

**MEDIEVAL ENGLAND  
(410-1485): KING  
ARTHUR AND  
CAMELOT: MYTH,  
LEGEND OR FACT?**



# MEDIEVAL ENGLAND (410-1485): KING ARTHUR AND CAMELOT: MYTH, LEGEND OR FACT?

## Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the stories behind King Arthur and the Arthurian legends, theorizing and taking a position as to whether the sources support the contention that Arthur actually existed.

## Subjects

European History, World History, English / Language Arts, Anthropology

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Many Arthurian Sites in Britain
- King Arthur Hall, Tintagel

## Essential Questions

- Who was King Arthur? Was he a real person?
- What are the legends associated with King Arthur?
- Why are the Arthurian legends so important to the British sense of self?

## Academic Summary

Uther Pendragon being dead, the nobility from several provinces assembled together at Silchester, and proposed to Dubricius, archbishop of Legions, that he should consecrate Arthur, Uther's son, to be their king. For they were now in great straits, because, upon hearing of the king's death, the Saxons had invited over their countrymen from Germany, and, under the command of Colgrin, were attempting to exterminate the whole British race. They had also entirely subdued all that part of the island which extends from the Humber to the sea of Caithness. Dubricius, therefore, grieving for the calamities of his country, in conjunction with the other bishops, set the crown upon Arthur's head. Arthur was then fifteen years old, but a youth of such unparalleled courage and generosity, joined with that sweetness of temper and innate goodness, as gained him universal love. When his coronation was over, he, according to the usual custom, showed his bounty and munificence to the people. And such a number of soldiers flocked to him upon it, that his treasury was not able to answer that vast expense. But such a spirit of generosity, joined with valor, can never long want means to support itself. Arthur, therefore, the better to keep up his munificence, resolved to make use of his courage, and to fall upon the Saxons, that he might enrich his followers with their wealth. To this he was also moved by the justice of the cause, since the entire monarchy of Britain belonged to him by hereditary right. Hereupon assembling the youth under his command, he marched to York, of which, when Colgrin had intelligence, he met him with a very great army, composed of Saxons, Scots, and Picts, by the river Douglas; where a battle happened, with the loss of the greater part of both armies. Notwithstanding, the victory fell to Arthur, who pursued Colgrin to York, and there besieged him. Baldulph, upon the news of his brother's flight, went towards the siege with a body of six thousand men, to his relief; for at the time of the battle he was upon the sea-coast, awaiting the arrival of duke Cheldric with succors from Germany. And being now no more than ten miles distant from the city, his purpose was to make a speedy march in the night-time, and fall upon the enemy by way of surprise. But Arthur, having intelligence of his design, sent a detachment of six hundred horse, and three thousand foot, under the command of Cador, duke of Cornwall, to meet him the same night. Cador, therefore, falling into the same road along which the enemy was passing, made a sudden assault upon them, and entirely defeated the Saxons, and put them to flight. Baldulph was excessively grieved at this disappointment in the relief which he intended for his brother, and began to think of some other stratagem to gain access to him; in which if he could but succeed, he thought they might concert measures together for their safety. And since he had no other way for it, he shaved his head and beard, and put on the habit of a jester with a harp, and in this disguise walked up and down in the camp, playing upon his instrument as if he had been a harper. He thus passed unsuspected, and by a little and little went up to the walls of the city, where he was at last discovered by the besieged, who thereupon drew him up with cords, and conducted him to

his brother. At this unexpected, though much desired meeting, they spent some time in joyfully embracing each other, and then began to consider various stratagems for their delivery. At last, just as they were considering their case desperate, the ambassadors returned from Germany, and brought with them to Albania a fleet of six hundred sail, laden with brave soldiers, under the command of Cheldric. Upon this news, Arthur was dissuaded by his council from continuing the siege any longer, for fear of hazarding a battle with so powerful and numerous an army.

*Geoffrey of Monmouth, History of the Kings of Britain, 1136 CE*

When he had done speaking, St. Dubricius, archbishop of Legions, going to the top of a hill, cried out with a loud voice, "You that have the honor to profess the Christian faith, keep fixed in your minds the love which you owe to your country and fellow subjects, whose sufferings by the treachery of the pagans will be an everlasting reproach to you, if you do not courageously defend them. It is your country which you fight for, and for which you should, when required, voluntarily suffer death; for that itself is victory and the curse of the soul. For he that shall die for his brethren, offers himself a living sacrifice to God, and has Christ for his example, who condescended to lay down his life for his brethren. If therefore any of you shall be killed in this war, that death itself, which is suffered in so glorious a cause, shall be to him for penance and absolution of all his sins." At these words, all of them, encouraged with the benediction of the holy prelate, instantly armed themselves, and prepared to obey his orders. Also Arthur himself, having put on a coat of mail suitable to the grandeur of so powerful a king, placed a golden helmet upon his head, on which was engraved the figure of a dragon; and on his shoulders his shield called Priwen; upon which the picture of the blessed Mary, mother of God, was painted, in order to put him frequently in mind of her. Then girding on his Caliburn, which was an excellent sword made in the isle of Avallon, he graced his right hand with his lance, named Ron, which was hard, broad, and fit for slaughter. After this, having placed his men in order, he boldly attacked the Saxons, who were drawn out in the shape of a wedge, as their manner was. And they, notwithstanding that the Britons fought with great eagerness, made a noble defense all that day; but at length, towards sun setting, climbed up the next mountain, which served them for a camp: for they desired no larger extent of ground, since they confided very much in their numbers. The next morning Arthur, with his army, went up the mountain, but lost many of his men in the ascent, by the advantage which the Saxons had in their station on the top, from whence they could pour down upon him with much greater speed, than he was able to advance against them. Notwithstanding, after a very hard struggle, the Britons gained the summit of the hill, and quickly came to a close engagement with the enemy, who again gave them a warm reception, and made a vigorous defense. In this manner was a great part of that day also spent; whereupon Arthur, provoked to see the little advantage he had yet gained, and that victory still continued in suspense, drew out his Caliburn, and, calling upon the name of the blessed Virgin, rushed forward with great fury into the thickest of the

enemy's ranks; of whom (such was the merit of his prayers) not one escaped alive that felt the fury of his sword; neither did he give over the fury of his assault until he had, with his Caliburn alone, killed four hundred and seventy men. The Britons, seeing this, followed their leader in great multitudes, and made slaughter on all sides; so that Colgrin, and Baldulph his brother, and many thousands more, fell before them.

*Geoffrey of Monmouth, History of the Kings of Britain, 1136 CE*

King Arthur: son of Uther, knight of the round table. The boy who pulled Excalibur out of a stone- or was it given to him by the Lady of the Lake? King of the Britons who fought against the Anglo-Saxon invasion, ruler of Camelot. Husband to Guinevere, best friend to Lancelot. Supernatural being, mythical figure, or simply a mortal man. Maybe he never really existed... no one really knows.

The tale of King Arthur is shrouded in mystery. For hundreds of years, historians and scholars have debated whether a king named Arthur ever existed, and if he did, what the true story of King Arthur really was. Stories of the king and his court were first written down hundreds of years after Arthur was supposed to have died. According to medieval sources, Arthur came from the union of Uther Pendragon (a king in 5th century Britain) and another man's wife. The same sources say that the young future king was raised by Merlin, a magical and mystical figure. Arthur became king after his father's death (with Merlin's help) and defeated the Anglo-Saxons, halting their invasion of Britannia at least temporarily. He eventually reigned over a realm that promoted chivalry, where his knights sat around the "round table" and were allowed to disagree with their king, and where King Arthur would listen and give their views equal weight. Perhaps the story of whether Arthur actually existed misses the point. Some scholars believe his story was supposed to be a way for medieval Brits living in a nasty, brutish world to connect and glorify their Celtic past. It is important to remember that the first Arthurian stories appeared only decades after the Norman Invasion under William the Conqueror. Norman law in the 12th century was fair, but harsh. William and his successors ruled England by power and a show of force. Perhaps Britons needed to believe that their leaders had once been supernatural beings capable of using logic and level-headedness in ruling the realm. By the 14th century, English kings linked themselves to the Arthurian legend, solidifying their positions with the people.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the stories behind King Arthur and the Arthurian legends, theorizing and taking a position as to whether the sources support the contention that Arthur actually existed.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the stories of King Arthur and the Arthurian legends.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why there are so many different stories behind the legend of King Arthur.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the differing opinions about King Arthur that have developed over the centuries, theorizing and taking a position as to whether they believe that the sources support the contention that Arthur actually existed.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Why do we have so much trouble discerning the “truth” in ancient and medieval history? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture – Brief overview of King Arthur and the Arthurian Legends. (10 min)
- Video – King Arthur (40 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on King Arthur and the Arthurian legends, taking notes as appropriate. (15 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion – What is the “real” story behind King Arthur? Was he a real historical figure or are stories of him just myths? (15 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the stories behind King Arthur and the Arthurian legends, theorizing and taking a position as to whether the sources support the contention that Arthur actually existed.

## Extension

### On tour: King Arthur’s Great Halls in Tintagel

While on tour in Great Britain, students can visit King Arthur’s Great Halls in Tintagel, where they can decide for themselves whether or not the small village (1800 people) has a genuine claim to King Arthur and Camelot. According to town legends, Tintagel Castle, just outside the modern town, is Arthur’s birthplace. Unfortunately, there are a number of other small villages across Great Britain that also claim a connection to a king who may, or may not, have existed.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/geoffrey-of-monmouth-arthurian-passages-from-the-history-of-the-kings-of-britain](http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/geoffrey-of-monmouth-arthurian-passages-from-the-history-of-the-kings-of-britain)  
Arthurian Passages from the History of the Kings of Britain (primary source) – primary source from Geoffrey of Monmouth, translated by JA Giles of the Camelot Project at the University of Rochester
- [edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/exploring-arthurian-legend](http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/exploring-arthurian-legend)  
Exploring Arthurian Legend (website) – from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Great site for teachers in many disciplines. Contains lesson plan suggestions, background and secondary sources – highly recommended for students and teachers.
- [edsitement.neh.gov/launchpad-exploring-arthurian-legend](http://edsitement.neh.gov/launchpad-exploring-arthurian-legend)  
Student Website for the NEH’s “Exploring Arthurian Legend” – links to primary and secondary sources
- [www.bartleby.com/182/104.html](http://www.bartleby.com/182/104.html)  
King Arthur and His Knights (secondary source) – from Thomas Bulfinch, Age of Fable: Vol III: The Age of Chivalry, New York: 1913
- [www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/student\\_orgs/arthurian\\_legend/england/arch/](http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/student_orgs/arthurian_legend/england/arch/)  
An Archeological Quest for the “real” King Arthur (website) – from the Archaeology Department at the University of Idaho
- [www.history.co.uk/shows/king-arthurs-round-table-revealed/articles/the-real-king-arthur](http://www.history.co.uk/shows/king-arthurs-round-table-revealed/articles/the-real-king-arthur)  
The Real King Arthur (website) – from the History Channel UK
- [cliojournal.wikispaces.com/The+Real+King+Arthur](http://cliojournal.wikispaces.com/The+Real+King+Arthur)  
The Real King Arthur (website) – from Ingrid Bean of Dickson College
- [www.kingarthursknights.com/](http://www.kingarthursknights.com/)  
King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table (website)
- [www.pbs.org/mythsandheroes/myths\\_four\\_arthur.html](http://www.pbs.org/mythsandheroes/myths_four_arthur.html)  
In Search of Myths and Heroes: King Arthur (website) – from PBS
- [www.arthuriana.co.uk/](http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/)  
Arthuriana (website) – from Dr. Thomas Green at the University of Oxford (UK)
- [csis.pace.edu/grendel/projs2a/art001.html](http://csis.pace.edu/grendel/projs2a/art001.html)  
King Arthur: A Character Analysis (website) – from INT 296: Interdisciplinary Course: Beowulf to Lear: Text, Image and Hypertext at Pace University (NY)
- [mrheinegg.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Arthurian-Legend-power-point-I-like-this-one.ppt](http://mrheinegg.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Arthurian-Legend-power-point-I-like-this-one.ppt)  
Arthurian Legend (PowerPoint) – from Max Heinegg, ELA teacher at Medford High School (MA)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZL0b\\_FNTNY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZL0b_FNTNY)

King Arthur: His Life and Legends (video) – 45-minute video from the Biography Channel that explores the story behind Arthur and the Arthurian legends.

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9RAZhBgSiM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9RAZhBgSiM)  
History of Britain: King Arthur (video) – BBC documentary on King Arthur. At 50 minutes long, this video might be too long for some classes, but it is well worth it. Outstanding documentary with great images and computer graphics. Highly recommended for students and teachers.

### **Background Information**

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King\\_Arthur](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_Arthur)  
King Arthur – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knights\\_of\\_the\\_Round\\_Table](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knights_of_the_Round_Table)  
Knights of the Round Table – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camelot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camelot)  
Camelot – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/the\\_united\\_kingdom/country\\_profile](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile)  
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-  
tales](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-tales)  
Medieval England – Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215)  
Medieval England – Magna Carta of 1215
- [www.passports.com/lesson-plans/england/norman-invasion-of-1066](http://www.passports.com/lesson-plans/england/norman-invasion-of-1066)  
Medieval England – Norman Invasion of 1066
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-richard-the-lionheart](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-richard-the-lionheart)  
Medieval England – Richard the Lionheart
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-robin-hood](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-robin-hood)  
Medieval England – Robin Hood

### **Key Terms**

- Anglo-Saxons
- Arthurian
- Britons
- Celts
- King Arthur
- Legend



