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THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

AN ILLUSTRATED ANTHOLOGY

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AN ADDITION TO GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH? POSSIBLE SOURCES & &

The piece which follows has never been published before. There are only two surviving manuscripts of it, one a garbled copy and the other a summary, and it is only distantly connected with other versions of King Arthur's death. The most likely explanation for its existence lies in the brief and mysterious account which Geoffrey of Monmouth and his imitators gave of Arthur's death. The piece is headed 'This is the true history of Arthur's death', and the closing words lead into the chapter of Geoffrey of Monmouth's book which follows Arthur's death, as though the story was intended to replace the end of Geoffrey's account by a fuller and more explicit version. It is included here as a reminder that anyone was at liberty to invent a variation on the 'accepted' story of Arthur, though very few of these variations have actually survived.

The main manuscript in which the story is found is fourteenth-century, and probably came from North Wales, but beyond this it is difficult to say when the story was written. There are details in it which echo the romance version of Arthur's death as told by Malory (pp. 135-138 below). However, they are distant echoes: here Arthur is killed by adder's venom, in Malory an adder is the cause of the great last battle; here Arthur's tomb appears miraculously in the place where he was to be buried, in Malory the tomb materialises miles from where he was last seen alive; in both, Arthur is buried at a hermitage. Other details come from Celtic tradition; there was a widespread belief that Arthur was still alive, which Geoffrey hinted at by making him go to the mysterious isle of Avalon, and which we know of from a number of twelfth-century writers. However, the discovery of Arthur's supposed grave at Glastonbury in 1191 had severely shaken belief in this idea, and it would be tempting to say that the present story, which does not mention Glastonbury as the site of the tomb but puts his burial firmly in Gwynedd, was earlier than 1191. But the Glastonbury discovery was not accepted as genuine by everyone, and the writer could simply have ignored it.

Other parts of the narrative seem to be taken from the world of Welsh romance as found in *The Mabinogion* (p. 34 below). For instance, the thunder and mist which descends

on Arthur's body is not unlike an episode in the story of Pryderi, when Pryderi and his wife Rhiannon are laid under a spell:

Rhiannon saw the gate of the caer open; there was no concealment on it, and in she came. And as soon as she came, she perceived Pryderi laving hold of the bowl, and she came towards him. 'Alas, my lord,' said she, 'what dost thou here?' And she laid hold of the bowl with him, and as soon as she laid hold, her own hands stuck to the bowl (of the fountain) and her feet to the slab, so that she too was not able to utter one word. And with that, as soon as it was night, lo, a peal of thunder over them, and a fall of mist, and thereupon the caer vanished, and away with them too.

A bowl and fountain are associated with a violent storm in a French romance based on Celtic stories, Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain* (p. 59 below), and the disappearance of Arthur's body could have come from a more elaborate version of Pryderi's enchantment. Equally, though there is no exact parallel, the young man with his elm lance could be a magical figure from Welsh romance. Arthur's devotion to the Virgin Mary could be taken from *The History of the Britons*. The general style of the piece is ambitious in its language, and points to a well-educated cleric as the author. Such, in brief, are the few scraps of evidence we have about this curious fragment, which, because of the complex phrasing of the original, is presented here in a fairly free translation.

Therefore, when the battle which was fought between Arthur King of the Britons and Mordred - whom I cannot call his nephew but rather his betrayer - had ended, and Mordred had been handed over to death, there were many dead all around, and many of the enemy were left on the spot. The king, although he had gained the victory, left the field with a heavy heart. He had been wounded; though the wound was not immediately fatal, it threatened to be so in the near future. At length he gave thanks for the victory he had achieved to the Creator of all things and to Our Lord's mother, the blessed Virgin Mary. He tempered the bitterness of his sorrow at the slaughter of his men with the joy of victory. This done, leaning on his shield, he sat down on the ground in order to recuperate. As he was sitting there, he ordered four of the leaders of his people, who had been summoned, to take off his armour carefully, lest a careless movement should increase the pain of his recent wounds. When the king was disarmed, a young man appeared, pleasant-looking, tall in stature, and, from the shape of his limbs, of very great strength; he was making his way on horseback, armed with a shaft of elm in his right hand, which was firm, and neither twisted nor knotty but smooth, with a sharp point like a lance, since at some time in the past it had been hardened with fire by a smith and made harder by being tempered in water. It had been dipped in adder's venom, so that it wounded less by the force of the thrust than by the poison, thus making up for any lack of strength in him who threw it. This high-spirited youth was set to ride over the king,

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but instead, halting in front of him, he cast the weapon just described at the king, adding to his already serious wounds a yet more serious one. Having done this, he fled in haste, but he did not go far, for the king, acting as quickly as a knight in full health, planted a quivering spear in the back of the fleeing youth, and pierced his heart. Thus wounded, he soon gave up the ghost. So, with the instrument of the king's death dead, the king immediately grew pale and discoloured as if in his last hour, and he told those around that he had not long to live. When they learned this, a flood of tears bathed the faces of those who loved him deeply, and mourning afflicted them all, since they despaired of maintaining Britain's freedom as he had done. As the proverb says, if better rarely follows good, it is much rarer for the best to follow the best. Then the king, recovering for a little, gave orders that he should be carried to Gwynedd, for he intended to stay in the isle of Avalon, a pleasant and delightful place, and very peaceful, where the pain of his wounds would be eased. When they arrived there, doctors used all their art to search the king's wounds; but the king found no relief from their efforts. Despairing of recovery, he sent for the archbishop of London, who came in answer to his summons accompanied by two bishops, Urian of Bangor and Urbegeu of Glamorgan. St David, archbishop of Menevia, would have been present if he had not been physically prevented by a serious illness. In the presence of the bishops Arthur made his confession and rendered himself answerable to his Creator's indulgence. Then he rewarded those who had served him with

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the bounty of royal generosity. And he gave the realm of Britain to Constantine, son of Duke Cadur. This done, he was given the Last Sacrament and took his leave of this wicked world. And the story relates that, clad in a hair-shirt, like a true penitent, with his hands outstretched he commended his spirit into the hands of his Redeemer. O what a doleful day, a day worthy of grief and full of mourning, that no inhabitant of Britain can remember without sorrow, and for good reason: for that day in Britain justice faltered, obedience to law became rare, the quietness of peace was disturbed, and noble liberty was imprisoned. For with glorious Arthur taken from their midst, Britain was deprived of victory, since she who was long in power is now entirely subservient to others. But lest I ramble on too long in this vein, let my pen describe the funeral of our dead hero. The three bishops aforesaid commended his spirit to Him who gave it with prayers and devotions. The others laid out the king's body royally, anointing it with balsam and myrrh and preparing it for burial. The next day they took the dead king's body to a little chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, since he had vowed in his lifetime that no other ground should receive him. It was there he wished to be hidden in earth, there that he desired his flesh to return to its origin, there that he commended himself to earth's keeping after his death, in the place which he honoured above all other. But when they arrived at the door of the chapel, the small and narrow entrance prevented them from bringing in the body, because of its size. So the body was left outside by the wall on a bier, because nothing else could be done: for the entry to the aforementioned chapel was so narrow and small that no one could enter it unless, turning sideways, they pushed in with all their might and skill. The inhabitant of this chapel was a certain hermit, who enjoyed the serenity of this most peaceful home all the more for its remoteness from the squalor of everyday business. The senior bishops entered it; the dead man's body remained outside. (Meanwhile, while the bishops were performing the last rites, the air thundered, the earth quaked, storms poured down relentlessly from the sky, lightning flashed, and winds blew from every quarter. After this, after the briefest of intervals, the air was filled with a mist which absorbed the brightness of the lightning, and plunged the bier on which the royal corpse lay into such darkness that the attendants could see nothing, though their eyes were wide open.) This mist persisted without a break from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon. As the hours passed, the air never grew still from the crash of thunder. Finally when the

no trace of the royal corpse, for the king had been carried off to an abode specially prepared for him; they looked at a bier empty of the body which had been left on it. They were seized by disquiet as a result of the removal of the king's body, to such an extent that great doubt as to the truth arose among them: 'Where could this mighty power have come from? By whose violence was he carried off?' Even today, there are shadowy doubts as to where King Arthur was destined to find his place of rest. For this reason certain people say he is still alive, and is both sound and well, since he was carried off without anyone's knowledge. Others contradict this bold guess, saying positively and without the least trace of doubt that he paid the debt of death: they rely on the following argument, that, when the mist already mentioned had lifted and visibility had been restored, a sealed tomb appeared in the sight of those present, both solidly closed and of one piece, so that it seemed indeed to be a single stone, whole and solid, rather than made in pieces with mortar and a builder's skill. They thought that the king was buried in its recesses, since they had discovered it already sealed and closed. And since this discovery was made, there has been no small disagreement among them.

He governed the realm of Britain for thirty-nine years in the power of his strength, the wisdom of his mind, the acuteness of his judgement, and through his renown in battle. In the fortieth year of his reign, he was destined to end his human lot. Therefore, with Arthur dead, Constantine the son of Duke Cadur, ascended to the British realm, etc.

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