King Arthur is an important figure in the mythology of Great Britain. He is the central character in Arthurian legends (known as the Matter of Britain), although there is disagreement about whether Arthur, or a model for him, ever actually existed and in the earliest mentions and Welsh texts he is never given the title "king". Early texts refer to him as dux bellorum ("war leader") and High Medieval Welsh texts often call him amerauder ("emperor"). However, a recent translation of newly discovered documents may have referred to him as a king.

**History of King Arthur**

One school of thought believes Arthur to have lived some time in the late 5th century to early 6th century, to have been of Romano-British origin, and to have fought against the Saxons. His power base was probably in either Wales, Cornwall or the west of what would become England, but controversy over the centre of his power and the extent and kind of power he wielded continues to rage.

Some members of this school, most notably Geoffrey Ashe and Fleuriot, have argued for identifying Arthur with one Riothamus, "King of the Brettones", who was active during the reign of the Roman Emperor Anthemius. Unfortunately, Riothamus is a shadowy figure of whom we know little, and scholars are not certain whether the "Brettones" he led were Britons or Bretons.

Other members suggest that Arthur should be identified as one Lucius Artorius Castus, a historical Roman of the 2nd century, whose military exploits in Britain may have been remembered for years afterward.

Another school of thought believes that Arthur is at best a half-forgotten Celtic deity devolved into a personage (citing sometimes a supposed change of the sea-god Lir into King Lear) or a possibly fictive person like Beowulf.

Subscribers to this school of thought argue that another Roman Briton of this period, for example Ambrosius Aurelianus, led the forces battling the Saxons at the battle of Mons Badonicus.

**Early History of Arthur**

Arthur first appears in Welsh literature. In a surviving early Welsh poem, the
Gododdin, (c. 594) the poet Aneirin (c. 535–600) writes of one of his subjects that "he fed black ravens on the ramparts, although he was not Arthur" — but this poem as it currently exists is full of interpolations, and it is not possible to decide if this passage is an interpolation from a later period. Possibly of an earlier date are the following poems attributed to Taliesin: The Chair of the Sovereign — which refers to "Arthur the Blessed" — Preiddeu Annwn ("The Treasures of Heaven") which mentions "the valour of Arthur" and states "we went with Arthur in his splendid labours", and the poem "Journey to Deganwy" which contains the passage "as at the battle of Badon with Arthur, chief giver of feasts, with his tall blades red from the battle which all men remember".

Another early reference to Arthur is in the Historia Britonum, attributed to the Welsh monk Nennius, who is said to have written this compilation of early Welsh history around the year AD 830. In this work Arthur is referred to as a "leader of battles" rather than as a king. Two separate sources within this compilation list twelve battles that he fought, culminating in the battle of Mons Badonicus, where he is said to have single-handedly killed 960 men. According to the Annales Cambriae, Arthur was killed at the Battle of Camlann in 537.

Arthur also appears in the Welsh tale Culhwch and Olwen, a narrative that is usually associated with the Mabinogion. In that work, Culhwch visits his court to seek his help in winning the hand of Olwen. Arthur, who is described as his kinsman, agrees to the request, and fulfills the demands of Olwen's giant father Ysbadden, which includes his hunt for the great boar Twrch Trwth, described at length by the author.

In some of the Welsh biographies of their best-known saints (also called Vitae or the "Life" of a specific saint), Arthur makes a number of appearances: for example, in the Life of Saint Illtud, he is said to be a cousin of that churchman. Many of these appearances portray Arthur as a fierce warrior, and not necessarily as morally impeccable as in later Romances. According to the Life of Saint Gildas, written in the 11th-century by Caradoc of Llancarfan, Arthur killed Gildas' brother Hueil, a pirate on the Isle of Man. Lifris writes in his Life of Saint Cadoc that Arthur was bettered by Cadoc: Cadoc gave protection to a man who killed three of Arthur's soldiers; Arthur was awarded a herd of cattle from Cadoc as wergeld for his men; Cadoc delivered them as demanded; but when Arthur took possession of the animals, they were transformed into bundles of ferns. The likely original purpose of this story would be to promote popular acceptance of the new Christian faith by "demonstrating"
that Cadoc, the Christian leader, had magical powers traditionally ascribed to Druids and of sufficient intensity to outsmart the temporal ruler, Arthur. Similar incidents are described in the late medieval biographies of Carannog, Padern, and Goeznovius.

This may be related to legends where Arthur is depicted as the leader of the Wild Hunt, a folk motif that is also recorded in Brittany, France, and Germany.

Later parts of the Trioedd Ynys Prydein, or Welsh Triads, mention Arthur and locate his court in Celliwig, which is located in Cornwall. Celliwig was identified by older Cornish antiquaries with Callington, but Rachel Bromwich, the latest editor of the Welsh Triads, matched it to Kelly Rounds, a hill fort in the Cornish parish of Egloshayle.

**Arthurian romance**

In AD 1133, Geoffrey of Monmouth produced a manuscript called the Historia Regum Britanniae. This work was the mediaeval equivalent of a best seller and helped draw the attention of other writers, such as Robert Wace and Layamon who then expanded on the tales of Arthur. One theory as to why this happened is that after the Norman Conquest of Britain in 1066 there was renewed interest in the Arthurian Legend as described by Edward Gibbon in The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire:

During a period of five hundred years the tradition of his exploits was preserved, and rudely embellished, by the obscure bards of Wales and Armorica, who were odious to the Saxons, and unknown to the rest of mankind. The pride and curiosity of the Norman conquerors prompted them to inquire into the ancient history of Britain; they listened with fond credulity to the tale of Arthur, and eagerly applauded the merit of a prince who had triumphed over the Saxons, their common enemies. [Chapter 38, Footnote 138]

Thus, according to Gibbon, the once obscure 500-year-old Welsh legend went mainstream (through the works of Anglo-Norman poet Wace and others), creating a unified cultural icon under which the Norman rulers and the native Welsh could rally against their common enemy: the Saxons.

While many scholars believe that Geoffrey is the source for medieval interest in Arthur, at least one scholar, Roger S. Loomis, has argued that many of the tales surrounding Arthur actually come from Breton oral traditions, which were spread through the royal and noble courts of Europe by professional storytellers known as jongleurs. The French medieval writer, Chrétien de Troyes, recounted tales
from the mythos during the mid-12th century, as did Marie de France in her narrative poems called lais. In any case, the later stories told by these two writers and by many, many others, appear to be independent of what Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote.

In these versions, which gained popularity beginning in the 12th century, Arthur gathered the Knights of the Round Table (Lancelot, Gawain, Galahad, and others). At his court, most often held at Camelot in the later prose romances, could sometimes be found the wizard Merlin. Arthur's knights engaged in fabulous quests, famously including one for the Holy Grail. Other stories from the Celtic world came to be associated with Arthur, such as the tale of Tristan and Isolde. In the late prose romances the love affair between Arthur's champion, Lancelot, and the Queen, Guinevere, becomes the central reason for the fall of the Arthurian world.

In Robert de Boron's Merlin, later followed by Thomas Malory, Arthur obtained the throne by pulling a sword from a stone and anvil. In this account, this act could not be performed except by "the true king", meaning the divinely appointed king or true heir of Uther Pendragon. This sword was presumably the famous Excalibur and the identity is made explicit in the later so-called Vulgate Merlin Continuation. However in what is sometimes called the Post-Vulgate Merlin Excalibur was taken from a hand rising from a lake and given to Arthur sometime after he began to reign by a sorcerous damsel (confused by post-medieval writers with The Lady of the Lake). In this Post-Vulgate version the sword's blade could slice through anything and its sheath made the wearer invincible.

Arthur was a casualty in his last battle, the Battle of Camlann, which he fought against the forces of Mordred. The Prose Lancelot and the later prose cyclic romances state that Mordred was also a Knight of the Round Table and the child of an incestuous union between Arthur and his sister Morgause. In almost all accounts Arthur was said to be mortally wounded, but after the battle he was taken away to Avalon (sometimes identified with Glastonbury in Somerset, England), where his wounds were healed or his body was buried in a chapel. Some texts refer to a return of Arthur in the future.

The Arthurian mythos spread far across the continent. An image of Arthur and his Knights attacking a castle was carved into an archivolt over the north doorway of Modena Cathedral in Italy sometime between 1099 and 1120. A mosaic pavement in the cathedral of Otranto, near Bari also in Italy was made in 1165 with the puzzling depiction of Arturus Rex bearing a sceptre and riding a goat. 15th century merchants set up an Arthurian hall in his honour in Gda?sk, Poland.
Retellings of the Arthurian cycle include the works of Gottfried von Strassburg, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur.

In 1191, monks of Glastonbury Abbey announced that they had found the burial site of Arthur and Guinevere. Their grave was shown to many people, and the reputed remains were moved to a new tomb in 1278. The tomb was destroyed during the Reformation, and the bones lost. The antiquary John Leland reports that he saw the cross found with the remains, and transcribed its inscription as

Hic iacet sepvltvs inclytvvs rex artrvvs in insvla avalonia — "Here is buried the famous king Arthur in the Island of Avalon".

If Leland accurately reproduced the script of this inscription, then it can be dated to the 10th century. At least one scholar has suggested that the cross was added when Arthur's remains were translated to the Abbey.

**King Arthur in the Media**

- John Steinbeck's The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights is a traditional take in modern language.
- Sidney Lanier's The Boy's King Arthur is a work based on Thomas Mallory's, written in such a way to appeal to the boys of the 19th century.
- Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon
- Bryher set her historical novel Ruan in Britain immediately after Arthur's death.
- Catherine Christian, The Pendragon tells the story from a 5th century Sir Bedivere.
- Susan Cooper's five volume saga, The Dark is Rising.
- Kevin Crossley-Holland's The Seeing-Stone, At the Crossing-Places and King of the Middle-March..
- Bernard Cornwell's The Warlord Chronicles, a trilogy with a completely different take on Arthur. "There is a sword and there is a stone, but one is not in the other", is Cornwell's own summary.
- The several books by Norma Lorre Goodrich are very popular, but are only loosely based in Arthurian legend and medieval history.
- Helen Hollick
- The Merlin books of Mary Stewart: The Crystal Cave sets up the background for the Arthurian legend. The Hollow Hills encompasses most of Arthur's lifespan, including his childhood with Merlin as his tutor.
- Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King
- Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court
• T.H. White's The Once and Future King cycle
• Persia Woolley
• Monty Python's Monty Python and the Holy Grail
• Guy Gavriel Kay: Part of the story of The Fionavar Tapestry is the continuation of the Camelot story in the framework of a wider epic.
• Stephen Lawhead's The Pendragon Cycle
• Jack Whyte's The Camulod Chronicles, a series of books based more in historical fiction than fantasy beginning with Roman Britain and leading through Arthur's reign.
• Christopher Gidlow's The Reign of Arthur: From History to Legend
• Nancy Springer's I am Mordred and I am Morgan le Fay
• First Knight, a movie based on the legend, featuring Sean Connery as Arthur, Richard Gere as Lancelot, and Julia Ormond as Lady Guinevere.
• King Arthur, a motion picture released on July 7, 2005, claiming to be more historically accurate about the legend with respect to new archaeological findings; similar in story line to Jack Whyte's books.