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# Introduction

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The literary tradition where Arthur first appeared belongs to Welsh language, the immediate descendent of the Brittonic Celtic language spoken across most of the island of Britain before the subsequent arrivals of the Romans, then the Angles, Saxons and Jutes,[1] and the Normans. At the turn of the sixth century, which marks the moment associated with the Arthur of history, the landscape and cultural outlook of Wales and northern Britain offered an anchor to what were probably oral stories in circulation. The earliest surviving Welsh Arthurian poems and narratives furnished the essence and the pathways for the later transmission and adaptation of the legends into other languages and territories throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.[2] *The Cambridge History of Arthurian Literature and Culture* (henceforth *CHALC*) acknowledges the *longue durée* of Arthuriana, from the origins of the Arthurian story to an exploration of its impressive reach across medieval Europe, then into the global world.

The Arthurian phenomenon, as indeed it is a literary phenomenon to start with, increased its appeal through complex processes. These are linked directly to the initial accretion of legend around Arthur and his first Welsh companions, Cai (later Kay), Bedwyr (later Bedevere), Gwalchmai (later Gauvain or Gawain) and others, which led, in its turn, to the crystallisation of the very essence of Arthurianism through the centuries: Arthur stands for a fantasy of a lost past, as well as for a wish for the future. Par excellence, the story of this Arthur opened a space for debate and an invitation to appropriate and retell the stories to suit a variety of complex and ever-shifting cultural movements and agendas. At an important historical, political and cultural junction for post-Roman Britannia and

[1] Here I acknowledge the recent and ongoing debates in Early English studies, and only use the terms employed by the Venerable Bede in his ninth-century *Historia ecclesiastica gens Anglorum*.
[2] See relevant chapters in Evans and Fulton (eds.), *Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*. For an introduction to this world, see Davies (ed. and intro.), *The Mabinogion*.



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for early medieval Europe, Arthur's legend was the starting point not only for a story from far away (from the point of view of the 'centre' in Rome), in a corner of the former Roman Empire, but also for the opportunity, for authors from a multitude of geographical and linguistic backgrounds, to retell the story of 'margins' as stories of a 'centre' or 'centres'.[3] Later, the Arthurian tradition gained a central place in the European literary, cultural, political and historiographical arena throughout the Middle Ages. The tradition was ever more interesting thanks to its origins, shrouded in mystery, and the early association with struggle against a foreign invading force, later oppressor.

The original pseudo-historical Arthur also became a symbol of challenging the odds of history in the conventional sense, of holding the Saxons back from invading Wales for a while, as well as in the sense of promoting a story from the peripheries of the culturally and politically dominant Roman Empire after its demise.[4] It was Geoffrey of Monmouth who, in his twelfth-century *Historia regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*, henceforth *HRB*), articulated the story of an imagined, though no less highly charged, cultural shift, the much-desired *translatio studii* and *translatio imperii* from the Roman Empire to the empire a (newly titled) King Arthur builds. By transmuting a much glorified classical legacy of the Roman Empire to a new age of local – and peripheral, geographically speaking – leaders like Arthur who fought to preserve their cultural identity and their land, Geoffrey of Monmouth, one of the fathers of the Arthurian legends as we know them today, participated in a new project, that of reconstructing – or rewriting – a past in order to make it worthy of his Norman present. This reconstruction of the past out of the earliest Arthurian stories into a palatable history for the political class of the day, the Normans, alongside the wishfulness contained in the imagined Arthur *redivivus* motif derived from the Welsh prophetic tradition, would eventually become the two key aspects of Arthurian writing that ensured the endurance of the legend from the sixth century to the twenty-first.

The Arthurian legends we now study, however, rest on two pillars, or medieval literary monuments to Arthur: one is Geoffrey's Latin *Historia*; the

[3] By 'centres' I refer to the imagined and real Norman world of medieval Europe, where the quest for ancient foundation myths formed as strong a pull as any foundation legend for Britain. For a historical exploration of Roman Britannia in the age of Arthur, see Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur*. For a novel exploration of the importance of the Norman world in relation to early medieval English literature (only), see Ashe, 'Norman Rule'.

[4] In recent years the relationships among the different parts of the British Isles, and between each and Continental politics and culture in early medieval Europe, have been explored in a number of studies. See, among others, Henley, *Reimagining the Past*; and Brady, *Origin Legends*.



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other one is represented by Chrétien de Troyes's French Arthurian romances. Geoffrey created a literary foundation for the imaginary Arthurian reign that would encompass lands abroad and the building of an Arthurian empire through conquest. Completed *c.*1135, his *HRB* (now considered by some editors and scholars under the title *De gestis Britonum*),[5] opened up not only a serious, albeit much contested, debate over Arthur's historicity, but also a considerable tradition in chronicle production that was to encompass many European languages and all the languages of medieval Britain (Middle Welsh, Old Scots, Middle English, Latin, Anglo-Norman French), in which Arthur was described as a model of kingship and governance as well as of colonial ambition and expansion both at home and abroad. As a *speculum principis* of sorts, Geoffrey's *Historia* promoted values that pertained to the twelfth-century Western European emergence of chivalry and Anglo-Norman political dominance. It speaks of the desire to appropriate and mould classical traditions of historical writing.[6] It enlists the wisdom of the mirrors for princes, to some extent anticipating the watershed moment when Aristotle's political theory would be adapted by Thomas Aquinas and his disciple, Aegidius Romanus (Giles of Rome), to fit the agendas of new governance and kingship models; it reflects the wisdom of Vegetius's fifth-century military manual *De re militari* in all aspects of battle tactics that Arthur undertakes (making Arthur recognisably 'Roman-trained', as some might claim); and introduces unforgettable details, such as Arthur's customs, attempting to convey a true move from the ancient culture of Troy through the invention of Brutus, great-grandson of Eneas, as the founding father of Britain.[7]

Geoffrey of Monmouth's legacy throughout the Middle Ages in Britain and Europe, and through to the early twentieth century in Wales, cannot be underestimated. First translated into Anglo-Norman by the court poet Wace, in his *Roman de Brut* (*c.*1155), in which the Round Table appears for the first time ('Fist Artur la Runde Table / Dunt Bretun dient mainte fable'; Arthur had the Round Table made, about which the British tell many a tale),[8] and then into Middle English by a priest from Areley Kings, La3amon, in his own early alliterative verse *Brut* reminiscent of Old English epic poetry (*c.*1200), the *HRB* was the most influential Arthurian pseudo-history of the first 1,500

[5] The title remains controversial since it has been suggested that it should be *De gestis*, but scholarship still utilises the better-known title *Historia*. See the introduction to the 2007 edition and translation by Reeve and Wright.
[6] See Russell, 'Classical and biblical inheritance'.
[7] Radulescu, 'Fiction and History'; also, Radulescu, 'Geoffrey'.
[8] Wace, *Roman de Brut*, pp. 226–7, lines 9751–2.



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years after Arthur's presumed historical existence. More than one hundred chronicles survive in Anglo-Norman, Latin, Middle English and Middle Welsh alone – all of them derived either directly from Geoffrey's work, or from his followers, and all devoting an exceptionally and consistently large portion of their overall narrative to Arthur's reign. This latter pseudo-historical narrative endures not only in manuscript form (more than two hundred manuscripts of the *HRB* survive across Europe from the Middle Ages alone, and hundreds of manuscripts of the chronicles produced in this tradition), which may come in both roll and codex format, but also in early print.[9] The *HRB* and its followers, all the way to the Anglo-Norman, Latin, Middle English and Welsh *Brut* chronicles, account for a large proportion of the reading material available to audiences in England, Scotland, Wales and parts of Europe.[10] There are Latin chronicles of the Iberian kings where their legendary past includes Arthurian 'history' from Geoffrey;[11] there is a Middle Dutch *Brut*, printed in the early sixteenth century, which also draws on the immensely popular Middle English tradition of the Prose *Brut*.[12]

Such writing furnished a rich complement to the courtly tradition, the fashionable literary trend of Arthurian romances, with Chrétien de Troyes's twelfth-century octosyllabic verse romances (*Yvain, ou le chevalier au lion, Lancelot, ou le chevalier de la charrette*, *Erec et Enide*, *Cligès* and *Conte du Graal*) quickly becoming a foundation stone for a much-revisited, admired golden era of Arthurian chivalry. Chrétien's romances enhanced the aura of courtliness and the sophistication that medieval audiences expected, and that characterise popular perceptions of Arthurian legend to the present day.[13] Yet Chrétien was not alone in building a monument to Western European chivalry, or Arthurian chivalry more specifically; his attempts belong to the same literary and historical traditions that glorified the actual historical characters of Charlemagne and Alexander the Great.[14] Without Chrétien's masterful romances in verse, the complex emotional worlds of the upper aristocracy would not have come to

[9] For a history of late medieval genealogical chronicles in roll format produced in England, see Rajsic, *History Unrolled*.
[10] For the chronicles, see chapters 6 (Kennedy) and 13 (Marvin and Radulescu) in *CHALC*, Volume I; for the Welsh *Bruts*, see Jones, 'Most Excellent Princes', and Pryce, *Writing Welsh History*.
[11] See relevant chapters in Hook (ed.), *Arthur of the Iberians*.
[12] See Levelt (ed.), *The Middle Dutch Brut*.
[13] See the classic studies by Busby, *Manuscrits de Chrétien de Troyes*; and James-Raoul, *Chrétien de Troyes*.
[14] There is insufficient space here to expand this discussion to encompass a comparison between these traditions. For Charlemagne, see Fulton and Rikhardsdottir (eds.), *Charlemagne*; for Alexander, see Bridges, *Medieval Narratives of Alexander the Great*.



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life, drawing readers' attention to the conflicts between duty and human love; without his Arthurian verse, not only would a myriad of appealing literary characters not have been born, but the deep symbolism embedded in medieval ethics and religion would not have been bestowed on Arthur's companions. The famous Grail appeared in Chrétien's unfinished *Conte du Graal*, inspired by older stories of a cauldron of plenty, but its literary adaptation into a dish, then a chalice holding the blood of Christ, had transformative effects not only on the Arthurian legends in many languages, but also on the chivalric way of life.[15] The nuancing of the stories, particularly the historical shading conveyed by the luxurious details of clothing, monumental architecture, customs, ethical and moral considerations, all contribute to the complexity of the development of this Arthurian literary phenomenon. Arthur, now a king surrounded by an enviable fellowship of knights, became a valuable and, above all, exceptionally recognisable symbol of pan-European aristocratic values and a paragon of chivalry all should emulate.[16]

It is these two monumental contributions – by Geoffrey and Chrétien – to the story of Arthur that both built and confirmed the value of using and adapting Arthurian stories in the European cultural arena. Arthur's court and his knights' adventures then crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries in lands ranging from Scandinavia to the margins of Eastern Europe. The varied and often unusual ways in which the stories and their very fame circulated were not predictable, nor devoid of challenging circumstances in terms of the survival of manuscript witnesses, yet the very endurance of a persistent drive to produce appropriations of the Galfridian tradition and Chrétien's courtly romances attests to the strong pull of key ingredients that secured their transhistorical fame: *aspiration, adventure* and *conquest*. The exploration of the multifaceted choices made by authors and patrons of literature and historical writing in their treatment of Arthur and his invented fellowship of the Round Table form the foundation stone of the present *CHALC*. We need to understand the myriad networks that led to the transmission and circulation of the stories to assess the role played by the Arthurian phenomenon across time and space from the sixth century to the twenty-first.

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[15] There are too many studies of Arthurian spirituality in relation to the Grail quest to mention here.
[16] See my Chapter 24 in *CHALC*, Volume I, about Arthurianism in medieval culture and society.



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The pseudo-historical character Arthur remains synonymous with war and resistance to foreign invasion, and still generates controversy – for example, in relation to the presumed location of his battles mentioned by Nennius, the monk whom some scholars accept as the author of the *Historia Brittonum* in the ninth century (discussed by Nicholas Higham in Chapter 2). This strand of investigation is often the more prominent in popular media. Most academic scholars and editors of medieval Arthurian texts have, from the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth, tended to prioritise research which focuses on the courtly Arthurian romances, starting from the world of Chrétien de Troyes, and what it stands for: chivalry on the battlefield and in the medieval court. Both strands of interpretation – the search for the historical Arthur in the old, fragmentary records, and the Arthur of French and then European courts – spring from medieval authors' weaving into their writing a nostalgia for a past that is lost, and the hope for a return to Arthurian values. The world of Arthur's conquests and wise governance was promoted in the immensely popular and widely available histories and chronicles written post Geoffrey's *HRB*. However, one of the main driving forces behind the transformation of the legends into a phenomenon across languages and time was the accretion of objects and places of symbolic value that provided the scaffolding of Arthurian stories: from Excalibur to the Round Table, from Tintagel to Winchester. The draw of the Arthurian legend can be said to have been irresistible in terms of courtly emulation and prestige, as well as inescapable – the medieval Arthur, it seems, is everywhere in Europe. To modern audiences this Arthur may appear to have been fully fleshed out in Geoffrey's *HRB* for the first time, then benefited from the fashionable trappings of courtly romance in Chrétien's verse romances. Of course this Arthur was fashioned differently before Geoffrey and Chrétien, in the early Welsh literary tradition, and will be clothed (literally and figuratively) in many more ways as the phenomenon of medieval Arthurianism developed over time. Indeed, all phenomena around Arthur since the Middle Ages are 'Arthurianism';[17] as such, it developed in leisure literature and historical writing, in ceremony, spectacle and political events.

[17] For reasons of space, I cannot engage in a debate about the topic. Here I want to highlight both the accretive nature of the literary productions even where new narratives were written, in different languages and with new characters; and the profound nostalgia and *renouvellement* contained and implied in any medieval Arthurian story after Geoffrey and Chrétien.



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Such was the political relevance of its use to English kings that, thanks to centuries of royal propaganda using Arthur's pseudo-historical claims over other territories, Arthurianism becomes a core element in the planning of a new dynastic narrative, that of the Tudors.[18] For European audiences Arthur was a king from far away and long ago, yet the Round Table ethos was embraced by many through the invention of new knights who joined the literary construct of Arthur's fellowship from different geographical and linguistic corners. This spread of Arthurianism enhanced individual and collective cultural capital (to use Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concept) and, occasionally at least, develops an association with the panoply of the greatest heroes of times past – which will, in time, become the Nine Worthies.[19]

Modern scholarship of the Arthurian world has explored the origins of the legends and their linguistic and geographical locations, including the breadth of Arthurian manifestations, from the initial moments when Arthur entered the imaginary of the Welsh and other British peoples at the turn of the sixth century to the protean manifestations of the legends in the twenty-first century. *CHALC* aims to cover all this ground authoritatively yet selectively. The phrase 'Arthurian literature and culture' is usually employed to refer to locating sources and analogues, the discovery and editing of texts, and the search of a motif or theme across time. In its specific and yet permeable boundaries, however, the 'Arthurian literature and culture' in the title of *CHALC* moves beyond the label with which it has often been associated to an acknowledgement of the interactions between Arthurian texts per se and other traditions, be they literary or religious, political or historical. By its very nature anchored in an era, a language, and customs from long ago, Arthurian matter has always called for reinterpretation, reuse and scrutiny of the agendas of each subsequent appropriation in particular historical moments. Without these connections, the interpretation of individual texts stagnates, new avenues for cross-generic fertilisation remain unidentified, and the object of study can risk being mistaken for the history of its manifestation in one area – often believed to be only in the Anglophone world. *CHALC* proves, through its breadth and spread of contributions dedicated to the Arthurian phenomenon from medieval Europe to the global modern world,

[18] See Davis, *Chivalry and Romance*; Bateman, *Local Place and the Arthurian Tradition*.
[19] On the topic of the emergence of the group later known as the 'Nine Worthies' (nine heroes of the classical, Christian and Jewish traditions), see my Chapter 24 on Arthurianism in medieval society and politics in *CHALC*, Volume I.



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that to speak of Arthur means to speak internationally – in a way that no existing authoritative work to date has done.

*CHALC* revisits, renews and challenges, where necessary, received interpretations of Arthurian texts with a view to reframing, reconnecting and deepening the understanding of this matter within, rather than separate from, the societies, linguistic environments and geographical locations where it was produced and circulated. Unlike the constituent parts in the *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* series, where each volume takes as its title the region or linguistic area where its focus lies (e.g., *The Arthur of the French*; *The Arthur of the Iberians*),[20] *CHALC* works as much with the national traditions as with the transnational concerns that drove the processes of transmission, renewal and changing reception of medieval Arthurian texts amongst languages, regions and reading communities. The depth and extent of the engagement with local and national traditions that were characteristic of the volumes in the *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* series (such as the *Arthur in the Celtic Languages*, published in 2019; and the most recent volume, *Arthur of the Low Countries*, published in 2021)[21] make those volumes predecessors and parallel developments to *CHALC*. Even in more recent volumes in the *Arthur of . . .* series, greater emphasis is placed on the medieval traditions than post-medieval developments, though some of the newer entries in the series include one or two longer chapters on modern Arthuriana. *CHALC* focuses on bringing together the traditions, looking at both the medieval and post-medieval manifestations of Arthurianism in equal measure.

For the post-medieval period, no publication to date gives as much space and attention to non-Anglophone developments as *CHALC* does. Even where the European Arthurian phenomena are examined in the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, for example in the recently published *La matière arthurienne tardive en Europe, 1270–1530* (2020),[22] the focus remains narrower than that of *CHALC*. Similarly, when giving precedence to post-medieval Arthurianism globally, existing publications grant more space to developments in the Anglophone world than in other linguistic areas. The space dedicated by *CHALC* to post-medieval Arthurian literatures and cultures, including both global transmission and the post-medieval lives of

[20] See Putter (gen. ed.), *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages* (University of Exeter Press, then University of Wales Press); also Burgess and Pratt (eds.), *Arthur of the French* and Hook (ed.), *Arthur of the Iberians*.
[21] Lloyd-Morgan and Poppe (eds.), *Arthur in the Celtic Languages*; Besamusca and Brandsma (eds.), *Arthur of the Low Countries*.
[22] See Ferlampin-Acher (ed.), *La matière arthurienne*.



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Arthurian matter in its original linguistic environment, that of Wales, to the present day is unrivalled in any other similar publication to date.

In a number of other ways explored in what follows and in the chapters, therefore, *CHALC* argues, in its constituent parts, and collectively, that in spirit and in its vitality, as well as its longevity of appeal, Arthurian matter is transnational. The contributors to these two *CHALC* volumes demonstrate, including in those chapters where focus is placed on a discrete area, that the spread and depth of engagement with Arthurian matter, and, most importantly, the utility of such engagement in different societies over time, could not have been achieved without consideration of its adaptive features – such features that form the constitutive parts of the earliest forms of the legend. In this respect, also, *CHALC* stands apart from two other important recent collective volumes, the *Handbook of Arthurian Romance: King Arthur's Court in Medieval European Literature* (2017),[23] and *The Arthurian World* (2022).[24] As the title of the former indicates, a concentration on the medieval manifestations of the legends across Europe, combined with theoretical approaches to broad areas of Arthurian study, limits the focus; many chapters in that volume tend to focus on individual texts rather than investigate the state of the field. The latter volume takes a different approach, dividing up the phenomenon of the dissemination of the Arthurian tradition in new ways, organised around material culture (Arthurian Texts and Material Contexts: 600–1600); the expansion of the matter to encompass new territories and worlds (The European World of Arthur: 1200–1800); and a selective investigation of some post-medieval phenomena (Crossing Genres, Crossing Centuries: 1500–2018). The coverage provided by that volume is different from *CHALC* in at least two ways: while it starts from traditional questions and areas such as the origins and territories where Arthurian texts were first written and utilised, the chapters are broader; where new elements are present, they are far more narrowly focused than those covered in *CHALC*. The ambitious range of essays in *CHALC* leads to a careful balance between the drive towards comprehensive coverage of the main traditions and topics and a selective approach to the multifaceted manifestations of Arthurian matter in the post-medieval global world.

*CHALC*, therefore, starts from the exploration of the grounds from which the legends grew and expanded the world of Arthur into an imaginary that stirred local insular political rulers' ambitions for conquest and for peaceful

[23] Tether and McFadyen (eds.), *Handbook of Arthurian Romance*.
[24] See Coldham-Fussell, Edlich-Muth and Ward (eds.), *Arthurian World*.



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emulation of Arthurian chivalry, as well as instructing and delighting audiences, from young to old, across all social classes. It is in the exploration of these medieval roots of the legends and their ramifications throughout medieval European culture that we can understand and better grasp the complexities of Arthurian appropriation as received and transformed throughout the post-medieval period, all the way to the modern period. Volume I deals with the medieval world of Arthur, fulfilling the inspired statement which William of Malmesbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth's contemporary, used to reflect on Arthur's importance to the twelfth-century literary world, an Arthur who 'quippe qui labantem patriam diu sustienuerit, infractasque ciuium ad bellum acuerit' ('long supported his country when in decline and gave his fellow citizens an edge for war').[25] William of Malmesbury gave voice to what many writers were going to acknowledge, directly or indirectly, over time: that Arthur was the leader who needed to be brought into history, or invented, should records of his existence not come to light. It is this Arthur who inspired awe and an aura of historicity in the post-Galfridian chronicles of the Middle Ages; in the same texts he became a controversial figure for later chroniclers, antiquarians and historians, but his stature as a hero remained admirable, nonetheless. Too little of this Arthur of histories and chronicles, political propaganda and prophecy is usually considered relevant to scholarship of the complex and colourful picture of the medieval literary Arthur.

The tendency to relegate the Arthur of historical writing only to historical studies reflects traditional academic disciplinary boundaries between literature and history departments as much as traditional aesthetic hierarchies between the written text and other cultural forms (including performances, monumental art or, in the twenty-first century, modern media). Yet it is the political stature of Arthur as created by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his 'mirror for princes'-like *HRB* that Anglo-Norman kings looked to emulate; it is the same portrayal of Arthur, of Galfridian extract, that paved the way to Arthur's appropriation as an English king. Crossing linguistic and generic borders from Welsh into Latin and French, and from legend into history and romance, this Arthur acquires the authority to speak out of the pseudo-historical record to each generation of readers throughout the Middle Ages. Paradoxically, the use of his legend by medieval English kings (and one modern American president) did not diminish Arthur's literary appeal

[25] For a discussion of William of Malmesbury and the circumstances in which Geoffrey wrote the *Historia*, see chapters 4 (Echard) and 6 (Kennedy) in *CHALC*, Volume I.



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