How valid is the statement that “Myths are a product of a specific time and space”?

Mythology, described as a traditional story that usually concerns early history of a people or social phenomena, also typical of a myth is the addition of supernatural beings and events. Myths are inextricably linked to a nation's cultural identity through the historical landscape and iconographic figures of moral or divine relevance to a culture of people. The statement that is the subject of this essay: “Myths are a product of a specific time and space”, must be evaluated more closely to properly determine its validity overall.

To begin with, to evaluate the statement that myths are a product of specific times and space the myth and legend of King Arthur of Britain can be closely tried against this statement. Arthurian Legend is a unique myth that has evolved and changed over time into many new forms and additions. This can be seen as from the various iterations of the myth, being established in Welsh poetry early on with a reference to him being made in Y Gododdin a poem that contains a series of elegies commending fallen soldiers. Arthur within this poem is simply drawn up with a reference as the author of the poem relates a soldier to being like Arthur, with no other description. This implies that Arthur was of importance for the time and held enough importance/reverence in the common populace that his name was related to feats of heroism or strength as shown in Y Gododdin. It also suggests that some stories of him existed prior to the point of the Y Gododdin. Additionally the reference to no status like “King of the Britons” infers that maybe Arthur at this point was not some mythical king but rather a famous warrior, not a king, who may have still been mythical or even a real person. Further on in time Arthur is portrayed as the “King of Britain” in the Welsh story book, the Mabinogion. Within the Mabinogion, Arthur takes up a role as the King of Britain who is usually based in Wales. However he still is not the primary focus of the tales, only appearing in the additional stories included in the Mabinogion and not the main “four branches”. Arthur is instead portrayed as a side character who often remains in his court and sends his knights out to do the quests, however in the story of Culhwch and Olwen he is a more heroic warrior-king who aids his cousin in completing a series of impossible tasks. His inclusion in these Mythological Welsh tales further outline his character and place in culture. It portrays Arthur as a king and that of a “King of Britain” that is tied to his character in later versions also. However, the lands of Wales that is the focus of this iteration of a character suggest that he was more of a symbol of Welsh culture and national pride for a people during this period of time that were pushed to the western fringes of the island. Crucially, even at this early stage of his mythos, he is tied inextricably to places and time periods. Even within his Welsh early heritage, the myth shifts from a seemingly legendary warrior to a mythological King that ties his royal power to Wales, providing Wales with monastic roots/claim to a mythical king who ruled all of Britain. The mythological element of Arthur takes its most well known form in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s the History of the Kings of Britain, written around 1136, which once more poses Arthur as a legendary imperial British monarch who deposes the Saxons and conquers Europe. To add to this the text also establishes more to the myth such as the addition of his legendary sword Caliburn and his wife, Guinevere. The evolution of his myth can be distinctly noted, as with the Mabinogion, as being so closely linked with the era in which Arthur is dredged up as a figure of genuine importance and additionally the places or scope of land that is focused on within the many iterations of the Arthurian myth. An example to show this is how in Geoffrey of Monmouth's ‘History of the Kings of Britain’ Arthur and his myth serve a purpose for the times and are altered from more of a traditional storybook character as featured in the Mabinogion to someone who is presented as a

semi-real figure of legend. This takes the form of a King who is powerful enough to rid Britain of the Saxons and go on to conquer much of Europe.

The reason this change can be linked to the time period is because around the time Geoffrey of Monmouth was writing his History of the Kings, Britain was in need of some patriotic figure to bolster national pride and install some identity into the country as being linked to a figure of legend that would have already been known in Wales, where Geoffrey wrote his tales. This early form of Arthur also features a few areas to do with the more fantastical elements of his story but still uses real locations and is formed of a few real battles that may have occurred, but most likely, did not involve the Arthur of legend as we know him and how Geoffrey of Monmouth depicts him. As stated previously Arthur and his legend do not change in independent of the context of the times and the places in which the story is reiterated, Arthur changes to fit Britain's needs for national pride a sense of growing ambitions as the nation develops and looks for power and to spur on that change Arthur serves the purpose of giving Britain its greater link to power and legitimacy among its European surroundings in the middle ages. The time period requires a figure like Arthur to spur a nationalistic feeling among the Britons and the land and space in which the myth forms and Britain itself as the space the Arthurian legend spawns from clearly influences his character from his origins in Welsh poetry and story centering him in Wales (Caer-Lleon) or Cornwall (Celliwig) to later on in his mythos, the legendary kingdom of Camelot.

12th Century Arthurian myth continues to serve as an example for the statement that “Myths are a product of a specific time and space” such as the works of Chretien de Troyes. Chretien de Troyes, like Geoffrey of Monmouth transformed the character of King Arthur to his own people and home country. This occurred during the reign of Henry the 2nd who expanded across Britain at the time of the new Arthur myth being written. This was a crucial period of french renaissance and Chretien de Troyes was given the task of taking older stories, in his case british celtic ones and creating new versions that held the ideals of the French nobility and focused more around the moral ethical dilemmas and psychological/romantic elements within stories rather than the military history focus that prior versions of his myth had focused on. French writers like Chretien de Troyes sought to turn Arthur into the perfect courtly king,in which the French nobility in the 12th century sought to embed their new chivalrous culture and code into, rather than a warrior king of celtic legend. This was a practice under the name of ‘bele conjointure’ and was used by Chretien de Troyes in his books centered around establishing this new King Arthur in titles such as Lancelot, the knight of the cart and Perceval, the story of the grail. In common with the mythos before this, the King Arthur myth once again becomes a figure to fit the time and place the story is adapted for. Essentially Arthur becomes a figure of myth who symbolises the move occurring in this time, as stated previously, towards French chivalric courtly culture and romance rather than the prior depictions of a strong militaristic leader. As a direct example of this, Chretien’s books focused on the love triangle between Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot and additionally religious aspects such as the Holy grail in his last unfinished work. This is in stark contrast to celtic mythology that sees the legendary king as a figure of reverence himself (“The once and future king”) and a character you don't get much insight into on an independent level, the opposite of Chretien’s depiction. This allows us to clearly see the distinct changes Arthur has undergone between the 5th/6th century “dark ages” to the 12th century “romance era” and changes that have been made to fit the needs of a culture of a people unique to their country and era. To add to this notion that the Arthurian

myth can be seen as being a product of a specific time and space we must also look to more later time periods, such as the Victorian period and the purpose Arthur served and symbolised for the nation then.

During the Victorian era, the King Arthur myth underwent a revival in literature and he became, once again, the ideal image of the era, a symbol of British identity and imperial pride. The myth now pictured Arthur as the “stainless gentleman” type of character, tying him to the period as he was definitely no longer a simple warrior king or even a heavy romantic character such as in Chretien’s works, Arthur was now recast as the figure of “ideal manhood” possessing moral integrity and unwavering self-restraint. A lot of the writings also centered on Camelot as a sort of moral utopia that was used by some to criticise the industrial revolution, the fall of Camelot was also seen to mirror the declining British empire as well. Victorian era gender roles also translated into the reimagined king Arthur mythos, with Guinevere’s infidelity to Arthur being portrayed as the cause of the collapse of Camelot, this reinforced the Victorian gender role of women by highlighting the era’s emphasis on “pure” marriage being the backbone of a civilised society. These reimagined Arthur myths were featured in works like the Idylls of the King by Alfred Lord Tennyson. Similar to the previous examples of Arthur's myth, it is obvious that the character and mythos that surrounds him suits the time and place and it is certainly no different in the victorian era either which is further removed from the 12th century or the “dark ages” where the myth originates from (as far as we know). As proven by the examples within this paragraph such as the victorian gender roles making alterations to characters other than Arthur such as within the character of Guinevere and making her the main cause of a utopia to fail because of “impurity”. Within Arthur himself his portrayal as a perfect victorian gentleman ideal mirrors the time periods needed for a national identity that mirrors what the Victorians needed Arthur to be as a symbol of Imperial pride and ideals being “pure” and “just” rather than a purely powerful warrior character or a romantic noble figure.

The statement that “myths are a product of a specific time and place” can be seen as holding a great deal of validity overall. Be it different countries and cultures to different formats of storytelling from poems and traditional writing to artwork, Mythology is shaped by the era and place to which they belong. All myths carry the sort of "genealogy" of a culture and time they belong to and are digested in. The example used in this essay proves it quite clearly as King Arthur is a myth that has been continually digested and reimagined by whole different eras of Britons and even other European cultures entirely (Chretien de Troyes as an example). This continual reimagining of the myth of Arthur proves it as Arthur as a myth serves a simple purpose across time to serve a generations needs for a mythical figure across Britain. It has been said that Arthur is a “once an future king” because every generation/era reimagines him to fit their ideal and need, whether it be a warrior king in his earliest depictions or a romantic ideal in the 12th century; Arthur as a myth provides the necessary evidence to validate the statement that “myths are a product of a specific time and space”.

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