MYTHS AND LEGENDS

THE KNIGHTS
OF THE ROUND TABLE

DANIEL MERSEY

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INTRODUCTION

In a magical, timeless land named Logres – now known as the British Isles – the brave Knights of the Round Table served Arthur, the great king of legend and folklore. Questing far and wide across the land, these armoured warriors upheld the king's chivalric values, righted wrongs, and maintained law and order. Together these knights formed the Order of the Round Table: an elite band of warriors from Logres and overseas.

The Round Table symbolized Arthur's desire for equality and fairness: although the knights seated at the table were proud and privileged warriors serving a powerful king, there was no head or foot of the table and therefore it lacked hierarchy and symbolized something other than the feudal system of lords and vassals. The 12th century writer Robert Wace explained that Arthur used this table to placate the nobles who served him, as none would agree to sit at a humbler place than his peers. The number of knights seated at the Round Table varies according to storyteller; most often 150 or 300 seats were at the table, although Robert de Boron placed just 50 knights around it and Layamon claimed 1,600 (at what would presumably be the world's largest piece of furniture). Arthur's Round Table was located at his court and castle of Camelot. Its first written appearance in Arthurian legend was in Wace's *Roman de Brut* (completed 1155), which was an adaptation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's earlier *Historia Regum Britanniae*. Wace noted that the Round Table was not his own invention, but originated in an earlier tale from Brittany.

Some of Arthur's knights had weaknesses and on occasion they would fail dramatically, yet none lacked bravery. Many of the stories about Arthur's knights highlight the perils of ill-chosen action as much as they celebrate good deeds, and as such they informed a real-life code of honour for medieval nobles and set the standards by which chivalry was to be judged.

Although King Arthur was introduced as a key character in medieval literature by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the early 12th century, the most influential works about Arthur's knights were written by Chrétien de Troyes later in the same century, and by Sir Thomas Malory in the 15th century. Many other deeds of the Round Table evolved across Europe and although the origins sit squarely in medieval England and France, adventures from other countries are interweaved and popular embellishments were made by 19th- and 20th-century authors. My own retellings are inspired by sources as varied as modern films and Victorian children's books in addition to the original

Lancelot slays a dragon; many of Arthur's knights fought and overcame such creatures including Yvain and Tristan. By Arthur Rackham from Alfred W Pollard's *The Romance of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table* (1910). (Alamy)

medieval stories: every writer of Arthurian lore adds their own ornamentation. Inevitably the narrative in a book of this length cannot furnish each story in its entirety: a bibliography of scholarly and at times challenging works of medieval and later literature which tell the whole story may be found at the end of this book.

The chapters in this book describe a diverse selection of the adventures of Arthur's knights from his coronation, through his ascendancy, and up to the appearance of the Holy Grail. Many of the later deeds of the Knights of the Round Table are far darker and relate to the arduous quest for the Grail and the eventual downfall of Arthur. As a consequence, the Grail Quest's most famous knights – including Galahad, Perceval, and Bors – are not principal

characters in this book. Arthur's rise to power and kingship, alongside his place in Celtic folklore and post-Roman British history are covered in my companion volume (*Myths & Legends 4: King Arthur*).

The Knights of the Round Table have evolved into an integral part of Western culture, remaining popular in fields so diverse as stories for children, as the setting for television series and movies, and as a building block of modern fantasy roleplaying and computer games. The legend of Arthur and his knights lives on and reinvents itself for new audiences time and time again.

An Arthurian Literary Timeline

Stories of the Knights of the Round Table were told first by English and French writers between the 12th and 15th centuries; even today, most books of Arthurian fiction draw inspiration from these and are little changed from the originals. Below is a list of some of the most influential works of Arthurian legend dating back to the 12th century AD.

1130s	Geoffrey of Monmouth: *Historia Regum Britanniae*	**1230s**	*Mort Artu*
			Suite du Merlin
1150s	Robert Wace: *Roman de Brut*	**1240s**	*Le Roman de Tristan de Léonis*
	Geoffrey of Monmouth: *Vita Merlini*	**1380s**	*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
1160s	Chrétien de Troyes: *Érec et Énide*	**1390s**	*Alliterative Morte Arthure*
1170s	Chrétien de Troyes: *Yvain: Le Chevalier au Lion*		*The Awntyrs of Arthure*
		1400s	*The Avowing of King Arthur*
	Chrétien de Troyes: *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*	**1450s**	*The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Lady Ragnell*
	Chrétien de Troyes: *Cligés*		*Gest of Sir Gawain*
	Marie de France: *Lanval*	**1470s**	Sir Thomas Malory: *Le Morte Darthur*
1180s	Chrétien de Troyes: *Perceval: Le Conte du Graal*	**1480s**	Print edition of *Le Morte Darthur*
	Renaut de Beaujeu: *Le Bel Inconnu*	**1590s**	Edmund Spenser: *The Faerie Queen*
	Hartmann von Aue: *Erek*	**1690s**	John Dryden: *King Arthur The British Worthy*
1190s	Layamon: *Brut*	**1800s**	Walter Scott: *Sir Tristrem*
	Ulrich von Zatzikhoven: *Lanzelet*	**1830s**	Alfred Tennyson: *The Lady of Shalott*
	Béroul: *Tristran*	**1850s**	Alfred Tennyson: *Idylls of the King*
1200s	Hartmann von Aue: *Iwein*		Matthew Arnold: *Tristram and Iseult*
	Robert de Boron: *Perceval*	**1860s**	Richard Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde*
	Robert de Boron: *Merlin*	**1880s**	Richard Wagner: *Parsifal*
	Wolfram von Eschenbach: *Parzifal*		Mark Twain: *A Connecticut Yankee in the Court of King Arthur*
1210s	*Lancelot du Lac*		Sidney Lanier: *The Boy's King Arthur*
	Queste del Saint Graal	**1900s**	Howard Pyle: *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*
1220s	*Estoire de Merlin*		
	Estoire del Saint Graal		