

The Myth of Arthur's Return (extract)

The three fragments narrate the passing of King Arthur. The first fragment is taken from Geoffrey of Monmouth's most famous work *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*) where he collected the legends of Merlin and King Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth (1100-c.1155) was a clergy who was probably born in Monmouth, Wales. Writing about 1136 in his *Historia*, he narrates Arthur's final battle in the usurpation of the crown by his nephew Mordred, who is living adulterously with Guinevere. Arthur forces Mordred's troops to flee. On hearing of Mordred's defeat, Guinevere flees and becomes a nun. Arthur besieges Mordred who has retreated to Winchester. Mordred and Arthur meet in a final battle on the River Camblam. Mordred is killed and Arthur severely wounded.

The second fragment is taken from Wace's *Roman de Brut*. Wace (1115-1183) was an Anglo-Norman poet brought up in Normandy. *Roman de Brut* (c. 1155) is based on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. He made the Arthur legend accessible to a wider public and was the first author to mention the Round Table and the name Excalibur for Arthur's sword.

The last fragment is from Layamon's *Brut*, a poem of some 16.000 lines. Layamon was a poet of the 13th c. His *Brut* (c. 1200) is a history of England in verse written in Early Middle English. Based on Wace's *Roman de Brut*, its versification is very difficult and it is often characterised as a rhythmical prose rather than verse per se. It tells the history of Britain from Brutus to the last Saxon victory over the Britons.

"Even the renowned king Arthur himself was mortally wounded; and being carried thence to the isle of Avallon to be cured of his wounds, he gave up the crown of Britain to his kinsman Constantine, the son of Cador, duke of Cornwall, in the five hundred and forty-second year of our Lord's incarnation."

[...] Arthur himself was wounded in his body to the death. He caused him to be borne to Avalon for the searching of his hurts. He is yet in Avalon, awaited of the Britons; for as they say and deem he will return from whence he went and live again. Master Wace, the writer of this book, cannot add more to this matter of his end than is spoken by Merlin the prophet. Merlin said of Arthur —if I read aright— that his end should be hidden in doubtfulness. The prophet spoke truly. Men have ever doubted, and —as I am persuaded— will ever doubt whether he liveth or is dead. Arthur bade that he should be carried to Avalon in this hope in the year 542 of the incarnation. The sorer sorrow that he was a childless man. To Constantine, Cador's son, Earl of Cornwall, and his near kin, Arthur committed the realm, commanding him to hold it as king until he returned to his own. The

earl took the land in his keeping. He held it as bidden, but nevertheless Arthur came never again.

Arthur was wounded wondrously much. There came to him a lad, who was of his kindred; he was Cador's son, the Earl of Cornwall; Constantine was the lad called, he was dear to the king. Arthur looked on him, where he lay on the ground, and said these words with a sorrowful heart: "Constantine, thou art welcome; thou wert Cador's son. I give thee here my kingdom, and defend thou my Britons ever in thy life, and maintain them all the laws that have stood in my days, and all the good laws that in Uther's days stood. And I will fare to Avalon, to the fairest of maidens, to Argante the queen, an elf most fair, and she shall make my wounds all sound; make me all whole with healing draughts. And afterwards I will come again to my kingdom, and dwell with the Britons with mickle joy."

Even with the words there approached from the sea that was a short boat, floating with the waves; and two women therein, wondrously formed; and they took Arthur anon, and bare him quickly, and laid him down softly, and forth again depart. Then was accomplished that Merlin whilom said, that mickle care should be of Arthur's departure. The Britons believe yet that he is alive, and dwelleth in Avalon with the fairest of all elves: and the Britons ever yet expect when Arthur shall return. Was never the man born, of ever any lady chosen, that knowesth of the sooth, to say more of Arthur. But whilom was the sage Merlin; he said with words —his sayings were sooth— that an Arthur should yet come to help the English.