

The Arthur of the Cinema: A Case Study of Two Examples

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The cinematic portrayal of historical figures is a very delicate balance; on the one hand the characterization must conform to the generally accepted traits and behaviors of the personage, including all cultural and language barriers. While on the other hand, the figure from history must be presentable to an audience that is unaware of whom this character was and his or her place in history, and thus be able to learn more about them from the experience of the cinema. When this attempt to portray a character from the past centers around a semi-historical or mythical person, the artistic license of presentation becomes unhindered by the main-stream's perception, only then does the producer, director or screen-writer try to satisfy the academic sources, or to use them to their own ends.

Such a difficult person to represent is King Arthur. Nearly sixty movies exist around the world from the last fifty years in a dozen languages¹, with every movie taking on the Arthurian mythology as their own. Every Arthurian movie, in recent times, greatly varies in its period of history to place him, whether it lay in the medieval world of Sir Thomas Malory or in the 'Dark-Ages' of the post-Roman era or some time in between. The early trend of movies Arthurian primarily were placed in the medieval period (circa. 12th century) and focused on the Malorian influenced literature of the *Le Morte D'Arthur*, but like all films, they give a picture of that modern period in history's perception of an era long in the past.

¹ Synder, Christopher. *The World of King Arthur* (Thames and Hudson, 2000) 169-171.

Heavily colored by the contemporary mores of the times on what is acceptable in the cinema and other fads, the earlier Arthurian movies act as a 'window' into the 1950's and 1960's society. One example of this is the early film, *Knights of the Round Table* (1953) with the roles of Morgan le Fay and Mordred. Due to the censored nature of the topic, incest was forbidden to be shown or portrayed in the media, and so no viewer really understood the motivations behind Morgan le Fay's plotting behind her brother Arthur's back throughout the movie. All hints of scandal and any sexual misconduct are completely absent. Only those viewers who knew the Malorian story or any other later medieval literature on this evil sister of Arthur would understand. It is because of these restrictions that many early Arthurian movies seem stilted in their presentation of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, to circumvent this block on the material; Arthur and his cohort are shown in bold, swashbuckling style, providing plenty of action and feats of heroism acceptable to the times.

These early Arthurian movies ignored the many academic views of Arthur for reasons unknown. Whether this is due to the lack of a sizable budget or understanding by the film-makers of the early medieval period (5th to 10th centuries) or perhaps the realization that the average film enthusiast does not care to see an Arthur in non-dramatic settings, this Arthur was ignored entirely. As the general public's comprehension of Arthurian and Celtic studies became savvier over time, in part due to the modern Arthurian literature, the cinematic image of Arthur and his 'world' evolved into a more progressive one. By the time of the 1970's onward, Arthur's cinematic world is one populated by paganism and magic more vibrant and alive than ever in the literature previously. One movie in particular, from 1972, *King Arthur: the Young Warlord*

attempts to fuse the Celtic perspective with a historical one and portray Arthur and his men as freedom fighters attempting to unite the Britons against the Saxon threat. The more contemporary Arthurian films fuse many unsettled questions and debates together with other strands of popular culture² on the subjects of Celtic paganism, Christianity and post-Roman Celtic Britain. The stereo typical medieval elements of Arthurian tradition; Camelot, the Round Table, his knights of legend, are all missing in this atypical departure from cinematic Arthuriana. Paradoxically today's Arthurian movies wish to appease the 'fringe' element more than ever, drawing in larger box-office returns than any period of Arthurian cinema previously.

The two movies analyzed represent different perspectives on Arthur, the first, *Excalibur*, stand as the pivot-point between the old Malorian traditions fused with modern popular culture in perhaps the nicest package of Arthurian cinema to date. The second movie, *King Arthur*, addresses the academic theory of the Arthur and his knights being of Sarmatian origin and demystifies all magic and myth in place of a 'historical' perspective. Each movie strongly serves as an icon for what its makers had hoped to represent to the viewer-ship. Both movies possibly represent the greatest in influence on popular culture regarding matters Arthurian than any other before or to come and personify modern general perceptions on the subject.

EXCALIBUR

² Rahtz, Philip. *Invitation to Archaeology* (Oxford, 1985) 128-137. Rahtz explains and displays the fringe element that influences and pervades the atmosphere surrounding all things Arthurian, primarily in regards to Glastonbury.

Directed and co-written by John Boorman in 1981, the movie *Excalibur* makes use of Sir Thomas Malory's *L'Morte D'Arthur*³ as its primary source. Unfortunately this movie strongly deviates in its plot from the main body of Malory's story; these particular changes are colored by the time period of the early 1980's, in its political, cultural and academic changes and perceptions. Another strong influence, but one not recognized, is the 'Vulgate Cycle' composed by French Medieval author Chrétien de Troyes in the 12th century⁴. Boorman's co-writer and the one responsible for adapting Malory is Rospo Pallenberg.

Though Malory composed *L'Morte D'Arthur* in 1468, at the end of the High Middle Ages, the movie *Excalibur* envisions Arthur's time as being in the 13th century. The movie setting is larger than life and the presence of magic is strong, the imagery of which is always present by a green glowing light off camera. Knights wearing full, heavy armor, often to the point of excess with castle sieges and catapults and tourneys appear in the movie, elements to be expected by Arthurian enthusiasts. The knights are boisterous and loud, pursuing 'manly' games and activities and prone to violence. The damsels and ladies of the court are modest and proper, but allowed wild free flowing hair at times, uncharacteristic of courtly behavior in the Middle-Ages. This a decision on the part of the director no doubt, influenced by the post-Women's liberation period. The repressive atmosphere towards courtly women would appear sexist, even chauvinistic after the 1960's social changes.

Ygraine's seductive dance in the *Excalibur* is clearly a modern directorial decision and not a Malorian literary invention. Ygraine's movements are raw and sexual,

³ Malory, Sir Thomas. *L'Morte D'Arthur* trans. Keith Baines (Signet, 1962)

⁴ *The Arthurian Encyclopedia* ed. Norris J. Lacy et al. (London, 1986) 609-614.

paced to an Italian *estampe* tune and vividly portray the basis for Uther's lust regarding her. Where this movie displays the catalyst for Uther's conception of Arthur, it fails to explain why Gorlois and he were at war in the beginning sequence of the movie. An explanation that Malory begins with his story:

*'King Uther Pendragon, ruler of all Britain, had been at war for many years with the Duke of Tintagil in Cornwall when he was told of the beauty of Lady Igraine, the duke's wife. Thereupon he called a feast for them, and where, as soon as they arrived, he was formerly reconciled to the duke through the good offices of his courtiers.'*⁵

Uther then plotted to make Igraine his mistress, a plot that she realized once they were in his feast. Both the Duke of Tintagel and Igraine then flee his court, renewing the previous conflict. In *Excalibur* Uther grants Gorlois the 'land from the Tamar to the Land's End', in an action inspired from the legendary partitioning of Wessex from the Celtic West Country by Athelstane between the years 924 and 939 C.E.⁶. Neither Malory nor Geoffrey ever gave the creation of Cornwall in the hands of Uther Pendragon, who understood the cultural links between the Cornish Britons and the Welsh, this was a move made by the film-makers who did not know the Brythonic cultures as well.

Tintagel castle is the traditional birthplace of King Arthur from the time of the literature of Geoffrey of Monmouth⁷ onward, the castle of Gorlois of Cornwall and his wife Ygern. The promontory castle is never completely in view in the movie, but its presence is well established in the conception of Arthur and succeeding siege by Uther Pendragon. Located near to the fort are the standing-stones of *Men-an-Tol*, a traditional

⁵ Malory, Sir Thomas. *L'Morte D'Arthur* trans. Keith Baines (Signet, 1962) 21.

⁶ Soulsbury, Ian. *The History of Cornwall* (Chichester, 1986) 25.

⁷ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain* (Penguin, 1966) 206-208, 246.

Cornish location for faeries and magic⁸, and a choice location for Merlin casting his shape changing spell on lusty Uther. The stone ring in the movie is a mock version of the actual location as the stones are oversized and the hole-stone is not entirely accurate with the original site, displaying that the Boorman did not film *in situ*.

Geoffrey's conception of Arthur in the *Historia* greatly varies from Boorman's visual interpretation, as does Malory, who slightly mentions the magical influence of Merlin⁹. Malory only interprets a loose version of Geoffrey's story, but with neither drugs nor Merlin's magic assisting Uther in the disguise. *Excalibur* glorifies the magical influence of Merlin on Uther with the 'dragon's mist'. A form of druidic fog or *ceó druídecta* that finds analogies in Celtic literature, for example in the Irish *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*¹⁰ and in the Fenian Cycle, a powerful illusionary ability attributed to the god-like *Tuatha Dé Danann* also named *féth fíada* in Gaelic. Traces of the druidic fog are found in the Welsh Mabinogion, in *Manwydan Vab Llyr*¹¹ and in the Middle Welsh tale of *Gereint ac Enid*. This mist aids not only Uther in the opening sequence of the movie, but pervades the Arthurian world throughout the picture, acting as one of the agents to the 'Dragon', or the Force of Nature. Not one literary source of Arthurian legend mentions such a concept, revealing a modern artistic interpretation, based on a combination of Welsh patriotism (*Y Ddraig Goch*) and New-Age pseudo-religions.

⁸ Hunt, Robert. *The Drolls, Traditions and Superstitions of Old Cornwall Series One* (Llanerch, 1993 Reprint) 176-177.

⁹ Malory, Sir Thomas. *L'Morte D'Arthur* trans. Keith Baines (Signet, 1962) 22.

¹⁰ *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 5 vols., Irish Texts Society, Nos. 34, 35, 39, 41, 44 (Dublin, 1938-56) repr. Irish Text Society (London, 1993).

¹¹ 'Ac ual y bydant yn eisted y uelly llyma dwrwf, a chan ueint y twrwf llyma gawat o nywl yn dyot, hyt na chanhoed yr un ohonunt wy y gilid. Ac yn ol y nywl llyma yn goleuhau pob lle... Though this mist is clearly not druidic in origin, but supernatural and world-changing. *Manwydan Vab Llyr: Text from the Diplomatic Edition of the White Book of Rhydderch*, by J. Gwenogvryn Evans (Ford and Bailie, 1999) 3.

Gorlois' death in *Excalibur* is tied to the appearance of three ravens during the ransacking of Uther's war-camp, again deviant from the alleged Malory inspiration. The moment of his death due to his spooked horse, Arthur is conceived by Uther and the child Morgan le Fay awakens a sequence that the film-makers must have drawn from Celtic literature and studies. In Malory's *D'Arthur*, the Duke of Tintagil's death comes simply at his own hands by raiding Uther's retreating army¹², there is no hint of magic or Merlin's magic being present. Everywhere Merlin (Nicol Williamson) appears in the movie *Excalibur*, the three ravens appear to follow, giving an indication that they are his servants. Morgan le Fay's connection to an earlier Irish war goddess *Mórrígan*¹³ was first discovered by Roger Sherman Loomis in his *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*¹⁴. The Irish war goddess was personified by a raven, a carrion feeder and doom bringer in Celtic societies in Iron-Age Europe. Both Merlin and Morgan le Fay find a common magical bond in the movie and share their paganism juxtaposed with the 'One God' of Christianity, possibly a modern perception of the magic of paganism coexisting with Christian Camelot. They come together during Arthur (Nigel Terry) and Guinevere's wedding beside a Celtic-styled god carved from stone as an altar. Merlin is a composite of the 'Two Merlins' of Geoffrey's *Historia*, both influencing Arthur's conception and his upbringing as a young king, occasionally speaking prophetic statements ignored by Arthur and the knights. Merlin's behavior is more closely related to *Merlinus Sylvanus* or *Myrddin Wyllt* as the slightly mad wise-man, who is foolish at times but deeply profound in his mutterings to Arthur and his knights.

¹² Malory, Sir Thomas. *L'Morte D'Arthur* trans. Keith Baines (Signet, 1962) 24.

¹³ Translates into 'Great Queen' in Irish Gaelic. A role in Arthuriana that Morgan fulfills as Arthur's sister and mother to Mordred, royal family to King Arthur.

¹⁴ Loomis, Roger Sherman. *Wales and the Arthurian Legend* (Cardiff, 1956) 105-130.

Camelot is a golden, shining castle in *Excalibur*, with the Welsh dragon displayed as stone figures and on banners throughout. The interior is filled with the wondrous sciences and inventions of the Medieval and Renaissance periods complete with fire-breathers and others who entertain and dash about the chambers. Music is heard echoing in the voluminous chambers, briefly capturing the most generalized view on fantastical Camelot. Malory never described Arthur's capital; the movie projects it as a utopia of the High Middle Ages, both within and without its walls. Its geography is not explained, as well as those limited few locations in the movie, so Camelot is presumably in Britain (i.e. Wales or Cornwall) or in England, but it is unclear. The only reference to its whereabouts is after the victory at Badon Hill when Arthur gathers his knights in view of Stonehenge and mentions building a great hall inside a great castle, this presumably is near the Ambrosian 'forts' of Amesbury and Cadbury¹⁵. The Great Hall of the Round Table is portrayed to be shining and regal with an air of sanctity about it, the Round Table sits in the middle of the chamber and possesses a touch a magic about its presence. The whole of Camelot in *Excalibur* is given the glamorization of Hollywood, idyllic and larger than life.

Guinevere's (Cherie Lunghi) appearance in *Excalibur* mildly fits the courtly appearance of modesty so demanded of medieval royalty in the literature, but she is a little wild in behavior and bears a touch of the 20th century in her character. While most Arthurian literature envisions the Queen to have fair tresses and a golden, almost pure aura, this cinematic portrayal is a contradiction. Guinevere has long, dark hair; she is a

¹⁵ Burkitt, Tim and Annette, 'The Frontier Zone and the Siege of Mount Badon: A Review of the Evidence for their Location', *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society* 134 (1990) 81-93. Tim and Annette Burkitt provide a fair argument for locating the site of Badon in their detailed research on this 'watershed' battle under a war-leader without naming Arthur.

little flighty in mood and is likely to complement Arthur's stoic behavior by the decision of the writer and director. She is petit in form and gradually seduces Lancelot with her feminine wiles, though the influence of Morgan le Fay contributes and propels the fall of Camelot. As with most of the characters in this movie, Guinevere's hair-style reveals the time-period of the film-makers undisguised, disregarding any of the previous centuries of aesthetic influences as seen in paintings and other art, for instance in the pre-Raphaelite Arthurian works.

Morgan le Fay's (Helen Mirren) appearance is one of a purely seductive nature, donning sleek, sheer scarves and Afghani jewelry to give her an exotic presence. Oddly, with her blatant sexuality and flamboyant style, she goes unnoticed by her brother Arthur and his noble knights, as the cause to Camelot's troubles. Malory's Morgan is described as little more than a conspirator against her brother's kingdom, her dark nature is only hinted at in the whole of the *L'Morte D'Arthur*¹⁶. Whilst Morgan appears darkly seductive, her incestuous son Mordred is a pale skinned, rosy cheeked fair haired boy with a mischievous air about him. To contrast his evil nature, he is suited in golden Roman-style parade armour and masked helm and acts with a spoilt demeanor, befitting his upbringing by Morgan le Fay. Malory's *D'Arthur* gives little description of Mordred physically, only his plotting and scheming plans behind his father's back to usurp Camelot.

The Battle of Camlan was inevitable in the movie, as the plot escalated in such a direction by all indications, contrary to the depiction of Mordred and Arthur's treaty in *D'Arthur*¹⁷. Arthur and Mordred meet in the large battle, obscured by Merlin's

¹⁶ Malory, Sir Thomas. *L'Morte D'Arthur* trans. Keith Baines (Signet, 1962) 508-9.

¹⁷ Malory, Sir Thomas. *L'Morte D'Arthur* trans. Keith Baines (Signet, 1962) 498-99.

‘Dragon’s breath’ and though they inflict wounds on each other taken directly from the literary source, there is no hint of a failed treaty due to an adder in the grass, the dialogue spoken between the two as they slay each other is purely scripted by Pallenberg and Boorman and not paraphrased from either Malory nor de Troyes.

Seemingly hurried, *Excalibur*’s conclusion quickly wraps up with the returning of Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake by Sir Bedivere and Arthur sailing to Avalon in the fading sunset. The story concludes with Guinevere a nun in a convent, who once held Excalibur in secret for the day when Arthur would return in strength. *D’Arthur* is not so kind to the adulterous queen, wherein she was to be burnt at the stake but Sir Launcelot and his loyal knights rescue her before it is too late¹⁸. She only becomes a nun *after* Arthur’s death at Camlan and passage to Avalon in remorse. Lancelot returns from his shamed exile in *Excalibur* during the battle of Camlan to aid his king one more time, but he and the other knights perish in the conflict against Mordred, this is another story element that deviates from Malory. Malory places Sir Launcelot at the head of a rebellion against Arthur and never reconciles with Arthur until his death at his tomb as he pines away his life in grief for the damage he had caused the greatest king in all ‘Christendom’¹⁹.

The movie *Excalibur* brings the Medieval Arthurian saga to life in a grandiose manner but tried to walk the middle ground on many of the themes within the episodic stories using Malory’s *L’Morte D’Arthur*. At points where the narrative failed to match contemporary mores, the film-makers either reverted to an outcome derived from de Troyes’ Vulgate Cycle or simply rewrote it to suit their own vision. The end result is one

¹⁸ Malory, Sir Thomas. *L’Morte D’Arthur* trans. Keith Baines (Signet, 1962) 479.

¹⁹ Malory, Sir Thomas. *L’Morte D’Arthur* trans. Keith Baines (Signet, 1962) 504-7.

that manages to recreate a summary of the whole saga in its own unique way and by its cult status, helps to introduce viewers to Arthuriana in a pop-culture context.

KING ARTHUR

Directed by Antoine Fuqua and produced by Jerry Bruckheimer, *King Arthur* (2004), envisions an Arthurian setting closest to many modern academic theories. Pretentious in its opening, *King Arthur* claims to be telling the true story of Arthur, deriving from the ‘recent archaeological evidence’ that Arthur lived a thousand years before the Middle-Ages. What this evidence might be is never disclosed, but the assumption is made strong and dramatically, possibly a reference to the *Artognou* stone discovered at Tintagel. The character of Arthur (Clive Owen) is based on the Roman officer *Lucius Artorius Castus* who, based on Roman documentation²⁰, commanded foreign non-British and non-Roman troops from the steppes of southern Russia. These *foederati* are his ‘knights’ who help him preserve the Roman *Pax Romana* throughout the length and breadth of Britain by a long standing tradition going back many generations, with each son of *Artorius* inheriting the title and duty of these Sarmatian warriors. The geography in *King Arthur* is as vague as the many other cinematic attempts at Arthuriana, but appears to be based at a fort along Hadrian’s Wall, possibly *Luguvalium*.

Clearly the script writer David Frazoni was inspired by the study *From Scythia to Camelot*²¹, research by C.S. Littleton and L.A. Malcon that culminates the earlier theories about Arthur being a Roman officer and his knights nothing more than foreign horsemen. The first to introduce this theory was Kemp Malone in 1925²², who felt that the later

²⁰ Wainwright F. T. ‘The Picts and the Problem’ *The Problem of the Picts* (New York, 1954) 51-2.

²¹ Littleton, C.S & Malcon, L.A. *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legend of King Arthur* (New York, 1994).

²² Malone, K. ‘Artorius’ in *Modern Philology* 22’ (1925) pp. 367-74.

notion of ‘Arthur’ had evolved from the earlier Roman *Lucius Artorius Castus*, a *praefectus* who commanded one hundred and seventy-five Iazyges cavalry who were stationed in the northern fort of *Bremetenacum* in the second century C.E.²³. While *Castus* was documented to have been in charge of these Sarmatians in the second century, the movie *King Arthur* places him living in the mid-5th century, evidently keeping the old tradition alive by the time of Rome’s departure and the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon invaders²⁴.

The ‘knights’ of Arthur in the movie are not the gentlemen of medieval literature, but crude, violent and brutal, only Arthur retains some degree of culture due to his Roman origins. The naming of these knights or *equites* still rings with the medieval names, completely anachronistic in 5th century Britain. The directorial impression is to give the perception that the later knights of Arthur were in reality these horsemen from Scythia, a theory proposed by Helmut Nickel²⁵ before Littleton and Malcon’s recent study. These knights are dressed in rough approximations to the battle-gear worn by the *cataphractarii*²⁶ or *clibanarii* cavalry who fought against and later for the Roman Empire. These eastern horsemen units were once influenced by the Persians in their manner of armor and tactics and used wind-sock banners on the battle-field to give signals and direction, one of which is documented to have been in the form a red dragon. This red dragon possesses a link to the Welsh flag and the traditions of *Y Ddraig Goch*,

²³ Dio mentions the resituating of the horsemen from Pannonia to assist Legio VI Victrix (Shrewsbury) in Britannia. Dio Cassius 71.16.2

²⁴ The story begins in the year 452 A.D. Presumably based on the presence of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain in the literature of early authors such as the Venerable Bede, who stated the arrival of the Saxons was in the year 449, see Jones, Michael E., and John Casey, 1988, ‘The Gallic Chronicle Restored: A Chronology of the Anglo-Saxon Invasions and the End of Roman Britain,’ *Britannia*, 19: 367-97.

²⁵ Nickel, H. ‘The Dawn of Chivalry’ in *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 32 (1975) pp. 150-152.

²⁶ Connolly, Peter. *Greece and Rome at War* (Greenhill, 1998) 234-238.

evidence enough for some to connect the red dragon of the Celtic Britons to the Sarmatians.

The film stresses from the onset the savageness of Roman Britain with the assault on Bishop Germanus' wagon train by the woad painted Britons. These 'woads' are never firmly ethnically established, whether they are the Celtic Britons or the Picts, but they raid south of the Wall at times, hinting they may be Pictish²⁷. The sheer size of the Woads' ambush party dwarfs Arthur and the Roman's defense, but due to the skill and ferocity of the heroes, they are defeated. These Woads apparently only oppose Roman occupation north of the Wall, but the movie gives the viewer assurance that the whole rest of southern Britain is securely Roman, ignoring the un-colonized and little Romanized regions of Wales, Cumbria and Cornwall. Wearing torcs and little more of such 'Celtic' accoutrements, these Woads are made to seem very primitive in the face of Roman civilization. Their tribes are made to speak an admixture of Old Welsh and Old Irish, apparently the screen-writer's assumption that these Britons had not developed away from a Common Celtic yet into the later dialects. Merlin (Stephan Dillane) is the leader in the Britons' fight against Roman oppression, but he goes against Arthurian convention by having no magic.

The portrayal of the Saxons in *King Arthur* is one of a separate ethnic distinction: they carry round 'Germanic' styled shields, have long braided beards and hair and occasionally speak in guttural Anglo-Saxon. What defies logic is their invasion of Britain. They land somewhere in the far north beyond the Wall (again the geography is

²⁷ David Frazoni avoided using the controversial ethnonym *Pictii* and chose to invent a conflated name, 'Woads' to still agree with the historical documentation of the wild painted tribes who raided past Hadrian's Wall from the 1st to 4th centuries in Roman Britain. Tacitus used the ethnonym *Caledonii* in the 1st century, while later Romans used *Pictii*, *Maeatae*, *Verturiones*, *Dicalydone*s and many tribal names. Wainwright F. T. 'The Picts and the Problem' *The Problem of the Picts* (New York, 1954) 49-52.

not specified) to march southwards. This invasion plan goes against all models of ethnic settlement in Britain²⁸ and traditional literature regarding the arrival of the invaders from Germania. The massive force is lead by a Cerdic²⁹ (Stellan Skarsgard), who is determined to conquer the island but with little known motivation, the viewer assumes perhaps a preempted strike before Rome officially departs the island. The Saxons are given the image of a ruthless, barbaric horde able to dominate the natives by their numbers alone, unskilled in complex battle tactics (excepting the 'shield-wall' in the Battle of Badon) and possessing no cavalry, thus their future difficulty in confronting Arthur and his warriors will be obvious.

The most striking departure from any previous Arthurian artistic interpretation in the cinema is the character of Guinevere (Keira Knightly). She is a lithe, dark haired warrior queen of the Woads, once imprisoned by wealthy Roman Marius Honorius (Ken Stott) in his villa, and now freed by Arthur and his men. Gradually throughout the second act of *King Arthur* her true wild nature becomes apparent, until at the Battle of Badon, she and her countrymen swarm the Saxons in tattooed frenzy. Guinevere personifies the subjugated peoples of Briton who seek freedom from Rome's oppression and the cause to Arthur's later fame as defender of the Britons and king. Indirectly, the movie proposes the theory that Arthur acquired his kingship by matrilineal succession with Guinevere, an old hypothesis concerning the Picts³⁰ system of kingship. This ceremony is done somewhere in the Cornwall near Tintagel in a ring of standing-

²⁸ See the 'Core-Periphery model' of invasion and acculturation of Britain in: Snyder, Christopher. *The Britons* (Blackwell, 2005) 24-25.

²⁹ A historical Cerdic (and a Cynric) were accredited with invading the south and southwestern British territories in the 6th century in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, though the movie placed his invasions to the far north against all evidence. Yorke, Barbara. *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester) 49.

³⁰ Wainwright F. T. 'The Picts and the Problem' *The Problem of the Picts* (New York, 1954) 25-8, 47-8, 130, 138, 153.

stones by Pen-an-Wlas (Land's End), establishing the southernmost 'court' of Arthur in the West Country, but to the average viewer this would not be apparent by any means.

While Arthur is a good, honorable leader, his 'best knight' Lancelot (Ioan Gruffudd) is not as just and fair. Lancelot is a nearly soulless warrior who is ruthless and only serves his function as protector in the manner of a mercenary, his only redeeming personality trait is his loyalty to his best friend Arthur and the other knights. *King Arthur* begins in the southern Russian steppes amidst a Sarmatian settlement as young Lancelot is being impressed into Roman service, displaying his perspective rather than Arthur's in the movie. The long overdone romance between Lancelot and Guinevere in literature and cinema is only given a few brief potential nuances but never goes with Arthurian convention, and another cliché is avoided as the two just remain as friends.

The Sarmatians live in the traditional 'yurts' (portable round houses) of the steppe peoples in the beginning of *King Arthur* and are portrayed with a vague sense of culture. Before charging in battle, Arthur's knights shout the battle-cry 'Rus!' an ethnic distinction that would never have been in existence in the 5th century due to the lack of Scandinavian settlements in the eastern Russian territories yet³¹. Each Sarmatian warrior had a particular trait and specialty in the way that both early Welsh and European medieval literature envisioned Arthur's knights, but due to time constraints little was ever shown to really identify each.

The Battle of Badon Hill, one of the few substantial recorded battles that may have an association with a real figure like Arthur³² is the movie's climatic conclusion. The narrative never informs the viewer that this long awaited show-down between Arthur

³¹ Jones, Gwyn. *The History of the Vikings* (Oxford, 1984) 76.

³² The earliest mention of the '*obsessio mons Badonicus*' is recorded in the writings of Gildas, but does not credit Arthur with the victory, another warrior named Ambrosius Aurelianus. Gildas, *De Excidio*, 26.

and the Saxons is the most famous of his alleged victories. Badon Hill occurs within the Roman fort north of the Wall, not in any of the possible locations in southern Britain or Wales as theorized recently³³ and is hardly on a hill or small mountain unfortunately. The scope of the battle is desirably meant to be large, but Fuqua isolates the locations within the walls with a vague separation between the forest, where the Woads are awaiting, and the enclosure.

From the onset of the battle the Saxon infantry's weakness towards Arthur's Sarmatian cavalry is made apparent as Arthur and his warriors fall upon them and slay countless men with ease. After the initial slaughter and shock, Arthur then calls upon his Pictish or Celtic allies to aid. These wild tribesmen, who had seemed to be incapable of defending their own island from Rome, begin using catapults and trebuchets against the Saxon hordes. Implying that Arthur, through his 'Roman' civilization, taught his allies in the arts of the war, but this would have occurred overnight, an impossible schooling for weaponry so complex and dangerous. One of the most common battle-field 'tactics' in historical and fantasy cinema is performed during Badon, the flaming trenches and pits set alight by flaming arrows, this hems in the frightened Saxon barbarians. After the initial strategic opening to the battle, the fray becomes nothing more than reckless and brutal sword-play by both sides. In another deviation from literary Arthuriana, Lancelot dies in the battle, before Arthur is made king of Britain. The defeat of the Saxons that day was complete, visually displaying the awfulness of war and the scale of Arthur's victory against the enemy. An underlying theme in *King Arthur* is freedom, and Arthur

³³ Burkitt, Tim, and Burkitt, Annette, 'The Frontier Zone and the Siege of Mount Badon: A Review of the Evidence for their location', *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society* 134 (1990) 84.

symbolized this ideal by this victory and his union with the Woads through Guinevere in the conclusion.

The Arthur of cinema is as variegated in its essence as the literary counterpart by the many visual avenues a production can take. Being purely dependant on the physical representations of every element, the cinematic Arthur must take his cues from factors such as: costuming, locations and props to 'exist' in the minds of the viewer-ship that are meant to perceive him as real. If any of these factors are at fault the image of Arthur, his knights and his world will fall into pure fantasy. Quite often, production mistakes are overlooked and matters so contemporary (hairstyles, clothing) that not one crew member notices them, find their way into the production, lessening the effect of the story of King Arthur taking place over a thousand years ago or more. A problem witnessed in *First Knight* (1992), a cinematic attempt at addressing the romance between Guinevere and Lancelot whilst ignoring the rest of Arthuriana to support it, leaving the film experience without much merit barely configuring into the modern experience of King Arthur for first time viewers to the topic and literature. Lancelot sported a very Californian hairstyle and appeared as more of a hot-shot surfer, with accompanying attitude. The locations and sets were more dating from the 18th century than the Middle-Ages of the post-Roman eras. The plot and driving back story to the movie never dealt with any familiar situations, aside from the romantic triangle between Arthur, Guinevere and Lancelot.

Excalibur portrays a Medieval Camelot with nuances of Malory and Geoffrey of Monmouth, but vividly explores the mores and norms with Western society in the early 1980's by its powerful sexual women characters and religious toleration. Magic and Christianity co-exist in Boorman's Camelot without friction and a pervading providence

envelopes his cinematic world, wherein Arthur and Merlin acknowledge their place in future legends and history. *King Arthur* shares in this self-awareness, as though the characters are simply fulfilling a necessary role aware of the observance of descendants and an audience, a benefit the classic Arthurian literary characters are not able to take part.

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