



Rex Quondam, Rexque Futurus

Celtic Tradition – Britain and France

There was a time when the land of the Britons was thrown into chaos. It was when the empire collapsed under a band of inept and corrupt rulers, in cahoots with a few great merchants equally sick with greed, who did not leave the peoples even the crumbs of their misery.

Thus, like the rest of the empire, the land of the Britons became a field of snares, skirmishes and battles between a few feudal lords, who did not seek the good of their peoples, but their own betterment. They all wanted to be 'the King', but none of them had the spirit of a true king.

Creating much calamity and misery for the Britons, barbarian tribes, from the other side of the channel, took advantage of the prevailing chaos to invade the island. Destruction, famine and untold dearth ravaged the people, as warlords and barbarians indulged in savage slaughter and looting, driven by their pathetic greed.

It was then that a true king emerged in the westernmost regions of the country. Drawing the sword from the stone, something no one had been able to do to claim the throne, the young king earned everyone's respect for his integrity, righteousness and nobility. His name was Arthur, and he did not come alone, but was accompanied by a great wizard, possibly the greatest magician of all time: Merlin.

A short time later, and with the help of Merlin, the true king managed to gather, under his dragon flag, all the kings and lords of Britain, to defeat the invading barbarians in a series of confrontations

that would culminate in the Battle of Mount Badon. In this way, he forced the invading hordes to retreat to the shores of the canal and to renounce further attempts at conquest. This was the beginning of a golden age which would be remembered for centuries throughout Europe.

At Merlin's suggestion, Arthur created a brotherhood of warriors and arranged them around a Round Table, as a symbol of the world and the sky above their heads. In it, no one had a privileged place, and the king, without ceasing to be the King, conversed with his warriors like any other knight. There, before the Round Table, they all conspired so that, once peace was achieved, the people of Britannia could rebuild their lives and flourish.

Thus, they pledged, under oath, to protect the weak from the abuses of the powerful, to help the most disadvantaged by administering justice, to defend and protect women from malicious men, to create just conditions so that girls and boys could grow up in a fertile environment, and old people could end their days in peace.

And, with justice in the lands of Britannia, true peace flourished, that peace which is sustained by the correct relationships between people, and between people and the land from which everyone is sustained.

The fame of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table reached all corners of the known world, and knights from other lands, other colours and other faiths began to arrive, yearning to join the brotherhood in order to assume its code of honour and increase the nobility of their souls. In this way, the Round Table grew with warriors coming from half the world. But not only men of the nobility joined it: Arthur appointed knights and included at the Round Table the sons of peasants and artisans, of shepherds ... and fairies. He even integrated into his egregious table men who, due to their differences and conditions, or even because of their illnesses, no king of this time would have admitted to his court.

As Merlin had told him from the beginning, no one should be excluded if the courage and nobility of his/her heart attested to his worthiness.

And, these being the conditions to be part of the brethernhood, how could there not be women?

Taking advice from Merlin, but also from his sister, Morgan le Fay, priestess of the sacred Isle of Avalon, the king opened the door of the brethernhood to wise and cunning women, women of character, instructed in the most different sciences and arts, also women of great courage and bravery, capable of facing any warrior with the power of her mere presence.

On the backs of this brethernhood of men and women of all races and conditions, of this elite assembly of justice and care, the people and lands of Britannia lived a prodigious time, better than they had ever lived before, or since.

But the wiles of the foolish, the mean and the greedy were to destroy that magnificent golden age, and betrayal opened the doors to disaster. In one of the most difficult moments in the future of the brethernhood, after the flower of chivalry succumbed in the Quest of the Holy Grail, the cursed Mordred, the incestuous son of Arthur, rallied the most devious and miserable of feudal lords of Britannia. These lords, resentful that Arthur had never given them entry to his Round Table, joined the barbarian hordes who had been waiting for decades to avenge the defeat that Arthur had inflicted on them.

And so came the fateful day when the King, with the meager remnants of his brotherhood and army, and now without the help of Merlin, faced the awe-inspiring army of Mordred in the ill-fated Battle of Camlann. The numerical superiority of Mordred's mighty army was outweighed by the bravery and valour of Arthur's warriors, but the battle resulted in horrendous carnage. In the end, only Arthur, Mordred and the good Bedivere, wounded, remained alive. Arthur killed Mordred, but the king was fatally wounded.

Arthur, seeing the shadows of death approaching, gave Bedivere the sword of his royalty, Excalibur, and entrusted him to return it to its true owner, the Lady of the Lake.

And soon after a small sailboat from the Isle of Avalon, with Morgan le Fay and three more priestesses of the Goddess, picked up the wounded Arthur and took him with them.

They say that, on the Isle of Avalon, they healed Arthur of his wounds, and there are many people who are certain that Arthur is still alive there. For they avow that there come be a day when the world will be in grave danger, and then King Arthur will return at the head of his brethrenhood of the Round Table, and his army of warriors, to avert disaster and bring a new golden age to the peoples of the world and the Earth.

That is why they say of King Arthur that he is the once and future king: *Rex Quondam, Rexque Futurus*.

In the county of Somerset, southern England, to the southwest of the town of South Cadbury, there is a flat hill about 500 feet high with an immense plain above. It is said that it is there the castle of Camelot was, at one time, located. This was the seat of Arthur's government, and where the great hall and the Round Table was sited.

In the village, located less than 1,000 feet from the path that goes up the hill, there is an ancient legend. This legend says that Cadbury Hill is hollow inside. They say that, within it, in its caverns, are the members of the brethrenhood of the Round Table together with all the warriors that once belonged to the army of King Arthur. And they say they are all in a state of lethargy, waiting for Arthur to arrive from Avalon and awaken them in preparation for the great 'battle' which would take place when the world faces great danger. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2020).

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Comments

From this story I have tried to gather relevant information about this myth of the future, although it is scattered throughout different medieval versions of the Arthurian Cycle as well as in the oral traditions of Great Britain and France. The only thing, that I know of, that does not appear in the medieval versions is the story related to the

priestesses of the Goddess in Avalon. This is not an invention of mine either, since I have taken the ideas of a contemporary version of the myth which, however recent, does not detract from it in any way. Here I am talking about *The Mists of Avalon*, by Marion Zimmer-Bradley.

For the rest, there is nothing that is out of place in the myth, not just the inclusion of women at the Round Table, but also of ‘commoners’, people of other races, Muslims and other ‘pagans’ and people with differential traits, like Sir Dinadan. These also include individuals with illnesses, like epilepsy, which were misunderstood in the Middle Ages. For more on this topic, I suggest reading ‘The Community of the Round Table’, which is included in this Collection and found among the stories in the epilogue of the Earth Charter.

In this sense it is surprising that, amid the religious obscurantism of medieval Europe, a mythology was created with values and moral attitudes far ahead of those of their time. However, many of those values and attitudes –such as, for example, the high value placed on women– probably came from the Celtic culture which produced the seed of these stories. This would eventually give rise to female devotion, as expressed in courtly love, and Dante's *Faithfuls of Love*.

As for the tradition of the return of Arthur and his warriors from Avalon, we find its scholarly and literary root in Geoffrey of Monmouth's classic, *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1138). Here it is stated that, although Arthur was mortally wounded at Camlann, he did not die there, but was taken to the Isle of Avalon to be miraculously healed. Later, Geoffrey himself would introduce a twist to the legend in his *Vita Merlini* (c. 1151), in which he claimed that Arthur was still alive and could return from Avalon to rule again (Green, 2009).

However, the oldest written source is not that of Geoffrey of Monmouth, but seems to be found in the writings of William of Malmesbury (1125), who said that 'Arthur's grave is nowhere seen, whence antiquity of fables still claims that he will return' (Padel, 1994). In addition, many authors during the 12th Century speak of the ‘hope of the Britons’, a legend which was apparently widespread in popular tradition. It was even spoken of in other parts of Europe, as witnessed by the French Peter de Blois (c. 1190) or the Italian Boncampagno da Signa (c. 1200) (Green, 2009).

Actually, the belief in Arthur's survival was so powerful among the people that the Belgian monk Hériman de Tournai (c. 1146) recounted that, in 1113, there was a violent outbreak in Wales at a religious meeting when a clergyman commented that King Arthur was dead (Green, 2009).

Three centuries later, the legend was still alive. Highlighting the character of the Isle of Avalon as a fairy island, John Lydgate, in his *Fall of Princes* (1431-1438), echoed the belief that Arthur 'shall resorte as lord and sovereyne Out of fayrye and regne in Breteyne' (Green, 2009). And, shortly after, the last of the great medieval creators of the Arthurian Cycle, Thomas Malory, in his *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), would record the legend under the heading *Rex quondam Rexque futurus*. Malory would introduce the legend into the tale, beginning with Arthur's own words to Bedivere:

'Confort thyself,' said the king, 'and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust in; for I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound: and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul.' (Malory, 1969, p. 517)

Malory then added as narrator:

Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of Our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross. I will not say that it shall be so, but rather I will say, here in this world he changed his life. But many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: hic iacet arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus. (Malory, 1969, p. 519)

That is, 'Here lies Arthur, the once and future king'.

Also eloquent in the prevalence and spread of the legend of Arthur's return is the fact that a Spanish chronicler recounted, at the end of the 16th Century, that the Spanish King Felipe ii swore when he married Mary Tudor in 1554, that he would renounce the kingdom of England if Arthur returned (Padel, 1994).

The alleged tomb of Arthur to which Malory refers was found, in 1190, in Glastonbury Abbey. But such a finding is suspicious since it took place seven years after a fire had destroyed the abbey and all the treasures accumulated by the monks. Apparently the monks needed

money to rebuild the abbey, and they could think of nothing better than to invent the discovery of the great king's tomb in order to encourage pilgrims to visit Glastonbury. On the other hand, Malory was wrong to transcribe the epitaph that, according to the monks, had appeared in Arthur's tomb. According to them, it read: *Hic iacet sepultus inclitus rex Arturius in Insula Avalonia*. This means: 'Here lies buried the illustrious King Arthur, on the Isle of Avalon'. I mean, it failed to say anything about the *Rex Quondam, Rexque Futurus*. Obviously, it was better for the monks that he was dead and well dead, and that people believed that he was buried in their abbey.

Actually, it is convenient to see King Arthur for what he is, a mythical character, an archetype of the collective unconscious, probably based on an authentic warrior leader who would have lived between the 5th and 6th centuries c.e., and on which different historical figures are proposed. However, the characters, stories and symbols associated with the Arthurian Cycle have clear roots in Celtic mythology (Campbell, 1991).

Finally, we need address the subject of Cadbury Hill which, according to an old reference (Phelps, 1839, Ch. VI, §1, p. 118), was formerly called Camelet with a clear resonance to the Camelot of the myth. This is the remains of a hillfort, a wooden fortification (the stone came with the myth). It was large and with walls with moats on four levels. According to archaeological studies, it housed a significant number of troops between the 5th and 6th centuries, the same time as one of the historical figures aspiring to be the authentic Arthur. According to archaeologists and historians, it would have been the best and most strategic site from which to control the movements of the Saxon forces in order to intercept them (Alcock, 1972; Radford and Swanton, 1975); Tabor, 2008).

Hence, the survival of the Cadbury legend is not strange. A Welsh antiquarian Elis Gruffudd, spoke of it at the beginning of the 16th Century. He wrote two versions of the legend. In one he mentioned the caves of Cadbury Hill in which Arthur and his warriors slept. Later, in the 19th Century, we once again find a mention of the legend, when an old man from South Cadbury asked a party of antiquaries who were visiting the village, 'Have you come to take the king out?' (Green, 2009).

However, similar legends speak of Arthur, his brotherhood of the Round Table and his warriors as being asleep, or lethargic, in caves. This belief can also be found in other parts of Britain.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to something especially striking about this myth of the future: how the cyclical –and non-linear– nature of the concept of time is clear throughout the story. For this story begins with a serious crisis befalling the civilising system, that of the so-called Dark Ages. The story’s hero and his companions resolve this crisis to finally announce, with their disappearance, that in the future there will be a similar, or more serious crisis, which will be solved by the same archetypes.

The *Rex Quondam, Rexque Futurus* is, in this sense, a magnificent example of a story that emerged from a culture with a clear cyclical concept of time.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

The Way Forward: Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace ...

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Preamble: The Global Situation.- Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

Principle 3b: Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

Principle 9c: Recognise the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 11a: Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them.

Principle 11b: Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.

Principle 12a: Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.

Principle 13e: Eliminate corruption in all public and private institutions.

Principle 16f: Recognise that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

The Way Forward: Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.

