

TEACHERS NOTES

“KING ARTHUR : CHAPTER ONE

THE SWORD FROM THE STONE”

KING ARTHUR: HISTORY OR JUST A STORY?

AD 400

The historic figure of Arthur as fifth-century warrior, leading Britons into battle against Saxon invaders, has so far proved impossible for historians to confirm.

So where does the legend come from?

AD 830

King Arthur first appears as a heroic British general in the 'History of the Britons', written in 830 and attributed to a writer called Nennius.

Nennius gives a list of 12 battles fought by Arthur, but this is not history. One man could not possibly have fought in all of them. Here we have the first signs of a legend coming into being.

AD 1066

In the turmoil of the period following the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066, Celtic literature experienced a flowering. Much of it concerned stories of Celtic Britons in glorious triumph against their new masters. All such stories need a main protagonist, a hero to lead the troops, and this is where Arthur fitted in.

When the writer Geoffrey of Monmouth, wrote 'The History of the Kings of Britain', Geoffrey claimed the work was based on a secret lost Celtic manuscript that only he was able to examine. But it's really a myth masquerading as history, a fantastical tale of the history of the British Isles, which tells tales of King Arthur and his wondrous deeds.

In this work, for the first time, Arthur's whole life is told - from his birth at Tintagel to his eventual betrayal and death. There's Guinevere and Merlin, there's the legendary sword Caliburn (later known as Excalibur), and even the king's final resting place at Avalon.

At the time it was written Geoffrey's book had a tremendous influence, and over 200 manuscripts still remain in existence. Its impact was as great in Europe as it was in Britain. Geoffrey had an expert way of mixing myth with fact, thus blurring reality - and this blend attracted a mass audience.

At the same time, the stories of Arthur began to spread in the Celtic lands of northern France. This French connection began soon after the Norman Conquest, when Henry II of England married Eleanor of Aquitaine. In their court the two worlds of French and English literature intermingled, and the Arthur legend became transformed into a tale of chivalric romance.

Perhaps the most important among the court writers was Chrétien de Troyes, probably the greatest medieval writer of Arthurian romances, and it was he who turned the legend from courtly romance into spiritual quest. The mysterious Holy Grail, first appears as part of the Arthurian legend in Chrétien's unfinished poem 'Perceval, or the Story of the Grail' (1181-90)

This is why when we see Arthurian legend represented today, it tends to be set loosely in the middle ages, not in 400 AD!

AD 1485

By the time the Tudor king Henry VII came to the throne of England in 1485, chivalric tales of Arthur's knightly quests and of the Knights of the Round Table, had inspired British writers to pen their own versions, and Arthur was a well established British hero. Thomas Malory's work the Death of Arthur, published in 1486, was one of the first books to be printed in England.

1800s

The 19th century in Britain was a time of great change, and the Industrial Revolution was transforming the nation. But this situation produced great doubt and uncertainty in people's minds. As we have seen, at times of great change the legend of King Arthur, with its unfaltering moral stability, has always proved popular, and so it proved again in the reign of Queen Victoria.

Today

Over the centuries the figure of Arthur has become a symbol of British history - a way of explaining Britain, the relationship between the Saxons and the Celts, and a way of exorcising ghosts and healing the wounds of the past.

It is a myth that offers not historical fact but a poetic imaginative truth about the history of the Britons over many hundreds of years.

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