

## **In the shadows of Rome**

### **Building an Arthurian England**

King Arthur is known today as the symbol of Britain, but Arthur was not always so important to his nation's identity. Stories of the king who unified his subjects and drove out invaders competed for popularity with another legend of origin: Britain's roots in ancient Rome. This article traces the growth of Arthur's legend through its strategic manipulation by English kings and the writers and historians they sponsored.

King Arthur, the bearded and regal ruler seated at his Round Table and armed with his legendary sword, seems to be a timeless symbol of British identity. Yet Arthur was not always such an integral part of Britain's cultural mythology. The king whose image is stamped on our popular imagination had very modest beginnings as the member of a valiant but failed resistance.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, though today Arthur is associated with the earliest moments of English and Welsh history, when Arthur first appeared in literature and historical chronicle, he had nothing to do with legends of British origin at all. Most medieval authors favored a story they considered more 'historical', one in which Britain began as a 'new Troy' founded by Brutus, the descendant of Aeneas.<sup>2</sup>

Early medieval England's relationship to its origins was a vexed one. Thanks to a series of invasions that lasted over nine centuries, the English continually struggled to build a nation in the shadow of their past as conquered subjects. Arthurian legend was instrumental in transforming English identity from conquered territory into conquering empire. Yet even though Arthur became embedded in history and literature as the Middle

1 See K. Hodges, 'Why Malory's Lancelot is not French. Region, Nation, and Political Identity', *PMLA* 125.3 (2010) 55-671, 558.

2 Latin accounts differ in their designation of Brutus as either the grandson or the great-grandson of Aeneas.

Ages progressed, his legend continually shifted in its struggle against the notion that Britain's true origins lay in ancient Greece and Rome. So, how did Arthur, the warrior who earned only a handful of lines in early English chronicle, manage to master all of Europe by the reign of Henry VIII? At what point did Arthur conquer Brutus to become the emblem of an empire?

## Early Arthurs

Arthur's exact origins are unclear: he was either a folk hero of the native Welsh eventually recorded in Latin chronicle, or he was mentioned first by Latin chroniclers and later adopted as a hero by the native British people.<sup>3</sup> Few written records of the earliest Welsh legends exist outside of the poem *Y Gododdin* and a set of tales collected as *The Mabinogion*, and the dates of these works are uncertain.<sup>4</sup> The earliest verifiable mention of Arthur thus appears in Latin chronicle. Though the Arthur of contemporary film and fiction often represents the hope of a new nation, the chronicle Arthur was emblematic of loss. The various chronicles composed under Saxon rule and Viking invasions record Arthur's victory against the invading Saxons as a distant memory, a brief moment of success in a campaign doomed to failure.<sup>5</sup>

Arthur is first mentioned by name in the ninth century *Historia Brittonum* written by a monk known as Nennius or Pseudo-Nennius.<sup>6</sup> Nennius's Arthur is no king, but he is a mighty war-leader. Nennius writes that when the Saxon

- 3 A great deal of ink has been spilt on the matter of Arthur's historicity. This essay does not concern itself with that very complex question; rather, it is focused on the political uses of the image of Arthur. For one of the most recent discussions of Arthur's historical validity, see P. J. C. Field, 'Arthur's Battles', *Arthuriana* 18.4 (2008) 3-32.
- 4 Some speculate that the Welsh poem *Y Gododdin*, which mentions Arthur as a renowned warrior very briefly, may have originated as early as the sixth century. The earliest manuscript in which the poem appears, however, is dated circa 1250. Likewise, P. J. C. Field dates the poem *Marwnad Cynddylan* around the same time, although the earliest manuscript for that poem is from the seventeenth century. See Field, 'Arthur's Battles', 5.
- 5 F. Riddy, 'Contextualizing *Le Morte Darthur*. Empire and Civil War' in: E. Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards ed., *A Companion to Malory* (Cambridge 2000) 55-74, 58-9.
- 6 Nennius's identity is contested among scholars; however, I will use the name 'Nennius' in this article for the sake of expediency. For a full and thorough explanation of the argument over the naming of this source, see N.J. Higham, *King Arthur: myth-making and history* (London 2002) 119-24.



This illustration of King Arthur is a typical example of his popular image. Illustration from Howard Pyle, *King Arthur and his Knights* (New York: Scribner's, 1903).

presence increased in Britain,

'the magnanimous Arthur, with all the kings and military force of Britain, fought against the Saxons. And though there were many more noble than himself, yet he was twelve times chosen their commander, and was as often conqueror'.<sup>7</sup>

Despite his insufficiently noble lineage, Nennius's Arthur possesses mythical strength: at the Battle of Badon Hill, 'nine hundred and forty fell by his hand alone, no one but the Lord affording him assistance'.<sup>8</sup> Still, Nennius connects neither the origin nor the identity of Britain to Arthur, who disappears after

he is mentioned without bearing any of the literary mantles associated with his legend today: kingship, empire, and the promise of return. Arthur makes an even briefer appearance in the tenth-century *Annales Cambriae*, or *The Annals of Wales*.<sup>9</sup> The set of annals cites Arthur's success at the Battle of Badon Hill and his death at the Battle of Camlann.

Nennius's *Historia* instead promotes the supposition that Britain's ancestry is linked to classical civilization. Nennius writes, 'According to the annals of Roman history, the Britons deduce their origin both from the Greeks and Romans (...) the named ancestor is Brutus, who descends from Aeneas'.<sup>10</sup> Brutus discovers the land that will be named after him when he is sent into exile as punishment for the accidental murder of his father. After a series of exploits,

'(...) he came to this island, named from him Britannia, dwelt there, and filled it with his own descendants, and it has been inhabited from that time to the present period'.<sup>11</sup>

7 'Nennius's History of the Britons' in: *Six old English chronicles*, translation J.A. Giles (1838. Reprint. New York 1968) Book 50, 408.

8 *Ibidem*, Book 50, 409.

9 The dates the *Annales Cambriae* were composed are a matter of dispute, however. See Field, 'Arthur's Battles', 18.

10 *Ibidem*, Book 10, 387.

11 *Ibidem*, Book 10, 388.

According to this origin story, Britain's discovery predates the creation of Rome, for Brutus is also said to be an ancestor of Romulus and Remus. The mythical connection to Rome's founders may have served to reduce the trauma of centuries of Roman colonization by providing an ancestral link to Britain's conquerors. But the Brutus story may also have been a symptom of England's anxiety over its identity as a nation. Even though the Romans had abandoned their territory Britannia to the invading Saxons, the prestigious status of Roman law, language, and faith lingered in England throughout the early Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> The loss of Roman civilization was lamented by chroniclers, who imagined that civilization as a compelling alternative to the violent uncertainty of early England.

As for Arthur, his brief victory paled in comparison to the eventual Saxon conquest of England. Perhaps it was because Arthur was known only for driving out the Saxons that his legend did not really rise until the House of Wessex fell. This led to a particularly ironic situation: when Britain's native hero flourished, he was appropriated early and often by Norman monarchs who used him to subdue the very territories Arthur was supposed to have defended.

William of Malmesbury's *Chronicle of the Kings of England* is one of the earliest texts to mention Arthur after the Norman Conquest, but the *Chronicle* seems to indicate that oral legends of Arthur had been on the rise throughout the bloody transition from Saxon to Norman rule in England. In fact, William's express intent is to separate myth from history concerning Arthur:

'It is of this Arthur that the Britons fondly tell so many fables, even to the present day; a man worthy to be celebrated, not by idle fictions, but by authentic history'.<sup>13</sup>

The 'authentic history' begins after the death of Vortimer:

'the British strength decayed, and all hope fled from them; and they would soon have perished altogether, had not Ambrosius, the sole survivor of the Romans, who became monarch after Vortigern, quelled the presumptuous barbarians [the Angles] by the powerful aid of warlike Arthur (...). He long upheld the sinking state and roused the spirit of his broken countrymen to

12 Rome conquered 'Britannia' between 75-77AD after a long series of attempted conquests of the island begun by Julius Caesar. The Romans pulled out early in the fifth century, however, leaving Britain to Saxon conquest.

13 *Ibidem*, 11.

war. Finally, at the siege of Mount Badon, relying on an image of the Virgin, which he had affixed to his armour, he engaged nine hundred of the enemy, single-handed, and dispersed them with incredible slaughter'.<sup>14</sup>

The *Chronicle's* Arthur fights on the side of Ambrosius, the last surviving Roman ruler in Britain; thus, in William's hands, Arthur's success transforms into another Roman victory. Arthur's conversion to a tool of the Roman empire begins to look very much like Norman propaganda when combined with the *Chronicle's* hostility toward native Britons who tell 'fables' and William's depreciation of his Anglo-Saxon chronicle sources (he assures the reader that he will 'season the crude materials with Roman art').<sup>15</sup> The *Chronicle* seems to imply a parallel between the Roman rulers who 'civilized' an unruly Britain and the Norman French who arrived more recently to impose their language and their law on the English. William even dedicated the 1127 version of his chronicle to Robert Earl of Gloucester, Henry I's son.<sup>16</sup> Although the *Chronicle* attempts to limit tales told about Arthur, William has no trouble embracing the Brutus myth. Indeed, he even uses it to legitimize England's new Norman monarchs by including them in a continuous line of kings that begins with Brutus himself. Arthur, on the other hand, remains disconnected from England's royal lineage at this point, but as monarchs sought to expand their territories, they would soon begin to lay claim to both Arthur's body and his blood.

## **Arthur's Awakening**

England experienced a period of turmoil known as 'The Anarchy' from 1135-1154. A bitter civil conflict erupted after the death of Henry I between the supporters of the Empress Matilda, Henry's daughter and heiress, and her uncle Stephen of Blois, who fought to take England for himself. Occurring less than one hundred years after the bloody Norman Conquest, this period of civil war traumatized an already weakened England. It was during this tumultuous time that Geoffrey of Monmouth composed his *Historia Regum Britannia*. Geoffrey's *Historia* advances Arthurian legend by exploring Arthur's origins and making him King of England rather than

14 Ibidem, 11.

15 Ibidem, 4. See also L. Finke and M. Shichtman, *King Arthur and the myth of history* (Gainesville, FL 2004) 31.

16 See J.A. Giles, editor and translator, *William of Malmesbury's chronicle of the kings of England* (New York 1968 [1847]).

just a warrior. More importantly, although Geoffrey retains the foundation myth that cites Brutus as 'the first king of the Britons', the nature of this myth changes drastically through his revisions to Arthur.<sup>17</sup>

Geoffrey's Brutus is a heroic figure, and the *Historia* spends ample time detailing his genealogy as Aeneas's descendant. Brutus's founding of a 'new Troy' is divinely-inspired. As he wanders in exile after killing his father, he stops to dedicate an island to Diana, who speaks to him in a dream:

'Brutus, beneath the setting sun, beyond the kingdoms of Gaul,  
There is an island [encircled by the sea,  
There is an island,] once inhabited by giants,  
But now it is deserted, ready to receive your people.  
It shall be a second Troy unto your descendants.  
There kings shall arise from your line, and unto them  
Shall the lands of the earth be subject'.<sup>18</sup>

When Brutus finally arrives at the promised land, Britannia, he builds a city called Troia Nova (known today as London) on the Thames. Hence, England is a 'second Troy' and all of its kings are Brutus's descendants.

Despite this reiteration of the Trojan foundation myth, Geoffrey's *Historia* makes two changes that will set historical trends for England: he reveals that Arthur, too, is Brutus's descendant. He then uses Arthur to sever England's debt to Rome. The break occurs when Geoffrey's Emperor Lucius demands tribute from Arthur and threatens to punish him for stealing Gaul.<sup>19</sup> Arthur's reaction to Lucius's demands asserts that Britain's ancestry and history of conquest predates Rome's:

'if Lucius demands that tribute must again be rendered to him merely because Julius Caesar and the other Roman kings once subjugated Britain, then I believe that the Romans should pay tribute to us, since my ancestors captured Rome in ancient times'.<sup>20</sup>

Arthur, who can trace his own lineage to Brutus, uses 'history' to position his people as conquerors rather than the conquered. Through Brutus and Arthur, the *Historia* places Britain at the scene of the conquest of Italy long before Rome ever invades Britain. The *Historia* then acts out a fantasy British victory

17 M.A. Faletra, editor and translator, *The history of the kings of Britain by Geoffrey of Monmouth* (Ontario, Canada 2008) 41.

18 Ibidem, 51.

19 Ibidem, 177.

20 Ibidem, 178-9.

over its colonizers: Arthur defeats the Roman army in Gaul. His victory is in no small part due to his ability to unite the various British territories and inspire their loyalty. Arthur and his allies then take vengeance on England's other former enemies, conquering Iceland, Norway, Denmark, and Gaul.<sup>21</sup>

In Geoffrey's version of events, the unification of Britain under Arthur is a prerequisite for British imperial power. Arthur clearly signifies his native land; he wears its emblems in battle against the Saxons, including a helm bearing the Welsh dragon, the sword 'Caliburn' (Excalibur) forged in Avalon, and the spear 'Ron'.<sup>22</sup> But Arthur must also subjugate the Irish, Scots, and Picts for the sake of British unity in a campaign which, one might argue, leads him to turn against his own people. Just as Geoffrey uses Arthur to 'solve' the problem of a history in which England is the victim of multiple conquests by Romans, Saxons, Vikings, and Normans, Arthur's connection to the Brutus myth also 'solves' his conquest of the Irish, Scottish, and Picts. In Geoffrey's account of Britain's origins, Brutus distributes his territories among his three sons, awarding them Scotland, England, and Wales. Thus, Arthur's conquests become acts of reclamation: Brutus's descendant is simply recovering the territories that belong to his bloodline.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's own historical moment and political situation may explain his enhancements to Arthur's legend. Different versions of Geoffrey's *Historia* were dedicated to Robert, Earl of Gloucester (a supporter of Matilda) and to Stephen of Blois, implying that Geoffrey could not predict who would be the victor of England's civil war. Geoffrey's own signature is on the Treaty of Westminster, which marks the compromise that finally brought peace between Stephen and Matilda in 1153.<sup>23</sup> Scholars also note Geoffrey's 'border' status as a Welsh monk writing for Norman patrons.<sup>24</sup> All of this provides the impression that if Arthur represents the fantasy of a unified Britain, it is likely a particularly urgent fantasy for Geoffrey.<sup>25</sup> Once civil unrest is healed by the coronation of Henry II, that fantasy also becomes terribly attractive to England's kings.

21 *Ibidem*, 170-3.

22 *Ibidem*, 166-9. Both weapons also appear in the Welsh triads.

23 According to the treaty, Stephen would rule until his death, after which Matilda's son, Henry II, would take the English throne and finally unify the bitterly divided land. See Faletra, *History*, 14.

24 See especially M. Warren, *History on the edge. Excalibur and the borders of Britain, 1100-1300* (Minneapolis 2000) xii; and L. Finke and M. Shichtman, *King Arthur*, 45.

25 D. Rollo, *Historical fabrication, ethnic fable and French romance in the twelfth century* (Lexington, KY 1998) 82.

## A Truly Royal Arthur

Geoffrey did not live to see Henry II's rule, but Henry became enamored of Geoffrey's stories of Arthur. Henry fancied himself a unifying figure in a land torn apart by conquest and conflict. He carried the blood of Normans, Saxons, and Scots, and then he married Eleanor of Aquitaine to ensure peace with France. Both Henry and Eleanor promoted Arthur's legend in different ways. Eleanor and her daughter, the Countess Marie de Champagne, sponsored the literary works of Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes. But Henry had a more strategic use for Arthur. He wanted peace and power for his kingdom, both of which meant subduing wayward British territories. The legend of Arthur and his conquests could be used to fuel and justify Henry's own ambitious monarchical expansion.

Henry sponsored the poet Wace, who rewrote Geoffrey's *Historia* to expand specifically on the episodes that featured Arthur as a conqueror, painting him, as Françoise Le Saux puts it, as a 'latter-day Alexander the Great'.<sup>26</sup> This image of Arthur fits perfectly with Henry's own agenda, which included plans to conquer Ireland, Brittany, and Wales.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Arthurian legend was employed frequently by Henry and the Plantagenet monarchs who succeeded him in order to legitimize their conquests. Richard the Lion-hearted invaded Sicily in 1190; as part of an eventual peace accord, he gave King Tancred of Sicily the sword 'Excalibur' in exchange for a ring and nineteen ships.<sup>28</sup> This 'gift' may also have served as a reminder of Arthur's legacy as the conqueror of Europe, almost a warning to Tancred that Sicily retained its autonomy at England's whim. Edward I, whose passion for Arthurian-themed celebrations and oath-taking ceremonies is well-documented, claimed to have the bodies of Arthur and his queen moved in 1278. Edward made a show of visiting the new graves and putting Arthur and Guinevere's skulls on display as relics.<sup>29</sup> His visit to the grave corresponded with a violent campaign to subdue the rest of Britain. As

26 F. Le Saux, 'Wace's "Roman de Brut"' in W.R.J. Barron ed., *The Arthur of the English. The Arthurian Legend in medieval English life and literature* (Cardiff 2001) 18-22, 21.

27 Warren, *History on the edge*, 140 and C. Snyder, *The world of king Arthur* (New York 2000) 130.

28 R. Rouse and C. Rushton, *The Medieval quest for Arthur* (Gloucestershire, Great Britain 2005) 77.

29 Higham, *King Arthur*, 230; Wood, 'At the Tomb', 13; J. Vale, *Edward III and Chivalry* (Woodbridge, UK 1982) 17; G. Ashe, *The quest for Arthur's Britain* (London 1972) 99.

Robert Rouse and Cory Rushton explain, Edward even played the role of Arthur during at least one of his tournaments, 'demonstrating to the world that just as Arthur had conquered all the peoples of Britain, so would he'.<sup>30</sup> Edward's ambitions resulted in his conquest of Wales, where he imposed English civil law and named his eldest son Prince of Wales, launching a tradition that remains in place today. Edward also turned Arthur against the native people: he claimed that the Welsh gave him Arthur's crown as a token of their submission, and he even attempted to use Geoffrey's *Historia* as legal evidence for his claim to Scotland.<sup>31</sup> When the Scottish appealed to Rome against English advances, Edward's secretaries produced as 'historical' evidence the portion of Geoffrey's *Historia* that described Scotland's surrender to King Arthur.<sup>32</sup> Edward III, who attempted to claim France during his reign, worked even harder than his grandfather to construct 'an Arthurian identity for himself, based on tournaments and various kinds of chivalric pageantry'.<sup>33</sup> He founded the 'Order of the Garter', modeled on Arthur's order of knights, and held multiple round tables and elaborate tournaments.

Arthur's legend was not unproblematic for English monarchs. Wace and his contemporaries had added a troubling element to the story that seems to have been derived from Welsh folklore: the hope that Arthur would return and unite Britain under native rule. 'Still the Britons wait for him', Wace writes, 'And so they talk of him with hope: / from there he'll come; he's still alive' 'It's always been in doubt', he adds, 'And will be every day, I think, / If Arthur's dead or if he's living. He was borne away to Avalon (...) but promised 'he'd be king when he returned'.<sup>34</sup> Scholars speculate that the promise of Arthur's return, nicknamed 'the Breton hope', led Henry II to sponsor the 'discovery' of Arthur's grave at Glastonbury.<sup>35</sup> Gerald of Wales indicates that thanks to the information of a Welsh bard, Henry notified the monks at Glastonbury that Arthur and Guinevere's graves would be

30 See Rouse and Rushton, *medieval quest*, 35.

31 Vale, *Edward III*, 17-18; R.S. Loomis, 'Edward I. Arthurian Enthusiast', *Speculum* 28.1 (1953), 114-27, 17.

32 Loomis, 'Edward I', 121; Higham, *King Arthur*, 232.

33 H. Fulton, 'Arthurian Prophecy and the Deposition of Richard II' in *Arthurian Literature* XXII (2005) 64-83, 67; S. Crane, *Insular romance. Politics, faith, and culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1986) 197. See also Vale, *Edward III*.

34 Wace, *Le Roman de Brut*, translated by A.W. Glowka (Arizona 2005) ll. 13279-13298.

35 Rouse and Rushton, *Medieval Quest*, 55.

found at their abbey, sixteen feet beneath the earth in a hollow oak.<sup>36</sup> The graves themselves are widely considered a hoax today, their discovery a political ploy meant to quell the rumors of Arthur's eventual resurrection.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Marc Morris asserts that Edward I's visit to Glastonbury was a response to rumors that the Breton hope had renewed among the Welsh and Scottish; thus, Edward chose to leave the evidence of Arthur's mortality 'on permanent display: the skulls of "Arthur" and "Guinevere" were not re-interred, but placed outside the tomb'.<sup>38</sup> Yet the supposition that Henry and Edward drew attention to Arthur's grave in order to prove to the native Britons that their savior was dead may not be the whole story. First of all, the Glastonbury grave was 'found' two years after Henry II's death, leading some to conclude that the Glastonbury monks attributed a lucrative relic scheme to the late king as a matter of political expediency.<sup>39</sup> But more importantly, the symbolic value of the physical excavations of Arthur's body mirrors what the Plantagenet line did with Arthur's legacy: they removed the great king from the legends of the native Britons and claimed his image as their own, eventually embedding Arthur into their own bloodline. Future monarchs would even purport to be Arthur reborn or christen their firstborn sons Arthur.

In another sense, however, the Plantagenet success in appropriating Arthur proved to be a double-edged sword. The monarchs who conquered British territories had wrested control of King Arthur from his people, but those people were becoming disenchanted with an increasingly avaricious and corrupt ruling class, especially under Richard II. As England began to lose territories to France in the Hundred Years War, Arthur's fantastical conquests began to lose their appeal. Hence, though legends of Arthur still circulated under Richard II, two of the best-known works of that period demonstrate skepticism, if not outright hostility, toward the glorious king and his court. Arthur's infusion into the line of English nobility had the unlikely effect of associating Arthur, once a populist hero, with the disdained elite whereas Brutus, the Trojan whose noble blood was supposed to be the

36 H.E. Butler, ed. and translator, *The autobiography of Gerald of Wales* (Woodbridge, UK 2005) 120.

37 See Finke and Shichtman, *King Arthur*, 31; Higham, *King Arthur*, 230.

38 M. Morris, *A great and terrible king. Edward I and the forging of Britain* (London 2008) 165-6. See also Rouse and Rushton, *Medieval Quest*, 62.

39 C. T. Wood, 'At the Tomb of King Arthur', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 8 (1998) 1-14, 4-5.



This sign is all that remains of Arthur's supposed grave at Glastonbury Abbey. The abbey was nearly destroyed under Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries. Author's original photograph.

source of all of Britain's kings, was reclaimed as the symbol of England.

The Brutus legend was so popular in the fourteenth century that Londoners even considered renaming their city 'Troynovant'.<sup>40</sup> Literature also showed a striking preference for founding myths that connected Britain to Troy. Chaucer recounts Brutus's story and Britain's Trojan legacy in several of his *Canterbury Tales* as well as *The Legend of Good Women*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and *The House of Fame*. By contrast, Arthur's appearances in Chaucer's works are very brief. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* infamously associates 'th' olde dayes of Kyng Arthour' with elf-queens and fairies, relegating Arthur to the world of romance and fantasy even as Chaucer's other poems elevate Troy to national history.<sup>41</sup> The Gawain poet, presumably writing around the same time as Chaucer (though the exact date of Sir Gawain and The Green Knight is unknown), frames his poem by invoking the birth of Britain from brave Brutus and the ashes of Troy.<sup>42</sup> The poet's Arthur, by contrast, is a rash youth who presides over a cowardly court. At the end of the poem, Arthur's knights don girdles as

40 S. A. Barney, 'Troilus and Criseyde' in: L. Benson ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (New York 1987) 472.

41 Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer* ll, 857.

42 J. Winny ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Peterborough, ON, 2006 [1992]) ll. 1-24.

emblems of Gawain's shame at the hands of the Green Knight, a literary representation that can be read as sharply critical of Edward III's Order of the Garter, or perhaps even all of his Arthurian theatics.<sup>43</sup> It would take another internal threat to England's unity in order to reunite Arthur with Britain's 'historical' past in the popular imagination.

## Arthur under Tudor

Despite Arthur's waning reputation in literature, he had not lost his appeal to the nobility. Both Richard II and Henry IV employed Arthurian symbolism and circulated competing Arthurian prophecies in their campaigns against one another.<sup>44</sup> As the houses of York and Lancaster took turns chasing each another off of the throne, England became a nation divided against itself once again, and once again, Arthur experienced a resurrection. No longer a figure of loss or a hero buried, unearthed, and exploited, he began to mark instead a collective desire for national identity.<sup>45</sup>

John Hardyng's fifteenth-century *Chronicle* retells the familiar ancestral stories of the English kings in order, Finke and Shichtman argue, to 'establish the sovereignty of the British monarch over Scotland'.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Hardyng claims to have provided Henry V with the original documents Edward I used to argue his own case for Scotland.<sup>47</sup> But like Geoffrey, Hardyng may have had British unity as his main motivation. Writing during the Wars of the Roses, Hardyng first intended his *Chronicle* for the patronage of Henry VI, but later revised his dedication for Richard, Duke of York, as a tribute to his son Edward IV.<sup>48</sup> Hardyng also emphasizes the continuity of English monarchy from its origins: not only is his Arthur descended from Brutus, founder of Britain, but the York royal line itself is now said to descend

43 F. Ingledew, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Order of The Garter* (Notre Dame, IN 2006). See Ingledew also for a dispute over the date of the poem, which is traditionally dated under Richard II. Ingledew argues for the poem's composition earlier, under Edward III, and therefore reads it more directly as a criticism of Edward's chivalric order. See also Rouse and Rushton, *The Medieval Quest for Arthur*, 41.

44 Fulton, 'Arthurian Prophecy', 64-7.

45 Riddy, 'Contextualizing', 68.

46 Finke and Shichtman, *King Arthur*, 136.

47 Hardyng, *Chronicle*, 292.

48 Finke and Shichtman, *King Arthur*, 136-7; S.L. Peverly, 'Political Consciousness and the Literary Mind in Late Medieval England. Men «Brought Up of Nought» in Vale, Hardyng, Mankind, and Malory', *Studies in Philology* 105.1 (2008) 1-29, 11-12.

from Arthur.<sup>49</sup>

Hardyng's *Chronicle* begins with the customary invocation of the Trojan historical muse: the tale of Aeneas, Brutus, and the founding of Britain. Yet he reinforces the link between Arthur and Brutus. In Hardyng's *Chronicle*, Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father, bears the arms 'of Troye, that Brutus bare' alongside the dragon standard of the native Britons.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Uther combines Roman and British nobility on his person. Arthur does the same, bearing six significant banners when he pursues the Saxons in Scotland: the Virgin Mary, the Trinity, St. George, Brutus's arms, gold crowns, and a gold dragon.<sup>51</sup> As a text that seems to desire the expansion of a kingdom that is itself in turmoil, the *Chronicle* seems anxious for a consistent, coherent national identity that marks England from its very point of origin. This identity, however, requires a mythological patricide. While earlier authors such as Geoffrey and Wace feature Arthur's defeat of the Roman Lucius on the battlefields of Gaul, Hardyng follows a more recent literary tradition in which Arthur invades and conquers Rome, then is crowned emperor by the Senate.<sup>52</sup> It seems that in the fifteenth-century English imagination, Arthur's imagined conquest of Rome finally vanquished the shadow of Rome's very real colonization of Britain.

Despite the political uses of Hardyng's *Chronicle*, it would be a nostalgic author writing from prison during the Wars of the Roses that would canonize Arthur as an English emperor. Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* was one of the earliest books to be printed, and its eventual acceptance as the standard Arthurian text ultimately would diminish the importance of England's Trojan origin story and elevate Arthur's own origins instead. Malory's Arthur, like Hardyng's, invades Italy and is crowned emperor by the Pope.<sup>53</sup> But unlike Hardyng, Malory ignores Brutus almost entirely. Instead, he begins England's story with the figure who continues to launch almost every Arthurian rendition today: Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father and 'kynge of all Englund'.<sup>54</sup> Brutus is only mentioned once, probably

49 F. Riddy, 'John Hardyng's Chronicle and the Wars of the Roses' in *Arthurian Literature* XII (1993) 91–108, 102. Hardyng's was but one of many Yorkist and Lancastrian 'genealogies' written to prove each line's ancestry through Brutus.

50 Henry Ellis ed., *The Chronicle of John Hardyng* (London 1984 [1812]) 17.

51 *Ibidem*, 122.

52 *Ibidem*, 144.

53 Eugène Vinaver ed., *The works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3 vols., rev. P.J.C. Field (Oxford 1990) I.245.

54 *Ibidem*, I.7.



An image of Arthur from the Winchester Round Table, his likeness painted to resemble Henry VIII. Image retrieved from <http://www3.hants.gov.uk/greathall/greathall-roundtable.htm>  
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accidentally thanks to one of Malory's sources, during the Lucius episode. Sir Clegis, a very minor character, announces in an equally minor verbal confrontation, 'from Troy Brute brought myne elders'.<sup>55</sup> For Malory, Arthur is the sum total of England's history, and Arthurian legend is the origin story that matters because Arthur unified Britain. For despite his descriptions of Arthur's conquests, Malory seems far more interested in a strong, united England than an expansionist one, and he writes in painstaking detail about Arthur's efforts to bring all of Britain under his peaceful rule.<sup>56</sup>

Henry Tudor would manipulate the very same desire for identity and stability that is so evident in Malory's text, marketing himself as often as possible as Arthur's own descendant. If the pending Tudor dynasty could prove that it inherited its right to rule from Arthur himself, in an age in which blood was more permanent than geographical boundaries, it would be of paramount importance that Arthurian inheritance move from theoretical to physical as quickly as possible. Like other contenders for the throne, Henry commissioned a report of his ancestry that traced his line through both Arthur and Brutus.<sup>57</sup> Unlike other prospective kings,

55 Ibidem, I.213.

56 Hodges, 'Malory's Lancelot', 562.

57 Finke and Shichtman, *King Arthur*, 159.

however, Henry specifically manipulated the passion for Arthur in Wales. His propaganda took for granted his inherited dominion over the Welsh, which he used not to force them into submission, but to rally the Welsh to fight for his cause. Henry even took up the title of the Mab Daragon, 'Son of Prophecy,' and fought under the banner of the Red Dragon, a symbol of both Arthur and Wales.<sup>58</sup> He defeated Richard at the Battle of Bosworth with the help of the Welsh in 1485, the same year that Caxton began printing Malory's *Morte Darthur*.

Once Arthur had absorbed both Rome and Troy, and the Tudors had absorbed Arthur, England was free from the shadow of its Roman past. Indeed, Henry VIII may have been channeling the exploits of his imagined ancestor in 1531, when his argument for his right to divorce rested on the claim that Rome had no authority over Henry or his nation because he was the descendant of Arthur, conqueror of empires.<sup>59</sup> Though it was hardly Arthur's only role in history, literature, or politics, driving off the shadows of Rome may have been one of the most important political battles over which the legendary medieval king triumphed. His success at winning the English imagination was a victory that would stand the test of time: even now King Arthur is known worldwide as the symbol of the earliest British origins, while Brutus and his 'second Troy' have disappeared into ancient history.

58 P.C. Ingham, *Sovereign fantasies. Arthurian romance and the making of Britain* (Philadelphia 2001) 72, 199.

59 Wood, 'At the Tomb', 7-8.