’s name to the battle of Badon and the battle list in the Historia Brittonum, together with his prominence in later British/Welsh sources, has led to him being regarded as a British hero associated with the native resistance to the Germanic conquest of southern and eastern Britain which gave rise to the creation of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England.

As to date, Arthur’s absence from British genealogies and reliable historical sources before the ninth or tenth centuries means that most attempts to place him historically have to push him back to the later fifth or earlier sixth century. After about 550 the historical silence about Arthur becomes more damning. In 500 British political units would probably still have ruled much of Britain from the Forth–Clyde line in Scotland south to the English Channel, though the extent of Anglo-Saxon territorial control is not historically documented at this period. Consequently the archaeological context for a notional British Arthur might be thought to be the post-Roman British kingdoms of the fifth and sixth centuries between Edinburgh in the north and Cornwall