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Camelot was a place which prided itself on chivalry, friendship and love, but ironically, what brought about the ruin of the kingdom and its great leader, King Arthur, was the cruel betrayal of his heart.What Is Camelot? Camelot is a fictional, castled city in the Kingdom of Logres ruled by King Arthur. Believed to be located in Great Britain, it is the home of the legendary round table in the Arthurian legends. The city of Camelot is described in romantic literature as being situated next to a river and surrounded by forests and fields. Within its walls, a beautiful cathedral called St. Stephens was said to exist. Origin According to sources, reference is first made to Arthur, the King of Camelot, in a Welsh poem by the medieval poet, Aneirin in 594 AD entitled Y Gododdin. In 830 AD, Arthur is mentioned in the History of the Britons, written by Nennius. Mention of Camelot first appears in 12th century French romance novels. It appears in the poem Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart by Chrétien de Troyes in the 1170s. A more detailed description appears in the 13th century in a series of French literature called the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles. Researcher Norris Lacy asserts the Vulgate cycles were composed between 1215 and 1235 by an anonymous group of authors. Here, Camelot is depicted as the main city in Arthur’s realm. Lacy alleges the Post-Vulgate cycles were also authored by an anonymous author or group of authors, and here the literature describes Camelot in greater detail, including the adventure and fantasy element of the myth. Camelot’s Location Though Camelot is believed to be a fictitious place, much speculation has nonetheless been made about where it may have been situated.Chrétien de Troyes and author Geoffrey of Monmouth believed Camelot may have been located in Wales, in Caerleon. Since Arthur was considered to be a Romano-Briton and the Welsh are direct descents of the Romano-British, this may add plausibility to the Caerleon claim. Another Welsh contender for the location of Camelot is the fictitious town of Carduel, which was based on the town of Carlisle. In Sir Thomas Malory’s book, Morte d’Arthur, Camelot is purported to be in Hampshire, in a town called Winchester. Winchester Castle has displayed a round, wooden table for hundreds of years, with the names of King Arthur and 24 of his knights painted on it. The town of Winchester was the capital and court of King Alfred the Great in the 9th century. The king was said to be a great warrior, wise leader, law maker and great statesman – the traits also synonymous with King Arthur. Another potential location in the UK is Cadbury Castle in Somerset County, according to antiquary John Leland. Archeological findings at the site indicate it was a well-fortified location. Evidence points to the inhabitants being wealthy and engaging in trade, possible affirmations that it was the castle of a Dark Ages king. Two towns existed in Roman Britain called Camulodunum, known in the modern day as Colchester and Outlane. Camulodunum may have been the source of the name Camelot. Early Camelot The Vulgate cycles mention Joseph of Arimathea visiting Camelot, bringing the Holy Grail with him. There, he was said to convert thousands of the inhabitants to Christianity and had the St. Stephens church built. King Arthur’s Camelot Camelot’s meadows were sufficiently large to host knightly tournaments. When the frequent tournaments were held, stands would be built for the numerous spectators. One of the stands was allegedly 1.5 miles in length! No definitive descriptions exist of the actual size of the town or its facilities, but during one particularly lavish court, the majority of the nobles could not be housed in Camelot, and were instead housed in the fields in tents and pavilions. The city’s defenses must have been formidable as they survived many wars, including invasions by the Saxons and Cornishmen. Camelot would have been at its peak when the quest for the Holy Grail began in approximately 453 AD. The Round Table The Vulgate cycles discuss the quintessential object in Arthurian legend, the round table, in detail. The text asserts the round table was a wedding gift from Guinevere’s father, King Leodagan. One hundred knights were already part of the round table at that stage. The remaining 50 members were chosen by Merlin, on Arthur’s behalf, to bring the number to the full contingent. The knight’s names were engraved on their chairs, bar one chair, which was referred to as the perilous chair, which would be filled by a great knight. The prestigious chair came to be filled by Sir Galahad. The Betrayals of Camelot Though the premise of Camelot is graciousness, chivalry and perhaps piety, these ideals were not always upheld. It is no surprise that the diversion from these ideals was the ubiquitous scourge of a love betrayal. Queen Guinevere’s affair with Lancelot causes Arthur to start a war with him. During the war between Arthur and Lancelot, the kingdom is entrusted to the king’s son, Mordred. Mordred betrays his father and takes over the castle in his absence. The king tries to kill Mordred and mortally wounds him. Mordred then strikes a deathblow to Arthur and kills him. Modern References In the 15th century, Sir Thomas Malory, in his book Morte d’Arthur, writes about Camelot and the Arthurian legends. His work influenced writers such as Alfred Tennyson, Mark Twain and John Steinbeck. In the 20th century, the name Camelot was used to describe the presidency of John F Kennedy after his death. Camelot and Magic The magical themes associated with Camelot could be closely linked to Pagan traditions at the time. The spread of Christianity perhaps swayed authors to include the mix of the old and new ways in the Arthurian legends. Elements of both Christianity and Paganism were needed to bring the story’s mains themes – like good, evil and magic – to the fore, and are central in creating the conflict needed in any good story. Over the love of a woman, many irrational thoughts, decisions and actions have arisen in myth and in the real world. The fragile hearts of man may become fortified with cynicism and retaliation, but if only King Arthur could have maintained his original ideals, perhaps his mythical kingdom would have continued and his heart remained whole through emotional fortitude rather. Or would that be akin to magic? Want to give your brand videos a cinematic edge? Join our visual experts and special guests for an info-packed hour of insights to elevate your next video project. Tune in on June 24 at 11am ET.Register NowHow can financial brands set themselves apart through visual storytelling? Our experts explain how.Learn MoreThe Motorsport Images Collections captures events from 1895 to today’s most recent coverage.Discover The CollectionWant to give your brand videos a cinematic edge? Join our visual experts and special guests for an info-packed hour of insights to elevate your next video project. 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CamelotMatter of Britain locationGustave Doré's illustration of Camelot from Idylls of the King (1867)First appearanceLancelot, the Knight of the CartCreated byChrétien de TroyesIn-universe informationRuled byKing ArthurCharacter(s)Guinevere, Knights of the Round Table, Morgan le Fay Camelot is a legendary castle and court associated with King Arthur. Absent in the early Arthurian material, Camelot first appeared in 12th-century French romances and, since the Lancelot-Grail cycle, eventually came to be described as the fantastic capital of Arthur's realm and a symbol of the Arthurian world. Medieval texts locate it somewhere in Great Britain and sometimes associate it with real cities, though more usually its precise location is not revealed. Most scholars regard it as being entirely fictional, its unspecified geography being perfect for chivalric romance writers. Nevertheless, arguments about the location of the "real Camelot" have occurred since the 15th century and continue today in popular works and for tourism purposes. The name's derivation is uncertain. It has numerous different spellings in medieval French Arthurian romances, including Camaalot, Camalot, Chamalot, Camehelot (sometimes read as Camchilot), Camaaloth, Caamalot, Camahaloth, Camaelot, Kamaalot, Kamaaloth, Kaamalot, Kamahaloth, Kameloth, Kamaelot, Kamelot, Kaamelot, Cameloth, and Gamalaot.[1][2][3] Arthurian scholar Ernst Brugger suggested that it was a corruption of the site of Arthur's final battle, the Battle of Camlann, in Welsh tradition.[3] Roger Sherman Loomis believed it was derived from Cavalon, a place name that he suggested was a corruption of Avalon (under the influence of the Breton place name Cavallon). He further suggested that Cavalon became Arthur's capital due to confusion with Arthur's other traditional court at Caerleon (Caer Lleon in Welsh).[1] Others have suggested a derivation from the British Iron Age and Romano-British place name Camulodunum, one of the first capitals of Roman Britain and which would have significance in Romano-British culture. Indeed, John Morris, the English historian who specialized in the study of the institutions of the Roman Empire and the history of Sub-Roman Britain, suggested in his book The Age of Arthur that as the descendants of Romanized Britons looked back to a golden age of peace and prosperity under Rome, the name "Camelot" of Arthurian legend may have referred to the capital of Britannia (Camulodunum) in Roman times. It is unclear, however, where Chrétien de Troyes would have encountered the name Camulodunum, or why he would render it as Camaalot, though Urban T. Holmes argued Chrétien could have had access to Book 2 of Pliny's Natural History, where it is rendered as Camaloduno.[4] Guinevere at Camelot in a 14th-century fresco at Siedlęcin TowerRaimund von Wichera's Guinevere and the Court at Camelot (1900) Arthur's court at Camelot is mentioned for the first time in Chrétien's poem Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart, dating to the 1170s, though it does not appear in all the manuscripts. In the C manuscript (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, fonds français 794, folio 27r), which might in fact contain the proper reading of Chretien's original text,[5] instead of the place name there is the Old French phrase con lui plot, meaning "as he pleased". The other manuscripts spell the name variously as Chamalot (MS A, f. f. 196r), Camehelot (MS E, f. 1r), Chamaalot (MS G, f. 34f), and Camalot (MS T, f. 41v); the name is missing, along with the rest of the passage containing it, in MS V (Vatican, Biblioteca Vaticana, Regina 1725).[6][7] Camelot is mentioned only in passing and is not described: A un jor d'une Acenssion / Fu venuz de vers Carlion / Li rois Artus et tenu ot / Cort molt riche a Camaalot, / Si riche com au jor estut.[8]King Arthur, one Ascension Day, had left Caerleon and held a most magnificent court at Camelot with all the splendour appropriate to the day.[9] Nothing in Chrétien's poem suggests the level of importance Camelot would have in later romances. For Chrétien, Arthur's chief court was in Caerleon in Wales; this was the king's primary base in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and subsequent literature.[6] Chrétien depicts Arthur, like a typical medieval monarch, holding court at a number of cities and castles. It is not until the 13th-century French prose romances, including the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles, that Camelot began to supersede Caerleon, and even then, many descriptive details applied to Camelot derive from Geoffrey's earlier grand depiction of the Welsh town.[6] Most Arthurian romances of this period produced in English or Welsh did not follow this trend; Camelot was referred to infrequently, and usually in translations from French. However, in Britain, Arthur's court was generally located at Caerleon, or at Carlisle, which is usually identified with the "Carduel" of the French romances.[10] One exception is Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, which locates Arthur's court at Camelot.[11] From Geoffrey's grand description of Caerleon, Camelot gains its impressive architecture, its many churches and the chivalry and courtesy of its inhabitants.[6] Geoffrey's description in turn drew on an already established tradition in Welsh oral tradition of the grandeur of Arthur's court. The tale Culhwch and Olwen, associated with the Mabinogion and perhaps first written in the 11th century, draws a dramatic picture of Arthur's hall and his many powerful warriors who go from there on great adventures, placing it in Celliwig, an uncertain locale in Cornwall. The Great Hall of Camelot, a scene painting by Hawes Craven (1895)A jousting tournament at Camelot, an Idylls of the King illustration by George and Louis Rhead (1898) The Lancelot-Grail cycle and the texts it influenced depict the city of Camelot as standing along a river, downstream from Astolat. It is surrounded by plains and forests, and its magnificent cathedral, St. Stephen's, originally established by Josephus, the son of Joseph of Arimathea,[12] is the religious centre for Arthur's Knights of the Round Table. There, Arthur and Guinevere are married and there are the tombs of many kings and knights. In a mighty castle stands the Round Table, created by Merlin and Uther Pendragon; it is here that Galahad conquers the Siege Perilous, and where the knights see a vision of the Holy Grail and swear to find it. Jousts are often held in a meadow outside the city. Its imprecise geography serves the romances well, as Camelot becomes less a literal place than a powerful symbol of Arthur's court and universe.[6] There is also a Kamaalot featured as the home of Percival's mother in the romance Perlesvaus.[13] In Palamedes and some other works, including the Post-Vulgate cycle, King Arthur's Camelot is eventually razed to the ground by the treacherous King Mark of Cornwall (who had besieged it earlier) in his invasion of Logres after the Battle of Camlann.[6] In the Tavola Ritonda, Camelot is abandoned and falls to ruin after the death of Arthur. Although the court at Celliwig is the most prominent in remaining early Welsh manuscripts, the various versions of the Welsh Triads agree in giving Arthur multiple courts, one in each of the areas inhabited by the Celtic Britons: Cornwall, Wales and the Hen Ogledd. This perhaps reflects the influence of widespread oral traditions common by the 9th century which are recorded in various place names and features such as Arthur's Seat, indicating Arthur was a hero known and associated with many locations across Brittonic areas of Britain as well as Brittany. Even at this stage Arthur could not be tied to one location.[14] Many other places are listed as a location where Arthur holds court in the later romances, Carlisle and London perhaps being the most prominent. In the 15th century, the English writer Thomas Malory created the image of Camelot most familiar today in his Le Morte d'Arthur, a summary compilation work based mostly on the French romances. He firmly identifies Camelot with Winchester in England, an identification that remained popular over the centuries, though it was rejected by Malory's own editor, William Caxton, who preferred a Welsh location.[15] Winchester Castle's Great Hall with a 13th-century prop Round Table Arthurian scholar Norris J. Lacy commented that "Camelot, located nowhere in particular, can be anywhere."[6] The romancers' versions of Camelot draw on earlier traditions of Arthur's fabulous court. The Celliwig of Culhwch and Olwen appears in the Welsh Triads as well; this early Welsh material places Wales' greatest leader outside its national boundaries. Geoffrey's description of Caerleon is probably based on his personal familiarity with the town and its Roman ruins; it is less clear that Caerleon was associated with Arthur before Geoffrey. Several French romances (Perlesvaus, the Didot Perceval attributed to Robert de Boron, and even the early romances of Chrétien such as Erec and Enide and Yvain, the Knight of the Lion) have Arthur hold court at "Carduel in Wales", a northern city based on the real Carlisle. Malory's identification of Camelot as Winchester was probably partially inspired by the latter city's history: it had been the capital of Wessex under Alfred the Great, and boasted the Winchester Round Table, an artefact constructed in the 13th century but widely believed to be the original by Malory's time. Caxton rejected the association, saying Camelot was in Wales and that its ruins could still be seen; this is a likely reference to the Roman ruins at Caerwent.[15] Cadbury Castle archaeological site In 1542, John Leland reported that the locals around Cadbury Castle (formerly known as Camalet)[16] in Somerset considered it to be the original Camelot. This theory, which was repeated by later antiquaries, is bolstered, or may have derived from, Cadbury's proximity to the River Cam and the villages of Queen Camel and West Camel, and remained popular enough to help inspire a large-scale archaeological dig in the 20th century.[14] These excavations, led by archaeologist Leslie Alcock from 1966 to 1970, were titled "Cadbury-Camelot" and won much media attention.[14] The dig revealed that the site seems to have been occupied as early as the 4th millennium BC and to have been refortified and occupied by a major Brittonic ruler and his war band from c. 470. This early medieval settlement continued until around 580.[17] The works were by far the largest known fortification of the period, double the size of comparative caers and with Mediterranean artefacts representing extensive trade[18][19][20] and Saxon ones showing possible conquest.[14] The use of the name Camelot and the support of Geoffrey Ashe helped ensure much publicity for the finds, but Alcock himself later grew embarrassed by the supposed Arthurian connection to the site. Following the arguments of David Dumville, Alcock felt the site was too late and too uncertain to be a tenable Camelot.[21] Modern archaeologists follow him in rejecting the name, calling it instead Cadbury Castle hill fort. Despite this, Cadbury remains widely associated with Camelot. The name of the Romano-British town of Camulodunum (modern Colchester) was derived from the Celtic god Camulus. However, it was located well within territory usually thought to have been conquered early in the 5th century by Saxons, so it is unlikely to have been the location of any "true" Camelot, as Arthur is traditionally dated to the late 5th and early 6th century. The town was definitely known as Colchester as early as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 917. Even Colchester Museum argues strongly regarding the historical Arthur: "It would be impossible and inconceivable to link him to the Colchester area, or to Essex more generally," pointing out that the connection between the name Camulodunum and Colchester was unknown until the 18th century.[22] Arthurian scholar Peter Field has suggested that another Camulodunum, a former Roman fort, is a likely location of King Arthur's Camelot[23] and that "Slack, on the outskirts of Huddersfield in West Yorkshire," is where Arthur would have held court. This is because of the name, and also regarding its strategic location: it is but a few miles from the extreme south-west of Hen Ogledd (also making close to North Wales), and would have been a flagship point in staving off attacks to the Celtic kingdoms from the Angles and others. Other places in Britain with names related to "Camel" have also been suggested, such as Camelford in Cornwall, located down the River Camel from where Geoffrey places Camlann, the scene of Arthur's final battle. The area's connections with Camelot and Camlann are merely speculative. Further north, Camelon and its connections with Arthur's O'on have been mentioned in relation to Camelot, but Camelon may be an antiquarian neologism coined after the 15th century, with its earlier name being Carmore or Carmure.[24] Graham Phillips rejected the word "Camelot" entirely as just Chrétien's invention and instead proposed the old Roman city of Viroconium (near Shrewsbury in modern England) as Arthur's capital, citing archaeological evidence of a grand palace having been in use around 500 AD.[25] Alistair Moffat identified Camelot with Roxburgh in Scotland.[26] Camelot has become a permanent fixture in modern interpretations of the Arthurian legend. The symbolism of Camelot so impressed Alfred, Lord Tennyson that he wrote up a prose sketch on the castle as one of his earliest attempts to treat the legend.[27] Modern stories typically retain Camelot's lack of precise location and its status as a symbol of the Arthurian world, though they typically transform the castle itself into romantically lavish visions of a High Middle Ages palace.[6] Some writers of the "realist" strain of modern Arthurian fiction have attempted a more sensible Camelot. Inspired by Alcock's Cadbury-Camelot excavation, some authors such as Marion Zimmer Bradley and Mary Stewart place their Camelots in that place and describe it accordingly.[14] Camelot Castle Hotel featuring a replica of the Winchester Round Table[28] (a view from Tintagel Castle) Camelot lends its name to the musical Camelot, which was adapted into a film of the same title, featuring the Castle of Coca, Segovia as Camelot. An Arthurian television series Camelot was also named after the castle, as were some other works including the video game Camelot and the comic book series Camelot 3000. French television series Kaamelott presents a humorous alternative version of the Arthurian legend; Camelot Theme Park is a now-abandoned Arthurian theme park resort located in the English county of Lancashire. The Camelot Group was the first operator of the UK National Lottery[29] with lottery machines named after characters, places, and objects in Arthurian legend.[30] The vast cultural impact of Camelot can be seen in numerous works, products, and organisations. Visualizing Camelot, a University of Rochester exhibit by Alan and Barbara Tepa Lupack offered a cross-section of 350 such items in 2024.[31] In strictly American contexts, Camelot era refers to the presidency of John F. Kennedy. In a 1963 Life interview, Jacqueline, his widow, referenced a line from the Lerner and Loewe musical to describe the Kennedy era White House: "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, that was known as Camelot." She indicated that it was one of Kennedy's favourite lyrics from the musical and added, "there'll be great Presidents again [...] but there'll never be another Camelot again."[32] List of mythological places Locations associated with Arthurian legend ^ a b Loomis, Roger Sherman, Arthurian tradition & Chrétien de Troyes, Columbia University Press, 1961, p. 480. ISBN 0-2318-7865-6 ^ Sommer, Heinrich Oskar, The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances: Lestoire de Merlin, Carnegie Institution, 1916, p. 19.[ISBN missing] ^ a b Brugger, Ernst, "Beiträge zur Erklärung der arthurischen Geographie", in: Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur, Volume 28, 1905, pp. 1–71.[ISBN missing] ^ Nitze, William A. et al. 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Camelot is the legendary castle and court of King Arthur that became the iconic center of Arthurian romance, first appearing in 12th-century French literary works. Summary Camelot is a storied and legendary castle, long associated with King Arthur and his court. Absent in early Arthurian material, it emerged in 12th-century French romances. Over time, Camelot became known as the mythical capital of Arthur’s realm, symbolizing the grandeur of the Arthurian world. Although medieval texts often placed it in Great Britain and sometimes linked it to real locations, its precise geography remained ambiguous, enhancing its mystique. Scholars largely regard Camelot as fictional, created to fit the needs of chivalric romance. Nonetheless, debates about its “real” location persist to this day, fueled by historical conjecture and tourism interests. Etymology The name Camelot has uncertain origins, appearing with varied spellings in medieval French texts: Camaalot, Camalot, Chamalot, and more. Some scholars have suggested it derived from the Battle of Camlann in Welsh tradition, while others believed it came from Cavalon, a name linked to Avalon and possibly confused with Caerleon, a traditional court of Arthur. Other scholars have connected Camelot to Camulodunum, the Roman British city and early capital of Roman Britain. Historian John Morris posited that Romanized Britons nostalgically referenced the golden era of Roman peace, inspiring Camelot’s legend. However, doubts remain about how Chrétien de Troyes, the earliest known writer to mention Camelot, could have encountered such references. American scholar Urban T. Holmes speculated that Chrétien might have been influenced by Pliny’s Natural History, where the name Camaloduno appears, but this remains uncertain. Camelot in Medieval Literature Camelot’s first literary mention appears in Chrétien de Troyes’ Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart (1170s). In the text, Camelot is referenced briefly as a location where Arthur held a magnificent court. Different manuscripts spell the name variously, and in some, the name is absent entirely. In Chrétien’s account, Arthur’s chief court is at Caerleon, which had earlier prominence in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae. Arthur’s court is portrayed as mobile, consistent with medieval monarchical practices. By the 13th century, Camelot’s significance grew in French prose romances, such as the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate cycles. These works established Camelot as Arthur’s primary court, eclipsing Caerleon. English and Welsh traditions, however, retained Caerleon or Carlisle as Arthur’s court. Camelot’s descriptive grandeur, with its cathedral and Round Table, mirrored Geoffrey’s depiction of Caerleon and broader Welsh oral traditions. Symbolism and Location Camelot transcends its physicality, becoming a potent symbol of Arthur’s realm. Its magnificence, courtesy, and chivalric ideals embody the utopian world of Arthurian romance. The Lancelot-Grail cycle situates Camelot along a river near Astolat, surrounded by plains and forests. It features St. Stephen’s Cathedral, which holds the tombs of kings and knights and serves as the spiritual hub for the Round Table. Camelot’s mythological stature deepened through depictions of jousts, quests, and the Holy Grail vision. In some versions, Camelot’s demise follows Arthur’s death. For instance, the Tavola Ritonda portrays the city’s abandonment and ruin. Other works like Palamedes describe King Mark of Cornwall’s invasion and destruction of Camelot after the Battle of Camlann. These narratives underscore Camelot’s symbolic linkage to Arthur’s fate and the fall of his chivalric order. Historical and Geographic Speculations In the 15th century, Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur solidified Camelot’s image. Malory identified it with Winchester, England, partly due to the city’s history as a Wessex capital and its association with the Winchester Round Table. Malory’s editor, William Caxton, preferred a Welsh location, possibly referencing Caerwent’s Roman ruins. Cadbury Castle in Somerset has been a strong candidate for Camelot since John Leland’s 1542 account, where locals linked it to Arthur. Archaeological digs in the 20th century, led by Leslie Alcock, revealed significant fortifications from around 470 to 580 CE, with evidence of trade and possible Saxon conquest. Though Alcock distanced himself from the Camelot connection, Cadbury Castle remains a popular contender. Other Theories Camulodunum (Colchester): Once the capital of Roman Britain, its name derived from the Celtic god Camulus. However, its early Saxon conquest makes its Arthurian connection unlikely. Camelford (Cornwall): Linked to the River Camel and Camlann, but its ties are speculative. Viroconium (Shrewsbury): Archaeological evidence of a grand palace supports its candidacy. Other Locations: Camelon in Scotland and Roxburgh have also been proposed, though with limited evidence. Cadbury Castle, an archaeological site, situated near South Cadbury and Yeovil in Somerset, England. Camelot in Modern Culture Camelot’s cultural resonance endures, symbolizing ideals of justice, chivalry, and utopia. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, immortalized it in his Idylls of the King. Modern portrayals of Camelot often depict it as a lavish medieval palace, emphasizing its romantic allure. Media and Literature Film and Theatre: The musical Camelot and its film adaptation popularized the castle’s imagery. Locations like Coca Castle in Spain served as cinematic Camelots. Television and Comics: The series Camelot and the comic Camelot 3000 reimagine the legend in new contexts. Did you know…? Camelot has inspired theme parks, hotels, and even the UK National Lottery’s first operator, the Camelot Group. The Kennedy administration was famously dubbed the “Camelot era” after Jacqueline Kennedy referenced the musical in a Life magazine interview. Is Camelot considered real or fictional? Most scholars view it as entirely fictional. Its indefinite location suited medieval romance writers and has fueled centuries of debate and tourism. Where did Camelot first appear in literature? It was first mentioned in Chrétien de Troyes’s 12th-century poem Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart, though the text barely describes it. Why are there so many theories about Camelot’s location? Its precise site was never firmly established in medieval sources, leading later readers to link it with places like Caerleon, Winchester, Cadbury Castle (sometimes called “Camalet”), and even Colchester—though none has been definitively proven. What is known about the name’s origin? There is no clear consensus on Camelot’s derivation. Some scholars suggest it is linked to Camlann (Arthur’s final battle) or “Cavalon,” while others connect it to the Roman town Camulodunum. How did Camelot evolve in medieval romances? Later French prose works elevated Camelot into a grand capital with a cathedral, the Round Table, and epic jousts, serving more as a symbolic ideal of Arthur’s court than as a tangible location. FACT CHECK: At World History Edu, we strive for utmost accuracy and objectivity. But if you come across something that doesn’t look right, don’t hesitate to leave a comment below. Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. 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Camelot was King Arthur’s capital, where he reigned over the Britons before the Saxon invasion, according to legend. It does not appear on any authentic early map from that time period. The words “cam” and “camel” do, however, appear as elements in pre-Saxon British location names. Camelot was the legendary castle of King Arthur, although whether it was a real location is still an unsolved question Camelot is never mentioned in Arthur’s earliest known stories. The first mention where King Arthur holds court explicitly Camelot, is in Chrétien de Troyes’ romance Lancelot, written between 1160 and 1180. Three centuries later, Malory describes Camelot as the capital of the kingdom and the location of the Round Table. He usually associates Camelot with Winchester, however Carlisle is also mentioned in one passage. Tennyson, on the other hand, never actually gave Camelot a location. The mythical city described in Idylls of the King was symbolic, in the poet’s words, of “the gradual growth of human beliefs and institutions, and of man’s spiritual development”. No longer a reference to a specific location, the name now evokes a feeling or an idea. Local legends and antiquarian guesswork have suggested several locations for this enigmatic city. According to one theory, it is located near Tintagel, Arthur’s renowned Cornish birthplace, in a district that includes the Camel River and Camelford. Cadbury Castle in Somerset, on the other hand, has the strongest claim to be the Arthur’s lost city of Camelot. An aerial photo of the site of Cadbury Castle The ‘Castle’ is a pre-Roman Iron Age earthwork fort on a 500-foot-high isolated hill with views over the Vale of Avalon to Glastonbury Tor in the distance. The ramparts encircle an 18-acre enclosure on top of the hill. The village of Queen Camel, formerly known as Camel, is nearby, as is the River Cam. During the reign of Henry VIII, the antiquary John Leland describes how locals referred to the hill-fort as Camalat and the home of Arthur. Folklore from all ages has gathered around it. A well within the fortifications is known as King Arthur’s Well, while the summit plateau is called King Arthur’s Palace. Legend says the King sleeps in a cave there, and that the hoofbeats of his loyal knights of the Round Table can be still be heard in midsummer. To say that this or that location is Camelot begs the question of what meaning can be attached to such an identification. There could never have been a medieval city like the one imagined by Malory at Cadbury Castle. The Camelot Research Committee, which excavated the hill between 1966 and 1970 under the direction of Leslie Alcock, raised this issue even more forcefully. Traces of several human occupations dating back centuries have been discovered. The evidence uncovered so far suggests that around the first quarter of the sixth century AD, Arthur’s presumed period, the castle on the Cadbury hill was the stronghold of a rich and powerful British ruler, who bought luxury items from the eastern Mediterranean, built at least one significant construction on the piece of ground known as King Arthur’s Palace, and renovated the defenses by layering a huge drystone rampart of Celtic type, the only one of its kind up until then. An artists’s depiction of what Camelot or Cadbury Castle may have looked like In light of other archeological discoveries, these findings indicate the phrase “Arthuran Britain” does have a historical basis, as well as Camelot being a historical reality which led to the creation of many legends, as they did around the smaller citadel of Troy. No matter what the truth is about the real Arthur, he represents a historical fact that can no longer be disputed. After living under Roman rule and becoming more civilized, the British Celts fought back against the first Anglo-Saxon invaders and drove them away. During the first half of the sixth century, the Britons dominated most of what is now England and the Scottish Lowlands. They enjoyed relative peace and prosperity for the majority of this time. Arthur appears to have been the British commander who received most of the credit for this prolonged period of peace. He may or may not have been a king, but his victories as a military leader and the peace he helped bring about are the reason why legends about him were created and passed down. Cadbury Castle, which is by far the biggest and most powerful of the known British strongholds from that period, makes sense as the leader’s base of operations. In that sense, it may be the “true Camelot” of the “true Arthur.” Moreover, the archeological context of Cadbury Castle includes other locations associated with the Arthurian legend. For example, there is no evidence that Arthur’s birth place, the castle of Tintagel, ever existed. However, recent archeological research suggests that the headland on the northern Cornwall coast where it was supposed to exist was in fact an important royal center during Arthur’s time. In fact, it may even have been the coronation place of British high kings. At a another Iron Age hillfort, Castle Dorein Cornwall, remnants of a chieftain’s sixth-century settlement have been discovered. This chieftain constructed a timber hall, and he could have served as the inspiration for King Mark in the tale of Tristan and Isolde. Other such hill-top dwellings have also been found in Wales and on Glastonbury Tor. Thus far, the theory that Cadbury Castle was Camelot, the primary headquarters of the real man that inspired the legend of Arthur, has held up well. Some authors, however, place Arthur’s birthplace elsewhere: Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman, for example, claim he was born in Gwynedd, Wales’ northwest corner. Some of the greatest tales associated with Camelot are those of the Holy Grail and of the Knights of the Round Table. Looking at the historical evidence we have so far, what can we learn of Camelot’s fabled order of knights (a symbol of political, secular power) and their quest for the Holy Grail (a symbol of Christ and of divine power)? Regarding the Knights of the Round Table, one popular theory claims that the real Arthur defeated the invading Saxons with a cavalry force, a personal corps of mounted men that, through legend, later became the Knights of the Round Table. Heavy mailed cavalry was created by Rome in the last years of the Western Empire. The heavy mailed cavalry likely appeared in Britain in the early 5th century and continued to be used as a model for horse mounted warfare. Furthermore, it is a fact that the Saxons were not horsemen, so they could have been defeated by mounted Britons. There is still no direct evidence for the cavalry theory. However, research has made significant progress in tracing the outline of an actual British nobility in the Dark Ages. Excavation results, combined with clues in early Welsh poetry, paint a convincing picture of warriors fighting under Arthur’s command and possibly gathering in his Cadbury millitary camp. These knights, who undoubtedly fought against the heathen, lacked the variety of the Middle Ages. They fought wars in thick leather tunics and breeches with mail coats, wielding long-bladed swords, spears, and round white washed shields. These nobles almost certainly owned horses and rode across country, although it is still debated whether they fought on horseback or dismounted as infantry. They were, at least nominally, Christians who attended divine service before a battle. Their civilian attire was bright and possibly simple, and were adorned with gold ornaments and jewelry. Bards played an important role in this early Briton society, with its strange mingling of barbarism and sophistication. This is because bards also acted as historians of sorts, since they held the knowledge of a chieftain’s ancestors and could thus prove their legitimacy to rule. Viewed from this perspective, Merlin and Taliesin may have been bards of old, who did truly exist but their true life stories were overcome by legends. Because of these highly respected figures, the legend of Arthur and the British heroic age associated with him was passed down to to provide the material for the medieval British romance stories. As for the religious symbol of Camelot, the Holy Grail, there is very little historical evidence that can act as a foundation for the tale of the Holy Grail. One thing is for sure, however: there is no doubt Christians lived in Arthurian Britain and the nearby Celtic lands. The Christianity of the people here was of a particular kind, and had the restless, wandering quality that the Grail stories reflect, and in some cases was strange enough to fit the peculiar atmosphere of the Holy Grail stories, if not the imagery in detail. Before the end of Roman rule, the ruling elite in Britain were largely Christianized, and even produced such notable figures as St. Patrick. The defeat of the Saxon invasion in Arthur’s time allowed a sequence of apostles, primarily Welsh, to shape a unique form of Christian culture as it spread in both Britain and Ireland. Ireland, in particular, rose to become the most educated western land of the Dark Ages, due in large part to the British saints who came after Patrick. During this time, the Celtic Church of the British Isles was almost completely separate from the Christianity of the continent, and because of this is evolved to have a character of its own. It was based on monasteries rather than dioceses; its ruling priests were abbots rather than bishops; and the tone was set by the monks rather than the secular clergy. According to Welsh legend, the major religious centers of Arthurian Britain were Amesbury, Glastonbury, and Llantwit Major in South Wales. Despite having monasteries, none of the three were bishops’ residences. Celtic monks in Britain and Ireland were more free than their counterparts on the European continent. They travelled extensively and had a more democratic worldview. Women were more respected than they were among Christians in Continental Europe because the importance of monks made nuns important too. However, the arts suffered as a because of the ascetic disdain for worldly things. Sculpture, for example, was reduced to decoration, and church architecture was non-existent. However, the Irish excelled in literature and scholarship, and Gildas, the only British monk of the sixth century whose writings survive, was well-read and wrote in Latin. The Church of the British Isles did not have to compete with a powerful and entrenched pagan priesthood, unlike the case of the Church on the European continent. Even the Irish Druids posed little danger. As a result, the old religion that existed before the arrival of Christianity was not regarded as Satanic in the same way, and the Celts preserved much mythology and history that had faded or dissapeared elsewhere on the continent, such as Celtic apocalypse & creation myths. The fact that they could safely possess fictionalized Christian books, which the Continental hierarchy forbade the faithful, aided the trend. Celtic monks’ writings contain strange doctrines about angels and even theories on how to communicate with the spirit world. St. Brigit is even referred to as a reincarnation of the Virgin Mary as well as a priestess in some obscure sense. Pagan beings reappear in Christian contexts, but this time as heroes rather than devils. Among them is the god Bran, a deity of both British and Irish Celts. He appears in some of Arthur’s early legends, as a lord of Britain in the Welsh Mabinogion, as an Atlantic seaman in an early Irish tale, and eventually as Brons, a follower of Joseph of Arimathea, in the Grail stories themselves. The saga of St. Brendan’s Voyage, which has its own links to the Grail Quest, combines Pagan myth, Christian legend, and classical scholarship. Despite all it’s particularities however, Celtic Christianity could never truly be described as heretical. However, it expressed an unusual flavor, a “sense of something else.” The Synod of Whitby in 663 brought the Celts into line with Rome, at a time when their missionaries had deeply influenced the Anglo-Saxons, and reversed their earlier westward movement. The ferocity of the Whitby debate reflects the contintental Roman clerics’ sense of being confronted with a perplexing and unusual form of Christianity that they wanted to control. There is no reason to believe that the Grail tales represent anything specific that occurred among Arthur’s people, but the medieval authors who saw that culture as a suitable setting for strange Christian mysteries were acting on a sound instinct. If Cadbury Castle was Camelot, its proximity to Glastonbury, the Celtic sanctuary where the Grail legend has lingered for so long, could be more than a coincidence. As a cultural concept, Arthurian Britain has gone through two stages. The early Welsh culture looked back to a mythical “Island of Britain” where Arthur and other heroes had lived. Geographically, England was known as “Logria,” and the “Cymry,” or Welsh, ruled over it. Then the Cymry lost Logria to the Anglo-Saxons, and only Wales kept what was left of Arthurian glory. However, it was prophesied that one day Arthur would return as a Celtic messiah and conquer the English. In the 1130s, Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote his History of the Kings of Britain, which did much to plant an exaggerated and romanticized Arthurian realm in the minds of non-Welsh readers. However, as the theme became more popular among non-Celtic romance writers, Arthur ceased to be a purely regional, Welsh hero and instead became a hero of the English as well. England’s Plantagenet sovereigns claimed to own his birthplace, chief cities, and grave, as well as being his rightful successors in the lordship of all Britain. Edward I displayed the alleged remains of King Arthur at Glastonbury to demonstrate that Arthur would never return to aid the Welsh. Henry Tudor skillfully combined both aspects of Arthur. He emphasized his Welsh ancestry and marched to overthrow Richard II under the Red Dragon banner. When he became King Henry VII, used his propagandists to interpret his coronation as king as fulfilling the prophecy of Arthur’s return, implying that a true “British” prince had rescued the entire country from civil war and brought back its ancient Arthurian glory. The great poetic believer of this Tudor myth is Edmund Spenser, who, in The Faerie Queen, depicts England under the rule of Elizabeth I as a magnificent kingdom that was restored in splendor of the long lost Britons. The same theme appears in other Elizabethan and Stuart writings, as late as 1757 in Gray’s poem The Bard. 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