

## **Cornwall in the Early Arthurian Tradition**

*Heather Dale April 2008*

It is believed that an actual “King Arthur” lived in 6th Century AD in the southwestern area of Britain. A brief history lesson is needed to provide the backdrop to this historical Arthur. In 43 AD, the Romans occupied Britain, subduing the northern Pictish & Scottish tribes, and incorporating the pre-literate but somewhat more civilized Celtic peoples into the Roman Empire. The Romans intermarried with the Celts, who emulated their customs and superior technology; these Romanized Celts became known as Britons. When the Romans abandoned Britain in 410 AD, the Britons found themselves attacked on all sides: the northern tribes pushed south, the Irish raided from the west, and fierce Germanic tribes (Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Franks, Frisians) and Norsemen slowly pushed the Celts into southwestern Wales and Cornwall. Some even fled across to the Continent, establishing Brittany in western France and becoming known as Bretons.

It is in this turbulent post-Roman time that a brave man, perhaps a sort of tribal chieftain, led a small force of Britons into battle with the Germanic tribes. And due to tactical skill, superior fighting prowess and/or incredible luck (we will never know) this Artorius or Arthur held back the Germanic hordes from his corner of Britain for 30 years, a full generation. This incredible feat is first mentioned in a 6th century quasi-historical Latin chronicle by the monk Gildas.

Later chroniclers added detail of dubious historical accuracy but great heroism to the tale of Arthur. The Venerable Bede wrote in 731 AD about the first great victory over the Saxons at Mount Badon (surmised by some to be Liddington Castle near Swindon), and the Welsh chronicler Nennius bases his 9th century story on material from the rich Welsh storytelling tradition. Traditional Welsh heroes like Culhwch (from the medieval *Mabinogion* story collection) and Gawain became associated with Arthur, while the Celtic fascination with giants, magicians, and the realm of the Otherworld or Fairy became inextricably linked with the more mundane aspects of Arthur's battles. This interest in spiritual mysteries is especially evident in the Quest for the Holy Grail, a confusing and conflicting theme which was added in the 12th Century.

Even before the first millennium had ended, Arthur had become a legendary hero: he allegedly killed 1000 men single-handedly, he carried the holy image of Mary on his shield which put his foes to flight, and was described as leading "all the Kings of Britain". Renowned warriors were complimented that they are "almost as good as Arthur", and heroic tales soon popped up all across Europe.

In 1066 AD, the French-speaking Normans conquered the Saxons and occupied Britain. Faced once more with relatively benign conquerors, the Britons began to adopt the romantic ideals of the Norman courts. Geoffrey of Monmouth's

colourful fictional history called *The History of the Kings of Britain* (1138) fired the imaginations of the cultured Normans by giving King Arthur a massive Continental war campaign, along with a Norman-style court at Camelot which was concerned with the new concept of courtly love. Introduced by Eleanor of Aquitaine (Queen of Henry II) and her daughter Marie, Countess of Champagne, the complex game of courtly love involved young knights and coy maidens, a great deal of flattering speech and swearing of undying love, the introduction of fighting tournaments to compete for the favour of a lady, and the idea that True Love could only happen by accident (and, tragically, outside of lawful marriage).

Tales about King Arthur's court flourished with the 12th century writings of Chretien de Troyes. A master of the Romance style, Chretien introduced Sir Lancelot as the ideal Courtly Lover. Chretien's romances fulfilled the Norman taste for tragic love stories: the Cornish prince Tristan and his Irish love Isolt, the lonely Welsh Perceval, and, of course, the doomed love between Sir Lancelot du Lac and Arthur's queen, Guinevere. Cornwall is well represented in these early Arthurian stories, both geographically and in terms of providing key players to our tale, I'll outline some of the instances below.

### **MAJOR CHARACTERS:**

**Arthur** himself is a Cornishman, though he's rarely identified as such in any of the legends. Contemporary writers probably didn't feel his maternal lineage was terribly important, but Arthur was the only son of Igraine (also spelled Igera, Ygerne, etc), who was wife to the Duke/King/Earl of Cornwall at the time of Arthur's conception. Very little is written about Igraine's heritage, but I think it likely that she was from the West Country, if not from Cornwall proper.

Geoffrey of Monmouth (1138) relates wonderfully scandalous tale: Uther Pendragon, a powerful warlord of Romano-Celtic stock, flirts a little too obviously with Igraine at a state dinner; in angry response, her husband Duke Gorlois locks her in Tintagel Castle (still to be seen in northern Cornwall), then races off to the citadel of Dimilioc (location unknown) to withstand Uther's siege. But Merlin (the Welsh magician and seer already introduced earlier in the book) transforms Uther into the very likeness of Igraine's husband, which allows him to sneak into Tintagel and spend a blissful evening with his ladylove. The next morning all is revealed: Gorlois has died of his battle wounds and Uther claims Igraine's hand in marriage.

Nine months later, their only son Arthur is born... but is immediately whisked away by Merlin to be raised in parts unknown. Interestingly, the 1138 version of the tale gives Arthur a sister named **Anna**, also the daughter of Uther & Igraine; Anna is an early benign prototype for the more malevolent Morgan Le Fay. Like Morgan, Anna marries King Lot (Loth) in northern Scotland and is the mother of both Gawain and Mordred. There's no mention of Anna's ultimate fate,

but by the end of Geoffrey's account, all the males in Arthur's line (Arthur, Mordred and Gawain) have died without leaving children of their own.

Where Arthur blood-tie to Cornwall may be debated, his half-sister **Morgan Le Fay** is as Cornish as they get. Eldest daughter of Duke Gorlois of Cornwall and his wife Lady Igraine, Morgan lost her inheritance following Arthur's birth (the law of primogeniture strikes again). She raises her illegitimate son **Mordred** to hate the king, and Mordred later starts a civil war that topples Camelot and Arthur's reign. Cornwall features heavily in Mordred's civil war: once Arthur's army returns from the Continent to fight him, Mordred “fled by boat into Cornwall over the River Camblan” (probably the river Camel in northeast Cornwall, which flows down past Wadebridge into estuary outside Padstow). There he laid in wait for Arthur at Camelford (southeast of Tintagel), and they destroyed each other in a final titanic battle of “Camlann”. In the writings of Layamon (last decade of 12<sup>th</sup> Century, the first full account of Arthurian story in English language, in the form of a 32,000 line poem), the river Camel is muddled up with the river Tamar, which is not even remotely nearby... but it makes for some great reading about “the River Tamar now rife with blood”.

Queen **Guinevere** is always said to be “from the West Country”, though never associated specifically being Cornish in the early texts. But I found a neat reference in Geoffrey's account (1138): “When he had finally brought the state of the whole country to its original dignity, Arthur married a woman named Guinevere, who was descended from a noble family of Romans and reared in the household of Duke Cador [of Cornwall!]. She was the loveliest woman in all the island.” So like many of us, Guinevere must have had fond childhood reminiscences of the Cornish coastlines.

**Duke Cador** of Cornwall succeeds Igraine's first husband **Duke Gorlois**, though how he and Cador are related is never explained. Cador is a powerful and trusted warleader in Arthur's army, which is to be expected as they would have considered each other close kin. Interestingly **Constantine**, son of Duke Cador, is listed as Arthur's successor to the British kingship in 542AD... but never seemed to merit any legends of his own. Last but certainly not least, I'd be completely remiss if I didn't mention the most famous of Cornish knights, **Sir Tristan**. He became wildly popular all across Europe in the later Middle Ages (13th-15th centuries), and his story stood on its own merits with only the most tenuous of connections to King Arthur's court at Camelot. As such, Arthur's military right-hand-man Duke Cador is replaced by the noble yet jealous **King Mark of Cornwall**... which would have proved much more delicious for the pampered women in Europe's glittering medieval courts.

Like Arthur, Tristan's mother was a Cornish princess – in Tristan's case, the lovely Blanchefleur who was sister to King Mark (or March) of Cornwall. After

falling madly in love with the dashing Prince Rivalin of Parmenie/Brittany, she elopes with him, but is soon widowed as Rivalin falls in battle. Before dying of grief, she bears her only son Tristan (named after “tristesse”, or “sorrow” in French) who is hidden from Parmenie's conquerors. A precocious lad, Tristan travels widely and is finally accepted by his beloved uncle King Mark to be Cornwall's heir. But Tristan is fatefully sent to fetch Mark's Irish bride, Princess Isolt (Iseult, Isolde, etc); Tristan and Isolt accidentally share a love potion... which needless to say puts Tristan at odds with his uncle. Bizarre romantic misadventures ensue. These culminate in Tristan's death by poison (or at Mark's hand, depending on the story). After Isolt's immediate and predictable death from grief, they are buried together in Cornwall (in Tintagel's chapel according to the most popular 1210 version by Gottfried von Strassburg). Twining rosebushes rise from their graves, locking them together for eternity... sadly there are no roses growing in Tintagel's ruins today, but it is a lovely image.

I hope you'll visit my website at [www.HeatherDale.com/music](http://www.HeatherDale.com/music) to check out some of my King Arthur-inspired songs and stories. Cornish-related ones include:

- **The Legends of Arthur storybook:** “King Arthur's Birth”, “Arthur's Sin”, “The Minstrel Prince”, “The Wooing of Isolt”, “Morgan's Trickeries”, “The Passing of Tristan”, “The Second King”, “War Between Brothers”.
- **May Queen CD:** “May Queen”, “Prodigal Son”, “Crashing Down”, “Tristan and Isolt”.
- **The Trial of Lancelot CD:** “The Trial of Lancelot”, “Mordred's Lullaby”.