Foundations of Model Kingship: A Literary-Historical Perspective on the Character of Arthur

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The legendary figure of King Arthur has echoed through the ages to resonate in the hearts of every generation since its inception. The story has encouraged leaders, inspired poets, and baffled historians. The adaptation of this king’s story takes many forms: movies, theatrical productions, songs, and art. However, the legends of Arthur have found no better medium than their original form—that of literature. Due to the lack of evidence concerning Arthur’s existence, this method of expression casts a specter of doubt on the historical details of Arthur’s reign. The lack of sources and the nature of the literature about Arthur place him more firmly in the realm of legend than that of solid fact.

The temptation to search for the true Arthur in history, however, has been irresistible to many. Historians, encumbered with the burdensome task of trying to prove a literary figure’s existence, have originated many theories about Arthur’s possible origins. Some of these theories propose mythological origins for Arthur’s reign. Others attempt to support the legends with historical evidence.¹ A more cohesive way to envision Arthur blends literary and historical material. In this light, Arthur emerges as a literary figure of the ideal king, whose legend has been shaped by writers who have modeled their stories on real British monarchs. Pieces of Arthur’s story may draw on the reigns of such figures as Edward III, Henry VIII, and even Elizabeth I. However, the foundations of the Arthur legend closely parallel the reign of Alfred the Great of England; the two kings bear similarities through the themes of their reigns as well as in the styles of their literary legends and the cultural legacies they left England.

In order to fully understand the importance of viewing Arthur as a blend of literary and historical tradition, some different theories about Arthur’s identity must be examined. Many historians have compared Arthur to some other historical figure. In their book Pendragon: The

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Definitive Account of the Origins of Arthur, Steve Blake and Scott Lloyd theorize that Arthur should be viewed in his original geographic context, which many historians have failed to do. According to Blake and Lloyd, since the Arthurian legends first originated in Wales, and the Welsh traditional locations and names are used, Arthur was Welsh. They also point out that Geoffrey of Monmouth used Welsh written and oral traditions and sources to fashion his version of Arthur.

Frank D. Reno also attempts to locate the geographical origins of Arthur in his book The Historic King Arthur. Reno uses the works of early English writers like Bede and Gildas as well as the Historia Brittonum to prove that Arthur lived in the southwest of England between 420 and 520 A.D. For evidence, Reno studies the symbolic value of place names and comes up with an interpretation of an Arthur as a combination of the historical figures of Ambrosius Aurelianus and Riothamus and of Arthur himself.

Two other authors agree with parts of Reno’s hypothesis. Philip Thornhill supports the argument that Arthur may have historical links to Ambrosius Aurelianus, although he arrives at this conclusion differently than Reno. Thornhill linguistically analyzes the connections that Arthur’s name may have to other figures’ names. However, he cautions against placing too much emphasis on the historical approach because of the lack of an Arthur figure in some major

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3 Ibid., 29.


6 Ibid., 12.

7 Ibid., 18.

early sources of his time.\textsuperscript{9} Despite some historical links, Arthur can best be understood as a mythological figure\textsuperscript{10} or even a “Christianized divinity.”\textsuperscript{11} Geoffrey Ashe supports the Riothamus side of Reno’s theory. In his book \textit{The Discovery of King Arthur}, Ashe notes the connections between Riothamus’ march into Gaul and Arthur’s campaign there.\textsuperscript{12} Ashe also suggests that Arthur may be modeled on a hero of the English battles of Badon and Camlann.\textsuperscript{13}

Norma Lorre Goodrich proposes a final theory in \textit{King Arthur}. She reacts to the idea of a cultic or divine Arthur and instead favors a historical explanation.\textsuperscript{14} The interesting part of Goodrich’s theory is that she explains some of the chronology problems in the early texts by suggesting that they use a circular concept of time rather than a linear one.\textsuperscript{15}

The benefit of a literary-historical interpretation of Arthur is that it can absorb all of these varying theories of the nature of Arthur. In literature, real historical examples may be blended with legend. The simple truth is that whoever Arthur was, and wherever he came from, the origin of his importance to the English people occurs in literature. The realities of his life are less important than the realities of his legend. Because Arthur’s character has such deep ties to literature, the precedents for his character—in this case the figure of Alfred—may also be found in literature.

At the outset, several factors must be noted that create problems for this study. First, many different versions of the Arthur legend exist. As previously noted, Arthur’s story often

\textsuperscript{9} Thornhill, “Origin,” 229.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 227.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 245.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 119.

\textsuperscript{14} Norma Lorre Goodrich, \textit{King Arthur} (New York: Franklin Watts, 1986), 36.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 33.
changes to reflect changing trends and ideals throughout time. This study cannot possibly examine even all of the early Arthur legends in entirety. Four early works will be referenced in this paper: Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *The History of the Kings of Britain, The Mabionogion, The Death of Arthur*, and Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. These Arthur tales span several hundred years and provide a glimpse of how Arthur’s story has been altered over time. Another problem exists in the fact that Alfred’s life was documented primarily by one tale, Bishop Asser of Sherborne’s *Life of King Alfred*. While enough other evidence exists to prove Alfred’s existence, many details of Alfred’s life from the book are uncorroborated and may be somewhat legendary themselves. However, the shaky evidence of historical details matters little. The primary concern is to examine Alfred’s literary legend in light of Arthur’s literary legend. Since Monmouth wrote his version of Arthur around 1136, a mere 243 years after Asser penned the *Life of King Alfred*, it follows that these two narratives bear the closest similarities out of all the legends. Compared to each other, these two accounts offer a solid case that Geoffrey of Monmouth may have modeled his Arthur story after Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*.

To understand these literary accounts, their time frames and subject matter must be taken into consideration. Alfred was born in 849 at Wantage. As the youngest child, Alfred did not inherit the throne until his four older brothers died. Alfred grew up during a time of political strife between his own kingdom of Wessex and the various other regions of England, although

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20 P.J. Helm, *Alfred the Great* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), 27.
Wessex eventually emerged to dominate the surrounding kingdoms.\textsuperscript{21} His kingdom also remained almost constantly under attack from Viking raiders throughout his life.\textsuperscript{22} Though he faced these difficult challenges, Alfred brought Wessex military and naval success, governed his kingdom with fairness, furthered the causes of learning and religion, and began to unite the scattered kingdoms of England into a cohesive group with a common identity. For these reasons, he became the only English ruler to receive the title of “The Great.”\textsuperscript{23}

Bishop Asser of Sherborne preserved the story of Alfred’s reign in his \textit{Life of King Alfred}, written in 893. Asser was Welsh, a fact that may bear significance to the argument about the Arthur tales since the oldest Arthur stories probably originated in Wales.\textsuperscript{24} The language Asser uses in the \textit{Life of King Alfred} is extremely flattering to Alfred, and Asser may have been writing the narrative as a sort of propaganda to present to the Welsh about Alfred.\textsuperscript{25} During the time of Asser’s writing, church and state power was not balanced. Kings ruled as religious as well as political leaders.\textsuperscript{26} In addition to this influence, Alfred made Asser the head of two monasteries.\textsuperscript{27} Asser’s views of Alfred were subsequently biased, and his language in the \textit{Life of King Alfred} reflects this complementary view. However, the very fact that Alfred may have had a hand in shaping his own legacy only adds to the power of Alfred as a literary figure.

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\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{23} Helm, \textit{Alfred}, 9.
\textsuperscript{24} Blake and Lloyd, \textit{Pendragon}, 3.
\textsuperscript{25} Keynes and Lapidge, “Introduction,” 48-56.
\textsuperscript{27} Keynes and Lapidge, “Introduction,” 52.
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Geoffrey of Monmouth uses a similarly biased writing style in his *The History of the Kings of Britain*. The time frame of the story and Geoffrey’s writing is very important. His Arthur supposedly lived in the 500’s,\(^{28}\) hundreds of years before Geoffrey wrote the *History*. The *Life of King Alfred* had been around for long enough for Geoffrey to be familiar with it, and Alfred’s legacy would have already been incorporated into English culture at the time of Geoffrey’s writing. Whether or not he was aware of this fact, the figure of Alfred provided a relatively recent literary example of an exceptional English king.

In *The Arthurian Handbook*, Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe point out that while Geoffrey of Monmouth drew on many of the earlier Arthur legends, he was the first person to provide a detailed written description of Arthur’s career. Therefore, Geoffrey had the opportunity to shape the direction the legends would take in the future. According to Lacy and Ashe, Geoffrey’s work provided the foundations of Arthur as a “hero of romance.”\(^{29}\) The best way to read Geoffrey is to consider his work as a blend of general historical observations and literary invention.\(^{30}\)

*The Mabinogion* contains eleven Welsh stories. The oldest surviving manuscript was written around 1325, but these tales were probably recorded much earlier and had been passed down orally for many years before they were recorded. Unlike Geoffrey’s version, these tales do not read like a historical chronicle. Instead, they contain several Celtic myths.\(^{31}\) Arthur appears as a character in several of the tales, but he is not the primary or central figure in the stories. In

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\(^{30}\) Thorpe, “Introduction,” 19.

his introduction to *The Mabinogion*, Jeffrey Gantz observes that Arthurian myth did not borrow much from these stories.\(^{32}\) The value of comparing *The Mabinogion* with the Alfred’s literary legend mainly lies in its source. Since Asser was a Welshman, and these tales originated in Wales, it is reasonable to assume that Asser was at least familiar with the oral tradition of Arthur as he appeared in *The Mabinogion*. The description of Arthur as a cultural leader could have influenced Asser’s literary portrayal of Alfred, which was then reflected back in Geoffrey’s version of Arthur.

The other two tales mentioned are less relevant to the case of the Arthur and Alfred comparison. *The Death of Arthur* is actually a French tale, written in the thirteenth century.\(^{33}\) This version of Arthur shares similarities with Malory’s, but dwells more on events than on chivalric interpretations. Thomas Malory wrote *Le Morte Darthur* in 1469 or 1470.\(^{34}\) Lacy and Ashe call this account the “culmination of medieval Arthuriana.”\(^{35}\) By this time, the story had become a chivalric romance.\(^{36}\) Malory’s Arthur, while important, does not even dominate the story. Much of Malory’s tale focuses on Arthur’s knights, Merlin, and Guinevere. The value of comparing the Malory version to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s version is a well-rounded look at the way Arthur has changed.

Comparing these four radically different literary accounts of Arthur proves that the author of each tale had a great role in determining the story’s style. It is clear that the story has become a template for each culture or generation to use. The present day view of Arthur draws from all

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\(^{34}\) Lacy and Ashe, *Arthurian Handbook*, 140.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 132.

of these sources as well as many others. In some ways, the current view of Arthur is far removed from Geoffrey’s; for example, Geoffrey never mentions the Round Table and does not focus on chivalry—two elements of the story that play an important part in the present-day Arthur’s character. These additions to the legend were later popularized by Chretien de Troyes. Geoffrey’s Arthur understandably reflects the values of the time in which he was writing. These values are also reflected in the character of Alfred.

There are several parallels between Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Arthur and Asser’s Alfred. The kings share an element of biographical similarity in their inauspicious beginnings. Both built on heroic military careers to bring their kingdoms glory. Religion played an important part in both men’s lives, and both justified their decisions with the claim of authority from God. Arthur and Alfred were Christian kings, but they both dealt with pagan influences. Both made their courts a place of learning and wisdom, attracting great men to their service. They also created effective administrations through their delegation of duties to appropriate people. In personality, they displayed courage and generosity as their defining characteristics. They both became figures of political unification and strove to bring peace to their kingdoms. Along with this peace, both restored their country’s glory through building projects and prosperity. Finally, both kings became motivational figures through becoming “people’s kings.”

The biographical similarity in the humble beginnings of both Arthur and Alfred may at first seem unimportant. Arthur’s father Uther fell in love with Ygerna, a married woman. With Merlin’s help, Uther disguised himself as Ygerna’s husband and tricked Ygerna into sleeping with him. From this union, Arthur was born. Though Alfred was not conceived illegitimately,

38 Geoffrey, History, 205-207.
he spent much of his life as a lesser prince. Due to the fact that he had four older brothers, the chances of Alfred’s becoming king were slim at his birth.\(^{39}\) Aside from the necessity of providing biographical details, the choice to include this information made both Arthur and Alfred into underdogs who did not seem destined for greatness at birth. Both Asser and Geoffrey later strongly emphasize the role of God’s will in blessing the kings, and this concept of divine blessing holds even more weight when contrasted with the obstacles both Alfred and Arthur overcame. By emphasizing the distance that the kings had from greatness, Asser and Geoffrey strengthen their cases for divine sanction of their kings’ reigns.

Militarily, Arthur and Alfred both achieved much needed victories for their kingdoms; the military aspect of these kings’ reigns also ties into the theme of God’s will. Both kings ruled at a time of contention between various groups moving through Britain. Alfred’s enemies were the Vikings, raiders from Scandinavia who had begun to consistently harass Wessex while Alfred’s father Ethelwulf reigned.\(^{40}\) The Vikings followed a simple process: they would invade England, fight the English, demand a tribute, and then leave for a while, only to return again later and repeat the process.\(^{41}\) When Alfred was a young man, the Vikings conquered the city of York and began dividing the kingdom of Northumbria among themselves in order to settle down there. As Arthur grew up, his own kingdom and other kingdoms around him were constantly under attack. By the time Alfred was nineteen, he began to lead campaigns against the Vikings.\(^{42}\) Though Alfred was not always successful, Asser emphasizes his bravery in attacking

\(^{39}\) Helm, *Alfred the Great*, 27.  

\(^{40}\) Duckett, *Alfred the Great*, 8.  


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 128-129.
the Vikings in battle with his men, “supported by divine counsel and strengthened by divine help.”\textsuperscript{43} Asser also highlights the religious issues at stake by referring to Alfred’s forces as the “Christians.”\textsuperscript{44} Alfred achieved overall success in his battles with the Vikings; on several occasions he created peace agreements with them.\textsuperscript{45} After defeating the Vikings at Edington, Alfred required the Viking leaders to become Christians with the Peace of Wedmore.\textsuperscript{46} It is important to remember that the Vikings were a recurring problem. Even when Alfred obtained a victory or made peace, the Vikings were only temporarily defeated.

Alfred’s other military contributions to English history were organizational. He created a navy to counter the Viking fleet.\textsuperscript{47} The larger size of the ships in Alfred’s navy made them formidable to the smaller Viking ships.\textsuperscript{48} He also divided his army, the \textit{fyrd}, into two parts. One stayed at home while the other was out on duty.\textsuperscript{49} Alfred also oversaw the construction of forts to help withstand Viking invasions.\textsuperscript{50} All of these innovations gave Alfred an edge in his fight against the Vikings. Alfred’s military victories occurred at a crucial moment—in refusing to allow his country to be overrun with foreign invaders and settlers, he provided a central figure for his kingdom to unite around and also preserved his Saxon culture from being replaced with Viking culture.

\textsuperscript{43} Asser, \textit{Life of Alfred}, 79.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 78.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 81.

\textsuperscript{46} Oman, “Alfred as Warrior,” 138.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 135.


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 237.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 239-241.
Arthur served a similar purpose in his military exploits. Arthur fought two main groups in his lifetime, the Anglo-Saxons and the Romans. Like Alfred, Arthur divided his army into two parts and sent one to conquer an opposing kingdom while he retained the other half for subjugating provinces in Gaul that he then united under his rule. Arthur’s trouble with the Saxons began almost immediately after he became king. The way Geoffrey of Monmouth describes the invading Anglo-Saxons sounds remarkably similar to the way Asser portrays the Vikings. Arthur laid siege to the Saxon forces in Caledon Wood just as Alfred besieged the Viking forces at Edington. The starving Saxons agreed to a truce, just as the Vikings did in the Alfred story. And just as in Alfred’s dealings with the Vikings, the peace did not last. The Saxons had hardly left when they turned their ships around and began to invade again. The religious justification that Alfred used in his campaigns also appears in the Geoffrey’s narrative. After hearing of the Saxon treachery, Arthur gave a speech to his men in which he promises to “keep faith with [his] God…” and proclaimed to his men that “with Christ’s help [they] would conquer [the Saxons], without any possible doubt!” Both Arthur and Alfred either perceived their military actions to be justified by God’s will or at least used this argument to try to inspire their men.

Arthur also clashed with the Romans. Arthur’s final battle with the Romans marked the beginning of the end of Roman political control. Like Alfred, Arthur resisted foreign influences and religions at a crucial moment for his kingdom. By achieving military victory, he preserved his country’s identity. One final military similarity is that Arthur, like Alfred, fought

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51 Geoffrey, History, 225.
52 Ibid., 214-215.
53 Ibid., 216.
54 Ibid., 256-257.
alongside his men in battle. This fact is not only evidence of Arthur’s bravery, but it also fits with the idea of Arthur and Alfred as “people’s kings.” Both were humble enough to actually fight in the battles with their men.

Politically, both Arthur and Alfred built on their military victories to stabilize their realms and to become unifying figures. Asser describes how Alfred began the administration of his kingdom after his major victories over the Vikings. Geoffrey follows suit, discussing Arthur’s establishment of his court after describing military victories against the Anglo-Saxons. Both kings delegated administrative authority, which served the dual purpose of pacifying under-kings who owed them allegiance and making administration of the kingdom more effective. Arthur, for example, had a “claim by rightful inheritance to the kingship of the whole island.” However, he restored “hereditary rights” of several kings to lands that had been lost during Saxon invasions. Alfred also became an overlord who delegated authority. After conquering the Vikings, “all the Angles and Saxons…turned willingly to King Alfred and willingly submitted themselves to his lordship.” Alfred then delegated administrative authority by dividing his noble court into three groups. Each took turns serving one month at court and living at home for two months. In both cases, the kings showed consideration for the well-being of

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55 Geoffrey, History, 217.
58 Ibid., 212.
59 Ibid., 221.
60 Asser, Life of Alfred, 98.
61 Ibid., 106.
their subjects, but at the same time shrewdly used those subjects to enable better administration of their kingdoms.

Arthur and Alfred both gave the important gift of internal and external peace to their realms. After Arthur returned to Britain, he “established the whole of his kingdom in a state of lasting peace.”\(^6\) Alfred spent his life trying to establish peace as well. He achieved periods of relative peace, like the one after the victory at Edington.\(^3\) The peace that these two kings created freed their realm to focus on religious matters and cultural progress.

Both Alfred and Arthur cared deeply about religion. As previously mentioned, both kings used religious justification for their military aims, partly due to the fact that both fought groups that were not Christian. Arthur and Alfred fought to preserve Christianity as much as to hold on to their territories. However, after they had achieved military victory, neither forgot about religion. Alfred’s religious convictions approached fanaticism. He rose early (apparently during the night) to attend churches, see relics, and pray daily; he often prayed that God would strengthen his faith by sending him “some illness which he would be able to tolerate.”\(^4\) Alfred built new monasteries and appointed new church officials.\(^5\) He also enjoyed listening to his subjects read Scripture aloud.\(^6\) He translated a copy of Pope Gregory’s *Pastoral Care* into English so that people could begin to understand religion.\(^7\) He also translated Augustine’s

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\(^6\) Geoffrey, *History*, 222.

\(^3\) Asser, *Life of Alfred*, 84-85.

\(^4\) Ibid., 90.

\(^5\) Ibid., 105.

\(^6\) Ibid., 91.

\(^7\) The Bishop of Bristol, “Alfred as a Religious Man and an Educationalist,” in Alfred the Great, ed. Alfred Bowker (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1899), 100.
Soliloquies, in which he added his own thoughts about religion. All of Alfred’s religious actions describe a man of deep religious feeling who had a desire to make religion accessible for his kingdom. Arthur performed a similar function for his kingdom’s religion. After the Saxons left, he restored churches and reestablished the church officials. Arthur’s court at Caerleon was renowned for the two churches he established there.

Because both Geoffrey and Asser focus so strongly on the military success of the kings as God’s will, the kings’ religious restorations become the manifestation of God’s will, the end that justifies the military expeditions the kings undertake. In Geoffrey’s account, Cador, the Duke of Cornwall makes a speech that claims that God has orchestrated the Roman attacks on the Britons to provoke the Britons out of their laziness and cowardice. Even Arthur’s claim to the throne rests on God’s authority (as Alfred’s does).

In addition to restoring religion, both kings reestablished culture after their military victories. First, both kings undertook rebuilding projects. In addition to constructing monasteries, Alfred rebuilt London. Arthur built royal palaces at his court of Caerleon, turning it into one of the greatest cities in the world. However, the building projects of the kings merely served as the foundations for the greater reforms that would take place there. At Caerleon, Arthur created a court of the most distinguished men of his time. Geoffrey provides a

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69 Geoffrey, History, 221.

70 Ibid., 226.

71 Ibid., 252.

72 Ibid., 212.

73 Asser, Life of Alfred, 97-98.

74 Geoffrey, History, 226.
detailed list of the various people who attended Arthur and notes that Arthur became a trendsetter in everything from clothing styles to “courtliness.”

Asser describes Alfred’s culturally flourishing court as a place where Alfred inspired his subjects to new levels of craftsmanship, intellectual pursuit, and religious dedication. By making themselves the centerpieces of their fashionable courts, Arthur and Alfred began their own cultural legacies. They used their courts as symbols of their own power. By setting cultural trends that others (within the country and outside England) began to imitate, they increased England’s cultural status as well.

One specific reason that the courts of Alfred and Arthur succeeded so well was that Arthur and Alfred both encouraged the pursuit of intellectual knowledge. For Alfred, this tendency reached back into his childhood, when he beat his brothers to win a book in a memorization contest. When he became king, Alfred required his own children along with most noble children to be educated; they learned to read and write in English and Latin. Asser mentions that Alfred showed as much concern for the education of the nobles’ sons as he did for that of his own children, and Alfred personally taught many of them. Asser ends his narrative of Alfred’s life by describing Alfred’s literary legacy. Alfred required all his administrators to learn to read. If they could not learn, they had to find someone to read to them. Alfred placed the highest value on learning and especially literacy. In additions to his translations of religious manuscripts, he supported the writing and distribution of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. He also translated Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Seven Books of Histories against the Pagans*.

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77 Ibid., 75.
78 Ibid., 90-91.
79 Ibid., 110.
Alfred both made scholarly works available in English and encouraged his subjects to learn to read so that they could appreciate these works.

Arthur also valued intellectual achievement. In setting up his court, he established a college. He selected two hundred men to study astronomy and make prophesies. Arthur also established monasteries for religious learning. Geoffrey’s Arthur focused less on personal pursuit of learning than Alfred did. Nevertheless, Arthur’s establishment of monasteries and colleges for intellectual study proves that he viewed learning as important.

In personality, Arthur and Alfred shared some defining characteristics. Both are described repeatedly as being generous and courageous. Asser describes Alfred’s monetary gifts to everyone, including the poor, monasteries, and schools. David A. Hinton notes in Alfred’s Kingdom: Wessex and the South that generosity was a highly valued trait for a Germanic king, since kings distributed the spoils after battles. This tradition was actually a pagan influence that had not died with paganism. Interestingly, Geoffrey notes that Arthur followed this same tradition. He states that “in Arthur courage was closely linked with generosity, and he made up his mind to harry the Saxons, so that with his wealth he might reward his retainers. . . .” At the very least, some Anglo-Saxon influence colored Geoffrey’s description of Arthur. Arthur’s generosity had already endeared him to his nation when he was crowned at age fifteen.

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80 Helm, Alfred the Great, 166-167.
82 Asser, Life of Alfred, 91, 107.
84 Geoffrey, History, 212.
85 Ibid., 212.
Both kings also displayed remarkable bravery in battle. Alfred possessed courage even when events were not going well. At Ashdown, Alfred’s army had the inferior position on lower ground, but he “courageously” led them up the slope to meet the Vikings.\textsuperscript{86} Geoffrey paints a fearsome picture of Arthur in a battle against the Saxons. Arthur realized the Saxons were gaining the advantage, so he personally led a charge, “rush[ing] forward at full speed into the thickest ranks of the enemy.”\textsuperscript{87} This display of courage rallied his men and caused the Britons to win the battle.\textsuperscript{88} Both texts contain many other mentions of the kings’ courage like these.

Though Alfred and Arthur possessed the kind of courage that struck fear in their enemies’ hearts, both of these kings also treated defeated enemies mercifully. After the siege at Edington, the Vikings had no bargaining material and basically were forced to accept Alfred’s terms for peace with no concessions. However, Alfred showed them compassion, and even became Guthrum’s godfather after his baptism and showered the Vikings with gifts as they departed.\textsuperscript{89} Arthur encountered a similar situation with the Scots and Picts. He stopped his destruction of this people at their pleading, and even allowed them to retain some land.\textsuperscript{90} As with most facets of Arthur’s and Alfred’s lives, their merciful tendencies relate back to their religious convictions. Asser presents Alfred as the ideal Christian king: powerful in battle, but merciful to the conquered. Geoffrey describes Arthur the same way.

The one area in which Geoffrey’s account lacks a substantial link to Asser’s \textit{Life of King Alfred} is in its lack of emphasis on law-making and justice. This is a surprising omission to

\textsuperscript{86} Asser, \textit{Life of Alfred}, 79.

\textsuperscript{87} Geoffrey, \textit{History}, 217.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 218.

\textsuperscript{89} Asser, \textit{Life of Alfred}, 84-85.

\textsuperscript{90} Geoffrey, \textit{History}, 220.
those who are familiar with Arthur’s present-day image of the fair king who sat at a Round Table with his men. In this respect, Malory’s account and the French tale *The Death of Arthur* bear more similarity to the account of Alfred. Alfred strongly emphasized justice in his rule. He distributed money equally between groups like craftsmen, administrators, church officials, and the poor. Asser describes him as a “painstaking judge in establishing the truth in judicial hearings,” whether for nobles or commoners. Alfred also compiled a law code of Anglo-Saxon laws. In the tale “Gereint and Enid” in *The Mabinogion*, Arthur acts as a judge for his subjects, attempting to make the fairest decision. Also in the much later romance by Malory, the concept of the Round Table pervades the book, and Arthur charges his knights with a code of conduct that rests on foundations of justice.

The fact that Geoffrey does not dwell on Arthur’s sense of justice is the weakest link in the comparison between Geoffrey’s Arthur and the Asser’s Alfred. Asser assigns so much importance to the concept that it is unlikely Geoffrey would fail to borrow this theme if he were basing Arthur’s character mainly on Alfred’s character. However, Geoffrey does imply that Arthur is a just ruler, especially when discussing his generous nature. While he does not dwell on Arthur’s fairness, later versions of Arthur draw on the basis of Arthur’s implied fairness that Geoffrey creates.

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92 Ibid., 109.
96 Ibid., 57.
The culmination of all of these themes in Arthur’s and Alfred’s lives creates the image of these men as “people’s kings.” Their military styles of fighting alongside their armies, their concern for their subjects’ education, standards of living and religious well-being, and their generosity—all of these themes reveal kings who sincerely cared about their subjects. One possibly untrue story about Alfred’s reign sums up this concept. When Alfred was on campaign with his troops, he supposedly went to a peasant’s cottage to eat. The housewife asked him to watch the cakes she was baking. Alfred forgot about the cakes while lost in thought. The cakes burned, and Alfred received a rebuke from the peasant woman, who did not know he was the king. Whether or not this legend actually occurred, the image of an Alfred who was not too proud to mingle with his subjects has lasted hundreds of years.98 Arthur’s motivational speeches to his men before major battles illustrate this point with equal strength. Before their major battle with the Romans, Arthur gave his men a speech that addressed his men as “My countrymen, you who have made Britain mistress of thirty kingdoms. . . .”99 In this one phrase, Arthur both placed himself on equal terms with his men and gave them the credit for Britain’s prior military success. Because Alfred refused to place his own importance above his subjects, they gave him the title of “the Great.” The legends of Arthur reflect the same theme: the great king is the one who considers himself on an equal level with his subjects.

In addition to thematic material, Geoffrey’s narrative resembles Asser’s account of Alfred’s life in literary style. Both provide a chronological account of the kings’ lives, although Asser presents more childhood background on Alfred than Geoffrey does for Arthur. Both use flattering language to describe their kings. Neither account presents negative information about the monarchs; only the positive aspects of Alfred’s and Arthur’s reigns are presented. Also, both


accounts contain a disproportionate emphasis on the military aspects of the kings’ reigns. Asser
discusses the cultural and religious progress Alfred made in much less detail than he does
Alfred’s military campaigns. He discusses Alfred’s life by year, focusing on military exploits,
and then offers discussion of cultural achievements in the second part of the account. Geoffrey’s
account follows a similar structure, although it does not list the events of Arthur’s life by year.
His discussion of Arthur’s cultural reforms is sandwiched between a description of Arthur’s
dealings with his two great enemies, the Saxons and the Romans. Also, regardless of the degree
of truth of the two accounts, both Geoffrey and Asser portray the events in their narratives as
truth. These accounts provide a sense of reality that later romanticized versions do not. Both
accounts place the focus of the narrative on the king figure. Later accounts of Arthur, like
Malory’s, concentrate much more time and attention on Arthur’s knights. In Geoffrey’s account,
Arthur stands at the center of the plot and action, just as Alfred does in the Life of King Alfred.

The final main similarity between the figures of Alfred and Arthur is the legacy they have
given the English. Interestingly, both figures gained popularity during Victorian times. The
Victorians used Arthur as material for different art forms during a period of national identity
crisis over what it meant to be English.\textsuperscript{100} In “‘The Highest Type of Englishman’: Gender, War,
and the Alfred the Great Millenary Commemoration of 1901,” Stephen Heathorn describes Lord
Roseberry’s speech at the dedication of a statue of Alfred. He states that Roseberry “suggested
that Alfred was a model to which all future men of Anglo-Saxon heritage should aspire.”\textsuperscript{101} In
both cases, the Victorians tried to define themselves through the legacies of these two kings.

\textsuperscript{100} Debra N. Mancoff, “‘An ancient idea of Chivalric greatness’: The Arthurian Revival and Victorian
History Painting,” in The Arthurian Tradition: Essays in Convergence ed. Mary Flowers Braswell and John Bugge

\textsuperscript{101} Stephen Heathorn, “‘The Highest Type of Englishman’: Gender, War and the Alfred the Great
However, Alfred and Arthur have contributed to more than just the Victorian Age. Their stories, especially Arthur’s, still thrive in today’s pop culture. The greatest gift that Arthur and Alfred gave the English was a sense of who they are.

Looking at Arthur as a literary accumulation of historical figures opens up many new directions to explore. Further research is necessary to examine whether writers have shaped the Arthur legends by appropriating the examples of great English monarchs throughout history. However, due to its preservation in literature, Arthur’s legend has become an example for later rulers. It is difficult to discern whether writers are using the stories of real rulers or whether these monarchs are in fact modeling aspects of their own reigns on Arthur’s legend. Geoffrey Ashe comes close to describing this phenomenon in *The Quest for Arthur’s Britain* when he discusses T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*. Ashe states that in this book, Arthur’s legend “sums up medieval Europe. . . Actual monarchs” are “mere shadows or expressions of the Arthurian archetype.”

One such comparison has already been made. In “The Staff in the Stone: Finding Arthur’s Sword in the *Vita Sancti Edwardi* of Aelred of Rievaulx,” Marsha L. Dutton notes that the Arthurian story of the sword in the stone closely corresponds to the story of the bishop Wulfstan’s staff during Edward the Confessor’s reign. This comparison has strong relevance to the literary-historical Arthur interpretation. The *Vita Sancti* was written before the legend of the sword and the stone became associated with the Arthur legends in a work called *Merlin*. Therefore, the writer of this work could have adopted an already available literary tradition to fit

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103 Ibid., 247.
the Arthur story. If the legends of Arthur have literary connections to this work as well as Alfred’s story, it is reasonable to speculate that Arthur’s legend has connections to other English historical figures as well.

In conclusion, the figure of Arthur may best be understood as the idea of a model king. Geoffrey’s figure of Arthur parallels Bishop Asser’s Alfred in many ways, which suggests that Monmouth may have drawn on some of Alfred’s story for his portrayal of Arthur. Later versions of Arthur reflected important ideals of their own times. In his book *Alfred the Great*, P.J. Helm lightly remarks that “small boys often confuse Alfred with Arthur.” Perhaps this confusion stems from more than just the similar names of these two kings—perhaps more emphasis should be given to the similarities between these two great English monarchs.

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Bibliography

Primary


Secondary


