Arthur – King Of The Britons

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King Arthur is one of the most famous figures in British mythology – but did he really exist? *Arthur – King Of The Britons* goes on a quest to discover the true story behind the legend.

Richard Harris – who famously portrayed Arthur in the film *Camelot* – unravels Arthur’s story and finds evidence for a real flesh-and-blood hero, hidden away in one of the most obscure periods of British history.

The programme reveals that there is compelling evidence for a real warrior king, a leader who united the Dark Age tribes of Britain against a common enemy, and overcame amazing odds to stem the tide of invasion for decades.

The earliest reliable record of the legend of King Arthur is a book written by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century, but the myth of Arthur continues to enthrall people around the world. Much of the story seems fanciful but there is evidence to suggest that the legend was inspired by real events that took place in fifth century Britannia.

This magical tale is brought to life by the award-winning team behind BBC ONE’s *Son Of God*. Using the same mix of live action, state-of-the-art computer technology and archaeology, *Arthur – King Of The Britons* recreates the real Dark Age origins of the legendary Camelot, and brings to life the battlefields where Arthur had his greatest victories.

Director Jean Claude Bragard says: “Richard Harris takes us on a journey through this ancient land of myths and legends. We visit the sites of Arthurian tradition – from Arthur’s historic birthplace at Tintagel, to the mystical Isle of Avalon, where he is said to be buried. Together, we’ll discover the truth at the heart of the story and reveal the man behind the myth.”
Evidence suggests that, if Arthur was real, he was probably an unsavoury Dark Age warlord rather than the heroic medieval English king of popular legend.

The programme examines the remarkable parallels between the military career of Arthur and that of Riothamus – a king of the Britons who reigned at a similar time. Could they have been one and the same?

There is strong archaeological evidence that Arthur’s legendary birthplace, Tintagel, was indeed a royal stronghold and could very well have been the birthplace of a real fifth-century king.

This part of the Arthurian myth may contain more than a grain of truth, the programme discovers. In ancient times, a sword was pulled from the middle of a stone mould as it was made.

Is the notion of a magical sword being pulled from a lake really that fanciful? The programme explores historical and archaeological evidence that suggests that Excalibur’s extraction from a lake may not be as bizarre as it seems.

The programme visits Cadbury Hill in Somerset to explore the archaeological and historical evidence that suggests that this location was, in fact, the real Camelot – home to a fifth-century king.

The idea of a round table may have been taken too literally in the past; it was more likely to have been a political ideal than a piece of furniture. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Dark Age warlords sat at circular tables, it is thought that they would have clustered in a circle around a central feasting hearth.

Richard Harris revisits Somerset, taking a journey to Glastonbury and to the remains of Glastonbury Abbey, only 10 miles from Cadbury Hill. The programme looks at evidence that suggests that this mystical place was more than an inland hill – that it could well have been the Isle of Avalon, as locals have claimed for centuries.
King Arthur – Medieval English king or Dark Age warlord?

The full legend of King Arthur first appears reliably in a 12th-century book, *The History Of The Kings Of Britain*, written by Geoffrey of Monmouth, a Welsh cleric. Although Geoffrey lived in the Middle Ages, his Arthur story is set 700 years earlier, in the fifth century AD – the Dark Ages. This fact changes the whole picture of Arthur as a medieval King.

As England did not exist in the fifth century, Arthur could not have been an English king. He must have been a Briton.

*Arthur – King Of The Britons* debunks the popular image of Arthur as a chivalrous knight in shining armour. Instead, it shows that he was more likely to have been a grubby, hairy Celtic warlord, who rallied the Britons against threats from barbarian invaders.

The programme unearths strong archaeological evidence that the Anglo-Saxons invading Britannia in the fifth and sixth centuries were stopped in their tracks and that their advance westward was halted for 50 years. Someone, somehow managed to contain them. But who inspired and led the resistance? Could this Dark Age hero’s life be the true story on which the fabulous legend of King Arthur is based?

The identity of the real Arthur

For centuries, Arthurian scholars have been frustrated by the fact that Arthur’s name so rarely appears in early documents. But perhaps they have been overlooking references to him. In *Arthur – King Of The Britons*, leading Arthurian expert Geoffrey Ashe presents evidence that the writers of the day may, in fact, have referred to Arthur by the title “Riothamus” (meaning supreme or high king) rather than by his name. The word “Riothamus” crops up in a number of early sources and there is little doubt that he was a real historical figure, a man who led a group of Britons on a campaign to Gaul. As Ashe demonstrates, dating errors may have led to the belief that Riothamus and Arthur were different people. If they are indeed one and the same, we have to refine still further our image of this “British hero” and see Arthur as a man steeped in Roman culture.

Tintagel – Arthur’s birthplace?

The programme visits Tintagel, on the north coast of Cornwall, to discover whether it could have been Arthur’s birthplace.

In Geoffrey of Monmouth’s story, Tintagel was the summer residence of the Duke of Cornwall and his wife, Ygraine. The then King of the Britons, Uther Pendragon, had no male heirs but he did have a passion for Ygraine. According to Geoffrey, the jealous Duke sent his wife away to the safety of the fortress of Tintagel, hoping that this would stop them consummating their love. But, he says, Uther used the wizardry of Merlin to help him gain entry into the fortress. Merlin agreed to help on condition that any child born of their union be handed over to him – Arthur was that child.

On the surface, the legend has no basis in history. The ruins at Tintagel belong to a medieval castle known to have been built after Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote the legend. But why would Geoffrey locate Arthur’s birthplace here? Did he have access to information that Tintagel was a settlement in the Dark Ages?

Archaeologists have unearthed a plaque bearing a fifth-century Latin inscription which confirms that Tintagel was indeed occupied during the Dark Ages. The inscription suggests that Tintagel was either a monastery or a palace. At first, the remoteness of the place indicated a monastery. But excavations revealed luxury jars
and glasses, suggesting that Tintagel must have been a royal stronghold. Only someone wealthy and powerful could have afforded to buy such luxuries – a king perhaps?

The possibility that Tintagel was once a royal stronghold was strengthened when further excavations revealed the remains of a fifth-century harbour – where great lords would have exercised control over trade. And an early form of moat uncovered there also suggests a royal fortress rather than a monastery. Together, this evidence makes Tintagel seem increasingly like the kind of place where a Dark Age prince might have been born.

The sword in the stone

As a Dark Age prince, Arthur would certainly have been taught to ride, hunt and – most importantly – to use a sword. Indeed, British and European poets of the time describe how lords and princes were inseparable from their swords.

But what makes swords so special in the Arthurian legend is their connection with magic. The story goes that a mighty, gleaming sword was thrust into a huge stone and that only one man could ever pull it out. He would then become the rightful King of Britain – and that young man was Arthur.

The programme explores the notion that, for all its magic, there may be more to this story than previously thought. Leading archaeologist Francis Pryor doesn’t accept that the sword in the stone is a complete fantasy. He believes that the story is the memory of a very real event played out in ancient times.

During Arthur’s time, swords were forged out of iron, but a thousand years earlier, they were made out of bronze. According to Pryor, it is this process that lies at the root of the legend. Bronze swords were made by pouring molten bronze into a stone mould. Once the molten bronze had cooled, the sword was withdrawn from the centre of the mould – making it look as though it was being drawn from stone.

The magic of Excalibur

The sword in the stone was not the only sword that featured in Arthur’s life. According to the legend, Excalibur was the most powerful sword of all and Merlin told Arthur where he could find this magical blade, fit for a king. Legend has it that the sword was held in a secret lake by an underwater enchantress – the Lady of the Lake.

On the face of it, it’s another fantastical tale. But archaeologists have unearthed countless ancient sword blades at the bottom of lakes. The programme reveals that lakes were believed to be the place where the souls of the dead went. Experts explain how swords were placed in the water as a symbol of the journey made by the deceased into the next world. If the throwing of swords into lakes marked the end of a reign, then perhaps the recovery of a sword marked the dawn of a new one.

Camelot

In Geoffrey’s story, the young Arthur is eventually crowned King of Britain and establishes a magnificent court. This is the classic image of Camelot – the romantic castle city at the heart of Arthurian legend. There, says the legend, Arthur ruled the land with his Queen Guinevere and his knights at his side.

Arthur – King Of The Britons visits Cadbury Hill in Somerset where, in 1542, John Leland, an antiquarian fascinated by the legend of Arthur, believed that he had found Camelot. He discovered that Cadbury Hill was very close to a river called Cam and two villages – West Camel and Queen Camel – and that there were local traditions linking the area to Arthur.

For many years, Leland’s claims were dismissed as groundless speculation and nowadays the site is an attractive, but otherwise unremarkable, piece of farmland. However, archaeological evidence confirms that this was indeed a quite extraordinary military centre. The programme uses state-of-the-art CGI (computer graphic imagery) technology to bring the Hill back to
life, recreating the gate tower and massive stone and timber ramparts discovered by archaeologists. What’s more, Richard Harris explains how the remains of broken pots found at the site have enabled archaeologists to date occupation of the site to the fifth century – Arthur’s time.

The fortification at Cadbury Hill was on a phenomenal scale: archaeologists have yet to discover a Dark Age settlement that approaches it in size. The ramparts were three-quarters of a mile long and experts calculate that the site would have housed 800 men, an exceptionally large warband by Dark Age standards. This was clearly the undertaking of a hugely powerful figure who commanded enormous resources. It was the fort of a mighty warlord – perhaps even the mightiest in Britannia at the time.

The Round Table

But did this warlord sit alongside his knights at a round table, as the popular story suggests? Although there is no evidence that tables in the Dark Ages were circular, Arthur – King Of The Britons reveals that the concept of a “round table” could indeed have its origins in the political reality of the day. The programme draws on pottery found at Cadbury Hill and poetry dating from Arthur’s time to build up a picture of the relationship between the warband leader and the men who followed him.

Leaders such as Arthur depended on a fiercely loyal, tightly-knit band of skilled warriors and these men were entertained in lavish style to strengthen their devotion. Using CGI technology, Arthur – King Of The Britons brings back to life the timbered feasting hall unearthed at Cadbury Hill, where the warband would have gathered, alongside Arthur, around a central hearth. Unfortunately, the furniture from the hall has not survived. However, there is little doubt that the primary purpose of this location was to foster a sense of brotherhood, the political ideal underpinning the concept of a “round table”.

Arthur’s final resting place

According to the legend, Arthur was killed by a fatal head wound inflicted by his nephew, Mordred. Arthur’s sword, Excalibur, was thrown back into the lake and the wounded Arthur was taken by boat to the Isle of Avalon, where he died.

Experts have searched for the Isle of Avalon off the Scottish, Welsh, Cornish and Breton coasts but have failed to uncover any irrefutable evidence identifying the burial place of a legendary Arthur – or, indeed, of any fifth-century warlord.

But there are strong clues that Avalon is not to be found off-shore at all. Instead, Richard Harris travels from Cadbury Hill to Glastonbury, just 10 miles away. For centuries, local people have believed Glastonbury to be the Isle of Avalon. Twelfth-century monks digging at Glastonbury Abbey claimed to have found two bodies in a grave, marked with the inscription: “Here lies the famous King Arthur and his queen Guinevere in the Isle of Avalon.” Some have dismissed this as a hoax, drummed up by the monks to attract publicity and money. But other clues suggest that Glastonbury was the natural place to bury a Dark Age warrior-king.

The programme uses CGI to show that Glastonbury was a very different place in Arthur’s day. During the Dark Ages, its remarkable Tor was not simply a hill, as it is today. Instead, flooding on the Somerset plains would have made it an island for much of the year, accessible only by boat.
Richard Harris

“I jumped at the chance to present Arthur – King Of The Britons because I’ve been fascinated by the story ever since I played the part of Arthur in the 1967 Hollywood musical, Camelot,” says veteran actor Richard Harris. “It was that role that made my career. I only wish I’d known as much about the story then as I do now.”

Screen legend Harris has had a long and varied career, spanning over four decades. In addition to his starring role in Camelot, the highly acclaimed actor is best known for films including The Wild Geese and A Man Called Horse.

He first made his mark as Frank Machine, the tortured rugby league player in This Sporting Life. That performance earned him his first Oscar nomination as Best Actor in 1964 and the Best Actor award at the Cannes Film Festival.

Since then, the Limerick-born actor’s film credits stretch from his role as Cain in The Bible, through such movies as Major Dundee, Robin And Marion, Gulliver’s Travels, Patriot Games and Cry The Beloved Country. His second Oscar nomination was for his role as Bull McCabe in Jim Sheridan’s The Field. Richard’s role as King Arthur in Camelot won him a Golden Globe and he has also played Arthur on both stage and television.

More recent performances include Marcus Aurelius in Gladiator, Abbe Faria in The Count Of Monte Cristo and, of course, wizard headmaster Albus Dumbledore in the hit film Harry Potter And The Philosopher’s Stone.

Richard Harris also recorded a No. 1 hit record, Macarthur Park, and won a Grammy for Spoken Arts for Jonathan Livingston Seagull. He is the author of the novel Honour Bound and has published a book of poetry, In The Membership Of My Days.
Bringing the story to life …

Red Vision, based in Manchester, is one of the leading companies in computer graphics. Using the most recent archaeological information and academic research, they have recreated some of the major sites connected with the story of Arthur.

Executive producer Ruth Pitt

Ruth Pitt joined the BBC as Editor of Everyman in 1999 and, at the end of 2000, became Creative Director of Documentaries in Manchester. Ruth was the executive producer of BBC ONE’s Son Of God.

Producer/director Jean Claude Bragard

Jean Claude Bragard is the award-winning director of BBC ONE’s Son Of God.