

Has the historians' debate on the existence of king arthur come to a reasonable c...

[History](#)



King Arthur

When we think of King Arthur we think of the great leader of the Knights of the Round Table and Camelot. However, King Arthur may not have even existed. It is debated among many historians whether there even was this great historical figure. While some say that he was real, some say that he couldn't have existed from various historical texts. Others believe that he may have existed, but was merely a soldier, and had nothing more to his story than any ordinary man. The arguments for these cases are plausible, and texts from the 12th century in Europe, which is where modern stories of Arthur and The Round Table and such are set, depict several versions of the man. However our modern idea of Arthur includes a suit of armor and a sword, riding a horse and great castles in historical Great Britain.

However suits of armor and castles is not an accurate depiction of the 12th century, and this assumption of how Arthur lived actually dates back to the Middle Ages. This kind of discrepancy casts doubt on whether or not Arthur actually existed. In the later Middle Ages historians took this idea of King Arthur and romanticized it by formulating poems about his great battles, and creating a love triangle with Lancelot and Guinevere. However before that, the stories were only about King Arthur, and on top of that he was depicted as a very different person than as the person we imagine him to be now.

The first documentation of King Arthur was in *Historia Brittonum*, a text written in the 9th century about the history of Britain. This text is now being viewed as unreliable, which provokes some scholars to question whether King Arthur existed at all. This text and others like it that followed after it

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said that King Arthur lived in the 6th century. Another book seen as a historical source of information on King Arthur was the *Historia Regum Britanniae* from the 12th century. This text was accredited to Geoffrey of Monmouth, who wrote the basis for the entire King Arthur story. Because of the many depictions of Arthur, texts written about him are categorized into three types: pre-Galfridian texts (such as *Historia Brittonum*), Galfridian texts, and post-Galfridian texts. Galfridian is the Latin translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's name.

Scholars have attempted to define Arthur's character from the pre-Galfridian spirit, and they have come up with very little. The little that is said goes something like this: one theory is that Arthur was a warrior who slayed monsters in his kingdom, although the monsters were of a supernatural being. The second theory is that the story of Arthur is folklore, and the third theory involves Arthur having help from the pagan gods. There are also other texts that are supposed to be from the 6th century, such as *Y Gododdin*, however this text is only known from a later text that cited it.

Now we get into the Galfridian text-era. A prose named *Culhwch and Olwen* from the 12th century included dialogue of Arthur and fellow men. Two hundred men's names are listed in it, of which *Cei* and *Bedwyr* are very commonly mentioned. These names translate from an early Welsh dialect into the names *Kay* and *Bedivere*, who are two of the first Knights of the Round Table, now known as *Sir Kay* and *Sir Bedivere*. By the time *Culhwch and Olwen* was written Arthur was considered a king and ruler of most of Europe.

There was also the *Vitae*, or lives, written about some post-Roman saints from the 11th century which suggest that Arthur never died and is simply in hiding, waiting to return. This is a key in the modern story of Arthur, because it is said that Arthur will reincarnate when he is needed. This idea probably originated from these sets of texts.

The *Historia Regum Britanniae* told the story of Arthur's life. The story takes place in the 7th century and starts when Uther Pendragon disguised by Merlin as his enemy, sleeps with his enemy's wife who conceives Arthur. Then when Arthur is fifteen, his father dies and he succeeds him as King of Britain. Through the next part of his life, Arthur is said to have conquered most of Europe until he reached Roman territory where he defeated the Roman emperor Tiberius. However after he had done this he got news that his nephew Mordred had married his wife and taken charge of Britain. He returns home and defeats his nephew but in the process he dies from his injuries. Before he dies he hands his crown to his companion Constantine. He is then taken to Avalon to be healed however he was never seen again.

From here on out, Arthurian legends became more and more popular, especially with the Renaissance. This begins the era of post-Galfridian texts. As the times changed, so did Arthur. He became more lazy and less of a warrior, and often even took the back seat to his knights and their romantic journeys. The beginning and, ironically enough, the epitome of these romances was *Le Morte d'Arthur* (The Death of Arthur) written in the 15th century by William Caxton. By the middle of the 17th century, King Arthur had disappeared entirely.

King Arthur reappeared in history in the 19th century, when Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote *The Lady of Shalott*. This, along with other works, reignited an interest in Arthur. The version of Arthur that was then represented in the 19th century was reflective of the late Medieval and early Renaissance belief that he was lazy, and not a warrior, but an older gentleman who was very wise, slightly resembling Santa Claus in that way. Arthur also stayed at the back of the stories, while characters such as Sir Lancelot made their debut appearance.

The idea of chivalry was introduced to the typical man of the 19th century, only to die out as the First World War came and went. After the war however writers such as T. S. Eliot picked up the romantic aspects of what was left of the Arthurian legend. Now in the last hundred years, these stories have become common with tales as far as *The Mists of Avalon* to Monty Python and the Holy Grail, who influenced shows such as the BBC's *Merlin* and Disney's new movie named *Avalon High*.

Despite how prolifically Arthur was written about, it remains unclear if he existed in historical Britain, if he was a great king and the leader of the Knights of the Round Table, or if he indeed was the mythological creature and king we now renowned him to be. Nonetheless, these stories and myths, whatever they may be came out of the Middle Ages of our history, giving us an in-depth picture of how the Middle Ages shaped our society today.