



Nigel Terry played Arthur in John Boorman's movie *Excalibur*. Released in 1981, it remains the most evocative retelling of Arthurian legend on film. (Corbis Images)

book. Personal names and locations have varied in their spelling over time, but these are standardized where possible within each chapter; checking the original source material will highlight variations from the names shown in this book.

THE MEDIEVAL ARTHUR

A thirteenth century English portrait of Arthur and the crowns of thirty kings who swore allegiance to him. Arthur's coat of arms sometimes appears on a red background and sometimes on a blue background, representing English and French influence respectively. (British Library, London, UK / © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved / The Bridgeman Art Library)

The most famous tales of Arthur were told first by English and French writers between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries and even today are little changed from the originals. The best-known Arthurian author of any period is England's Sir Thomas Malory, whose fifteenth-century tales are considered to be a milestone in the retelling of Arthur's legend and in the development of printing and publishing; Malory's work has influenced almost all writers of Arthurian literature who came after him.

However, Malory was not the first medieval writer to weave these tales about this mysterious yet magnificent king, as he followed a rich tradition of Arthurian story telling that had built up in the centuries before his lifetime. The father of this earlier medieval tradition is considered to be Geoffrey of Monmouth.

English and French medieval tales of Arthur and his knights generally fall into one of two camps: stories learned from traditional Celtic originals and restyled to appeal to their new audience, and stories invented to demonstrate the courtly behaviours of chivalric English and French medieval knights, which are more loosely linked to their Arthurian setting. Eventually both strands of the legend merged in the works of Malory.

Geoffrey Of Monmouth: The History Of The Kings Of Britain

The earliest surviving English or French account of Arthur running to any substantial length is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* (*Historia regum Britanniae*), completed c. 1136. Geoffrey's tale of Arthur introduced many of the plots and ideas that became the backbone of Arthurian legend. However, his Arthur is not quite the chivalric champion of the later medieval period, instead reflecting a curious combination of Dark Ages warlord and contemporary twelfth-century king. Geoffrey's narrative was the first



popular story of Arthur, but also differed in many ways to the later, more familiar tales.

Although Geoffrey was the first medieval writer to promote Arthur in detail, two Anglo-Norman writers mentioned Arthur in passing at an earlier date. William of Malmesbury included a passing reference to Arthur in his *Deeds of the English Kings* (*Gesta regum Anglorum*), which was completed in 1125, noting that the Britons recited oral traditions of Arthur and describing their stories as nonsense. Four years after William completed his work and a few years before Geoffrey of Monmouth, Henry of Huntingdon listed 12 battles that Arthur had fought and won in *The History of the English People* (*Historia Anglorum*).

Henry's list was taken from a British account of Arthur written a couple of hundred years earlier. The original Celtic versions of both of these stories are covered in the next chapter.

Geoffrey's work *The History of the Kings of Britain* begins with Albion as an isolated, magical land inhabited by giants. Around 1200 BC, Brutus of Troy arrived on the shores of Albion. Brutus and his followers fought the giants and conquered the island, renaming it Britain in honour of their leader; henceforth the inhabitants were known as Britons. Geoffrey describes the reigns of around 75 other kings, most of them seemingly coming from the depths of his own imagination rather than any historical source.

Despite Geoffrey's fictitious vision of British history, it is possible that there were elements of truth in his writing. Some of his immediately pre-Roman and Roman history bears some relation to that recorded elsewhere, although there is no consistency or prolonged accuracy in Geoffrey's work. Geoffrey claimed that Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, presented him with an ancient book written in the British language listing everything he had included in his own work. If Geoffrey did indeed have such a major source, it has long since been lost, and even some of his contemporaries branded him a liar.

The part of Geoffrey's *History* that tells us of Arthur occurs after the end of Roman dominance. This period occurred in Geoffrey's *History* roughly from the mid-fifth to mid-sixth centuries, with his Arthur coming to the throne around 490 (the actual date is not stated by Geoffrey) and dying in 542.



Arthur's victory at Bedegraine, a battle fought to prove his right to rule as the Pendragon. From the *Story of Merlin*, c. 1280–90. (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France / The Bridgeman Art Library)