

The Legendary King Arthur and its Possible Oral History Flourishing Transmitters from the Dark Ages until the Middle Ages

Laura Rebeca Precup Stiegelbauer¹, Speranta Sofia Milancovici² and Narcisa Tirban³

Vasile Goldiș Western University of Arad

Abstract. This Article starts by analysing the first mentioning of the legendary King Arthur in the world history and it goes on by describing its possible Oral History Transmitters. By analysing the way people dressed and behaved during the Dark Ages and further on during the Middle Ages this Article intends to emphasise the importance of the Arthurian Oral History Transmitters along the centuries. The article proposes to analyse the society which moulded the Legend from generation to generation always, existing means of transmitting it regardless the Age or the social status.

Keywords: King Arthur, Oral History, Transmitters, Dark Age, Middle Age.

1. Introduction

In order to understand why King Arthur is considered to be the most beloved historical figure brought to life through the help of Oral History, we have to understand the society he lived in, moreover, to understand the people that created this character. From times immemorial it appears that human beings, regardless the society they lived in, have been distinguished by their ability to have ideas that even if they were influenced by their everyday life, went beyond their everyday experience. In whatever way and in whichever society we analyse the human being, we reach the same conclusion, we are, and have always been, meaning – seeking creatures. Human beings have always found some myth creating possibility in everything that surrounded them – starting from the way they dressed, what they ate and up to the society that surrounded them.

2. The Dark Ages Arthurian Oral History Transmitters

The first time Arthur is mentioned, is in the *Annates Cambriae* (‘Annals of Wales’) where it is being stated that around 518 A.D. Arthur won the battle of Badon, and in about 539 A.D. he was killed with Medraut at the battle of Camlann. The second mentioning is the *Historia Brittonum* (‘History of the Britons’) which includes a list of Arthur’s battles, however, it tells us little about him. Along with the information from William of Malmesbury, these two help us narrow down the Arthurian period to sometime between the late fifth and the early sixth centuries.

Though we lack a British Homer, we can still do our best to supplement archaeology from other sources: from the literature that exists in our personal libraries, from visiting world acknowledged libraries and more important than that from visiting the places where the legend was created. I believe that we cannot create a clear picture of the society of those times if we can form no mental image of the living human beings who made it up. To begin with, how did the Britons dress?

As we are concerned with Arthur ourselves and, of course, those who followed him in his daily life, it would be suitable to consider first, how the well – dressed warrior appeared. With the knowledge and skills gained during the years under Rome, and adapted to the needs of a land which knew a hard climate, Arthur and his men would have presented efficiently clothing, which could front any enemy. The warriors were men well-armed and fitted out for battle. The continuing imperial contact would have helped them to keep up with current ideas in weapons and armour.

The research shows that the outer tunic would be a leather tunic, over which would be a coat of mail. The discoveries made on the Welsh sites, such as Dinas Powys, prove that there was no lack of skilled craftsmen in parts of Britain who would have been able to make mail in the form of metal rings. The mail coat was worn with a leather belt at the waist. Under it the leather tunic hung down to about the knee. Warriors might also have worn some sort of leg protection, such as leather breeches.

The helmet was an item which had been degenerating for some time. By the fourth century, the Roman infantry apparently seldom wore helmets. The barbarian auxiliaries did not like them, and preferred to protect their heads by wearing their hair long. As for cavalry helmets, there was a trend towards making them of pieces riveted together. In a letter written in 474, the Gallic author Sidonius Apollinaris refers to 'the flexible cheek pieces of the helm'. A specimen discovered at Worms was constructed in sections including neck and ear guards riveted on. Another one, found in Derbyshire hints at a simpler British type - in essence, a leather cap covered with metal.

As already mentioned, the military equipment was worn and carried in addition to the everyday costume worn by men generally. This would have varied from area to area. Basically, however, clothing would be much the same. The traditional costume of the British Celts can be reconstructed from descriptions or references in classical authors. During the third and fourth centuries, there was a tendency towards Roman fashions among the upper classes. But, by Arthur's time, it is probable that the Britons had largely reverted to their old style of dress.

Men's dress was based on three main garments: a simple tunic, long breeches or trousers and a warm cloak. The tunic, which reached to the knees, had long or short sleeves and a plain round neck. It was pulled on, over the head. Several tunics could be worn at once if the weather was cold. This outer tunic was usually of wool. Furs or pelts were also used for outer garments. Leather belts were worn round the waist. There is no certainty that this garment was adopted by the Britons, however, taking into consideration all the documents I have read I can assume the possibility.

Women's costume was probably very much as described by the Roman historian Dio Cassius in his account of Boadicea. Women wore an ankle-length tunic which, like the man's, had long or short sleeves and a round neck. It was worn with or without a leather belt. A woman might easily have worn a more elaborate form of belt with plaques or brooches, with the addition of a purse and possibly a small dagger attached. Over the tunic a three-quarter-length gown could be worn. This was either short-sleeved or sleeveless. With these outer garments there may have been some slight surviving Roman stylistic influence, at least among the upper classes. Underneath the outer clothes were one or more short under-tunics or *camisiae*, the number depending on the weather. These would be of linen if the wearer was of high enough rank to afford it. The woman's cloak was the same as the man's and fastened in the same manner.

Shoes for both sexes were simple. According to the documents they resembled moccasins and were made of a single piece of rawhide, cut large enough so that when a thong was drawn through the edge it could be tied round the top of the foot, rather like a mobcap. Sandals of Roman inspiration were also made.

Both **men** and **women** wore their hair long and flowing. The women's hair, of which they were extremely proud, reached to their waists or even further. The men usually wore beards. As a rule the people went bareheaded, except in cold weather when a small cap of fur or wool would be worn. Women of rank wore a gold fillet round their foreheads. The dark-age archaeology of Teutonic lands has supplied razors, combs and scissors, and all three are mentioned in an Arthurian context in some of the writings.

Jewellery, like everything else, had come under both Roman and Celtic influences, though by Arthur's time the Celtic was predominant. Ornaments of bronze, iron and gold were decorated by incising or embossing, with stones, coral and enamel. There are many good examples from Ireland and more specimens from Wales.

Although we do have a certain amount of solid information concerning the culture of the Britons in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, there is plainly much that we can still only assume. For this semi-barbaric period the phrase 'Dark Age' is still very appropriate. But with the search for knowledge widening all the time, it is not too much to hope that in due course we shall discover and piece together enough recognisable remains of an Arthurian wardrobe to set our minds at rest as to what really was high fashion in those far-off

days. Thus, on one hand, the Arthurian Flourishing Transmitter could have been both the **men** and the **women** living those days, both **rich** and **poor** with their specific clothing.

When we leave everyday objects and turn to institutions, religion and art, our information tends to become vague. It needs careful interpreting, especially because of doubts over date. Both Welsh and English literature supply many assertions about the Arthurian Age, the Dark Age, and writings said to have been composed in it, however, what has been kept until today is too little to draw 100 percent true conclusions. At best, they reveal only a minority of the people: nobles, courtiers, priests. But the revelation is better than nothing, and from these writings we can use our imagination and suppose things, hence becoming ourselves a flourishing transmitter of the Arthurian Legend.

In order to take the research further, and besides the above mentioned possible Arthur Legend Transmitters, we wanted to see whether there was any other feasible mouth to mouth transmitter. We found the writing of Gildas who refers to royal minstrels before 547, at the court of Maelgwn. Then, the oldest existing Welsh poetry which dates from the later sixth century, and which is the work of a school of bards in Rheged, the Cumberland area, gave me the proved support that both minstrels and bards can be Arthurian Transmitters with all their poems of praise, celebration or lamentation and with all their legends.

3. The Middle Ages Arthurian Oral History Transmitters

From the end of the sixth century up until 1125, the Arthurian Legends, namely King Arthur, was under a certain shadow. People, step by step did not transmit by word of mouth the legends. However, in 1135, Geoffrey Monmouth, the Welsh cleric, wrote the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain). In this written work we can read a detailed account of King Arthur. This became the foundation upon which all the later stories of King Arthur were constructed. Although much of Geoffrey Monmouth's Arthurian story cannot be supported by historical evidence, as I have written before, he did not invent King Arthur.

Besides what we have abovementioned, we have to refer to the fact that some ten years before the *Historia*, in 1125, William of Malmesbury, a monk from the abbey of Malmesbury in Wiltshire, wrote the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* ('Acts of the Kings of the English') in which Arthur is briefly mentioned. William tells us that Arthur helped Ambrosius Aurelianus in holding back the advancing Angles and led the British at the battle of Badon. Moreover, in the British Library there are two manuscripts written in the early 1100s which also briefly include Arthur.

Even if some of his writings do not have any proven and documented historical facts, Geoffrey does not appear to have invented King Arthur. It is obvious that Geoffrey drew upon the *Historia Brittonum*, and it is likely that he used other, now unknown sources to construct a story which vaguely fitted the facts, echoing his approach when writing about better documented eras of British history. Perhaps the most intriguing question, however, is why did he devote so much attention to King Arthur at all. Moreover, exactly as I did with the Dark Age period, I was interested how the society looked like those days, how medieval life was and who were the flourishing transmitters of the story.

Life in the Middle Ages was much, much harder than it is now. By 1200 AD life was more advanced than it had been in the past, in the fifth and sixth century I briefly described, and it was certainly not peaceful. There were wars, crusades and peasant revolts. There was plague, starvation and great contrasts in living standards between rich and poor. For most of the persons who lived and worked in the countryside, most of the time life was peaceful. Step by step, trade flourished and towns grew and prospered. New industries were set up and luxury goods reached Europe and at the same time Britain, from the far corners of the world. This is the time when skilled craftsmen built castles and cathedrals.

According to my research most country people, possible legend transmitters, lived on a manor which consisted of a village, the lord's house or a castle, a church and the surrounding farmland. The **lord** of the manor governed the local community by appointing officials who made sure that the villagers carried out their duties. The lord's main duty however was to the king; he was a knight and as such would provide arms to the crown whenever he was required.

Typical duties for the **villagers** included farming the lord's land and paying rent to the lord in the form of products. Criminals were also brought before the lord for swift justice. He had the power to fine those who

broke the law. Manors were usually very isolated and as such the villagers had to produce everything they would need themselves.

Lords and ladies had a great deal of spare time as most of the day to day running of the manor would be left to others. They had much spare time to listen to all sorts of stories and legends and to transmit them, adding something or leaving out something on purpose, thus becoming an important part of the Arthurian Middle Age Flourishing Transmitter.

The lord appointed many officials but the most important was the **steward**. The steward organised the farm workers and kept records of the estate's money. Also if the lord of the manor had to go away the steward had control and presided at the manor court until the lord's return. Stewards were the best paid and powerful of all the lord's officials.

After the steward came the **bailiff**. The bailiff was a freeholder who owned his own land and it was his role to allot the jobs to the peasants whilst taking care repairing the buildings for which he would hire skilled labourers such as carpenters and blacksmiths. Just like the steward, the bailiff also had a right hand man, he was called the **reeve**. The reeve was a peasant chosen by the other villagers and it was his job to check that everyone turned up for work on time and that no-one stole any produce from the lord.

Women were seen by many to be inferior to men during the Middle Ages. The church taught them that they should be humble and submissive to their fathers and husbands. In reality however very few of the women could stay quietly at home because most had to work for a living in the fields beside their husbands and fathers whilst at the same time feeding and clothing their families. However very few women became powerful enough to have any bearing on national events.

Besides all the aforementioned possible Arthurian Middle Age Flourishing Transmitters, we would like to add, just as we did for the fifth and sixth century, the Early Medieval **bard**. He was a professional poet and singer whose occupation was to compose and sing verses in honour of the heroic achievements of princess and brave men. Early Medieval literature was not written. It was passed by word of mouth from one generation to another by English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish Medieval Bards. My research shows that Medieval bards were a distinct class with hereditary privileges. They appear to have been divided into three great sections: the first celebrated victories and sang hymns of praise; the second chanted the laws of the nation; the third gave poetic genealogies and family histories, thus the Medieval Bard held a powerful influence.

The Early Medieval Bard was replaced by the Minstrels and Troubadours who flourished during this period. A minstrel was a servant first employed as a travelling entertainer and then as a castle or court musician or Medieval Bard. Medieval Minstrels often created their own ballads about chivalry and courtly love but they were also famous for memorising long poems based on myths and legends just as the Medieval Bards had done before them. These epic poems were called 'chansons de geste'. The themes of the songs sung by the Troubadours dealt with chivalry and courtly love but they also told stories of far lands and historical events. They were very helpful for the transmission of all the legends and poems because they travelled a lot being present in the major European cities especially in England, France and Italy.

4. The Middle Ages Arthurian Oral History Transmitters

To conclude with we would like to say that *The Most Beloved Historical Figure Present in British Oral History, King Arthur* is the creation of the changing times. We could say that the flourishing transmission period of the Arthurian legend had two steps that we had already mentioned, the Dark Age period and the Middle Age Period. After researching and analysing the characters involved in these two periods we could say that, starting from the rich up to the poor, from the lord of the manor up to the minstrels, everybody was a possible Arthurian Legend Flourishing Transmitter. More important than this, the research took us a step further, it brought to our attention, the analysis of a possible third transmission step... the Modern Age Arthurian Flourishing Transmitter...us as young researchers and you, as a reader.

5. References

- [1] Andrews, Elizabeth, *Faeries and Folklore of the British Isles*, Arris Publishing, Ltd, Moreton in Marsh, Gloucestershire, 2006
- [2] Armstrong, Karen, *A Short History of Myth*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2005
- [3] Ashe, Geoffrey, *The Discovery of King Arthur*, Sutton Publishing, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2003
- [4] Broadhurst, Paul, *Tintagel and the Arthurian Mythos*, Pendragon Press, Cornwall, 1999
- [5] Coghlan, Ronan, *The Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends*, Element Books Limited, Dorset, 1991
- [6] Steinbeck, John, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, Penguin Group, London, 2005
- [7] White, Paul, *King Arthur's Footsteps*, Bossiney Books, Launceston, 2005