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Summary Article: **King Arthur**

From *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*

Semi-legendary 6th-century king of the Britons.

Enduring legends have ensured a place in British tradition for King Arthur, but was there ever such a person in reality, and how much of the legend is true?

If a historical Arthur existed, he was probably a war leader (not necessarily a king) of the British people who, both Romanized and Christian, resisted the encroachments of the pagan Saxons in the 6th century. He is supposed to have won a great victory at Mount Badon (c.518), to have met his death in a further battle at Camlan (c.539) and to have been buried at Glastonbury. In fact the sites of these battles have not been comprehensively identified and there is no firm evidence to connect Arthur with Glastonbury.

As far as historical chronicles are concerned, the first appearance of Arthur is in the *Historia Britonum* ascribed to the Welsh writer Nennius (fl.769). It might have been expected that he would merit a mention in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, which are usually dated to the reign of Alfred the Great (849–99), but no such personage is included.

It has been suggested that Arthur is based on a legendary Celtic hero, as shown by the widespread occurrence of traditional tales about him throughout the former Celtic strongholds, from Cornwall to Scotland and from Wales to Brittany.

Whether or not a real Arthur existed, it is the legend that has become more important, especially as it was elaborated at the hands of writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100–c.1154) and Sir Thomas Malory (d.1471). It is to these later authors that we owe the tradition of his being the son of a high king of Britain, Uther Pendragon, as well as the famous tales of Camelot, the Knights of the Round Table and their quest for the holy grail, the magical sword Excalibur, Lancelot and Guinevere, and Merlin. The post-medieval themes of chivalry and the purity of the knight would certainly not have made much sense to a war leader fighting for the survival of his people against the Saxons.

According to the stories, after a glorious career of winning battles and righting wrongs, Arthur was mortally wounded at the battle of Camlan by his nephew Mordred. From there he was carried to Avalon, whence in his people's hour of greatest need he will return to save them. Support for this notion is lent by the alleged inscription on his grave: *Hic iacet artorius rex quondam rexque futurus* ('Here lies Arthur, the once and future king'). However, the magnitude of the disaster awaiting the British people that would be severe enough to summon Arthur from his rest must be cataclysmic indeed, given that World War II was not enough to inspire his reappearance.

It is essentially impossible to say for sure whether or not there was a historical Arthur. The chronicles on which we depend for evidence were known to 'print the legend' as well as recount fact. Perhaps Arthur is really a composite figure made up of attributes of several real or legendary heroes and the battles and sites associated with his name belong to more than one individual.

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