

## Who Was King Arthur?

The name “King Arthur” brings to mind certain images when we hear it. We think of King Arthur as a brave, kind, honest—an almost magical figure that tried to make a perfect kingdom for his people. The King Arthur legend, which seems to have originated in England in medieval times, is an example of myth.

The romantic story of King Arthur and his knights is so appealing that many poems, stories, books, and films have been created with this theme. But who was King Arthur? Was he a fictional character, or a real man? How has his story influenced society’s values and ideals, especially the notions of chivalry and honor?

Visit this list of websites in the order given. As you read, you should take notes. Try to develop your own theories about how and why the King Arthur myth developed. When you are done, use your notes to write a short essay (one side of a page) that answers the questions that follow.

### King Arthur: A Character Analysis

<http://csis.pace.edu/grendel/projs2a/art001.html>

This site gives three versions of the Arthur story, **which** may show you how a real-life person became legend.

**Excerpt** - “There is much debate whether Arthur was an actual historical person. There is no absolute evidence, but it is possible that Arthur was a Briton or Romano-Briton king who led the Celts against the Anglo-Saxons in the early 8th century (Americana, Arthurian Romances, 1972). The kings of the medieval period were warlords that protected a particular area of land. They surrounded themselves with knights, or thanes, who swore allegiance in battle in exchange for gifts of gold, armor, and land. There are stories that depict Arthur in this role, similar to that of Beowulf and Hrothgar in the poem Beowulf. However, later stories show Arthur in a different light. There are three basic character descriptions of Arthur: Arthur as epic hero, Arthur as symbol of the virtues of Camelot, and Arthur as Victim of Fate.”

### The Camelot Project, University of Rochester, NY

<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot>

This site contains several Arthurian texts, images, bibliographies, and basic information. It also contains links to read several poems and stories, written at different times, all about aspects of the King Arthur story. This will give you a chance to see different perspectives of the story.

**Excerpt** - “King Arthur is the figure at the heart of the Arthurian legends... Arthur is a near mythic figure in Celtic stories... In early Latin chronicles he is presented as a military leader... in later romance he is presented as a king and emperor. One of the questions that has occupied those interested in King Arthur is whether or not he is a historical figure. The debate has raged since the Renaissance when Arthur’s historicity was vigorously defended, partly because the Tudor monarchs traced their lineage to Arthur and used that connection as a justification for their reign. Modern scholarship has generally assumed that there was some actual person at the heart of the legends, though not of course a king with a band of knights in shining armor... If there is a historical basis to the character, it is clear that he would have gained fame as a warrior battling the Germanic invaders of the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Since there is no conclusive evidence for or against Arthur’s historicity, the debate will continue. But what can not be denied is the influence of the figure of Arthur on literature, art, music, and society from the Middle Ages to the present.”

## **Bartleby Online**

<http://www.bartleby.com/>

This site provides access to books and poetry. On the homepage, in the “search” section, type in the word *chivalry* and click “Go.” Of the returned entries, click and read as many as you can.

**Excerpt** - “The word ‘Chivalry’ is derived from the French *cheval*, a horse. The word ‘knight,’ which originally meant boy or servant, was particularly applied to a young man after he was admitted to the privilege of bearing arms. This privilege was conferred on youths of family and fortune only, for the mass of the people were not furnished with arms. The knight then was a mounted warrior, a man of rank, or in the service and maintenance of some man of rank, generally possessing some independent means of support, but often relying mainly on the gratitude of those whom he served for the supply of his wants, and often, no doubt, resorting to the means which power confers on its possessor.”

## **The Adventures of Beowulf**

<http://www.lone-star.net/literature/beowulf/beowulf.html>

This is a translation into modern English, by Dr. David Breeden, of the famous poem *Beowulf*. This poem will give you a look into the story of another well-known European warrior of Arthur’s time.

**Excerpt** - "Listen: You have heard of the Danish Kings in the old days and how they were great warriors. Shield, the son of Sheaf, took many an enemy's chair, terrified many a warrior, after he was found an orphan. He prospered under the sky until people everywhere listened when he spoke. He was a good king!"

1. What do you think Arthur was like in history? Why do you think the Arthurian myth developed?
2. How do our images of mythical characters such as King Arthur and his knights affect our modern ideas about correct and admirable behavior?
3. Do you think chivalry exists today? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of any ways in which these ideas about honorable behavior might affect your expectations of yourself?