

**READ THROUGH THE PAGES BELOW AND FIND THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION
ON THE LEGEND OF KING ARTHUR.**

a. King Arthur:

- When did King Arthur live?
- What role did he play?
- Find the name of Arthur's parents.
- Where was Arthur born?
- Why was Arthur taken away from his parents?
- Who took him away and who raised him?
- How old was Arthur when he ruled over Britain?
- Where did Arthur die?

b. The contest:

- Who was it organized by?
- What was its goal?
- Who won it and how?

c. Excalibur:

- What is it?
- Who gave King Arthur Excalibur?
- What was it for?

d. Camelot and the Round Table:

- What was Camelot?
- What did the Round Table symbolize?

e. Friends or foes?

- Who was Mordred?
- How was he related to Arthur?
- Name two famous knights.

f. Battle of Camlann:

- Why was Arthur seriously wounded?
- By whom?
- What happened to the sword?

g. Name a famous composer who based one of his operas on the life of one famous knight.

h. What values do King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table embody or defend? Why do they still attract people today?

KING ARTHUR'S LEGEND

The epic tale of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table is one of the greatest myths of medieval literature.

If Arthur was a truly historical figure, it was likely in the 5th or 6th century. King Arthur is a legendary figure who is said to have lived in the Middle Ages and defended Britain against the Saxon invaders.

King Arthur's legend was popularized by T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (quartet of novels by T.H. White, published in a single volume in 1958). The basis of the Arthurian literary tradition before T.H. White is quite diverse, from the barbaric Arthur in the Welsh saga *Mabinogion* (medieval Welsh manuscripts) to Geoffroy of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (written c. 1136), from Chrétien de Troyes and the French romance tradition, to Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485).

Here are the "facts" of Arthur's life, according to these literary sources.

KING ARTHUR'S CHILDHOOD

A warrior King named Uther Pendragon ruled Britain. With magical help from his advisor, Merlin the Enchanter, King Uther tricked his rival's wife Igraine and conceived Arthur at Tintagel Castle. As part of the bargain with Uther, Merlin then took the infant Arthur away from Tintagel, to the house of Sir Ector, where he was brought up as a foster son, ignorant of his heritage.

When Uther died, many people tried to claim his throne. On the advice of Merlin, the Archbishop of Canterbury called all the kings, lords and knights of the land to come to London. After mass, a sword in a stone mysteriously appeared in the churchyard, with the inscription: "Who so Pulleth out this Sword of this Stone and Anvil, is Rightwise King Born of England."

All the knights and noblemen tried to remove the sword, but they all failed. A tournament was organized to find somebody who could draw the sword out. Arthur went along, as squire to his foster brother Kay. Before the tournament, Kay realized he had forgotten his sword, and sent Arthur to retrieve it. Arthur wasn't able to get Kay's sword, but ran across the sword in the stone by accident, without knowing how important it was. He pulled out the sword easily, and brought it to Kay.

When Ector realized what sword Arthur was carrying, Arthur was asked to replace the sword. Many knights tried to pull out the sword, but nobody could withdraw it. People were amazed to see that Arthur could withdraw the sword easily. Merlin intervened, telling them that Arthur was King Uther's true son.

Arthur was then crowned High King. He was sixteen years old. Eleven kings refused to pay homage to Arthur, and started rebelling.

To help him rule the country, Merlin took Arthur to a magical lake where Arthur was given a sword, called Excalibur, by an enchantress known as the Lady of the Lake. Excalibur helped Arthur win battles without being hurt. The magic scabbard protected him during all the battles against his enemies.

KING ARTHUR, THE WARRIOR

The young king had to defend Briton against barbarian invaders. He had to fight against the Saxons who had invaded Britain before his birth, and still wanted to conquer new land.

He had to unite the kingdom.

King Arthur set up his palace at Camelot. He married Guinevere. He was given a huge round table as wedding present from her father. After his wedding, he went on a long campaign to fight the Saxons and won many battles, last of which was the Battle of Mount Badon.

He also sent his knights on many quests. Once a year, the knights would come back to Camelot to share their adventures. They sat at the Round Table and were all equal in prestige and honour. The table symbolised equality, unity and chivalry. He sent his best knights, including Lancelot, Perceval and Galahad, in search of the Holy Grail.

BETRAYAL AND DEATH

Mordred, King Arthur's illegitimate son, came to Camelot. He discovered that Sir Lancelot was having an affair with Queen Guinevere and informed the king. Lancelot ran away while Guinevere was taken to court to be sentenced. Lancelot rescued her before she was burnt to death. Arthur took the head of an army to catch the two lovers.

Mordred started to plot against Arthur. While Arthur was away fighting on the continent, Mordred tried to become king. When Arthur discovered he had been betrayed, he fought against Mordred's army at the battle of Camlann. Morgan le Fay, Arthur's half-sister, had stolen the magic scabbard from Arthur, so Arthur was no longer protected from mortal wounds. Mordred and Arthur were the only survivors and fought in single combat, dealing each other mortal blows. Mordred was seriously wounded and died.

Arthur asked his most loyal knight, Bedivere, to take Excalibur and throw it into the lake. Bedivere hid the sword under a bush, telling his master the sword had sunk. Arthur knew the noble knight had lied to him and made him return it to the lake. As soon as Bedivere threw the sword into the lake it was grasped by the Lady of the Lake and drawn under.

Four enchantresses later took Arthur away to the Isle of Avalon, where he died of his wounds.

FROM CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES TO MODERN MYTH

When Henry II of England married Eleanor of Aquitaine (May 18th, 1152), poets and troubadours transformed the legend of King Arthur into a tale of chivalric romance.

Chrétien de Troyes turned the legend from courtly romance into a spiritual quest. He wrote *Perceval or the Story of the Holy Grail* (between 1181 and 1190).

In the 19th century, during the reign of Queen Victoria, the Arthurian legends became very popular again. Poems such as Tennysson's *Idylls of the King* (published between 1856 and 1885) and William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858) were published.

The Pre-Raphaelite painters painted many scenes from Arthurian legend.

How can one talk about the Grail and not mention Wagner's *Parsifal* (1877)? Listen to the overture from *Parsifal*.

Films such as Robert Bresson's *Lancelot* (1972), John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) and *King Arthur* (2004) by Antoine Fuqua were based on King Arthur's legend.

King Arthur is still an icon because he embodies loyalty, chivalry, strength, boldness and faithfulness. The Knights of the Round Table exemplify faith, trust, bravery, perseverance and brotherhood, although most of them have a critical flaw that leads to dire consequences.