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Christian monks during the Middle Ages followed a daily regime of prayer, studying scriptures, and chores. There was no socialization time, and very little relaxation time. Monks did not enter a Christian monastery unless they had fully committed themselves to God and to the Scriptures. Yet one day in 1220, the abbot of the monastery Gevard of Heisterbach was preaching the scriptures when he realized that many of his monks were dozing off. Seeing his monks asleep during his preaching, Gevard knew he needed to grab their attention before he lost them for good.

“So he suddenly exclaimed: ‘Listen, I have something new and wonderful to tell you! There was once a king whose name was Arthur...’ Instantly the monks were rapt with attention. The abbot had proved his point: even the Cistercian brethren were more interested in the legends of Arthur than the Scriptures.” (Stirling 11).

This quote shows that the legendary Arthur was someone who was far more interesting than the Christian Bible. This essay will examine the relationship between the historical Arthur and the legendary King Arthur, the relationship between Arthur and the Orthodox Church, and how the use of Arthurian myth was commandeered to aid certain political agendas. Essentially, this paper will ask: why was the historical Arthur hidden beneath the mythical King Arthur?

So what is the difference between the historical Arthur and the mythical King Arthur? To answer that question, first one must delve into the very foundation of the Arthurian legends. Where did the first legends of the elusive Arthur originate? A sixth-century historian, Gildas, was the first to report on a historical figure that fits

Arthur's description. Gildas described a decisive victory at the Battle of Mount Badon sometime around 500 AD. Gildas described the battle as the victory that halted the Saxons from advancing into Britain (Jones 3). A later historian, Nennius, living in the eighth-century, cited Arthur as a warlord living at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries. Nennius wrote,

“Following the withdrawal of the Roman legions from Britannia, the natives had been left to fend for themselves and Arthur, champion of the Christian Celts, united [the] resistance against [the] heathen Saxon invaders.” (Jones 2-3)

According to journalist Neil Jones of *Britain Magazine*, Arthur may have taken advantage of the power vacuum to unite the people of Britannia, who were in need of a king to lead them as the Saxons were invading. This may have been the beginning of Arthur being considered a king. Both accounts from Gildas and Nennius feature overlapping information. Both report a warrior living in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century. In addition, both historians emphasize the invasion attempt by the Saxons in their individual reports. The conclusion is that Nennius and Gildas were describing a similar situation, or perhaps even the same event, which would lead to the conclusion that perhaps Arthur was an actual person

It is even possible that Arthur was not one person, but rather an amalgamation of several historically relevant warriors living in the same time period. Jones suggests that the mythical form of Arthur may have taken form through the retellings of war stories of many different warriors from the given era (Jones 3). There were particular warriors that held similar positions to what Arthur was said to have held. Scholars speculate that Arthur may be based off one of more

of the warriors Owain Ddantgwyn, Athrwys ap Meurig and Aurelius Ambrosius, among others. Each of these warriors possessed similar characteristics and histories to Arthur, especially when they are all combined. Ddantgwyn led multiple, successful campaigns by Britons against the Saxons. Moreover, Arthur was his nickname on the battlefield, stemming from the ancient meaning of “arth,” which meant bear. Meurig also went by a nickname that sounded similar to Arthur: Arthmael, meaning “Bear Prince.” Ambrosius was a Romano-Briton warlord who many scholars believe was one of the lords who led the Britons against the Saxons at the Battle of Mount Badon (Jones 3). Each one of these warriors bears resemblance to King Arthur in some way; it is more likely that as the heroic stories of each warrior were passed down from generation to generation, they began to collectively encompass one figure: King Arthur.

It was not until the twelfth-century chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth authored *History of the Kings of Britain* that the historical Arthur began his transformation into a truly mythical being. According to Alan MacColl, journalist for popular magazine *History Today*, Geoffrey’s work popularized the Arthurian legends to a much wider audience (MacColl 7). Jones agrees: “Largely thanks to Geoffrey’s mythmaking, it’s the West Country and Cornwall where most people hunt” (3). Jones insinuates that Geoffrey’s publication is what’s consulted by the average person when searching for King Arthur’s city of Avalon. This lines up with MacColl’s position. Jones and MacColl indicate how Geoffrey’s book became the common standard for most information regarding King Arthur. Geoffrey’s work is still the

basis today by which Arthur explorers search for clues of him. Neither the West Country nor Cornwall is outlined in the works of Gildas or Nennius, however.

Digging deeper into the aforementioned quote, Jones alludes to the fabrication of information that Geoffrey included in *History of the Kings of Britain*. The fact that Jones used the word “mythmaking” demonstrates how much of the history in Geoffrey’s book is actually fiction versus fact. MacColl goes further than Jones in his article about the process of Geoffrey’s “mythmaking”:

“Geoffrey’s edifice was constructed on the slight frame of accepted British history... Using bits and pieces of material adapted from a multitude of other sources (most of them having nothing to do with Wales or Britain), he [skillfully] filled in [his] framework and gave it apparent solidity, binding it all together in a largely fictional narrative matrix.” (MacColl 8)

MacColl posits that the historical Arthur may have been the original framework for Geoffrey’s *History of the Kings of Britain*. Yet Geoffrey abandoned that framework rather quickly, substituting information from sources that were primarily non-British. According to MacColl, Geoffrey bound his tale by writing fiction, in order to portray “solidary.” In other words, Geoffrey knew that in order to depict an accurate history, he would have to provide volume to his stories. His only way of producing volume was to create myth.

But what was Geoffrey’s motivation for inventing a fictional Arthur character? While some may believe that it was personal, MacColl reports that it also was a sense of nationalism that pushed Geoffrey to craft *History of the Kings of Britain*. In his article, he describes the flattering comparison of Arthur to other legendary historical figures: “Arthur’s astounding continental conquests put him in

the company of Alexander and Charlemagne” (MacColl 9). Elevating the historical greatness of Britain’s history would have given the citizens of Britain great pride, but it also triggered another fact, which gave the monarchy of England a greater sense of pride:

“By giving England the right sort of ancient history the work made her new rulers on a par with the French, allowing a discreet veil to be drawn over their real past” (MacColl 9)

MacColl points out that Geoffrey’s book allowed the English rulers to kill two birds with one stone. First, it allowed them remain on par with the French in terms of historical significance. They were no longer second-fiddle in Europe; they were now able to compete with France with pride. Second, Geoffrey’s book gave England the opportunity to paint over their troubled Viking past. The book allowed England to release the Vikings from England’s past, giving England the same type of lineage as France. In both instances, England’s sense of nationalism is outlined as an attempt to compete with a foreign nation.

Later, British politicians would also emulate the romanticized King Arthur. In the late twentieth century, Britain experienced some political discontent. A man named John Timothy Rothwell wanted to affect change. He wanted to push his political agenda forward. In order to garner attention, Rothwell decided to change his name to Arthur Uther Pendragon and market himself as “the reincarnation of Arthur as ancient Celtic chieftain” (Bowman 21). His pitch was that he had returned during the time of a great national crisis described in many romanticized Arthurian legends in order to solve the numerous crises facing Britain. Rothwell played into the Arthurian legends in order to propel his political agenda. King Arthur is known

as the savior, and since he was claiming to be a direct ancestor, it would essentially make him the perfect candidate to fix the state of emergency.

Regardless of Geoffrey's intentions, *History of the Kings of Britain* inspired other artists to follow in his footsteps and expand the tales of the legendary king. Poetry was one medium that suited the expansion of the Arthurian myths. Poetry regarding Arthurian legends was not limited to the Middle Ages. Poets began crafting epic tales in the Middle Ages, and as each century passed, later poets would each expanded upon Geoffrey's mythmaking. Poets such as Chrétien de Troyes of the twelfth-century, Sir Thomas Malory of the fifteenth-century, and Alfred Lord Tennyson of the nineteenth-century all "embellished" Monmouth's stories in order to suit the mood of their respective time periods (Jones 2). Jones' use of the word "embellish" is similar to the context in which he used "mythmaking." Jones' intent behind his choice of words is for the reader to understand that the poems created by Troyes, Malory, Tennyson, and all others contained exaggerations of the myths published in Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*.

Yet Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* was already greatly exaggerated. Sometimes, artists would take the liberty to spice up the Arthurian legends even more by inventing and injecting new characters into the myths. For example, according to scholar Leah Haught of the *Parergon Journal for the Australian & New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, Malory generated a new character for the Arthurian legends in one of his poems: Lancelot, King Arthur's right-hand knight. Soon the stories about Arthur were anything but historically accurate.

Once Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* was published, the historical Arthur was forgotten as the legendary Arthur was embraced:

"There are dozens of places with Arthurian associations across Britain, yet so elaborate have the stories surrounding him become that despite his ubiquity, he's a surprisingly elusive figure to pin down" (Jones 2).

As previously mentioned, by the time that the majority of Europeans were reading the stories of King Arthur, through poetry and other mediums, the tales that were in circulation were firmly entrenched in fiction, not fact. However, there was a reason that the public embraced the legendary endeavors of King Arthur. The updated themes of the epic tales were appealing and relatable to most citizens:

"Plot lines like the Quest for the Holy Grail held particular appeal when knights went on Crusade, while the introduction of Sir Lancelot's affair with Arthur's Queen Guinevere perfectly chimed with the fashion for medieval romances." (Jones 2)

Clearly, once the tales got into the hands of the poets and other artists, historical accuracy took a backseat. The Quest for the Holy Grail may have actually encouraged some knights to participate in the Crusades, as the authors of the fables knew that knights would relate to the stories; hoping that they themselves would be lucky enough to find the legendary, and artificially produced, Holy Grail. Even in current times, action stories and drama stories are two of the most popular themes of the stories told today.

There was another way the historical Arthur was pushed to the side in favor of the fictional Arthur: mythology. Since Nennius posited that the historical Arthur was a Celtic war champion, the Celtic community eventually appropriated the legendary Arthur for their own mythological purposes. Some scholars hold the

belief that Arthur actually may have been a Celtic god, “whose [Holy] Grail was originally the Celts cauldron of wisdom and inspiration.” (Bowman 21). By holding this belief, the Celts would have drawn attention to the fact that Holy Grail was actually a Celtic relic. Celts may have taken a sense of pride in their alleged lineage and relation to the mythological King Arthur. Historical King Arthur could not match up with the godly, mythological Celtic Arthur. Arthur became even more of a Celtic God/hero, when Merlin became prevalent in the common epic Arthurian adventures. According to the scholars Marion Bowman and Milton Keynes, the character Merlin from the classic Arthurian tales was actually based on a warlock from ancient Celtic mythology, Myrddin.

The Celts were not the only group to appropriate King Arthur. The Christian Church also did so. How did the Church commandeer King Arthur? The Church took advantage of the frenzy and fervor associated with Arthurian legends. Their first task was to establish Arthur as primarily a Christian king:

“But the legends of Arthur continued to delight and inspire... Arthur and his knights were brought into the orthodox fold, becoming the perfect Christian king and his pious cohorts.” (Stirling 11)

When Geoffrey released *History of the Kings of Britain*, the public began to explore the quests of King Arthur. According to Simon Andrew Stirling, journalist for journal *History Today*, by the twelfth century, the fictional legend began to spread throughout Britain. Arthur was a figure who was looked upon as a god/hero. In the midst of a crisis, the Church was able to take advantage of Arthur’s persona to aid itself. According to Stirling, in 1184, the old church at Glastonbury caught fire and

burned to the ground. The monastery needed funds to build a new, more resilient building. Henry II and the monks of Glastonbury colluded to help each other financially by authorizing an excavation on the church grounds to search for Arthur's burial ground. The fix was in, as Stirling writes, "The monks took the hint" to stage Arthur's gravesite (Stirling 12):

"In no time at all the monks uncovered a grave which they claimed was that of Arthur and his second wife Guenevere. [The Church] then sought the maximum publicity to encourage a flood of pilgrims to Glastonbury." (Stirling 12)

The fact that the Glastonbury Church immediately sought publicity after the "discovery" of Arthur's burial site portrays the Church's misguided priority during this event. As Stirling indicates, instead of seeking confirmation and authenticity, the Church chose to pursue maximum publicity to increase the amount of tourists and pilgrims visiting Glastonbury. Simply, the Church leadership's priority was to make money. Once the monks "found" Arthur's grave, the leadership understood that many Christians would attempt to make a pilgrimage to Glastonbury in order to see the great Christian King's final resting place. With an influx of people brings an influx of cash: cash that could be used to fund the construction of a new church.

This would not be the last time that members of the Christian Church manipulated Arthurian legend to financially gain from it. Stirling writes that around 1200 an Orthodox poet asserted that the Holy Grail of legend was actually the Cup of the Last Supper. The poet proclaimed that Christ's blood had been collected in the cup and was subsequently transported to an abbey in Britain. The specified abbey had a history of capitalizing financially on its collection of sacred relics, including an

arm bone from Mary Magdalene's corpse and the same blood of Christ that was transported in the Holy Grail to the abbey. Stirling actually describes the relics as "money-spinning items" (12). The abbey was displaying these relics purely to raise capital. That, coupled with the fact that a Christian poet crafted a poem that conveniently links the Holy Grail to Christ's blood, highlights a questionable coincidence. If it is no coincidence, then this means that the abbey fabricated an Arthurian story in order to profit directly from the false tale. A second instance of moneymaking for Christian institutions begins to reveal a troubling pattern.

The pattern continued beginning in the twelfth-century. Many ecclesiastical institutions sought to avoid paying property taxes on their land. To avoid taxation, one monastery decided to take advantage of the growing legend of Arthur:

"[In order to avoid paying taxes, the ecclesiastical institution] needed to prove that their lands had been granted to them by a ruling monarch. The monastery founded by St Cadog at Llancarfan in South Wales in the sixth century led the way in making use of Arthur's memory for its own purposes." (Stirling 12)

To avoid paying property taxes that they deservedly owed, this monastery decided to manipulate the memory of Arthur to fit their financial agenda. They wrote their own version of an Arthurian legend, similar to the aforementioned poet. In their story, Arthur encounters the monks of the monasteries while exploring. Arthur then proceeds to act like a thug by premeditating to rape the saint's mother. Finally, after realizing the error of his ways, King Arthur "begs the saint's forgiveness and bestows on him a generous gift of land." (Stirling 12). Clearly, the monks at the monastery scribed their own epic tale to provide justification for their petition to avoid paying property taxes on their estate, since King Arthur had granted their

monastery the land. Furthermore, soon after the first monastery fabricated a story involving King Arthur, other monasteries began to follow suit:

“These and other saints’ [stories] of the period routinely portrayed Arthur as a thug who was easily humbled by a man of the Church. Arthur would then repent and donate land to the saint. In the absence of any legal charter this was often as close as a monastery could get to demonstrating that it owed its wealth to a royal grant. Such fables served a dual purpose:... the original benefactor had been that most famous of kings.” (Stirling 12-13)

The monasteries knew that with the ways that records were kept in the Middle Ages, there would not have to be a written record of the gift of land from a king. They crafted the stories because they knew that it would be enough evidence for their cause. That Arthur was a king was monumentally important to the story because the law only allowed for tax-free land that was granted by a monarch (12). The pattern is clear: Christian institutions, including the Church, steadily manipulated Arthurian legends in order to benefit selfishly. By crafting their own stories, they buried the historical facts of Arthur to promote their personal agendas.

In summation, this essay has discussed the origins of the historical Arthur. It has also discussed the origins of the fictional Arthur. Facts back the historical Arthur, yet this version of Arthur is insignificant compared to the mythical Arthur. Both Christian institutions and Britain politicians have manipulated and created Arthurian legends to promote their financial and political agendas. They prefer the romanticized Arthurian tales. Arthur is one of the greatest mysteries in European history. Yet people ignore who he really was, and instead focus on fairy tales.

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