

In the Name of the King

*From King Arthur to Captain America: The
Arthurian Roots of Modern Superheroes*

By Ryan Illon Gorcey

February 2025

“It is the secret of the world that all things subsist and do not die, but retire a little from sight and afterwards return again.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *All Return Again*

Table of Contents

Preface.....	6
Introduction: A Legend is Sung.....	17
Part 1: This is No Fairy Tale.....	25
Chapter 1: I'm Not the Son of Some Roman God	
Bridging a 3,000-Year Gap Between Heroes of Antiquity and Modern Superheroes.....	26
Chapter 2: A Name Half-Whispered	
The Coming of Arthur.....	34
What's in a Name?.....	37
Defender of the Land.....	42
The Blink of an Eye.....	44
Chapter 3: Artorius	
The True Story of the Real King Arthur.....	50
Knights of Rome.....	52
Dragon Warriors.....	53
Soldier of the Empire.....	55
Across the Sea.....	59
A Province in Need.....	61
Written in the Stars.....	63
Chapter 4: Land of Bear and Land of Eagle	
Sarmatians, Celts, and a 'Second Artorius' Give Us Arthur's Superhero Symbol.....	65
Defending the Land ... Again.....	67
The Legend of the Sword.....	70
The Red Dragon of Wales.....	75
Chapter 5: Music of the Spheres	
The Fingerprints of Folklore: Vladimir Propp's Spheres of Action.....	83
The Dispatcher.....	84
Princess and Her Father.....	84
The Donor.....	85
The (Magical) Helper.....	85
The Villain.....	86
The Hero and the False Hero/Usurper.....	89
Chapter 6: Rightwise King Born of All England	
How the Auchinleck Manuscript Puts King Arthur Into Conversation With Previous	
Examples of Kingship.....	95
Three Kings.....	96
Four Roles.....	103

Novice/Neophyte.....	104
The Commander.....	106
Giant Slayer.....	107
Outsider.....	108
Chapter 7: A Very Strange, Enchanted Boy	
The Arthur of the Auchinleck.....	113
The Englishing of Arthur.....	117
Converting the King.....	121
Once and Future.....	126
Chapter 8: A Big, Round Table	
Arthur's Gift: A Mission.....	134
Room for More.....	139
Part 2: More Than a Mask.....	145
Chapter 9: A Hero Comes Home	
The Gray Champion: Who Was That (Un)masked Man?.....	146
Chapter 10: Holding Out for a Hero.....	152
The First Wave of Arthurian Superheroes Emerge.....	152
Novices and Neophytes.....	157
The Commanders.....	159
Giant Slayers.....	161
Outsiders.....	169
Chapter 11: And There Came a Day Unlike Any Other	
The New Knights of the Round Table(s).....	174
Chapter 12: Modern Folklore	
Folkloric Spheres of Action in the Earliest Modern Superhero Stories.....	180
The Villain.....	181
The Donor.....	185
The Magical Helper.....	186
The Dispatcher.....	187
The Princess and Her Father*.....	188
The False Hero/Usurper.....	190
Chapter 13: Putting Away Childish Things	
Dr. Frederic Wertham and the Dismissal of Comic Books.....	196
Doth Mother know you wear-eth her drapes?.....	197
Seduction of the Ignorant.....	201
The Comics Code Authority.....	206
Chapter 14: Turning Pain Into Power	

Subverting the Comics Code: Outsiders From the Start.....	210
The Immigrant Alien.....	212
The Paperboy.....	216
The Man Out of Time.....	217
The Amazon.....	223
Part 3: Leaping Forward.....	225
Chapter 15: The Spark is Now a Flame	
A New Age of Heroes.....	226
King (Arthur) of the Seven Seas.....	228
Whosoever Holds This Hammer, If He Be Worthy	229
The Fastest Man Alive.....	232
In Brightest Day, In Blackest Night	235
“We’re Ironmongers, Tony”.....	237
Whatever a Spider Can.....	240
To Me, My X-Men!.....	242
King of Wakanda.....	248
Chapter 16: I Don’t See Myself	
Superheroic Otherness: A Fraught History.....	251
Chapter 17: Truth, Justice, and America’s Better Angels	
Forging a Better Tomorrow.....	258
Chapter 18: Random Notes of Parchment	
Of Works, Texts, and Disseminated Social Authorship.....	270
Everybody’s Got a Weakness, Some Kind of Kryptonite Wearin’ ‘Em Down.....	278
Box Office Blunders.....	281
Part 4: Rexque Quondam, Rexque Futurus.....	287
Chapter 19: Last Forever	
What Happens When the Story Ends?.....	288
Here Lies Arthur.....	290
Superman Returns.....	294
Oh Captain, My Captain!.....	295
Chapter 20: Change the World	
The Transcendence of Christopher Reeve.....	304
Chapter 21: Waiting for Superman	
Our Heroes—Past, Present, and Future—Live In Us:	
A Conclusion, and a Beginning.....	311
Bibliography.....	323

Preface

What makes a great comic book superhero? It's a question that artists, writers, filmmakers, studio executives, and publishers have been asking for nearly a century. For every Batman there's a Cat Man, for every Superman there's a Blue Snowman, for every Wonder Woman an Asbestos Lady, and for every Catwoman, there's a horribly miscast and plotless movie with only a tangential relationship to the source material.

No, a great superhero cannot just be conjured, engineered, or cobbled together from the notes of a focus group. It's almost like ... magic. There's always been something ephemeral, something ineffable, something almost spontaneously organic about how truly transcendent superheroes—and narratives that do them justice—manifest. Yet, the 'why' and the 'how' are not altogether unknowable. To paraphrase Aristotle: To understand a river, one must first consider its source. You have to go back to the beginning. But, where—and when—did superheroes begin?

Conventional wisdom says that superhero history must begin in April of 1938, when an alien in spandex drawn by two Jewish kids from Cleveland took the world by storm and became a global icon: Superman. Some have argued that the mystery men and pulp heroes of the early 20th century who preceded him—Doc Savage, The Phantom, The Shadow, Zorro, and the Scarlet Pimpernel—were superheroes' most recent common ancestors, if not, some of them, superheroes in their own right. One of Superman's creators, Jerry Siegel, said that his inspirations were Hercules and Samson, and, to be sure, superheroes do seem to share DNA both from these supernatural strongmen and those masked vigilantes, almost as if inherited from two sides of a family tree. And yet, there's still something missing, something that never quite added up for me, because the Shadow and Hercules together do not a Superman make. There had to be a better answer.

Finding that answer has been, for me, something more consuming than an obsession, something harder to kick than an addiction.¹ With little exaggeration, it has been the central project of my entire life.

As someone who spent more than a decade as a journalist, it should come as no surprise that, as far back as I can remember, I've been obsessed with storytelling, even as a child. I wasn't obsessed with just any kind of storytelling, mind you. I was obsessed with the kind of storytelling that made you hold your head up higher, throw your shoulders back and stand up straighter—the kind that made you want to be *better*, to be a hero.

As a toddler, I would eagerly clamber into my mother's bed every night to hear her read from the Illustrated Junior Library's King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table, and when she would inevitably fall asleep, I'd take the book out of her hands and read it myself. I converted household furniture into X-Wing starfighter cockpits and galloping steeds; I wielded toy Roman short swords and circular shields made of red plastic trash can lids; I threw a red apron over my shoulders, tied it 'round my neck and flew into battle against imaginary enemies in epic showdowns with nothing less than the fate of the world at stake. I spent every last sweaty allowance dollar I earned as a tween at the local comic book store. I didn't buy with any particular reading order in mind; I just wanted to devour as many stories as I could get my hands on, to *feel* what being a hero meant, to learn from their examples.

I guess you could say I grew out of make-believe (although, given that I wear some form of Captain America cosplay every time I visit Avengers Campus at Disney California Adventure, maybe I really didn't), but I always knew—deep down in my bones—that there had to be some kind of connection between my superheroes and King Arthur, a connection I needed to explore. I

¹ I must here acknowledge my fraternity brother Joe Rothberg, who quoted this line in his toast at the rehearsal dinner the night before my wedding.

didn't know exactly *what* it was, only *that* it was. These elusive, recessive threads of narrative DNA, these fingerprints of a sort of literary string theory—I could feel these strands of connection vibrate every time I sat down to watch the Saturday-morning superhero-styled cartoon *King Arthur and the Knights of Justice*. I could see them in paint and ink in the most iconic of comic book frames—Superman shouldering the globe of the *Daily Planet*, Captain America protecting innocents with his shield, the X-Men fighting to save people who would just as soon see them hanging by the end of a rope. I could hear it in songs, from Welsh artist Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for a Hero" ("Where have all the good men gone / And where are all the gods? / Where's the streetwise Hercules / to fight the rising odds? / Isn't there a white knight upon a fiery steed? ... It's going to take a Superman to sweep me off my feet")² to Styx's "Captain America" ("Are you the man who can lead us once again?").³

Then, during my sophomore year at the University of California, Berkeley (Go Bears!), Prof. Jennifer Miller, one of the most passionate medievalists you'll ever meet, introduced me to the Auchinleck manuscript, the earliest known monolingual collection of Middle English literature. Little-known outside academic circles, the Auchinleck is actually of great importance with regards to the formation of the Western literary canon: Assembled in London ca. 1330 C.E. by a group of scribes, it was intended to establish a national body of English literature in the waning days of Norman influence, giving the English a library of their own stories in their own national language,⁴ providing, as late Wayne State University professor Karen Haslanger

² Tyler, Bonnie. "Holding Out for a Hero." *Secret Dreams and Forbidden Fire*, CBS / Columbia, 1984.

³ Styx. "Captain America." *Cyclorama*, Sanctuary/CMC International, 2003.

⁴ Loomis, Laura Hibbard. "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340." Adventures in the Middle Ages: A Memorial Collection of Essays and Studies. New York: Burt Franklin, 1962. First published in PMLA (the publication of the Modern Language Association of America) 57 (1942): 595-627.

Vaneman wrote, the “proper views of significant relationships and primary loyalties and the behaviours appropriate and even valuable to the perpetuation of those views.”⁵

But in studying this recondite manuscript in an undergraduate seminar, I saw something beyond what would seem to a 20-year-old English major an eclectic collection of mostly obscure medieval texts: I saw a cycle of literary resurrection and reconsideration working both backwards and forwards in time, stories that encompassed more than the words on the page, and a rhetorical positioning of the King Arthur story that crystalized centuries of the character’s broader cultural function.

In the Auchinleck’s stories of King Arthur, King David, and Alexander the Great, I found character roles, themes, motifs, and tropes that were all too familiar to me from a lifetime of comic consumption—what I would later learn the world’s leading Arthurian expert, John Matthews, called the “shadowy forms of earlier traditions.”⁶

There is a story—what we call in Judaism, a *midrash*—that my years of study and research on this subject have evoked for me. It’s a parable by Rabbi Israel Baal ben Eliezer that’s often told as part of the liturgy during the yearly High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The story—meant to explain the sound of the *shofar* (ram’s horn)—goes that there was once a king who, wanting his son to master different fields of knowledge and gain real experience among the cultures of the world, sent his son abroad with a generous endowment of silver and gold. Far from home, the prince squanders his fortune, and, destitute, finds himself unable to pay for passage home. He eventually does make his way back, but having been away for so many years, he could only speak what little of his native tongue he still remembered with a

⁵ Vaneman, Karen Haslanger. ‘OF ARTHOUR AND OF MERLIN: Arthour’s Story as Arena for the Conflict of Custom and Common Law,’ *Quondam et Futurus*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1988), p. 17.

⁶ Matthews, John. *Reappraising Gawain: Pagan Champion or Christian Knight?* in *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, issue XXXI, 1994. pp. 7-14.

strange and foreign accent. When he approached the guards at his father's castle, they turned away this ranting vagrant who claimed to be the prince. With nothing left but the deepest, most profound and primal sorrow, the yearning, longing prince began to cry out. His cries were long, loud, halting, gasping, ragged, and raw—the kind of uncontrollable full-body weeping that sends the heart racing and leaves one gasping for air.

The wailing sounds that issued from the tragic prince's throat in the throes of his desperation are said to have inspired the three different calls of the *shofar*: the *t'kiyah* (one long blast), the *sh'varim* (literally translating to “breaks” or “fractures,” this call is composed of three medium-length notes often likened to the sound of sobbing), and *t'ruah* (a series of short, rapid, stuttering, broken blasts). Upon hearing this plaintive, heartrending weeping, the king recognized the voice of his son, went out to him, and—embracing him—brought him home.

Why do I recount this *midrash* here, now? Because it reminds us that we remember and recognize more than we realize, and that, even at our lowest, we have more in common with one another—even across centuries and oceans—than we have things which set us apart. We all speak in a common tongue—the language of stories, the words of the heart—and when the stories we tell are so universally evocative, when they speak to those shared feelings, experiences, truths, and Truths, they echo down through the centuries. It is these echoes, these shadows, and these reminders that connect a second-century Roman commander to a sixth-century Celtic chieftain, and in turn connect them both to the costumed crusaders that have captured the popular imagination nearly two millennia later.

These are the stories that connect us to memories that aren't even ours, and remind us of a time when each of us believed in being something *more*. Though these traditions have rarely

been put into conversation with one another, the enduring folkloric tropes that undergird superhero stories are proof that we haven't forgotten as much as we think we have.

Where did superheroes come from? Who was the first superhero? What makes a great superhero? In the interwoven oralities from which the legend of King Arthur was formed, in the ancient heroic roles Arthur inhabits, in the diverse traditions of which he was composed, in the universality of his themes and motifs, and in his relationship with previous examples of kingship and heroism, the Figure of Arthur—everything real and historical, imaginary and literary, oral and textual—is the answer to what I'd been searching for all along.

King Arthur was the first superhero, the single ancestor from whom all others descended. The advent of the Figure of Arthur heralded a new age of storytelling, giving us the foundational elements that—centuries later—would find new, colorful expression in a renaissance of heroic literature on the other side of the Atlantic, as plate armor and chainmail gave way to spandex and capes.

If this conclusion was so obvious to an undergrad, though, why hadn't anybody else picked up on it before then, and why hasn't anyone picked up on it in the 16 years since? It has remained undiscovered simply because the two Texts had been separated for so long that, even once superhero studies exploded in relevance, no one had ever thought to look for a connection.

At the time I originally argued for Arthur as the first superhero, the serious academic consideration of comic books was niche-er than niche. The majority of scholarly attention comics got was focused on high-concept graphic novels like *Watchmen* and *Sandman*, not the monthly installments of Spider-Man and Dr. Fate. The seminal work in this nascent field of superhero studies—Peter Coogan's Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre—was just two years in print. When I contacted Mr. Coogan in hopes of joining his Comic Art Conference, this

founder of a movement cautioned me against pursuing superhero study as a full-time career, because, as he could attest, you could write yourself out of a job publishing about this stuff.

While spaces had opened up for the discussion of alternative forms, voices, and narratives, I still found myself needing to argue for comics as a valid form of literature. So, I deployed anthropologist Clifford Geertz's theory of thick description⁷ to show the similarities between comic book superhero stories and the earliest modes of Arthurian storytelling. I brought in the works of Alan Bloom⁸ and Stephen Greenblatt,⁹ and through Lawrence Levine's Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America, I deconstructed the argument against canon reconsideration and showed how the very idea of a 'high' culture separate and apart from a more coarse and simplistic 'low' culture was but a 19th century construct that, like the antebellum attitudes it was rooted in, was fundamentally flawed.¹⁰ Then *Iron Man* came out—just four days before I turned in my final draft—and the world changed the way it viewed superhero comic books.

Sixteen years later, the thousands of words I spent on my legitimating lines of argument are (much to my publisher's joy) no longer necessary. The case for comics has been made, over and over again, and I owe a great debt of gratitude to those trailblazers who went before me, like Coogan, and those who have since established superhero studies as a legitimate field of inquiry—Jess Nevins, Jeffrey K. Johnson, Chris Bavalier, Brian R. Solomon, Alex Grand, Jason Tondro, Terrence R. Wandtke, Richard A. Hall, Robert G. Weiner—and so many others for opening up that door.

⁷ Geertz, Clifford. The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books, 1973. pp. 7.

⁸ Bloom, Allan. The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students. New York, Simon and Shuster, 1987, pp. 68-80.

⁹ Greenblatt, Stephen. "The Touch of the Real." *Representations*, no. 59, 1997. pp. 3.

¹⁰ Levine, Lawrence W., et al. "William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation." Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984. pp. 157–189.

While that community was blossoming, I was telling stories as a sports journalist, as was always the plan. It was a dream come true, and I was just beginning to come into my own when I was laid off right before the COVID-19 pandemic. After eventually finding work in communications, I was laid off again in late 2023. Nearing middle age (*shudders*) and facing my second identity crisis in less than a decade, I was inspired by former *Batman* editor Jordan B. Gorfinkel, Carl Wilson of the Superhero Studies Network, and Eisner-nominated Fanbase Press editor-in-chief Barbra Dillon to revisit my dusty, 189-page college thesis, written just a decade after comics stood at the brink of extinction, when no one could have fathomed that a major blockbuster starring a comic book superhero could make a billion dollars at the box office—not even Batman or Superman.

I hadn't dipped a toe into that world in years, but nine months of research and writing later, the oh-so-gracious John Matthews and I finally connected. I knew I had met a kindred spirit when he pulled a Roman *spatha* from the pile of books behind his desk during our first conversation, but I still wasn't prepared to hear the Godfather of All Things Arthurian tell me something that made me nearly fall out of my chair: *He, too, had long suspected there was a connection between King Arthur and superheroes, but neither he nor any other scholar had thought through it in the way I had.* It reassured me that the journey I had begun nearly 20 years ago was one I needed to finish. So, here we are.

If there is but a single sentence that encapsulates this work, it would be a lyric from a song by Train, which I chose for one of my chapter titles: “When I look to the sky, something tells me you’re here with me.”

This book—this journey—began as a quest for original meaning, borne out of a cultural milieu dominated by such quests: The Da Vinci Code was a bestselling book and a hit film; the

History Channel ran specials not only on the historical King Arthur, but on the apocryphal gospels of the Christian Bible; and *Batman Begins* brought the Caped Crusader back to gritty, fundamental basics. But by the end of the journey—here, now—it has become something more. I wrote at the beginning of this preface about the magic of storytelling, how it can transport us to different galaxies, times, worlds, and states of being. There is another kind of magic at play: not just *transportation*, but *transformation*. If a reader walks away from a story unchanged, then it's only been just that—a story—and nothing more. The best stories teach us something about ourselves, and about our world.

In the next few hundred pages or so, you'll see a lot of citations, a lot of philosophy, a smidge of archeology, the nonstop-laugh-a-minute fun of literary theory (/sarcasm), geography, sociology, anthropology, and even Roman history. On the face of it, that's a pretty daunting list of disciplines. But, while I'm not an expert in all of them, I am—like you—curious, probing, and thirsty for knowledge. I never want to be the smartest person in the room, and I'm more than willing to admit that I don't know or understand something. So, I read a lot of material, and I ask a lot of questions. It's an occupational hazard of being a sports journalist, a profession where becoming a conversant expert on esoteric topics in as little as an afternoon is our bread and butter. That's how liberal arts majors can explain to the season ticket holder in the back row what microfracture surgery is.

What you're about to read is written to be accessible, entertaining, self-referential, self-deprecating, hopefully funny, and always informative. In the course of this quest, I will be your guide, your interpreter, your translator, and your ADHD pop-up video Fun Fact finder (enjoy those endnotes and parenthetical asides). Yes, this is a serious work of scholarship, but I have never lost sight of the fact that we're dealing with aliens in spandex bodysuits and bright

red undies, and knights in shining armor, which is to say that, above all, we must never forget to find joy in these stories — hearing them, telling them, making them our own, and ultimately passing them on—because that’s what they’re *for*. That’s what they’ve always been for. So, why not have some fun with them?

Each step on this journey has led me—as I hope it will lead you—to a greater understanding of what these stories—from King Arthur to Captain America—mean to us, and why building a bridge between Arthur and superheroes is so important: In continually creating and re-creating these heroes as we do—not just by putting pen to paper, but by putting head to pillow—we all become part of a tradition stretching back millennia, an unbroken chain spanning continents, cultures, and generations. That tradition connects us to each other, to the past, to our present, and to a shared future that is up to us to shape. Our heroes—whether heralded by the flash of a sword or the flutter of a red cape—do not come from above, but from within, giving us both immeasurable power and the heavy responsibility that goes with it. As Aunt May (Rosemarie Harris) said in *Spider-Man 2*: “I believe there’s a hero in all of us.”

Beneath all of this is one constant thread: *Hope*. It is what picks us up, bloodied, from the mud. It is what keeps us going. It is what keeps us dreaming. It is both the weight that anchors us in the storm, and the wings that lift us above the clouds. It is what still lives on in us, even after a lifetime of wandering in the wilderness, of disappointment and hardship. It is with this notion of hope, in this frame of mind, that I wish you to enter upon this work. I ask you to read it with the same open minds that we all had as children and the open hearts that we perhaps still hold within our chests, buried deep beneath our cynicism and our adult sensibilities. All I ask is that you remember the way we once were—each of us—when the world was still new, and when we still believed that a man could fly. In doing so, you will pull back the veil of time and space, cynicism

and skepticism, to allow yourself a glimpse at a kind of meta-textual awareness—a shared human consciousness—where all great stories reside, an unknowable-yet-familiar Avalon where Arthur—where *hope*—still lives.

Introduction: A Legend is Sung

“A legend is sung of when England was young
And knights were brave and bold
The good king had died
And no one could decide
Who was rightful heir to the throne”

—*The Legend of the Sword in the Stone* Music and Lyrics by The Sherman Brothers¹¹

The deeds of heroes of old were spread through verse and song. Nobles would gather in banquet halls to hear heroic songs in praise of famous deeds sung by professional singers and sometimes, even by the warriors themselves. The great Israelite warrior hero King David was himself “skillful in playing the lyre.”¹² Songs of heroes and their adventures were sung to inspire soldiers before battle, to supply the warriors with “models of ideal heroic behavior.”¹³

Strongmen and conquerors, demigods and kings, the likes of Samson, Hercules, Gilgamesh, Enkidu, David, Alexander, Achilles, Jason, and Perseus have had their praises sung, their deeds celebrated, and their stories worshiped throughout history.

So, it should come as little surprise that, after hearing just eight of the first 33 notes written by John Williams for a small, arthouse film based on a niche folktale about a strange boy from beyond the stars, millions across the world will say the exact same name. When the film’s director, Richard Donner, first viewed the finished cut, the lyric-less march spoke to him: “The music came on, and it *said* ‘Superman!’”¹⁴ Williams’ score for *Superman* has become so iconic

¹¹ Reitherman, Wolfgang, director. *The Sword in the Stone*. Buena Vista Distribution Co., Walt Disney Home Video, 1963.

¹² 1 Samuel 16:16.

¹³ “epic.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 2008. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. 28 April 2008.
<<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-50868>>.

¹⁴ *You Will Believe: The Making of a Saga*. DVD. Prod. Constantine Nasr. New Wave Entertainment, 2006.

that it is now as much a part of that nearly-90-year-old DC Comics character as the S shield that stretches across his chest.

In the first 33 notes of Williams' score, nine decades of history, social commentary, imagination, art, popular culture, and bedtime stories become as clear as the blue sky up into which those very notes urge us to look. Thirty-three notes, speaking to the child within us all, and to memories that are not even ours.

Given the history of the mythological figures listed above, it's no surprise that they are considered Superman's ancestors, the closest common ancestors of our modern superheroes, the technicolor rainbow of costumed do-gooders who have permeated American popular culture for nearly a century. But that's not quite the whole story of our new mythology.

Comic book superheroes have served as catalysts for political and social change. Their messages and ethics have become subjects of endless discussion. Their marks and insignias decorate everything from skateboard decks and t-shirts to cufflinks and neckties. They and their stories have become as diverse as their readers, facing the same prejudices and challenges and struggles for acceptance. Hardly just mere escapist fantasy or fairy tale fantasies, their stories are told in works touching every genre. They are something bigger, something *more* than the sum of what seem to be their parts—those heroes of deep antiquity and the masked avengers of early-20th century pulp magazines. That genealogy cannot and does not explain the most fundamental elements of the character type: that they perform selfless deeds of heroism according to a prosocial moral code (a “Mission”); that they possess extraordinary physical, mental, or supernatural abilities (or “Powers”); that they have an evocative code name or *nom de guerre* that represents some aspect of their biography (their “Identity”¹⁵); and that in the guise of

¹⁵ Note that, even when Coogan coined this convention back in 2006, he did not term it “secret identity,” because, by then, many superheroes had ditched the secret identity; Captain America and the Fantastic Four had by then long been up-front about their real names with the public. Hence, King Arthur did not need to secretly be anything, rather he only needed to be known by the name Pendragon, which, as I will show, links directly back to his historical roots.

that identity, they wear a costume or attire which may or may not include a chevron, and that the costume and chevron each serve to emblemize the character's identity and externalize either their inner character or biography.

The fact is that there has been only one other secular cultural phenomenon that can match what we have seen in comic book superheroes over the last nine decades: the story of King Arthur.

Stretching back 1,800 years, the Arthurian tradition spans generations and encompasses a wide spectrum of diverse forms like narrative and metric verse, prose, historiographies, *vitae*, and chivalric romances. It includes not only works of written text, but films, television, music, stage dramas, even some of literature's first spinoffs, and—yes—comic books.¹⁶ It includes works fictional, historical, pseudo-historical, fantastical, and everything in between, inviting scholarly engagement from a staggering array of disciplines.

Both Arthur and superhero comic books are yet something even greater than the sum of all of these, something which philosopher Roland Barthes called a Text. To genre fans, the idea of a Text should be far from foreign, because it is, in essence, what many in such communities would recognize as “lore”—the canonized, written material, yes, but also stuff in the air, the rumor, and the ephemera that surround Superman and Captain America, the things people *just know*. A Text is different from text—the literal words on the page—and from a work—a single composition or constituent unit of a larger Text. For example: Ed Brubaker's run on Captain America—which encompasses all 50 issues that comprise the fifth volume of Captain America comics—taken as a whole, would be considered a work. It can be held in hand (in trade paperbacks, single issues, etc.), it is finite, and it is easily classified and categorized. Brubaker

¹⁶ Beranek, Adam (w), Christian Beranek (w), Chris Moreno (a), Jay Fotos (a). Dracula Vs. King Arthur #1-2 (Oct.-Nov. 2005), Silent Devil Press; Barr, Mike W. (w), Brian Bolland (p), Bruce Patterson, et al. (i). Camelot 3000 #1-12 (Dec. 1982-Apr. 1985), DC Comics.

wrote all 50 issues, and his creative partner Steve Epting is credited as the artist on all but 19 issues. Each constituent story arc during that run is like a chapter in one big book. However, that volume exists as part of the larger Text of Captain America—the films, novels, cartoons, radio plays, movie serials, and all past and future volumes of Cap’s comic book story.

Texts like that of Arthur and comic book superheroes have a multi-dimensional web of signification that cuts across genre, space, and time, and encompasses all individual works and traditions concerning a literary subject. Each part of the greater Text—each constituent work—is held with a certain degree of intertextuality. Each individual work is “the text-between of another text ... not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the ‘sources’, the ‘influences’ of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas.”¹⁷ It is due to this intertextuality that a Text lacks closure. The hero may die or the individual work may end, but the Text goes on (and on, and on)¹⁸ in still more works, which themselves can be categorized, classified, and attributed to single authors, to branches of a tradition (Vulgate, Post-Vulgate, etc.), and to genres. We will delve further into this concept in more detail, but here are four key concepts to keep in mind when considering a Text:

- **Plurality of meaning:** Each reading of a Text refers back to many previous works, readings, and interpretations of the Text, which fortifies the meaning.
- **Reader participation:** The reader (that’s us!) plays a key role in engaging with and reproducing the Text. This is also called the disseminated social authorship, which ties into ...
- **Untraceable origin:** A Text has no single, definitive author or authorial source, as opposed to a work, the origin of which is always emphasized (and the author celebrated).
- **Active reading:** The reader in essence becomes an author, taking an active role in the process of production, and creating meaning from the Text. The reader is not only part

¹⁷ Barthes, Roland. Image—Music—Text. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. pp. 160.

¹⁸ Reimer, Stephen R. and Raymond H. Thompson. “Legend of Arthur’s Return.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

of the Text's production, but also participates in a dialogue with the Text to maintain the continuity of meaning.

The individual texts of King Arthur tell important truths and Truths about the cultures and eras from which they originate, but the Text of Arthur shows us the history of those cultures and the history of human storytelling writ large. The texts and works that form the cornerstones of the Arthurian Text tell stories of outsidership and inclusion, of hope and fear, and of the true meaning of power and the consequences of its abuse and absence. Its stories were sung around campfires and in great halls, passed across oceans by bards and poets, composed out loud and interpreted and re-interpreted by cultures the world over, always cohering around a core mythology defined by hope, unity, and courage that first coalesced not in medieval England, but in the wild sub-Roman Britain of the second century.

Rooted in very real history—twice over, in fact—the origin of the Arthur myth was birthed amid a remarkable confluence of circumstances that brought the folkloric traditions of three distinct cultures together in the same unlikely place at the same historical moment. The more closely we look at the origins and evolution of the Arthur myth, its roots in folklore, its means of transmission, and its modes of production, the more apparent it becomes that not only did King Arthur exemplify the key conventions and marks by which we recognize superheroes today—Mission, Powers, Identity, Costume/Chevron—but he was, in fact, their prototype.

Indeed, when considering the way in which Arthur is written of in the seventh-century Welsh poem, *Y Gododdin*—one of his earliest mentions—it was clear to eminent Celtic scholar J.T. Koch that, even as early as “the later sixth century **there existed in North Britain a tradition of a Brittonic superhero Arthur**” (emphasis my own).¹⁹

¹⁹ Koch, J.T., “The Celtic Lands”, in N.J. Lacy (ed.) *Medieval Arthurian Literature: A Guide to Recent Research* (New York, 1996), pp. 242.

The impact and significance of superheroes have been studied from almost every angle over the last 16 years. That's because, as Solomon wrote in 2023's Superheroes! The History of a Pop-Culture Phenomenon From Ant-Man to Zorro, "There is something in our cultural DNA that has encouraged us to hope beyond our own abilities, and to look for those who can somehow save us from our various predicaments."²⁰

While analyzing comic book superheroes from a mythological and historical perspective, scholars almost always adhere to a single orthodoxy: While figures that pre-dated Superman's debut in 1938 may have looked or acted like superheroes at times, or in some way influenced or shaped the character type's evolution and distinctive visual style, Superman was still the first—no pun intended—true blue superhero, and "the ultimate template for absolutely everything that came after him, to this day."²¹ While more recent scholarship concedes that the stories of Arthur and his knights certainly had influence on the superhero genre, Arthur himself is not considered a superhero—much less the first. At best, he's called a proto-superhero, or a primary influence.

In 2011's Superheroes of the Round Table, Jason Tondro explicitly drew attention to the similarities comic book superhero narratives share with Arthurian myth in terms of themes, story structures, motifs, characters, and character traits. He wrote that "the superhero can be transplanted into an Arthurian romance with no significant alteration of either his goals or his methods. The challenges and moral questions he confronts are the same, as are his roles," and that Arthur, when he appears in comic books, "functions as a kind of silent collaborator, providing thematic elements, symbols, or tropes which may be—but are not always—explicitly unpacked by the comic creators."²²

²⁰ Solomon, Brian R. Superheroes! The History of a Pop-Culture Phenomenon from Ant-Man to Zorro. Applause: 2023. pp. 5.

²¹ Solomon, 11.

²² Tondro, Jason. Superheroes of the Round Table: Comics Connections to Medieval and Renaissance Literature. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011. pp. 13.

By analyzing the tropes of superhero comic books in relation to medieval Arthurian chivalric romances, Tondro made an exceptionally well-stated case for the value of studying comic books as literature. In Jess Nevins' 2017 book, The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger: A 4,000 Year History, he wrote that superheroes "can't be said" to have begun with "Arthur et al.,"²³ but did attribute a good chunk of superheroic DNA to Arthurian tradition: "One can argue a great many things about King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table: their historical origins, their members, their continuity ... [b]ut what cannot reasonably be argued is the influence of Arthur et al. on modern superheroes. After all, the very idea of a team of superheroes is Arthurian."²⁴ It's that "et al." part, though, that stands out: Nevins sees the *knights* as the biggest influence on superheroes, *not* Arthur himself. In 2023, Solomon went the farthest, listing the body of Arthuriana as being among the genre's most influential texts, and identifying Arthur as one of the most influential figures in superheroes' development, but he didn't call Arthur a superhero:

"Of all the legends of the Middle Ages, the mythos of King Arthur and his noble knights of Camelot has resonated the most through the centuries ... [T]he legendary ruler of the Britons, with his magical sword Excalibur, messianic origin story, and mystical advisor Merlin by his side, was a superhuman figure around which much of Anglo-Saxon identity was built—not to mention the derring-do of his brave cohorts like Sir Lancelot, Sir Galahad, and Sir Gawain ..."²⁵

But why should we care if King Arthur really was the first superhero, or even a superhero at all? Why should it matter? Would we consider superhero comic books any differently than if we were to still go by established orthodoxy—that the first superhero was Superman? Would it really make any difference in how we read or study superhero comic books today, or in how we read the stories of King Arthur?

²³ Nevins, Jess. The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger: A 4,000 Year History. Praeger: 2017. pp. 48.

²⁴ Nevins, 64.

²⁵ Solomon, 28-29.

It matters because it changes our understanding of what and why superheroes are, what they mean, and what separates the great ones—and the great adaptations—from the Josh Trank *Fant4stics*, the Albert Pyun *Captain Americas*, the *Elektras*, and the Catmen of the world. More than that, establishing a historical and literary lineage that connects superheroes not just to the Knights of the Round Table, but to King Arthur *himself*, would further a decades-long effort to open up Western literary canon to include works of folk art and folk literature, with superhero comic books being among such works. Furthermore, by putting the modern and postmodern into real conversation with the medieval—as the Auchinleck put Arthur into conversation with the ancients—a field of inquiry that had heretofore relegated to the fringes of academia—largely unwelcoming, inscrutable, esoteric, and inaccessible to the average reader (have you ever tried to read Middle English? It’s enough to make you have, as Robin Williams said in his 2004 *Live on Broadway* set, ‘a vowel movement’)—would be opened up to modern reinterpretation and reconsideration on a much broader scale, by scholars with alternative points of view and fresh perspectives.

Most exciting of all: By establishing that King Arthur is the first superhero, we see that the DNA connecting Arthur and his modern comic book counterparts—in their modes of production, means of transmission, folkloric underpinnings, themes, motifs, messages, and in the function they serve in the larger, global society—suggests a novel new theory of historical transmission, where, through a kind of pan-cultural collective unconscious, all of humankind participates in a single, unifying project: telling one, big story.

Indeed, as David Newman—a writer for Donner’s *Superman* (1978)—replied when asked why he would do such a ‘childish’ movie: “Superman is our King Arthur. This is our legend. This is our version of pulling the sword from the rock.”²⁶

²⁶ You Will Believe, 10:38.

Part 1: This is No Fairy Tale

“Once upon a time ... no, no ... that’s not the way to start. You’ll think this is a fairy tale and it isn’t. It has elements of a fairy tale: Dragons, elves, griffins, fairies, and so on. And, it has *magic*. Now, in my day, magic was much more commonplace. Oh well, all things change. The arrow of time points in one direction only.”

—Sam Neill’s opening narration as the titular character in the 1998 NBC Television miniseries *Merlin*, which recounts the life of King Arthur’s wizard and the mythical history of Britain

Chapter 1: I'm Not the Son of Some Roman God
Bridging a 3,000-Year Gap Between Heroes of Antiquity and Modern Superheroes

“I'm not the son of some Roman god but anyway
 I think I'm gonna be okay”

– Ookla the Mok, *Secret Origin*

Before taking her first flight into the Metropolis night in *Superman: The Movie* (1978), Margot Kidder's Lois Lane relays to Christopher Reeve's titular Kryptonian that her friend, Clark (wink, wink) told her that the fresh-on-the-scene flying superhero was just like Peter Pan. To this, Superman replies: “Peter Pan flew with children, Lois. In a fairy tale.”

Superheroes are, as The Man himself said, not to be confused with fairy tales—a series of motifs or episodes without definite locality that move in an unreal world filled with the marvelous²⁷—but have long been directly traceable to ancient mythology. So sayeth one of the founding fathers of the genre, Jerry Siegel, one of Superman's co-creators. Recalling his first conception of Superman, Siegel said: “I'm lying in bed counting sheep when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive [of] a character like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so.” It certainly makes sense, on the surface. Superhuman strength? Check. Supernatural stamina and agility? Check. Facing improbable odds, defying fate, and tangling with various nasty beasties, monsters, and ne'er-do-wells? Check, check, and check. Where do superheroes come from? If the answer comes from one of the two men who created the first superhero, who are we to argue?

Except, that's not quite the end of the story, and that brief assessment is certainly not worth the hard-earned money you paid for this collection of lovingly crafted pieces of artisanally

²⁷ Thompson, Stith. The Folktale. The University of California Press, 1978.

shredded, dried, and pressed tree pulp. Coogan wrote that, while these “mythological and legendary heroes provide the deep background, roots, and prototypes for the superhero,”²⁸ they were not, themselves, superheroes. While C.J. Mackie compares the dynamic between Superman and Batman to the dynamic between Achilles and Odysseus in his essay, *Men of Darkness*,²⁹ these early heroes and their like were, in fact, pretty far from superheroes, in more ways than one.

The first written mention of Hercules comes to us in the form of an oblique reference by the character of Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad* (ca. the seventh or eighth century B.C.E.). Given the brevity and matter-of-factness of that mention, it’s clear that tales of the amoral Greek demigod were already well-known and widespread, dating back to before ca. 1,000 B.C.E.³⁰ Tales of the Israelite strongman Samson are thought to be younger, but not by much, and some even argue that they derived from the same Near Eastern folk tradition that birthed not only Hercules, but the Mesopotamian tales of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as well (which are even older, with the earliest written version of the Gilgamesh epic dating to as early as 2100 B.C.E.).³¹

Each possessing superhuman abilities and accomplishing remarkable feats, these characters became part of the mythologies of their respective cultures, and rightly so. Yet, while they may display some of the attributes of modern-day comic book superheroes, they and their ilk were, by and large, self-interested, prideful, provincial, and fundamentally flawed characters. All that is to say that there’s a lot of evolution that had to be done in the 3,000 years between Hercules and Superman, because these figures were missing many of the crucial elements that define what a superhero is.

²⁸ Coogan, Peter. *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. 1st. Austin, TX: Monkeybrain Books, 2006. pp. 124-5.

²⁹ Mackie, C.J. “Men of Darkness.” *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman*. Ed. Wendy Haslem, Angela Ndalians, Chris Mackie. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2007. pp. 84

³⁰ *Herakles Undying: A Look at Herakles in Cult*. Ed. Dr. Andrea Deagon. December 2000. University of North Carolina, Wilmington. 28 Apr. 2008 < <http://people.uncw.edu/deagona/herakles/cultmain.htm> >.

³¹ Mobley, Gregory. *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*. New York and London: T & T Clark, 2006. pp. 5–12; Nevins, 33.

Otto Rank's The Myth of the Birth of the Hero (1914) was influenced by Freudian theory, and defined the motifs and tropes that characterized heroes of classical (and Biblical) myth. One of the several responses to Rank's work—Baron Raglan's The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama (1956)—dealt more with cultural heroes, and was mainly influenced by James Frazer's The Golden Bough (1922) as it dealt with the likes of King Arthur, Robin Hood, Hengist and Horsa, and Cuchulainn. Another response to Rank was written by Joseph Campbell: 1949's The Hero With a Thousand Faces, which has shaped how we read works of popular culture and modern mythology.³² His so-called hero's journey can be boiled down to a simple three-act structure "separation–initiation–return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth."³³ But each of these schemas follow that neat and tidy structure—one that has a distinct ending. As we know from decades of seemingly endless refrains of "to be continued ...", superhero stories never truly end.

Coogan was the first to try and nail down what exactly a superhero is. He established four key attributes that mark a character as a superhero from the decision issued by Judge Learned Hand in *Detective v. Bruns*, a copyright infringement case which ruled that Fox Comics' superhero Wonder Man (not Marvel's Simon Williams, but a different hero introduced in May of 1939) infringed upon DC's Superman: **MPIC**, standing for **M**ission, **P**owers, **I**ntity, and **C**ostume/**C**hevron.

Mission: "The superhero's mission is prosocial and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda ... The mission convention is essential to the superhero genre because someone who does not act selflessly to aid others in times of need is not heroic and

³² Nevins, 18-19.

³³ Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949; repr., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 30.

therefore not a hero.”³⁴ Nevins calls this “heroic intent,” which separates superheroes and even proto-superheroes from cultural epic heroes like Gilgamesh.³⁵ As Danny Fingeroth would later write, this can also be called “nobility of purpose.”³⁶

Powers: Extraordinary powers, abilities, attributes, or resources beyond those possessed by common human beings: Superman’s heat vision, Arctic breath, strength, flight, and invulnerability; Spider-Man’s ability to stick to walls and sense danger with his Spider-Sense; the enhanced strength, agility, and endurance of Captain America; and the Flash’s astonishing speed, to name a few.

Solomon’s take on the convention gives us some latitude: “A superhero must have a greater-than-normal ability of some kind.”³⁷ While Ben Affleck’s DCEU interpretation of Bruce Wayne facetiously tells Ezra Miller’s Barry Allen that his superpower boils down to “I’m rich,” in 2017’s *Justice League*, Batman’s actual greater-than-normal abilities are his uncannily intuitive detective skills, self discipline, strategic acumen, martial arts prowess, and scientific aptitude. Having a few billion in the bank and an entire military-contract-funded R&D department at your fingertips, though, doesn’t exactly hurt. Onward!

Identity: A codename or *nom de guerre* that both represents some aspect of the character’s biography and yet paradoxically serves to separate the superhero persona from the squishy mortal filling inside. For example: the name “*The Batman*” represents the fear the Dark Knight strikes in the hearts of criminals by evoking a terrifying and mysterious creature of the night, while also being evocative of Bruce Wayne’s biography: His parents were murdered at night (after attending a performance of *The Mark of Zorro*, incidentally), so he operates at night, much like the evildoers he hunts and much like bat he encounters while seeking a suitably

³⁴ Coogan, 31.

³⁵ Nevins, 35-36.

³⁶ Rosenberg, Robin and Peter Coogan, *What Is a Superhero?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 125.

³⁷ Solomon, 5.

terrifying disguise for his new crime-fighting persona.³⁸ In later retellings, he is also said to have had a childhood fear of bats. Likewise, the codename “*Captain America*” represents the might and right of a noble United States of America, shielding the world from fascism. It also externalizes the character attributes that allowed Steve Rogers to be Project: Rebirth’s only success (which we will detail later).

Costume/Chevron: This convention grows out of the Identity convention. A superhero must have a costume, a look, and/or chevron that emblemize the character’s identity and “firmly externalize either their alter ego’s inner character or biography,”³⁹ and thus embody Scott McCloud’s theory of “amplification through simplification,” as stated in his 1993 book Understanding Comics.⁴⁰

There is some latitude in this, as many superheroes—Thor, the Hulk, The Spirit, Swamp Thing, and others—either wear everyday clothes (such as a stylized business suit), or are essentially wrapped in a protective costume that is in fact an amped-up version of them. Nevins, for one, prefers to use the term “distinctive appearance,” which is useful in this context.⁴¹

More traditionally, we have Superman’s costume, which was sewn by Martha Kent out of the blankets baby Kal-El was wrapped in when the Kents found him, and Captain America’s star-spangled costume and shield (a defensive weapon that rhetorically echoes the eagle’s head turned toward the olive branches rather than the arrows on the Great Seal of the United States) represent the purest form of the ideals of the United States.

Another key attribute of the superhero costume is that it often bears a chevron that becomes an iconic symbol—an abstract distillation of a character’s essence. Think Superman’s S

³⁸ Finger, Bill (w, i), Gardner Fox (w), Bob Kane (p), and Sheldon Moldoff (p, l). “Legend: The Batman and How He Came to Be.” Detective Comics #33 (November 1939), DC Comics.

³⁹ Coogan, 32.

⁴⁰ McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993. pp. 30

⁴¹ Nevins, 36.

shield, which has since been retroactively defined both as the sigil for the House of El and as the Kryptonian glyph for “hope”⁴²; the bat silhouette on Batman’s chest; the star on Captain America’s scale mail armor, the image of his shield, or the A on his forehead; the spider on Spider-Man’s chest and back; the X-Men’s X (for the X gene responsible for mutations and for the surname of team founder Charles Xavier); or the Flash’s bolt of lightning, which denotes not only his speed, but the accident in which he acquired his connection to the Speed Force—being struck by a bolt of lightning and bathed in crime lab chemicals.

It’s safe to say that there was no such thing as branding three millennia ago, so the Costume/Chevron, and Identity conventions were completely absent from the likes of Hercules, Enkidu, Samson, et al., as was the prosocial Mission. Faced with such a chasm in the fossil record, so to speak, Coogan and others identified several transitional figures to help chart the evolution of the superhero.

In 1903, Baroness Emma Orczy’s masked French swordsman known as the Scarlet Pimpernel—the alter ego of the seemingly-foppish English nobleman Sir Percy Blakeney—debuted in a wildly popular London stage play, saving those sentenced to the guillotine of the French Revolution. Soon afterward, he appeared in his own series of novels. In 1919, Johnston McCully created serial magazine hero Zorro, who Coogan referred to as a Californian Robin Hood, “championing peasants oppressed by a corrupt government.”⁴³ A masked horseman with a quick wit and an even quicker sword, Zorro thrilled readers by dispensing his own brand of frontier justice while wearing a stylized all-black costume and

⁴² Initially, there was no deeper meaning behind the S-shield. It wasn’t until Marlon Brando’s insistence that Jor-El wear the S as a family crest in *Superman* (1978) that the idea took root. The folklore surrounding the shield developed over the next few decades. In Jon Ostrander’s 1999 maxi series, *The Kents*, it was revealed to have been derived from a Native American symbol for a snake, which is considered to be a healer by the tribe native to Smallville’s area of Kansas. It’s not too far a distance from a snake to a serpent to a royal Pendragon. In the first-season *Smallville* episode “Rogue” (2002), Lex Luthor (Michael Rosenbaum) shows Clark (Tom Welling) a battle cuirass won by Alexander the Great, which bears a jeweled snake symbol on the chest approximating Superman’s eventual chest symbol. The 2004 series *Superman: Birthright* by Mark Waid, is the first time that Superman’s S-Shield is said to be both a coat of arms for the House of El, as well as the Kryptonian symbol for “hope.”

⁴³ Evangelista 1995: 637.

carving his distinctive “Z” mark on walls, trees, and the clothing of the henchmen and villains he encountered.

Then came the mystery men, pulp heroes like Doc Savage, The Phantom, The Shadow, and Flash Gordon, whose globe-(and sometimes galaxy-)spanning tales of adventure and intrigue helped birth the modern comic book form.

From the ancient ancestors to the modern proto-superheroes, we see a linear development in nearly each of the four conventions: Instead of being amoral and self-interested, these proto-superheroes at the very least seem to have a social conscience, a need to do good for others whether or not it is of benefit to them. They also develop visual signifiers or attire that separates them from their public personas, along with evocative *noms de guerre*. There’s just something missing.

The Shadow can cloud men’s minds, but he’d still need help to change a tire. Doc Savage was cited by the inimitable Stan Lee as the forerunner of modern superheroes, but not a superhero in his own right. He is, like Captain America, as athletic as an Olympian at their peak, but unlike the Super Soldier Serum-powered Steve Rogers, he is still susceptible to fatigue, poisons (including alcohol), and toxins, and though he is supremely competent in a staggering variety of disciplines, he’s just a swole James Bond.

These characters must rely on their skills, their cunning, and deception to accomplish their ends. Yes, they wear masks like many modern superheroes, but they do not use their costumes or masks to externalize their characters or biographies. The Scarlet Pimpernel’s ensemble doesn’t resemble a roadside flower in the slightest. And, while *Zorro* (Spanish for “fox”) may be an appropriate name for a cunning vigilante, Don Diego De La Vega’s all-black get-up, his mask, and *sombrero cordobés* neither evoke nor resemble his namesake. These outfits

are instead used to hide, concealing the character so they can more effectively hunt their quarry or, more pointedly, to avoid harming their public personas' reputations.

This suggests an alternative line of thinking: that superheroes and these mystery men are in fact *not* related, at least, taxonomically speaking. Think of it like countershading in marine animals: Two completely different species with different evolutionary histories, living in the same biome (sharks and cetaceans), can and do develop similar adaptations (darker dorsal coloring, lighter ventral coloring) for the same reason (concealment) but for different purposes (to disguise their approach in search of prey; to escape the notice of predators).

Most of the aforementioned characters can therefore be more precisely placed into a completely different clade altogether: the shapeshifting, code-switching characters known as tricksters. Even Zorro's very name hints at such a lineage: The fox appears as a trickster in tales from cultures across the globe, including the Japanese *kitsune*, the Chinese *huli jing*, the Korean *kumiho*, the foxes of Aesop's fables, the European medieval character Reynard the Fox, and Br'er Fox of African-American oral tradition.

If not through the Scarlet Pimpernel, Zorro, The Shadow, and the like, then, how *do* we get from the likes of Samson, Hercules, and Gilgamesh to Superman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America? Where is the missing link? There was, indeed, someone else. There was *something* else.⁴⁴ While Coogan was writing of the ancients when he composed the following passage, it serves as an appropriate bridge to introduce that someone else, who has until now been shrouded in the mists of history:

“Sometimes they offer immediate inspiration to the creators, as with Samson ... other times, they merely serve as a version of the “collective unconscious”—the

⁴⁴ Yes, this is an intentional reference to Stephen Amell's opening monologue from the CW television series *Arrow*, based on the adventures of the DC superhero Green Arrow, which ran from 2012 to 2020: “My name is Oliver Queen. For five years I was stranded on an island with only one goal: survive. Now I will fulfill my father's dying wish—to use the list of names he left me and bring down those who are poisoning my city. To do this, I must become someone else. I must become *something* else.”

background we all carry with us because of the way characters, motifs, and plot dynamics provide the models of character and narrative that authors draw on intentionally or unintentionally.”

Chapter 2: A Name Half-Whispered

The Coming of Arthur

“Arthur. Wherever I go on this wretched island, I hear your name. Always half-whispered, as if you were ... a god.”

–Stellan Skarsgård as Cerdic in *King Arthur* (2004)

Above a sooty haze of burning pitch and straw, a solitary warrior on an armored white steed sits atop a grassy hill, surveying the invading horde on the other side of Hadrian’s Wall. Upon seeing a white flag waving through the smoke, he plants his Roman legion’s standard into the ground, and gallops out to a fateful parley.

The gilded embellishments of his battle-worn cavalry armor chipped away; his crested officer’s helmet darkened by years of blood and dirt; this is a man of action whose back is a road map of jagged scars, purple and silver keepsakes from his years of brutal combat at the edge of the civilized world. This is a man who has lost faith, friends, and brothers in arms. This is a man who now sees more seats empty than occupied at his round table. This is Clive Owen’s Artorius Castus, the semi-fictional fifth-century Roman commander at the center of the 2004 Jerry Bruckheimer historical epic *King Arthur*.

At this point late in the film, Artorius presumes that his now-discharged Sarmatian knights, along with their families and the civilians who populated the Roman fort they garrisoned, are well on their way to safety from the invading Saxon horde before him. Though Lancelot (Ioan Gruffud) had begged his friend and longtime leader to come with them, Artorius chose to stay and fight shoulder-to-shoulder with his mother’s people—the blue-painted natives known as Woads (a name for the historical Picts made up by screenwriter David

Franzoni)—alongside their warrior queen Guinevere and shaman leader Merlin. As far as Artorius knows, his highly-trained soldiers will not be by his side in the battle to come.

The Saxon leader Cerdic (played by Stellan Skarsgård, and based on a real historical Saxon leader of the same name) has called this parley in order to—at long last—look this Roman commander in the eye before what is to be a pivotal battle in what will ultimately be the Saxon conquest of Britain. Despite having witnessed the carnage wrought by the Saxons during their march to the wall, Artorius is far from wary. He and his mount trot defiantly toward Cerdic and circle the eerily calm Saxon chieftain, who remains quietly confident on foot, his words never rising above a low growl.

“*Arthur*,” Cerdic breathes. “Wherever I go on this wretched island, I hear your name. Always half whispered, as if you were a ... *god*. All I see is flesh, blood. No more god than the creature you're sitting on.”

“Speak your terms, Saxon,” Artorius demands. Instead, Cerdic continues to prod: “The Romans have left you. Who are you fighting for?”

“I fight for a cause beyond yours or Rome’s understanding,” says Artorius. This seems to amuse the Saxon. “If you come to beg a truce, you should be on your knees,” Cerdic says.

Instead, Artorius points his sword—yeah, *that* sword—at Cerdic and, looking down the blade’s twin fullers, makes a promise: “I came to see your face so that I alone may find you on the battlefield. And you would do well to mark my face, Saxon, for the next time you see it, it will be the last thing you see on this earth.” The meeting concluded, Artorius wheels his horse around and gallops back to the wall. Cerdic turns, thumps his chest, and says to himself, with not a small amount of satisfaction, “Ahhh, finally: A man worth killing.”

When Artorius reaches the other side of the gate, he finds that his faithful knights have in fact returned to aid him in his fight, a fight that is now theirs, as well. They eventually prevail, allying with the natives to repel the Saxons at what a closing voiceover by the disembodied spirit of Lancelot tells the audience is “Badon Hill,” or, as it’s commonly known in the Arthurian lore, Mount Badon. Artorius goes on to marry Guinevere (the appropriately-named Keira *Knightly*) at a seaside stonehenge, after which Merlin dubs him King Arthur. Roll credits.

Although it received a somewhat tepid response from critics and moviegoers alike, and although there was quite a bit of liberty taken with the historical facts (much to the chagrin of historical advisors John Matthews and Linda A. Malcor), the film is notable for being the first in which the titular king had appeared as anything but a plate-armored chivalric knight of the high medieval period. Though advertised as being based on, as the title card said, “[r]ecently discovered archeological evidence,” the theory that there was a real, historical King Arthur was, by that point, nearly 80 years old. Matthews was brought in to consult not only because of his expertise in Arthurian lore in general (his 2022 retelling of the legend, *The Great Book of King Arthur*, is testament to that), but more specifically because of his expertise in that very real (though far from recently-discovered) evidence.

So, you ask, does that mean there really was a Sword in the Stone, a wizard named Merlin, a queen named Guinevere ... all of that? If you’re asking whether there was a high king who united Britain and whose knights errant rescued fair maidens, jousted in tournaments, and quested for the Holy Grail, you’re barking up the wrong Green Knight. *That* Arthur is a literary creation of medieval chivalric romance. But, what about Owen’s Artorius? Closer to the mark, but still, not quite.

Why, though, should any of this even matter? We *are* talking about just a character here, right? If King Arthur is part of the evolution of the superhero—that missing link between Samson and Superman—then surely, he needn’t be any more real than Sherlock Holmes, Optimus Prime, or Squirrel Girl, right? Because in peeling back the layers of history and doing a bit of Arthurian archeology—sifting through the myth to find the man (or men) at its core, and to find what is earliest and most formative—we find the building blocks—indeed, the cornerstones—of what made the literary King Arthur not only *a* superhero according to Coogan’s MPIC framework, but the *very first* superhero, the one from whom all others spring.

What’s in a Name?

Practically all Arthurian scholars concerned with the king’s historicity agree that the historical Arthur must have been a Romanized Celtic chieftain who led a military effort to preserve the remnants of Roman civilization in Britain from an invading force of heathen barbarians—the Angles and Saxons. The question, though, is: When?

Could Arthur have been the “King of the Britons” who sixth-century historian Jordanes said led 12,000 troops into Gaul to battle the Saxons in 468 C.E.?⁴⁵ That expedition has been attributed to a man named Riothamus (who was betrayed to the Visigoths by the Praetorian Prefect of Gaul) but it is itself evocative (if not outright derivative) of an episode from the career of one Magnus Maximus, who declared himself Imperator in 383 C.E., crossed into Gaul with the majority of the Roman troops then stationed in Britain, and then proceeded to march against Rome, only to be defeated and killed at Aquileia in 388 C.E. Nevertheless, eminent Arthur scholar Geoffrey Ashe argued that it was Riothamus’ biography that was the basis for the Arthur

⁴⁵ Jordanes. 551 C.E. *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*. Translated by Charles Christopher Mierow, 2005.

myth.⁴⁶ Indeed, it could be that the exploits of these men (and others) each contributed something to the Arthurian legend that came to be codified in Geoffrey of Monmouth's pseudohistorical Historia Regum Britanniae (The History of the Kings of Britain) ca. 1136 C.E.

As a historical dramatization, Geoffrey's Historia is more fiction than fact, more *pseudo*-than historic, and far from a primary source. It in fact built on another purported history of the island, just as Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur—published in 1485, 15 years after his death—built on Geoffrey. The anonymously-authored Historia Brittonum, set down in the ninth century and often attributed to Nennius because of his added commentary, employed the same root in its title, a word which gives us a way through the mist, the fog, and the smoke—a window into the very real world from which the legend sprang.

The word “Britain” (and therefore the Latinized *Britanniae*, and *Brittonum*) is derived from the word *Britannia*, the name of a Roman province which stretched from the southern tip of the largest of the British Isles all the way up to Caledonia (modern-day Scotland) in the north. But *Britannia* is a word with even deeper roots.

Historia Brittonum posits that one Brutus of Troy, the grandson of Trojan hero Aeneas (of Virgil's *Aeneid*), was the founder and namesake of the region. As the legend goes, long after the Trojan War, Brutus and his family settled in Italy with other members of the post-war Trojan diaspora. After accidentally killing his father during a hunt, Brutus is banished from the community. During his subsequent wanderings, he happens upon another colony of displaced Trojans, where he asks a statue of the goddess Diana (the Roman counterpart to the Greek

⁴⁶ *Britannia: Conversation with Geoffrey Ashe*, 17 Aug. 1997, web.archive.org/web/20120206091814/britannia.com/history/h17a.html.

Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, as well as the namesake of the future Wonder Woman)⁴⁷ for guidance:

*Diva potens nemorum, terror sylvestribus apris; Cui licet amfractus ire
æthereos, Infernasque domos; terrestria jura resolve, Et dic quas terras nos habitare
velis? Dic certam sedem qua te venerabor in ævum, Qua tibi virgineis templa dicabo
choris!*

Goddess of woods, tremendous in the chase
To mountain board, and all the savage
race! Wide o'er the ethereal walks extend thy sway,
And o'er the infernal mansions void of
day! Look upon us on earth! unfold our fate,
And say what region is our destined
seat? Where shall we next thy lasting temples raise?
And choirs of virgins celebrate thy
praise?⁴⁸

After devotional offerings, Brutus falls asleep for three to four hours. As he slumbers, an apparition of the goddess appears before him, and foretells the rise of a great empire and a legendary royal line:

*Brute! sub accasum solis trans Gallica regna
Insula in oceano est undique clausa
mari: Insula in oceano est habitata gigantibus olim,
Nunc deserta quidem, gentibus apta
tuis. Hanc pete, namque tibi sedes erit illa perennis:
Sic fiet natis altera Troja tuis. Sic de
prole tua reges nascentur: et ipsis
Totius terræ subditus orbis erit.*

Brutus! there lies beyond the Gallic bounds [beyond Gaul (modern-day France)] An island which the western sea surrounds,
By giants once possessed, now few remain
To bar thy entrance, or obstruct thy reign.
To reach that happy shore thy sails employ
There fate decrees to raise a second Troy
And found an empire in thy royal line,
Which time shall ne'er destroy, nor bounds confine.⁴⁹

The legend, as related in both Historia Brittonum and Historia Regum Britanniae, continues: Upon arriving on the southwestern shore of that island—then called Albion—Brutus establishes a settlement, and when the few remaining native giants who still inhabit the island threaten to destroy that settlement, he slaughters them.⁵⁰ Brutus establishes a capital city on what

⁴⁷ Both are goddesses of the hunt, wild animals, and nature, but in Roman tradition, Diana is also associated with childbirth, the night, the moon, and crossroads (apt, considering Brutus is at the crossroads of history at this point in the story). Artemis—whose name will be more important later—is associated with the wilderness, vegetation, and care of children.

⁴⁸ Historia Regum Britanniae, Book I, Ch. XI

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Historia Regum Britanniae, Book I, Ch. XVI

would become the River Thames, names this city *Troia Nova* (New Troy, eventually to become *Trinovantum*, then *Londinium*, and eventually modern London), and becomes the first king of Britain,⁵¹ whose inhabitants would hereafter be called British, and speak in the British tongue, not Greek or Trojan. Thus—we are told—all the kings of Britain are said to descend from Brutus. As Brutus himself was descended from Aeneas, who was also the ancestor of the semi-mythical founders of Rome—Romulus and Remus—the kings of Britain are therefore the inheritors of the legacies of both Troy *and* Rome.

In actuality, the name *Britannia* is a Latinization of *Prydein*, a Middle Welsh name for the same geographic region.⁵² *Prydein* itself evolved from the name **Pritanī*, from the proto-Celtic language called *Common Brittonic*, dating to the sixth century B.C.E. **Pritanī* gave birth to the Greek terms (*Prettanike* and *Brettaniai*) for the natives of the British islands—the Celts, Welsh, and Scots.⁵³ So, when the Romans began occupying the largest of the British Isles in 43 C.E., they named the province *Brittania*., which eventually became home to three full legions.

By the late fourth century of the Common Era, the Roman Empire stretched from modern-day Armenia in the east to the coast of the Iberian Peninsula in the west, and from Aswan, Egypt in the south to the furthest and most remote reaches of the north, bounded by the Antonine Wall separating Britannia from Caledonia. Governing—not to mention defending—such an Empire proved both cumbersome and expensive, so Rome began to withdraw from what were deemed indefensible, far-flung outposts. That included Brittania, which was left open to incursions from other ... *ahem* ... interested parties.

⁵¹ Clark, John. "Trinovantum—the Evolution of a Legend." *Journal of Medieval History* 7, no. 2 (1981): 135–51. doi:10.1016/0304-4181(81)90024-5.

⁵² The name Britannia was used by the Romans to identify that particular region in much the same way as they used the name Judea—a Latinization of the native Hebrew יהודה name for the Kingdom of Judah over which the Biblical King David ruled—to refer to the Roman province that encompassed the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people, a territory known as the modern-day State of Israel.

⁵³ Rhys, Guto. "Approaching the Pictish language: historiography, early evidence and the question of Pritenic" (<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/6285/7/2015RhysPhD.pdf>). University of Glasgow.

Legend says that the Saxons, a seafaring Germanic people from across the North Sea, had originally been invited to Britain by a pseudo-historical warlord, referred to as Vortigern the Usurper in Arthurian lore. Brought over to fight against those who opposed Vortigern's efforts to make himself High King of Britain, these Saxon mercenaries eventually mutinied and joined with their cousins the Angles⁵⁴ to fill the power vacuum left by the departing Romans.⁵⁵

Following the Anglo-Saxon invasion in the sixth century (also important to keep this date in mind), the term *Briton* was used to refer to the Celtic-speaking native peoples and their lands on the western portion of the island (which we today know as Wales), while the eastern portion was referred to as the land of the conquering Angles, or Angle Land, hence modern England.

In his *Historia*, Geoffrey periodically cites a mysterious lost book—purportedly presented to him by Walter, the Archdeacon of Gloucester—as his primary source. Whenever he cites the book, Geoffrey uses the phrase “*ex Britannia*”—Latin for “from (or ‘out of’) Britannia.” At the time he was writing, that phrase would have been understood to mean that this mysterious book came “out of Wales.”⁵⁶

Though this possibly fictitious volume has yet to be uncovered in the nearly nine centuries since Geoffrey wrote, clues in his text clearly indicate that he clearly had access to the insular written and oral folk traditions of the Welsh Britons,⁵⁷ and it's likely that these were the sources that he used to construct much of his narrative. Take, for example, how Geoffrey describes the arming of King Arthur before the battle of Mount Badon (Latin: *Mons Badonicus*) in *Historia Regum Britanniae*:

Ipse vero Arthurus, lorica tanto rege condigna, indutus, auream galeam simulacro draconis insculptam capiti adaptavit. Umeris quoque suis clipeum, vocabulo Prydwen, imposuit, in quo imago sanctae Mariae, Dei genitricis, inerat picta,

⁵⁴ A fellow Germanic tribe originating from the narrow strip of land at the base of the Jutland Peninsula in what is now Denmark.

⁵⁵ Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, Ch. 23, ca. 483-545 C.E.

⁵⁶ Barber, Richard. *The Figure of Arthur*. London: Longman, 1972. pp. 38

⁵⁷ Blake, Steve. *Pendragon: The Definitive Account of the Origins of Arthur*. London: Samuel French, 2002 pp. 37

*quae ipsum in memoriam ipsius saepissime revocabat. Accinctus etiam Caliburno, gladio optimo, in insula Aval<l>onis fabricato, lancea dexteram suam decorat, quae Ron nomine vocabatur: haec erat ardua lataque lancea, cladibus apta.*⁵⁸

And so Arthur donned a *lorica* worthy of a mighty king, placed on his head a golden helmet engraved with the image of a dragon, and on his shoulders his shield called *Priwen*; upon which the picture of the blessed Mary, mother of God, was painted, in order to put him frequently in mind of her. He also buckled on *Caliburnus*, an excellent blade forged on the isle of Avallon, and graced his hand with his spear, called *Ron*, a steep and wide lance fit for destruction.

With his dragon helmet and a shield emblazoned with a motif of the Virgin Mary,⁵⁹

Arthur's battle attire would have been quite odd indeed for knights in the second quarter of the 12th century, the time in which Geoffrey wrote. But, there is a clue as to just why he would be armed so strangely: Geoffrey explicitly uses the Latin word *lorica*. Though sometimes translated as "[chain]mail shirt" or "hauberk" (a neck and shoulder armor), the word actually refers to a very specific type of leather cuirass that would have been worn by soldiers who patrolled Britannia for nearly 400 years: Roman legionnaires.

Defender of the Land

In Book VI, Chapter 3 of his *Historia*, Geoffrey wrote that when the Romans departed, they "encouraged the timorous people," native to Britain to resist, and "left them patterns of their arms" to defend themselves.

When they first invaded, the Saxons would have relied heavily on hit-and-run tactics to plunder along the island's coast, using rivers to make forays into the island interior to terrorize the native Britons and raid villages and settlements. The best defense against those Anglo-Saxon raids (think Vikings before the Vikings were Vikings) would have been a brigade of heavy cavalry armed with Roman or Roman-style equipment, using fast-moving tactics similar to those

⁵⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth (2007). Reeve, Michael D. (ed.). *The History of the Kings of Britain: An Edition and Translation of De Gestis Britonum [Historia Regum Britanniae]*. Arthurian Studies LXIX. Translated by Wright, Neil. Woodbridge: Boydell Press. pp. 198–199

⁵⁹ Langtoft's Chronicles: Northern England, c. 1307 - c. 1327, Royal MS 20 a ii, f. 4r

used by a renowned group of foreign auxiliaries that had first been brought to the island by the Romans in the second century.⁶⁰

So, what does all this mean for our quest to find a historical King Arthur, and how does it shed any light on his role in the development of the superhero? Well, at some point in the late fifth or early sixth century, the Saxon advance was—at least temporarily—halted in just such a manner. Arthur historian Leon Fleuriot argued that Riothamus—his preferred contender for a ‘historical Arthur’—was in fact one and the same with a warrior named Ambrosius Aurelianus, a figure who is said to have won a similarly important fifth-century battle against the Anglo-Saxons in De Excidio Britanniae, written by vitriolic British monk Gildas between 520 and 560 C.E.⁶¹ De Excidio Britanniae—along with giving us the very first mention of an individual that resembles the familiar literary King Arthur—is the origin for the idea that a real historical Arthur was the victorious commander who halted the Saxons at what he called the siege of Mount Badon. Gildas even claims that he was born on the very day it was fought. Though no concrete date has been established for the battle (or siege), it is thought to have occurred between 482 and 518 C.E.⁶²

As can be gleaned from the work’s evocative title (On the Ruin of Britain), Gildas—a Briton—was writing on the eventual fall of Britain (Wales) to the Saxons. His work laments the cowardice displayed by his countrymen in battle (likely spawning Geoffrey’s description of them as “timorous” 600 years later), comparing them unfavorably to the exploits of the aforementioned Ambrosius Aurelianus, describing him as the savior of the island from the Saxon incursion and dubbing him the “only true Roman” left.

⁶⁰ Nickel, Helmut. *The Last Days of Rome in Britain and the Origins of the Arthurian Legends* in Cambi, N. & Matthews, J. (eds) Lucius Artorius Castus and the King Arthur Legend, Književni krug Split/Ogranak Matice Hrvatske Podstrana, 2014.

⁶¹ Barber, 1972: 39-53.

⁶² Breeze, Andrew, British Battles 493–937: Mount Badon to Brunanburh, Anthem Press: 2020. pp. 1-10..

Yet, for all the adulation Gildas heaped upon him, Aurelianus⁶³ is not named as the commander at that specific pivotal Mount Badon engagement (he only won a battle *like* it). Gildas doesn't even mention that Mount Badon commander by name. He didn't have to, argued Helmut Nickel—one of the 20th century's preeminent Arthurian scholars—because, “in all probability ... he was only too well known.”⁶⁴

The Blink of an Eye

Ten years after Gildas wrote his De Excidio Britanniae, the Roman-sounding name ‘Artorius’ underwent a revival in popularity, as attested to in contemporary documents.⁶⁵

Nearly 200 years after the Battle of Mount Badon, the seventh-century Old Welsh poem *Y Gododdin*, in the midst of praising 80 warriors for their deeds in the battle at Catraeth in 600 C.E., singles out one such warrior for fighting bravely and killing over 300 men, “even though he was no Arthur.” Arthur, here, is already considered an impossible standard, someone to whose heights of valor not “even a man who killed 300 in one rush could compare.”⁶⁶

Written in 828 C.E., Historia Brittonum—the aforementioned tract that gave us the Trojan origins of Britain—refers to Arthur not as a king, but as a *dux bellorum*. Given that the Latin word *dux*—the origin for the English title of Duke—is derived from the verb *ducere* (to lead), this “Duke of Battles” (or “Leader of Battles”) was not considered to be a king, but something closer to what the cinematic Merlin (Stephen Dillane) calls Artorius in the 2004 film: a Master of War. Indeed, Historia Brittonum tells us that Arthur is said to have fought alongside the kings of Britain, though he was not one of them. Historia Brittonum says that Arthur fought

⁶³ In Welsh tradition, he is depicted as a supernaturally powerful Commander. Later, those attributes would be divided up between two completely separate characters by Geoffrey of Monmouth, one being Arthur's uncle (Ambrosius Aurelianus) and the other being Merlin Emrys (sometimes called Ambrose Merlin).

⁶⁴ Nickel 2014.

⁶⁵ Ash, Geoffrey. “Arthur, Origins of Legend.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

⁶⁶ Green, T. “The Historicity and Historicisation of Arthur.” *Arthurian Resources*. 1998.
<http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthur.htm>

and won 12 named battles in his time, and that he single-handedly slew 960 foes at Mount Badon (given that stat line, it's no wonder why even the guy who killed 300 couldn't measure up).⁶⁷

From the seventh to the 11th centuries, stories of this impossibly prolific warrior entered the oral tradition in the so-called Celtic Fringe (Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany) and first circulated to continental Europe through the poems and verse of Breton storytellers. Within 50 years of Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, stories of King Arthur had spread throughout all of Europe, and over the next 500 years, audiences across the Western world clamored for the each new take on the story—each new episode added to the lore, and each fresh redaction or translation—like mid-20th century readers waiting for the next issue of a superhero comic book. Three hundred years before the advent of the printing press, and some 850 years before the Internet, Arthur went from *Dux Bellorum* to High King and then went *viral*. But how?

Scottish art critic, writer, and lecturer Dugald MacColl wrote: "... in such times, when little is written and less read, more is remembered and retold. The tongue is then the pen of a ready writer, the memory has its leaves printed with indelible ink, and these are ceaselessly read and copied by earnest learners in the house and by the way."⁶⁸

Indo-European scholar Dr. Kresimir Vukovitch explained: "In oral literature and folk tradition like this one, four hundred years is a blink of an eye."⁶⁹

If indeed we take Koch's assertion at face value—that Arthur's mention in *Y Gododdin* "would tell us that by the later sixth century there existed in North Britain a tradition of a Brittonic superhero Arthur"⁷⁰—that would mean that Arthur had already achieved mythic status within *less than 100 years* of the hypothesized date of the Battle of Badon Hill. Even by

⁶⁷ Ash 1991.

⁶⁸ MacColl, Dugald. 'Early British Church—The Arthurian Legends,' *The Catholic Presbyterian* (March, 1890): 180 [176-185].

⁶⁹ Personal communication with John Matthews.

⁷⁰ Koch 1996: 242.

Vukovitch's standards, that's record time, which would suggest that the foundations had actually been laid much, much earlier in the underlying local oral tradition—in its folklore.

Folklore is a body of traditional stories known as **folktales**. These narrative traditions are thought of in their native cultures as deeply True (if not literally true—little 't'), and have been passed down through generations, usually by word of mouth, which is to say, they are—usually—not written down. That's why America's most important folklorist, Stith Thompson, called folktales the underlying foundation of all narrative forms, and among them, the most universal. For Thompson, folktales were no less than living art.

In arguing for the literary consideration of folktales, folk anecdotes, and indigenous oral traditions in 1977, anthropologist Clifford Geertz coined the term 'thick description' to describe that quality of folktales (which included the traditional community anecdotes that littered his field notes) which made them so significant: Folk stories—whether True, true, or both—are intrinsically authentic, as opposed to fictive literature, which is constructed to reflect the reality an author seeks to portray.

Folk stories have, as American literary historian Stephen Greenblatt called it, the “touch of the real,”⁷¹ meaning that they authentically represent the values, anxieties, traditions, aspirations, morals—indeed, the lived realities—of the culture or society from whence they come. That's because folktales, Greenblatt argued, possess within them the 'linked intentions' of their originating cultures, and they retain the fingerprints of these touches of the real and these linked intentions even as they evolve into legend, and then into mythology.⁷²

But what's the difference, you ask, between fairy tales, folktales, legends, and myths? Aren't they all the same—just tall tales and flights of fancy meant to entertain? There are, in fact,

⁷¹ Greenblatt 1997: 14–29.

⁷² Greenblatt 1997: 18.

very important distinctions between each of these forms, all of which inform the development of the Arthurian—and superheroic—narrative.

Fairy tales are episodes—oral or literary—which move in an unreal world without definite locality (a Never-Never Land, not to put too fine a point on it), which involve quests in which “humble heroes kill adversaries, succeed to kingdoms, and marry princesses,” Thompson wrote. They are highly versatile and adapt to the needs of the culture and the teller in the historical moment, but, most importantly, they are not ever and never were supposed to be thought of as literally true by any reasonable narrator or reader.⁷³

Legends, on the other hand, are stories that—though embellished—are grounded in and based upon purported historical facts. They depict the “improbable within the world of the possible,”⁷⁴ and while they often involve at least some element of the supernatural, a legend itself never asks for any suspension of disbelief.⁷⁵ The negotiation of the (literal) truth of a legend instead happens in the act of telling the tale—the reciting of the verse, the singing of the song, the *narration* of the legend. While each teller and receiver of a given legend may determine its level of veracity for themselves, that diversity of opinion has no bearing on whether or not a narrative is a legend. It is a legend precisely *because* the question of truth is even being entertained. Folklorist Linda Dégh and her husband Andrew Vázsonyi wrote: “The legend tells explicitly or implicitly almost without exception that its message is or was believed *sometime*, by *someone*, *somewhere*.”⁷⁶

Given enough time and the right conditions, legends passed down through generations evolve into **myths**—stories typically involving supernatural beings or events which explain or

⁷³ Thompson 1977

⁷⁴ Oring, Elliott. “Folk Narratives.” Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction. Edited by Elliott Oring, Utah State University Press, 1986, pp. 125

⁷⁵ Oring 1997: 125.

⁷⁶ Dégh, Linda and Andrew Vázsonyi. “Legend and Belief.” Folklore Genres. Ed. Dan Ben-Amos. USA: University of Texas Press, 1976, pp. 118.

concern natural or social phenomena, often centered around a heroic figure. They answer the questions: “Why is the world the way it is?” and “What is my place in it?”

While the perception of a myth’s literal truth (with a little ‘t’) is an important component of what makes a myth a myth, it is not as important as a myth’s Truth (big ‘T’). Take, for example, the story of the Israelite Exodus from Egypt. Speaking as a serious, educated, rational, science- and history-minded Jew in the 21st century, I don’t believe that God *literally* opened up the Sea of Reeds to let my ancestors pass through without so much as soaking a single sandal. But, I do believe that, at some point, my people did migrate *en masse* from ancient Egypt to Canaan behind a charismatic leader, likely with military experience. I also believe that these people needed something to believe in, some unitary idea or guiding set of rules to keep them on the straight-and-narrow, to bind them as a nation, and to reinforce their national identity as separate and distinct from the other peoples around them in perpetuity. So, that’s how we get the Exodus myth, which includes the origin stories for our sacred text (the Torah), many of our important pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Sukkot, and Shavuot), and the set of laws by which Jews were supposed to live (the Ten Commandments, the laws of *kashrut*—what’s kosher and what isn’t—and other important tenets for society, such as how to treat widows, orphans, and others less fortunate).

That’s a practical example of how a myth’s literal veracity (truth, little ‘t’—what actually happened) and its metaphorical and allegorical veracity (the meaning of what happened through the lens of time—Truth, big ‘T’) interact and intertwine as they acquire layers of tradition and meaning over centuries and millennia. These layers, while sometimes larger-than-life, tend only to stick if they resonate with the core literal truths of what becomes a body of **mythology**. So, as Sam Neill’s Merlin said at the top of this section, the story of King Arthur is no fairy tale, and it

has persisted for nearly two millennia because of the touches of the real—the fingerprints of history—embedded in its very DNA, the same DNA it passed along to modern-day superheroes.

Chapter 3: Artorius

The True Story of the Real King Arthur

“I’m waiting for my Lady of the Lake
to come and crown me King
I’m waiting for my rocket to land
So I can get my power ring”

—Ookla the Mok, *Secret Origin*

In the mid-19th century, two little-heralded archeological finds were made that, though they were separated by over 1,000 miles, told two chapters of a single story, perhaps the greatest story ever told this side of the Bible. The first, a fragment of a stone memorial plaque decorated with carved rosettes, was found in the cemetery wall of a church in the Croatian town of Podstrana. The other—a simple, five-gram gold ring—was unearthed from the soil covering the ruins of a Roman fort at Great Chesterford in Essex, England.

The former was found to be one of two carvings created to memorialize a decorated military man whose lengthy career spanned the breadth of the Roman Empire. The latter had likely fallen off the finger of some Roman soldier serving at the frontier, and for decades was lost in the archives of the British Museum, never seen by the public, and hardly considered by scholars. Each of these finds dated from the late second century of the Common Era, and each of them bore the same Roman name: ARTOR,⁷⁷ a shortened form of the name of one distinguished Roman family in particular: the *Artorii* (the plural form of *Artorius*).

A Roman name was traditionally made up of three parts: the *praenomen* (the personal name for a Roman child, chosen by the parents, analogous to the modern ‘given’ name), the

⁷⁷ Nicolini, Giuseppe, Antonio Trinchese, and Alessandro Faggiani. “King Arthur’s Ring? Finding of the Golden Ring of the Gens Artoria in Ancient Britannia.” *King Arthur’s Ring? Finding of the Golden Ring of the Gens Artoria in ancient Britannia*. (Feb., 2021): 11. Print.

nomen (familial name—*gens*—from patrilineal descent), and the *cognomen* (a personal nickname, though later used to distinguish branches of a *gens*, or family/clan).

There are myriad ways for a small piece of jewelry such as the ARTOR ring to travel great distances, and indeed, there are records of many *Artorii* proudly serving the Empire on both land and sea, across the Mediterranean and into the Caucasus, during the first three centuries of the Common Era. However, there was only one documented member of the *Artorii* to serve in the legions during the Roman occupation of Britain, and only one Artorius even *in Britain* between the second and fourth centuries of the Common Era. Here, in the twilight of the *Pax Romana*, is where we find one Lucius Artorius Castus, the same man whose career was detailed in those two memorial carvings, a career which brought him into close and sustained contact with the people and cultural traditions that came to form the earliest and most foundational elements of the Arthur mythos.⁷⁸

In 1924, American medievalist Kemp Malone became the first to posit that Castus' exploits were the origin point for the local folklore that grew into the King Arthur myth. Thanks in large part to the research done by Nickel, Malcor, and Matthews—building on Malone's work and diverging from that done by Frank Reno, Ashe, and Fleuriot—Castus has become, among Arthurian scholars, the consensus choice for a 'real King Arthur.'

To understand who Lucius Artorius Castus was, and why he inspired not only centuries of heroic storytelling, but some of the greatest and most fantastical heroes to ever be conceived by the human mind, we must understand the world he was born into, his family, his career, and the choices he made.

⁷⁸ Lucius Artorius Castus' life is wonderfully reconstructed in the deeply-sourced *Artorius: The Real King Arthur* (2023) by Malcor and Matthews, so I will draw from their extensive work for much of the history of the *gens Artorii* which follows. I urge you to pick up *Artorius*, as it is a fascinating read.

Knights of Rome

By Roman law, the ARTOR ring found in England—known as an *Anulus Aureus* (literally: golden ring)—could only be worn by members of certain noble classes, and therefore, could only belong to a person of great importance.⁷⁹ The *Artorii* were members of just such a class. The *gens Artorii* were a noble family, one which was part of an order that ranked just below the senatorial class in terms of prestige: the Equestrians, otherwise known as knights of Rome.⁸⁰ While this Arthur may not have been a king, he was certainly of noble blood: According to archeological evidence, members of the *gens Artorii* had been Equestrians dating back to 27 B.C.E.⁸¹

A pair of Castus' forebears—twin brothers—were instrumental in elevating their family into that lofty order. During the Battle of Philippi in Macedonia, advice from one Marcus Artorius Asclepiades—who, as his *cognomen* suggests, was a healer⁸²—helped save the life of future emperor Augustus. The Senate later tapped Asclepiades' twin brother Marcus Artorius Geminus (clearly, the family had a sense of humor⁸³) to serve as an officer in charge of the military treasury, one of 12 *praetors* under the man who had by then become Caesar Augustus, the very emperor who founded the Equestrians.⁸⁴ Branches of the family held business interests in a wide variety of industries throughout the empire, particularly in shipping, medicine, banking, gladiatorial combat, and farming. Hailing from the Roman province of Campania (from *Campania felix*, or “fertile pastures”) on the southwestern portion of the Italian peninsula, not

⁷⁹ Nicolini 2021.

⁸⁰ Malcor & Matthews, 30-31.

⁸¹ Malcor & Matthews, 37.

⁸² Asclepius was the Roman and Greek god of healing and medicine.

⁸³ His *cognomen* literally means “twin.” That would mean one brother was named Marcus, and the other Marcus's Twin. Holy inferiority complex, Batman!

⁸⁴ Malcor & Matthews, 43-44.

only did the *Artorii* deal in wine and olive oil, but they also dealt in their home region's most notable product: Horses.

Several members of the *gens* ended up serving in the Roman navy, and others in legions that fought on the eastern edges of the Empire, in and around the Caucasus, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Carpathian Mountains, and the Danube—a region that was home to the Sarmatians, an ancient-Iranian-speaking group of equestrian nomads who reigned across the Pontic-Caspian steppe from a time three centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Dragon Warriors

The Sarmatians were renowned as fearsome warriors, particularly on horseback. Their heavy cavalry (called *cataphracts*) was regarded across the empire as one of the known world's most effective fighting forces. In the fifth century, Greek historian Herodotus gave a lengthy description of a Scythian ceremony that gives a glimpse into just one reason why these tribes may have been so feared on the battlefield: They would construct a flat-topped wooden pyramid surmounted by an altar, into which an ancient iron sword was stuck to represent their god of war (who Herodotus likened to Ares). Prisoners were lined up in front of the altar, and their right arms were severed and thrown into the air, left on the ground wherever they fell. The blood of the prisoners was collected in a golden cup⁸⁵ and poured over the iron sword.⁸⁶

Part of the wider Scythian culture from the Caucasus which included the Alans (some of whom eventually settled in northern Gaul), Aorsi, Roxolani, and Iazyges, the more eastern Sarmatian tribes typically wore a unique type of armor made of overlapping discs or small plates (*lamellae*) made of materials like horns, horse hooves, and iron. Not only was it lighter and more

⁸⁵ There are other “sacred chalice” motifs in the wider Scythian and Celtic traditions that preceded the Arthurian introduction of the Holy Grail, but more on that later.

⁸⁶ Malcor & Matthews, 53.

flexible than later medieval plate armor (perfect for a fighting force consisting chiefly of mounted cavalry), but it was also stronger than typical leather armor worn by Roman soldiers. Not unlike the mail armor worn by Captain America in modern comics, it gives the appearance of either feathers (like the American bald eagle) or the scales of a serpent or a dragon.⁸⁷ In fact, Herodotus and his contemporaries considered the Sarmatians and the *Sauromatae* ('lizard people') to be members of the same race. If you're already connecting the dots from 'dragon' to 'Pendragon,' you're on the right track, as dragons were common in both Scythian and Brythonic mythology.⁸⁸

In 69 C.E., a group of Sarmatians enrolled in the Roman army in Moesia (in the Balkans), where it's likely that several members of the *Artorii* family trained and fought alongside them. Between 85-88 C.E. and in 101 C.E., the Iazyges tribe sent its heavy cavalry to fight in the Dacian wars alongside Emperor Trajan's forces, though they eventually turned on the Romans and raided Moesia in 92 C.E. That love-hate relationship between the Sarmatians and Rome would have made it likely that members of the *Artorii* clan not only fought *alongside* warriors of Sarmatian blood, but *against* them, as well: One Marcus Artorius Rufus Zephyrus, who served Rome in the mid-second century, may have taken his *cognomen* (nickname) Zephyrus from one of Alexander the Great's generals who fell in battle against the Caucasians.⁸⁹ Another member of the *Artorii* living in the late first and early second century, (takes deep breath) Marcus Artorius Marci Filius Palatina Priscillus Vicasius Sabidianus, served in legions that fought heavy cavalry

⁸⁷ Nefedkin, Alexander. "Sarmatian Armour According to Narrative and Archaeological Data." Arms and Armour as Indicators of Cultural Transfer: The Steppes and the Ancient World from Hellenistic Times to the Early Middle Ages. Ed. by M. Mode, J. Tubach, S. G. Vashalomidze. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2006. P. 433–444. (Nomaden und Sesshafte. Bd. 4).

⁸⁸ Malcor & Matthews, 121.

⁸⁹ EDCS Journal. (1985). *Edcsepigraphik-Datenbank Clauss / Slaby*. Epigraphik Datenbank.

https://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi_url.php?s_sprache=en&p_publication=AE%2B1985%2C%2B00401&r_sortierung=Belegstelle

in the Caucasus, but later in his career, he commanded a group of Pannonians, who could have been of Sarmatian stock.⁹⁰

Slaves taken by the Romans in their victories over the Dacians (an Indo-European people closely related to the Sarmatians) and Iazyges would have come on the market in one of the *Artorii's* traditional seats, Puteoli, where the *Artorii* would have had first pick at auction. Having fought both with and against them, perhaps the *Artorii* chose their slaves with an eye toward teaching their future-legionnaire sons the Sarmatians' horse-handling techniques, fighting style, and language. Other slaves from this cohort would have been inducted into the gladiatorial ranks, where yet another branch of the *Artorii* in *that* business would have chosen them because of their first-hand knowledge of the Sarmatians' battlefield prowess. All this is to say that the *Artorii* were almost certainly intimately familiar with Sarmatian culture, language, traditions, and fighting styles.

After Emperor Hadrian defeated the Iazyges in 117-119 C.E. to take control of Dacia, there was peace between the Sarmatians and Rome for 50 years, with Iazygean *kontari* (heavy armored cavalry named for their chief weapon, a two-handed cavalry lance called a *kontos*) joining the Roman army as auxiliaries. This is likely the period of time during which Sabidianus would have commanded Pannonian soldiers.

Soldier of the Empire

With all these points of intersection, the name Artorius would already be well-known in the Sarmatian sphere of influence by the time Castus was born, probably ca. 140 C.E. By then, the *Artorii* had long since become a part of Roman imperial families through marriage and other associations. Thus, in his youth, Castus would have been very well educated, likely in the city of

⁹⁰ Malcor & Matthews, 47-51.

Rome itself, and perhaps even at the home of Sabidianus, who may well have been Castus' grandfather. The 'Palatina' part of Sabidianus' name tells us that, along with being a military man, he was a member of the *Palatina* voting tribe—as such, he would have lived on Palatine Hill in Rome—and that he belonged to the *flamen divi Augusti*, the priests responsible for the worship of Roman emperors as gods.⁹¹

Given the family's close association with the Roman religion, it's no surprise that Castus' aforementioned mausoleum was decorated with floral rosettes: They almost certainly represent a particular Roman goddess the *Artorii* likely had an affinity for, one whose cult unsurprisingly appealed to military and gladiatorial types—Flora. A sort of reverse Persephone, Flora reigned as a goddess of death and new life, created the rose, and birthed both Achilles' horses and the war god Ares. The worship of this goddess became so entangled with the early veneration of the Virgin Mary that it was impossible to distinguish an image of one from the other. Remember, Castus was born just over 100 years after the time of Jesus of Nazareth, when Christianity was going through a painful process of pulling away from Judaism, and was still a long way from becoming the state religion of the Empire. Thus, the image Geoffrey gave us of Mary on Arthur's shoulder or shield—described as early as the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*—may very well have been a recollection of an image of the Roman goddess Flora.⁹²

After a well-rounded education that included schooling in the arts of hand-to-hand combat (such as Greco-Roman wrestling), rhetoric (public speaking), philosophy, statecraft, and history, Castus would have followed in the footsteps of Sabidianus and his other forebears in service of the Empire once he came of age.⁹³ Like Sabidianus, he was first posted to the *Legio III Gallica*, which drew its number locally from the citizens of Campania. Also like Sabidianus,

⁹¹ Malcor & Matthews, 47.

⁹² Langtoft's Chronicles: Northern England, c. 1307 - c. 1327, Royal MS 20 a ii, f. 4r1; The idea of the Virgin Mary on Arthur's shield, though, may not be entirely Christian, after all. (Malcor & Matthews, 50-54).

⁹³ Malcor & Matthews, 50.

Castus then transferred to the *Legio VI Ferrata* in Jerusalem (the prospect of King Arthur treading the same stones as King David is an intriguing one, indeed, and one which will take on another layer of meaning in later chapters), where he would have learned much about that new growing religion of Christianity and would have also familiarized himself with Jewish customs and culture.

As a Centurion in Syria, he battled the *cataphracts* of the Parthians, an early Iranian dynasty that shared heritage and culture with the Sarmatians. In the deserts of the Middle East, he would have learned to counter the Parthian ‘heavies’ with a technique called a *testudo* (named for this particular shield formation’s resemblance to a tortoise’s protective shell), which had been used by none other than Alexander the Great, whose tactics would have likely been required reading for students of Castus’ pedigree.

After posting to Judea and then Budapest as a Centurion, Castus served as a Centurion and the *Primus Pilus* (literally: ‘First Spear’) of *Legio V Macedonica* on the steppes of Eastern Europe, where he would put his desert education to good use.

In 172 C.E., two tribes with whom Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius had brokered a truce—the Quadi and Sarmatian Iazyges—once again turned on their Roman allies, and in their surge westward, came to face the *Legio V Macedonica* at the southern bank of the icy Danube River. While it’s not known for certain whether Castus commanded the detachment that met the Qadi and Sarmatian Iazyges, such a responsibility would have been among his duties as *Primus Pilus*, and Dio noted that this detachment was conspicuously well trained in the fighting styles (vicious hand-to-hand Greco-Roman wrestling) and strategies (the *testudo*) that would have been in Castus’ arsenal—tools specifically designed to counter the Sarmatians’ most devastating

tactics—enabling the smaller Roman force to overcome a significant numerical disadvantage to capture their opponents, forcing the Iazyges’ king to send an envoy to sue for peace.⁹⁴

In 175 C.E., rather than asking for nobles as part of negotiations (as was standard practice at the time), Emperor Marcus Aurelius—as part of the peace treaty—demanded 8,000 Sarmatian cavalymen to be inducted into the Roman fighting force as auxiliaries. He would immediately send 5,500 of them to shore up a northern frontier in turmoil: In Britannia, the *Legios VI Victrix* and *II Augusta* had been in a near-constant state of revolt, and native British tribes—the Caledoni, Brigantes, Ordovices, and Iceni—were causing trouble south of Hadrian’s wall.⁹⁵

To conduct the Sarmatians across the breadth of the Empire to the restless and troublesome province, Emperor Marcus Aurelius chose Castus, a man he likely knew and trusted.⁹⁶ As *Primus Pilus*, Castus would have been included in war councils with the Emperor himself in the lead-up to the clashes with the Iazyges.⁹⁷ In those councils, he would have proved an invaluable asset given his service both with and against Sarmatians and Caucasian heavy cavalry, as well as for his knowledge of their tactics, language, and culture. Once the treaties were signed, that familiarity—along with the respect he and his family name commanded from the Sarmatians—would have made Castus the natural choice to conduct the conscripts—along with their families, possessions, livestock, and over 1,000 horses—across the breadth of the Empire. Traversing nearly 2,000 miles with such an unwieldy group would seem to be quite an impressive feat in and of itself, were it not for the aid of Roman roadways, but the real trick was somehow managing to get that city-sized multitude of grassland natives and wild steppe mounts across the English Channel.

⁹⁴ Dio, 72.7.1-5; Cary 1932:22-25

⁹⁵ Nickel, Helmut. “Sarmatian Connection.” *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

⁹⁶ Malcor & Matthews, 83-85.

⁹⁷ Malcor & Matthews, 83-84.

Across the Sea

Since the Chunnel was about 1,800 years away from completion, the only way to cross the English Channel in the second century would have been by ship. Given his family's maritime holdings—branches of the *Artorii* were known shipbuilders—Castus would likely have utilized enormous merchant ships to ferry his charges across the Channel, a mode of transportation the vast majority of Sarmatians would likely never have seen before, since the only seas many of them knew were the seas of grass in western Eurasia.

Such an undertaking would have been the ancient Roman logistical equivalent of the Berlin Airlift or the Dunkirk evacuation (except without the Nazis), and as such would certainly have been a feat worthy of enshrinement in cultural memory, not unlike the Hebrew Exodus. It's also clear from that memory's survival in later Arthur stories that it seemed a positively superhuman feat to medieval redactors, as well, because from the fourth through the 10th centuries, no ruler in Britain could have possibly commanded a fleet capable of such massive marine troop movement, as the technology to build those ships was lost to the Western world after the fall of Rome.⁹⁸

In the Arthurian Text, Arthur and his knights—along with their armored horses and gear—regularly sail back and forth to the Continent to fight Roman legions, battle giants, and conduct various campaigns. Of particular note is an episode in Book XXI, Chapter 1 of Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, where Arthur returns from his siege of Lancelot on the Continent to battle the usurper Mordred at home, landing back on English soil at Dover. *Portus Dubris*, as it would have been known in Castus' time, was and still is the closest point on the British Isles to continental Europe, and as such, it was not only the base of operations for the *Classis*

⁹⁸ Malcor & Matthews, 99-100.

Britannica—the Roman fleet tasked with protecting the sea routes between Britannia and Gaul—but would have been the natural landing point for Castus’ Sarmatian Sea Lift. As a full Roman port, it would also have been a hub of the Roman road system in Britannia, allowing for the easy movement of troops and materiel all across the island.

Once Castus and his Sarmatians crossed the Channel at Dover, they would have used these roads to make their way to the fort of Bremetennacum in modern-day Ribchester, located in northwestern England—which would be known well into the medieval era as the home of the Britons, or Britannia, the same place from which Geoffrey’s mysterious lost book came.

Knowing both the material and cultural needs of the Sarmatians, Castus would have chosen Bremetennacum not only to bring the troubled *VI Victrix* to heel and cow the native Brigantes in the region,⁹⁹ but because the wide open plains around the fort would have been perfect for the steppe mounts the Sarmatians brought with them, mounts used to having plenty of room to roam. Archeological evidence shows that, around the time of the Sarmatian host’s arrival, the *vicus* (village) that surrounded the fort underwent a massive, unprecedented expansion, adding bath houses, steam rooms, and a new parade ground suited to the new cavalry.¹⁰⁰ While the journey survived in memory for the Sarmatians, their arrival would have inspired both fear and awe in the locals, who had likely never seen such a brobdingnagian assemblage, much less one on the move.

Once the Sarmatians had been settled, Castus returned from the Emperor’s assignment to take a post as the *Praepositus* of the *Classis Misenensis*—the senior fleet of the Imperial Roman navy, sailing out of Misenum in his ancestral home region—under the newly-crowned emperor, Commodus, who had succeeded his father Marcus Aurelius (given this information, you can be

⁹⁹ Malcor & Matthews, 146.

¹⁰⁰ Malcor & Matthews, 88-91.

forgiven if you're wondering incredulously why there was no Artorius cameo in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*; rest assured, you are not alone). During this period, Castus would have likely taken a wife in a marriage of political advantage (Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote that "Guanhumara [Guinevere] descended from a noble family of Romans in Book IX, Chapter 9), and started a family.¹⁰¹

A Province in Need

Rome, meanwhile, was losing its hold on Britannia. Two of the three legions stationed there revolted amidst a relentless campaign waged against Roman Britain by the Caledonians (Scots) from north of Hadrian's Wall; the northern tribe of natives known as the Brigantes rose up in revolt (again); and the *Legio VI Victrix* was decimated by heavy losses. Having accompanied his father during the Marcomannic Wars against the Qadi and Iazyges years earlier, Commodus would have witnessed firsthand Castus' martial and diplomatic skill, as well as the esteem in which he was held by Marcus Aurelius and by the Sarmatian peoples. So, with Britannia in flames, Commodus tapped Castus to return to the island to restore some kind of order. In 181 C.E., Castus arrived at the *Legio VI Victrix*'s headquarters in York.¹⁰² His service in Britain would cement his reputation among both the locals and the Sarmatians, as he grew into a figure who would live on in folktales and legends.¹⁰³

Given the state of the island when he returned, Castus was given wide latitude in dealing with the Sarmatians under his command. Rather than pushing them to assimilate into the Roman way of life, Castus empowered the Sarmatians, encouraging them to remain true to their culture,

¹⁰¹ Malcor & Matthews, 112-113.

¹⁰² Malcor & Matthews, 115; In Book XI, Chapter 1 of Geoffrey's *Historia*, during Arthur's campaign against Modred, Guinevere, "despairing of success, fled from York to the City of Legions." After several years to settle into his new post, Castus would have sent for his wife and children, as was the practice among such legion commanders, meaning that his "queen" would indeed have lived at York.

¹⁰³ Barber, 37; Malcor & Matthews, 87-88.

beliefs, customs, and values,¹⁰⁴ which had the (intended) consequence of them retaining their fearsome fighting abilities and horsemanship.

Castus led his Sarmatians in a four-year campaign against the ferocious Caledonian invasion that had threatened to rout the Romans. He dealt the Scottish armies a series of devastating defeats and chased them back up north, past even the Antonine Wall, likely giving rise to the story of Arthur's invasion of Scotland in Geoffrey's *Historia*. After victory was declared, Castus took some of his Sarmatians on an expedition to Rome to protect Commodus from an assassination attempt hatched by hopeful usurper Perennis, whose son had just defeated Sarmatians in Pannonia—Sarmatians that were blood relatives of those who rode with Castus.¹⁰⁵

While he was away, the *VI Victrix* fell apart under acting governor Marcus Crescens, and then revolted against his successor—future Emperor Pertinax. Since the only region of Britain that had seen any kind of stability in recent years had been the one policed by Castus and his Sarmatians, Commodus took the extraordinary step of sending Castus back to Britannia with the title *Dux*, putting him in command of all three British legions, uniting all of the military units on the island under his command and making him the *de facto* governor of the province, as evidenced by the four-year gap (187-191 C.E.) in the formal list of governors of Britannia, between Pertinax and Decius Claudius Albinus.¹⁰⁶ This new title of *dux* eventually became conflated with *Rex* (King) by later writers who would have seen little practical difference between the battlefield functions of a king and a commander.¹⁰⁷

As commander of all three legions, he would have made periodic inspections of various forts. One such fort was manned by the third British legion, the *XX Valeria Victrix*, which

¹⁰⁴ Malcor & Matthews, 117-118.

¹⁰⁵ Malcor & Matthews, 138.

¹⁰⁶ Birley, Anthony. *The Roman Government of Britain*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005.

¹⁰⁷ Malcor & Matthews, 148.

guarded the port at Great Chesterford (*Deva*)—a launching point for any forays into Ireland (Hibernia). This was the area in which it is believed the ARTO ring was found.¹⁰⁸

Once his time serving with and commanding the Sarmatians was done, Castus became centenary *procurator* (high-ranking magistrate) of the Roman province of Liburnia (on the northeast Adriatic, also in modern-day Croatia), placing his later career well within the western reaches of the Sarmatians' sphere of influence.¹⁰⁹ The two stone monuments bearing the inscriptions that detail his career were traced to the ruins of his villa in modern-day Podstrana, Croatia, a locale that would have fallen within the Roman province of Pannonia (remember: Castus' grandfather commanded Pannonians in battle, and they were cousins of the Sarmatians), where Castus was eventually laid to rest in 197 C.E.

Written in the Stars

For the four years Castus commanded all three legions, there was peace in Britannia, save for some minor flare-ups—such as when he made an expedition to Wales and Cornwall (the Briton heartland) to suppress a rebellion. For the natives of Roman Britannia, Castus' deeds would have seemed apt for a man with such a name. In Old Irish, *art* means 'bear,' 'hero,' or 'warrior,' and in fifth-century Welsh, the root of the name Arthur—*arth*—means “the bear” (as with the Latin *ursus*, Greek *arktos*, and Sanskrit *rksa*).¹¹⁰ As the natives of Britannia shared a common tongue (the Celtic Breton language) with the Celtic inhabitants of Amorica (a peninsula in northwestern Gaul), it is notable that both the Celtic bear goddess Artio and the Celtic bear god Artaois derive their names from the Gaulish word for bear: *artos*.¹¹¹ A goddess of the natural

¹⁰⁸ Malcor & Matthews, 120-153.

¹⁰⁹ Malcor & Matthews, 25-30.

¹¹⁰ Colarusso, John. Forward to *Artorius: The Real King Arthur* (John Matthews and Linda A. Malcor). Gloucestershire, UK: Amberley, 2023.

¹¹¹ Room, Adrian, *Placenames of the World: Origins and Meanings of the Names for 6,600 Countries, Cities, Territories, Natural Features, and Historic Sites*, McFarland Books, 2006, p. 57.

world and animals, Artio was also—fittingly enough—a goddess of protection, like a mother bear protecting her cubs—not unlike Artemis or Diana. Each of those Gaulish names derives from the Proto-Indo-European **h₂rtkos*.¹¹² Astronomy buffs will also note that another cognate derived from this is Arcturus, the brightest star in the constellation Boötes, which just so happens to be located near Ursa Major (The Great Bear).

While Castus' family name may not have originated in Celtic languages, to the natives, he was not just a *dux bellorum*, but (insert trumpet fanfare here) **Artos the Bear**.¹¹³ It's no "Batman" or "Superman," but it certainly checks Coogan's Identity box, just as slaying over 900 men single-handedly and moving thousands of men, women, children, horses, and materiel across the sea would fulfill the Powers convention. But what about the Mission and the Costume/Chevron? For that, we look more closely at the culture whose warriors would become the inspiration for the Knights of the Round Table, the men who followed not just the imperial eagle of Rome, but a commander with the heart—and name—of a bear.

¹¹² Matasović, Ranko (2009). *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*. Brill. pp. 42-43

¹¹³ Ash 1991.

Chapter 4: Land of Bear and Land of Eagle

Sarmatians, Celts, and a ‘Second Artorius’ Give Us Arthur’s Superhero Symbol

“Land of bear and land of eagle
Land that gave us birth and blessing
Land that called us ever homewards
We will go home across the mountains”

— “Song of Exile,” from *King Arthur* (2004), music and lyrics by Caitlin Matthews

Before the introduction of Islam to the nomadic Iranian steppe tribes like the Sarmatians, they— along with tribes of the wider Scythian culture originating in the Caucasus—followed a shamanistic religion, where their holy men not only looked after the welfare of the individual, but of the entire tribe. In fact, the Sarmatians brought to Britain insisted that there were no serfs or subordinates in their tribe; rather, they were all equally nobly born. These Sarmatians traditionally ate at (and enjoyed dancing on) round tables,¹¹⁴ and, as Herodotus noted, worshiped their god of war by planting a naked sword in the ground or on a raised platform.¹¹⁵

Echoes of these ideas—a shaman counselor, a worshiped sword embedded in the earth, and an egalitarian philosophy that certainly sounds an awful lot like the Round Table at the heart of Arthur’s Camelot—not only survived in Arthurian lore, but became essential to it.¹¹⁶ I could go on (and will!), but suffice it to say that there have been volumes upon volumes written on the so-called Sarmatian Connection, and yet, for the average reader, it would understandably be a long way to go to connect the second-century Roman commander Lucius Artorius Castus to the leader of the united Breton forces at the late-fifth-century Battle of Mount Badon, to say nothing of the knight-in-shining-armor of medieval chivalric romances. But, then again, that’s the thing

¹¹⁴ Matthews, John. “A Knightly Endeavor: The Making of Jerry Bruckheimer’s ‘King Arthur.’” *Arthuriana*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2004, pp. 112–15. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870644>.

¹¹⁵ Jacobson, Esther. *The Art of the Scythians: The Interpenetration of Cultures at the Edge of the Hellenic World*. Leiden; New York: Brill Publishers, 1995. pp. 52-64; Campbell, Leroy A. *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*. Leiden: BRILL, 1969. p. 73

¹¹⁶ Nickel 2014.

about folktales and Texts of oral tradition: They have remarkable staying power (especially when backed by the impressions left by seeing 5,500 soldiers, their families, and over 1,000 horses march into town). His name would have lived on not only in the eastern Sarmatian tradition (thanks also to the family's long association with them), but in the oral folktales of the descendants of the Sarmatians whom Castus brought to Britannia and the Celtic natives with whom they interacted.

Two and a half centuries after the first Sarmatians were brought to Britannia to serve Rome under Castus' command, their descendants in Britain still retained a very strong sense of tribal identity, so much so that, despite being separated by 250 years and thousands of miles from a homeland none of them probably had ever seen, they still identified as Sarmatians.¹¹⁷ They retained their language, folklore, religion, egalitarian ideals, and superstition, meaning that, for over 250 years, the enduring cultural memory of Sarmatian and Scythian themes, motifs, symbols, and folk traditions had steeped in local Romano-Briton folk tradition, intermingling with the Britons' own themes, symbols, and motifs as the stories of Lucius Artorius Castus moved from folktale to legend and, eventually, to mythology until, centuries after Castus, Britain—to paraphrase Welsh singer Bonnie Tyler—needed a hero, or, as Malcor, Matthews, and Nickel call him, a “second Artorius.”¹¹⁸

The life and reputation of the real-life Castus—an Equestrian who commanded a host of Iranian-speaking Sarmatians whom he had escorted across the Empire to Britain, where they brought four years of peace to a suffering province before leaving across the sea for Liburnia, never to return (not unlike the literary Arthur sailing to Avalon)—likely inspired the Sarmatians' descendants and the native Britons to associate his name with martial strength and leadership.

¹¹⁷ Nickel 2014.

¹¹⁸ Ash 1991.

The name Artorius (or, in Welsh, Arthur) would have been remembered by the Sarmatians “and their descendants as a synonym for “the General,” as the name Caesar became a title for the Romans, and lived on as Kaiser and Tsar among further generations,”¹¹⁹ and would have become an honorific title for local chieftains. As years passed into decades, and decades into centuries, successive holders of that title would cease to be remembered as distinct individuals, and instead, like the proto-superhero The Phantom, they became merged into one.

Wrote Malcor and Matthews: “Arthur himself is a construct of all that went before, with each new version of the story ... adding what was remembered. This same process was almost certainly at work as the defence of Britain fell to successive leaders.”¹²⁰ We can surmise that one of these leaders was the victorious commander of Badon Hill, who benefitted not only from the cultural memory of Castus, but the legacy of his Sarmatian cavalry.¹²¹

Defending the Land ... Again

While centuries have been spent trying to ascertain the exact sites of the 12 battle victories attributed to Arthur in Historia Britonum, it would appear that seven of the 12 were fought at or near rivers. Three locations in particular—Castel Gwinnion (Vinonia/Binchester), the City of the Legions (most likely Chester), and Bregomion (which might be Bremetennacum/Ribchester)—were noted by Nickel to have once been locations of Roman heavy cavalry, and were likely garrisoned by Sarmatian cavalymen. Notably, the Sarmatian auxiliaries at Bremetennacum were referred to in contemporary documents not merely as a Roman army unit, but as a military *settlement*.¹²² While they were indeed soldiers who fought for Rome, these Sarmatians and their families were not afforded Roman citizenship, and as such,

¹¹⁹ Nickel, Helmut. “Sarmatian Connection.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.

¹²⁰ Malcor & Matthews, 193-194.

¹²¹ Nickel 2014.

¹²² Nickel 2014.

they would presumably not have been recalled to Rome when the Empire retreated from Britain in the early fifth century. As terms of service for such auxiliaries were 25 years, the Sarmatians brought to Britannia by Castus would likely have set down roots, perhaps even marrying and starting families with the natives, and remaining there as a local defense force, passing on their horsemanship, fighting techniques, tactics, and stories to their descendants.¹²³

After the end of Irish raids up the River Ribble ca. 450 C.E., those descendants of the original Arthurian Sarmatians certainly would have been available to help the native Britons (who by then were likely their friends, allies, or even blood relatives through intermarriage) combat the sea-borne Saxon bands sailing up eastern waterways to make their inland raids. The most effective strategy against such raids would have been a brigade of heavy cavalry armed with Roman or Roman-style weapons, using fast-moving tactics and fighting styles passed down from Castus' Sarmatians.¹²⁴

Thus, the name of a second-century Roman soldier became attached to the deeds of the fifth- or sixth-century chieftain who led this effort, whether he was himself named Artorius, or inherited the honorific title that the name Artorius became, or claimed descent from Castus, or claimed that he was no less than Artorius reborn, or, at the very least, simply didn't quell such rumors. It's fitting that this Badon Hill commander—the 'second Artorius'—became conflated with Castus (and possibly a number of other leaders in between), because in Latin, *arto*—a possible root for the Roman 'Artorius'—means 'to press together,' 'reduce,' or 'abridged.'

We see this borne out in the writings of 16th century antiquarian John Leyland, who mentioned an ancient wax seal preserved at Westminster inscribed with the deeds of this second Artorius: *Patricus Arturus Brittaniae Galliae Germaniae Daciae Imperator* (The Noble Arthur,

¹²³ Malcor & Matthews, 88-90

¹²⁴ Nickel 2014.

Emperor of Britain, Gaul, Germany and Dacia). Each place mentioned on that seal is one in which the second-century Lucius Artorius Castus fought.¹²⁵

What made this greater Figure of Arthur—the sum of all of Arthur, both mythical and historical and everything in between—so unique from other folk heroes, and what allowed its vast and speedy dissemination, was that it was formed out of a singular stew of the oral and folk traditions from cultures spanning the breadth of the known world at the same extraordinary historical moment during the twilight of Rome’s influence in Britain. This blendedness imbued the stories with a Protean universality and cross-cultural appeal that wouldn’t be seen again for centuries.

These folktales didn’t need to be written down or explicated; they were held, preserved, and transmitted in language. Across the English Channel in Gaul, Sarmatian Alans would have lived side-by-side with Celts in Brittany. The stories passed from the two groups’ kinsmen on the island would find firm purchase there, and could therefore spread easily throughout the Empire along the same Roman roads Castus and his Sarmatians used to travel from Sarmatia to Britannia.

To add another layer of intrigue, Roman historian Strabo (63 B.C.E. to 23 C.E.)—who wrote extensively about both communities—posited that the Celts and the Sarmatians were *related*, and suggested a strong Celtic presence among the people of the steppes, referring to one group as *Keltoskythai*, Celtic Scythians. If such a linguistic or cultural link did exist, it would serve as yet another reason why the Arthur folklore spread so far and wide, and remained so embedded in cultures separated by thousands of miles—transmission of it would have been *much* easier if these groups spoke the same language, both literally and culturally.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Kennedy, Edward D. King Arthur: A Casebook, New York: Garland, 1996.

¹²⁶ Malcor & Matthews, 121.

In fact, it is in the fusion of these cultures and languages that we catch the first glimpse of one of the most foundational pieces of the Arthur myth: the most important weapon in literary history this side of David's slingshot.

The Legend of the Sword

Intended as a shorthand aid for oral storytellers, the Welsh Triads—a series of 11th century notes on the details of much earlier tales from Welsh folklore and mythology—not only refer to Arthur and other semi-historical characters from sub-Roman Britain, but also give us our first reference to a mighty weapon called *Caledfwlch* (specifically in *Culhwch ac Olwen*, a story about a hero—Culhwch—connected to Arthur).

While you may never have read that name before (and while those five consecutive consonants may have many of you struggling to read it aloud now), you know this weapon all too well. Geoffrey of Monmouth, too, knew of this sword, a gift from God with a name that roughly translates as 'hard-cleft,' and which, when swung around the head of the bearer, slayed surrounding enemies with a blinding flash of white light: "Llenlleawn the Irishman seized Caledfwlch, swung it round in a circle and killed Diwnach the Irishman and his entire retinue."¹²⁷ Geoffrey gave it a new, Latin name, one with a root—"ebureus"—that meant 'radiant white': *Caliburnus*. You may know it as Excalibur.

Squint hard enough and you can even argue that it makes a cameo in the Brad Pitt-led sword-and-sandal epic *Troy* (2004). During the third act, as a group of Trojans flee their burning city, Paris (Orlando Bloom) hands one of them—a young boy—the Sword of Troy (a Hollywood invention that appears nowhere in any surviving Homeric or post-Homeric Greek tradition of the Trojan War). "As long as it remains in the hands of a Trojan, our people have a future," Paris

¹²⁷ The Mabinogion. Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. London: Penguin, 1976. pp. 170.

tells him. “Take them, *Aeneas*. Find them a new home.”¹²⁸ Yes, *that* Aeneas. In the film’s world, the sword is said to belong to King Priam, and its passing is meant to establish a continuity between the royal family and these refugees, who will in turn (as The Aeneid, Historia Brittonum, and Historia Regum Britanniae tell us) lay the foundations for Rome and eventually Britain. This sword is never explicitly referred to as Excalibur, and it may not even have been meant as a reference to it, but its function and place in the film’s story are certainly evocative of Arthur’s kingly cutlery.

Whether coming out of the fires of Ilium, or whether it was bestowed upon Arthur by the Lady of the Lake, or whether he assayed it from a stone in a London churchyard as a squire, Excalibur remains one of the most enduring elements in Arthurian lore. It has served as a symbol of the right to rule; an unbreakable, insuperable weapon; a mark of Arthur’s familial legacy; and a product of eldritch magicks lost to time; but, no matter the form or function, Excalibur’s importance in Arthurian tradition is matched only by the Holy Grail.

While Excalibur is not, in primary sources, ever tied back to Britain’s reputed Trojan origins, its story—like Arthur’s—is still older than many realize, older than the Grail, certainly, and older even than *Caledfwlch*. While I’d wager you can see it in your mind’s eye—a golden cruciform hilt, its crossguard inlaid with dragon scrollwork; a two-handed, wire-wrapped grip ending in an ornate pommel; and on its flawless, gleaming steel blade, an ancient inscription in a lost language—that picture is completely and utterly wrong. If Excalibur—or a real inspiration for it—did exist, it looked nothing like a medieval arming sword, and certainly nothing like an ancient Trojan blade. It was, like Arthur, almost certainly Roman,¹²⁹ and while one Greco-Roman

¹²⁸ Petersen, Wolfgang., et al. *Troy*. 2-disc full-screen ed. Burbank, CA, Warner Home Video, 2005.

¹²⁹ Bishop, M.C.. The Spatha: The Roman Long Sword. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.



root for Geoffrey's Caliburnus— *-ebureus*—means 'radiant white,' another—*chalybs*—is the Latin root for 'steel,' a root derived from Kalybes, the name of a tribe of Sarmatian smiths.¹³⁰

Given Castus' respect for their customs and religion, Sarmatians in general and Iazyges in particular would have had a "theological impulse to interpret the name Artorius as *Art Hor*, which could be rendered as 'fire priest — sacred,' hence, 'Arthur,'" the man who achieved the bright white, venerated sword in later redactions.¹³¹

But, other than its impressive wattage, what did this sword actually *look* like? At the time the Sarmatians and Castus served in Britannia, the sword of choice for Roman cavalry was a straight, double-edged blade called a *spatha*, eight examples of which have been found at British archeological sites.¹³² Used by Roman armies from the first through the seventh centuries of the Common Era, the *spatha* was designed with mounted soldiers in mind. Featuring a blunted tip to avoid injuring horses (foot soldiers carried a variant with a sharper, tapered tip), the cutting and slashing weapon was longer than its predecessor, the leaf-shaped *gladius*, and was thus well suited to being wielded from horseback (which Excalibur is described as being¹³³).

¹³⁰ Nickel 2014..

¹³¹ Malcor & Matthews, 121.

¹³² "Double Sword Burial." *Canterbury Museums & Galleries*, Canterbury Roman Museum, 3 Apr. 2024, canterburymuseums.co.uk/collections/canterbury-roman-museum/double-sword-burial/.

¹³³ *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Book IX, Ch. 10

As soldiers in the Roman army—even auxiliaries—bore the cost of their own weaponry (including richly adorned parade gear), those of sufficient means could customize and individualize their equipment at their own expense. Castus not only had more than sufficient financial means due to his Equestrian status, but considering that cavalymen (and consequently cavalry officers) were among the highest paid soldiers, Castus' sword would likely have been made of superior quality steel and adorned with embellishments befitting his rank and status. These elements would have distinguished Castus' sword from *spathae*-like swords made in the Roman style by later Celtic smiths, and from the swords used by his Sarmatians, who, as auxiliaries, would have been permitted to use their own traditional weapons.

As Castus' final posting after Britannia was as a *procurator* in Liburnia—a cushy administrative gig to ease him into a comfortable retirement after a lengthy field career—one could surmise that, upon his departure, he bequeathed his sword to the men he led and their families, who he had come to know over the course of their trek across the Empire and their subsequent service together at its frontier.¹³⁴ It would have been a fitting gift to a people who considered a warrior's sword his most treasured possession.

When Castus brought his Sarmatian host to Britain, they brought with them not only their high regard for swordsmanship and swords, but also a body of folk tradition now known as the Nart tales—hero stories which preserved traditions of the Iranian-speaking Caucasian peoples from deep antiquity. In these tales, there is one hero who pulls his weapon from the earth's nine layers to prove his worth (we will see how meaningful the number nine is later). Another pulls

¹³⁴ Nicolay, Johan. "Military Equipment and the Life Cycle of a Roman Soldier." *Armed Batavians: Use and Significance of Weaponry and Horse Gear from Non-Military Contexts in the Rhine Delta (50 BC to AD 450)*, Amsterdam University Press, 2007, pp. 157–206. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n2g3.8>.

his weapon from an anvil, and then embeds the *anvil* in the nine layers of the earth. Each of these threads contributed to the sword-in-anvil-on-stone of later Arthurian romance.¹³⁵

The Sarmatian folk traditions of a great hero achieving a powerful sword, along with the cultural memory of Castus' *spatha* and the probable passing of it from generation to generation as a mark of office, dovetail nicely with the textual and historical evidence of a cavalry-based defense against the Saxons conducted by the hypothesized 'second Artorius' to whom such a sword may have eventually fallen.

While it's rare to see this Roman Excalibur depicted in modern pop culture, it's been seen more often in the last three decades. In the 1998 NBC Television miniseries *Merlin*, the sword wielded by both Uther (Mark Jax) and Arthur (Paul Curran) in the second and third episodes has the large counterweighted pommel common to Roman swords like the *spatha* and the *gladius*, and an ornate and stylized round handguard befitting a *spatha* meant to display the wealth, power, rank, and station of its owner.¹³⁶ The blade is also significantly brighter (and cleaner) than those of other soldiers. Though not explicitly identified as Roman, the Uther of that miniseries is outfitted in Roman-style armor, complete with a Roman officer's helmet topped with a red *crista*. Production designer Roger Hall said that this was intentional, meant to show the passing of the rule of the island from Romans to Britons.¹³⁷ While the official dimensions of the prop have been lost, visual inspection of scenes where Merlin wields the sword show its blade to be no longer than actor Sam Neill's arm. As Neill stands at an even six feet tall, the blade length is likely about 30 inches—well in line with the typical *spatha*, the blade of which typically fell in the

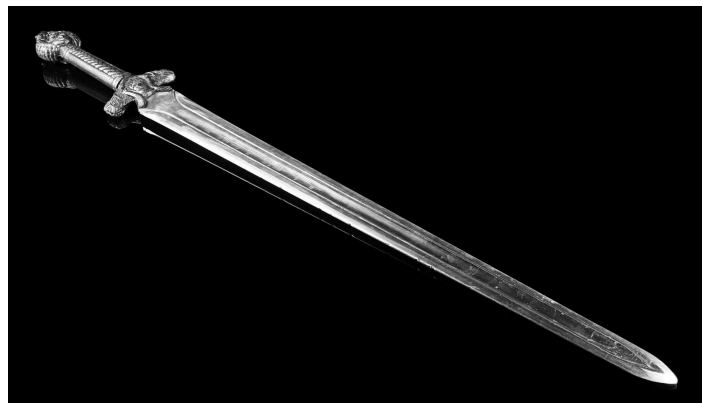
¹³⁵ Colarusso, John, ed., *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus: Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs*, Princeton University Press: 2002.

¹³⁶ Mickov, David. "Spatha 101: Dimensions, Types, and History of the Roman Long Sword." Edited by Juliana Cummings, *Swordis*, 25 Jan. 2023, swordis.com/blog/spatha-sword/.

¹³⁷ Personal correspondence with Roger Hall.

range between 23-33 inches (though they could be as long as 40), and the hilt of which ranged between seven and eight inches.¹³⁸

Six years after the miniseries, Clive Owen's cinematic Artorius wielded an Excalibur that was also clearly not the medieval arming sword depicted in many popular illustrations and prop reproductions (i.e. the John Boorman 1981 *Excalibur* prop, or the one on my wall). With a broad blade and shortened quillons somewhere between medieval cruciform hand guards and Roman roundguards, it is very much in keeping with what the *spatha* of a decorated Roman cavalry officer would look like, especially one with significant financial means. And, in accordance with its early folk history, it is treated reverentially by the Britons who encounter it: When Artorius has one of the native fighters at his mercy, that native says, through gritted teeth (spitting his words at Artorius in a reconstructed blend of Latin and proto-Celtic): "Spill my blood with Excalibur and ... make this ground holy."¹³⁹



During a midnight parlay at the end of the second act of that 2004 film, Merlin tells Artorius that Excalibur was made of "iron from this earth," and, like Artorius himself, was "forged in the fires of Britain."¹⁴⁰ It is at this moment that the cynical, battle-hardened Roman, who had been fighting the Britons out of anger and vengeance for his mother's accidental death during a native raid gone wrong, realizes his true purpose: to defend the land his father loved so much that he married one of its people. Appropriately, thanks to Caitlin Matthews (a widely

¹³⁸ Evangelista, Nick. *The Encyclopedia of the Sword*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995, pp. 508.

¹³⁹ Fuqua, Antoine (Dir.), Jerry Bruckheimer (Prod.), David Franzoni (Writ.). *King Arthur*. Touchstone Pictures, 2004. 9:17.

¹⁴⁰ *King Arthur* 2004: 1:04:40.



published authority on Celtic traditions in her own right, and John's wife), the 2004 Excalibur prop's blade bears the inscription "Defender of the Land," written in an ancient Celtic alphabet called Ogham.¹⁴¹ In order to have access to the Roman arms, equipment, tactics, and Sarmatian cavalry

needed to beat back the Saxons, the hypothesized 'second Artorius'—just like this fictional counterpart—would almost certainly have been of mixed parentage (some combination of Sarmatian, Roman, and Briton), which would have allowed him to unite disparate tribes under a single banner in defense of their common homeland.

The Red Dragon of Wales

As Vortegirn, king of the Britons, was sitting upon the bank of the drained pond, the two dragons, one of which was white, the other red, came forth, and approaching one another, began a terrible fight, and cast forth fire with their breath. But the white dragon had the advantage, and made the other fly to the end of the lake. And he, for grief at his flight, renewed the assault upon his pursuer, and forced him to retire. After this battle of the dragons, the king commanded Ambrose Merlin to tell him what it portended. Upon which he, bursting into tears, delivered what his prophetic spirit suggested to him, as follows:-

"Woe to the red dragon, for his banishment hasteneth on. His lurking holes shall be seized by the white dragon, which signifies the Saxons whom you invited over; but the red denotes the British nation, which shall be oppressed by the white. Therefore shall its mountains be levelled as the valleys, and the rivers of the valleys shall run with blood. The exercise of religion shall be destroyed, and churches be laid open to ruin. At last the oppressed shall prevail, and oppose the cruelty of foreigners. For a boar of Cornwall¹⁴² shall give his assistance, and trample their necks under his feet. The islands of the ocean shall be subject to his power¹⁴³, and he shall possess the forests of Gaul. The house of

¹⁴¹ Personal correspondence with John Matthews.

¹⁴² In Celtic mythology, the boar represented—among other things—a courageous warrior. Here, the boar is a prefiguration of Arthur, whose mother Igraine was married to Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall, when Uther assumed Gorlois' form to lay with her and conceive Arthur.

¹⁴³ Perhaps another shadow of the Sarmatian Sea Lift in later Arthurian lore?

*Romulus shall dread his courage, and his end shall be doubtful. He shall be celebrated in the mouths of the people and his exploits shall be food to those that relate them.*¹⁴⁴

In this classic piece of Arthurian lore, dating back to Historia Brittonum, one of Arthur's predecessors—the tyrant King Vortigern—attempts to build his castle upon a cliffside. Each night, the walls and foundations collapse. Vortigern is told by his advisors that he must sacrifice a boy who has no natural father, in order to prevent further collapses. That boy turned out to be the future wizard Merlin, who, upon hearing that he is to be put to death, adroitly dismisses the superstitious (and for him, potentially fatal) counsel of Vortigern's advisors. Instead, he tells the king that his real problem is two dragons, neither of whom will be sated by the blood of one measly fatherless boy. Merlin tells Vortigern that the real root of his troubles lay below: In a cave beneath the castle's foundations is a pool, by which two dragons lay sleeping, and it is this void which causes the ground above to be unstable. After Vortigern's men dig out an entrance to the cave, the two dragons awaken and begin to clash.

In this story, the white dragon represents the Anglo-Saxon forces brought to the island by Vortigern to fight the Britons, who are themselves represented by the red dragon. Those Britons are the same peoples over whom the literary King Arthur would rule, and the tribes of which united behind the leader at Mount Badon to repel the Saxons.

The account quoted from Geoffrey's *Historia* is a microcosm of the entire Arthur Text. In it, we see the clear echo of an originating historical event: Lucius Artorius Castus' arrival on Britain's shores with his 5,500 Sarmatian soldiers—having come across the sea in massive ships the likes of which the natives had likely never seen—but also shadows of the traditions that were laid on top of that history. We also see an echo of the 'second Artorius,' fighting for the Britons against the Saxons. Finally, we see Arthur called the Boar of Cornwall, which not only foretells

¹⁴⁴ Historia Regum Britannia, Book VII, Chapter III

where Arthur is to be conceived, but also gestures at some historiographically significant Arthurian geography, as Cornwall is also right smack in the middle of the Celtic Fringe—where the earliest Welsh traditions of the legend developed.

By the time Geoffrey wrote, of course, this had all been passed into legend, and through a historical game of telephone. In Geoffrey's legendary version of medieval history, Vortigern eventually came to be opposed by two men: Ambrosius Aurelianus (possibly a real historical figure) and Uther, Arthur's future father. Geoffrey made these men brothers, giving them the surname Pendragon, a name seemingly derived from the native Welsh word *pen* (head) and the Latin word *draco* (dragon).

It just so happens that, in the languages of Central Asia familiar to and used by the Sarmatians and their related peoples (the Scythians, Dacians, Iranians, and the Alans), the words *pan* (meaning 'lord') and *tarkhan* (meaning 'leader'¹⁴⁵) also come together to form *Pantarkhan*, or, in Arthurian parlance, the High King (or, in modern parlance, the HMFIC ... kids, ask your parents). But, while *Pantarkhan* surely sounds close enough to Pendragon to establish a link between the two (especially given the mountains of archeological and documentary evidence of the Sarmatians' presence in Britain), there's an even more intriguing root for Arthur's most famous Costume/Chevron.

Between 101-106 C.E., the Dacians—a Sarmatian-adjacent people who oftentimes allied with the Sarmatians in warbands—rode into battle against Emperor Trajan's legions behind screaming dragon-head battle standards trailing dyed fabric strips or bodies, which were called *dracos* by the Latin-speaking Romans.¹⁴⁶ When they arrived in Britain, Castus' Sarmatian cavalry brought with them a windsock dragon mounted atop a pole, with a gilded bronze head

¹⁴⁵ Reno, Frank D. The Historic King Arthur: Authenticating the Celtic Hero of Post-Roman Britain. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1996. pp. 264.

¹⁴⁶ Milner, N.P. *Epitome of Military Science by Vegetius*. Liverpool University Press, 1997.

trailing a tail of red fabric, which became a mascot of sorts for the *Legio VI Victrix*. When air passed through its jaws (say, at the head of a galloping cavalry charge), it made a terrifying screeching, howling sound.¹⁴⁷ Fierce mounted warriors speaking a strange-sounding tongue, riding into battle behind a writhing and roaring red dragon with a golden maw, led by a man with the name of a god who had—in spite of the seeming impossibility of the task—brought a massive contingent of 5,500 men (plus their families) and over 1,000 horses across the sea, all the way to Bremetennacum—“Certainly,” the natives must have thought, “*this* is the Head Dragon.”

While the heraldic shield given to Arthur by medieval redactors of the legend has been depicted as bearing three or 13 gold crowns on an azure field (a later addition to the tradition), the most famous and frequent feature is a certain scaled beastly, whether it be a gold dragon on a field of red or a red dragon on a field of gold.¹⁴⁸ Does anybody in the class know what Wales—the region Geoffrey of Monmouth would have known as Britain—uses as its national emblem to this day? Yes, you, in the back? A red dragon! That, Dear Reader, is no coincidence. Consider the following intersections:

- The earliest and most influential stories of King Arthur originated from Wales. Archeological and textual evidence suggest that these stories were most likely based on veteran Roman commander Lucius Artorius Castus, a career soldier who came from a noble family which had for generations served as Roman knights. This commander, like his forebears, had served against and alongside the feared Sarmatian heavy cavalry in their native lands of the eastern steppe, which is why Emperor Marcus Aurelius tapped him to conduct a massive force of them across

¹⁴⁷ Matthews, John. "King Arthur of the Romans: Lucius Artorius Castus and the Sarmatians in Britain." *HrčAk - Portal of Scientific Journals of Croatia*, 2018, p. 292.

¹⁴⁸ Nickel, Helmut. "Heraldry." *New Arthurian Encyclopedia*. 1991.

the breadth of the Roman Empire to Britannia, where they would eventually serve under him.

- Sarmatian heavy cavalry conscripted into the Roman fighting force would not have been seen as slaves or mercenaries, but as allies of Rome who served in support of the legions, but were not a part of them. Castus was not a king (*rex*), but was named a *dux bellorum* (Duke of Battles) by Emperor Commodus, who put him in command of all three British legions after Castus and his Sarmatians foiled an attempt on Commodus' life. In early written accounts, Artur is described as fighting alongside Rome's allies, as well as fighting alongside the kings of the Britons.¹⁴⁹
- Artorius and his Sarmatians brought four years of peace to Britannia, the natives of which spoke Celtic languages, like their kinsmen in Brittany and Gaul. While the Artorius name did not itself have Celtic or Welsh roots, the natives would have understood it to be linguistically proximate to the words for "The Bear," due to its similarity to the names for their protective bear gods. So, just as the Sarmatians and their descendants (who still strongly identified themselves culturally as Sarmatians more than 250 years after Castus served) would have remembered the name Artorius as a synonym for 'the General,' the natives would have remembered the name as an aptronym for a great and ferocious warrior who protected Britain.
- Arthur's literary family name is Pendragon, a name seemingly formed by combining the Welsh word for head, *pen*, and the Latin word *draco* (dragon), but possibly also from the Sarmatian words for 'lord' and 'leader.' The Sarmatians

¹⁴⁹ Malcor & Matthews, 118.

brought their gilded, bronze-headed, howling red dragon battle standard to Britain, where they served under Castus in *Legio VI Victrix*, which took that dragon as its symbol. That gilded, howling *draco* would have been a striking, terrifying, and (most of all) memorable symbol to the native Britons, who would have come to associate it with Castus (again: Artos the Bear! *trumpets*) in the folk traditions that would surely have arisen from the activities of Castus and his men, likely contributing to the enduring nature of the Pendragon name and symbology (*Pendraco*, Head Dragon, or *Pantarkhan*, Chief Leader).

- The Sarmatians were a shamanistic Iranian-speaking people from the Caucasus who worshiped one of their gods in a ceremony surrounding a sword embedded in the earth, and whose greatest heroes achieved magical swords by freeing them from the nine layers of the earth and an anvil. They considered a warrior's sword his greatest treasure.
- Castus would have likely been equipped with a finely-crafted Roman *spatha* owing to his family's status and generational record of service, as well as his own military success—a sword that could have been passed down as a mark of office once he departed Britain for a late-career administrative posting.
- The combined Sarmatio-Celtic-Breton cultural memory of Castus would have been so powerful that any warrior chieftain of sufficient martial prowess and leadership skill would have been seen as a 'second Artorius.' If he were particularly cunning and politically savvy, he would have presented himself as Artorius reborn. Or, if he were an already-established warrior chieftain, he may very well have held the title of Artorius, if not Castus' sword, as well.

- This ‘second Artorius’ halting the Saxon advance at Badon Hill would only have strengthened the oral tradition surrounding a now-seemingly immortal warrior, who in the Welsh language would be known and celebrated as *Arthur*. Ten years after Gildas wrote of Badon, the Roman-sounding name ‘Artorius’ underwent a revival of popularity, as witnessed in contemporary documents, when that name was practically absent from Britannia before that time, save, of course, for Castus.¹⁵⁰
- Not long after the sixth-century time of this hypothesized ‘second Artorius,’ the region of Wales took as its national emblem the image of a red dragon.
- Geoffrey of Monmouth and those who chronicled Arthur before him all had access to the insular Welsh (Celtic) oral traditions in which this stew of cultural memory was formed, and in which we find the earliest examples of the most foundational elements of the Arthurian myth.

These intersections give us the first superhero’s **Costume/Chevron**: The Pendragon. The red *crista* atop a Roman commander’s helmet would undoubtedly look like the fringe atop a dragon, and Arthur is described as having a dragon image on his helmet by medieval redactors. These attributes serve to externalize not only Arthur’s literary biography and character, but his real, historical roots, as well. By the 10th century, the Costume/Chevron, Identity, and Powers had each crystallized not because of any single account or interpretation, but because it had lived as part of the oral tradition—the folklore—that was passed between the native Britons, the Roman remnant who lived among them, the descendants of the Sarmatians, and even the Anglo-Saxons who came to conquer the island, a folklore that simmered and a song that was sung for centuries before it was ever written down.

¹⁵⁰ Geoffrey Ash. “Arthur, Origins of Legend.” New Arthurian Encyclopedia. 1991.