

CELTIC MYTHOLOGY AS THE FOUNDATION OF THE BRITISH ARTHURIAN EPIC CYCLE

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Abstract. This article explores how Celtic mythology shaped the Arthurian epic cycle and medieval legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. It examines themes of heroism, sacred kingship, magic, the Otherworld, and supernatural quests, alongside symbols such as Avalon, Excalibur, and the Holy Grail. The study also analyzes the roles of Arthur and Merlin, the influence of Celtic heroic traditions on knightly ideals, and the Christianization of Celtic myths, highlighting their enduring impact on British culture and modern interpretations of Arthurian legends.

Keywords: Celtic mythology; Arthurian cycle; King Arthur; medieval literature; Celtic traditions; mythology; heroic legends; Avalon; Merlin; British cultural identity.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada kelt mifologiyasining Artur haqidagi epik sikl hamda Qirol Artur va Dumaloq stol ritsarlari haqidagi o'rta asr afsonalarining shakllanishiga ko'rsatgan ta'siri o'rganiladi. Tadqiqotda qahramonlik, muqaddas podshohlik, sehr-jodu, O'zga olam (Otherworld) va g'ayritabiiy izlanishlar kabi mavzular, shuningdek, Avalon, Excalibur va Muqaddas Graal kabi ramzlar tahlil qilinadi. Maqolada, shuningdek, Artur va Merlin obrazlarining o'rni, kelt qahramonlik an'alarining ritsarlik ideallariga ta'siri hamda kelt miflarining xristianlashtirilish jarayoni ko'rib chiqilib, ularning Britaniya madaniyati va Artur afsonalarining zamonaviy talqinlariga ko'rsatgan uzoq muddatli ta'siri yoritiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: kelt mifologiyasi; Artur sikli; Qirol Artur; o'rta asr adabiyoti; kelt an'analari; mifologiya; qahramonlik afsonalari; Avalon; Merlin; Britaniya madaniy o'zligi.

Аннотация. В данной статье исследуется влияние кельтской мифологии на формирование артуровского эпоса и средневековых легенд о короле Артуре и рыцарях Круглого стола. Анализируются такие темы, как героизм, сакральная природа королевской власти, магия, Потусторонний мир и сверхъестественные quests (путешествия-испытания), а также символы — Авалон, Эскалибур и Святой Грааль. В работе также рассматриваются роли Артура и Мерлина, влияние кельтских героических традиций на рыцарские идеалы и христианизация кельтских мифов, подчёркивается их непреходящее воздействие на британскую культуру и современные интерпретации артуровских легенд.

Ключевые слова: кельтская мифология, артуровский цикл, король Артур, средневековая литература, кельтские традиции, мифология, героические сказания, Авалон, Мерлин, британская культурная идентичность.

Introduction. Arthurian legends are essential parts of the literary legacy of Britain and Europe because they merge history, mythology, and moral values. Celtic mythology, which is rooted in the beliefs and customs of the ancient Celtic peoples, had a major role in the development of the Arthurian epic cycle, notably in the themes of heroism, magic and the supernatural Otherworld.[1] The Arthurian cycle consists of a series of medieval stories about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.[2] This paper will discuss the effect of Celtic mythological traditions on the creation of Arthurian stories and the establishment of national literary identity in Britain.

Celtic mythology developed from the beliefs and traditions of inhabitants of the ancient Celtic tribes who lived in the lands of Britain, Ireland and Western Europe. Nature,

spirituality, and supernatural powers were all a part of the Celtic worldview, and they played an important role in their mythology and heroic stories. The main form of storytelling for the Celts was via oral tradition, and therefore myths and stories were handed down from generation to generation through druids, poets and storytellers.[1] Thus, notions of heroism, magical strength, a mystical Otherworld and holy monarchy were retained in Celtic legend. Heroes in Celtic mythology were generally courageous warriors with magical powers who were destined to defend their people. Magic also featured prominently in Celtic beliefs, with it appearing in spells, prophesies and other worldly entities. Another key element was the Otherworld, a mysterious region connected with immortality, knowledge, and divine abilities.[3] Moreover, the notion of holy kingship stressed the spiritual tie between the sovereign and the land and community.

Literature review. On the basis of these mythical notions the Arthurian tradition was created and subsequently turned into a literary epic. Some of the earliest references to King Arthur as a heroic military commander are in early Welsh chronicles and poetry such as the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae*. [4] Whether Arthur was a real historical individual is still debated by historians, although his image was probably derived from a Romano-British commander repelling the invasions of the Saxons. Over time, the folklore traditions elaborated Arthur's image, filling it with Celtic mythical themes and magical aspects. In the Middle Ages, writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth translated oral traditions into written works, providing the basis of the Arthurian epic cycle.[5]

The Arthurian epic cycle is rich with aspects of Celtic mythology which reveal themselves in the depiction of characters, magical themes, and symbolic items. The main character of the cycle is King Arthur, who is shown as both a mythological hero and an ideal ruler. His image is similar to that of Celtic military chiefs who were considered guardians of the people and had a sacred connection with divine power. Arthur represents ideals of destiny, rightful kingship, and the spiritual unity of the nation.[6] Many scholars point out that Arthur combines the characteristics of a historical warrior and a legendary Celtic hero.

Another important feature of Celtic influence is the concept of sacred kingship. In Celtic traditions, the king was believed to have a spiritual relationship with the land, and the prosperity of the kingdom depended on the ruler's moral and physical strength.[3] This idea is reflected in Arthurian legends, where the condition of the kingdom often mirrors the condition of the king himself. The decline of Camelot after Arthur's downfall symbolizes the collapse of harmony between the ruler and society.

Merlin is a prominent figure in the Arthurian cycle, and his image is strongly associated with the traditions of Celtic druids. Druids were considered wise men, prophets, healers, and mediators between the human world and supernatural powers. Merlin possesses prophetic abilities, profound wisdom, and magical powers, making him a continuation of the ancient druidic tradition.[1] The narratives also contain magical

transformations, prophecies, and supernatural events characteristic of Celtic mythology. Merlin's role as Arthur's advisor further emphasizes the importance of wisdom and spiritual guidance in Celtic heroic traditions.

Of special importance is Avalon, a mysterious island connected with Celtic ideas of the Otherworld. In Celtic mythology, the Otherworld was described as a place of immortality, healing, eternal youth, and supernatural beauty.[3] Arthur's journey to Avalon after his final battle strengthens the connection between Arthurian legends and Celtic beliefs about life after death. Avalon also symbolizes hope and rebirth, since many legends claim that Arthur will one day return to save Britain in times of crisis.

In addition, magical objects such as Excalibur and the Holy Grail carry deep symbolic meaning. Excalibur represents legitimate authority, divine power, and the king's responsibility to protect his people. According to some legends, the sword was given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake, a figure linked to Celtic water deities and nature spirits.[7] The Holy Grail, meanwhile, resembles magical cauldrons in Celtic mythology that provided wisdom, abundance, or immortality. Over time, medieval Christian writers transformed the Grail into a sacred Christian relic associated with purity and redemption.[6]

The influence of Celtic mythology can also be seen in the structure of heroic quests in Arthurian literature. In Celtic heroic tales, heroes often traveled through dangerous lands, faced supernatural beings, and overcame spiritual trials in order to achieve glory or wisdom.[1] These motifs became central elements in Arthurian romances, especially in the quests undertaken by knights such as Percival and Gawain. Their journeys symbolize both physical adventure and spiritual transformation.

Methodology. Methodologically, this study applies comparative literary analysis and mythological interpretation to examine the relationship between Celtic mythology and the Arthurian tradition. Historical sources, medieval chronicles, and literary texts are analyzed to identify recurring mythological motifs, symbolic structures, and cultural transformations. The study also uses an interdisciplinary approach by combining literary criticism, mythology studies, and medieval history in order to understand how ancient Celtic beliefs were adapted into medieval Christian narratives.

Analysis and Results. The imagery of the knights in the Arthurian cycle and their moral values were strongly influenced by the Celtic heroic tradition. In Celtic mythology, heroes were courageous and devoted warriors whose most important qualities were bravery, honour, loyalty, and devotion to their king and people. These characteristics later became the foundation of the chivalric code in Arthurian literature. The Knights of the Round Table, such as Lancelot, Gawain, and Percival, represent Celtic ideals of nobility, self-sacrifice, and martial strength.[1] Celtic mythology also emphasized the importance of personal glory and the trials a hero had to overcome in order to gain spiritual and social recognition.

The Round Table itself carries symbolic meaning connected with equality and unity. Unlike ordinary royal courts, the Round Table symbolized the absence of hierarchy among Arthur's knights, reflecting ideals of brotherhood and collective responsibility.[7] This concept strengthened the moral and social values associated with medieval knighthood and contributed to the development of the idealized image of the noble warrior in European literature.

The theme of journey and quest is one of the most important elements of both Celtic mythology and the Arthurian cycle. In Celtic heroic tales, journeys often involved dangerous adventures, supernatural encounters, and moral challenges. Heroes traveled through mysterious forests, enchanted islands, and unknown territories in search of wisdom, honor, or magical objects.[3] These ideas are clearly reflected in the quest for the Holy Grail, which symbolizes not only a sacred relic but also the spiritual transformation of the hero. For the knights, the Grail quest becomes a test of faith, moral purity, courage, and inner perfection.[6] Therefore, the journey functions as a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment and self-discovery.

The figure of Percival is especially significant in this context because his Grail quest reflects the transition from youthful innocence to spiritual maturity. His adventures demonstrate the Celtic idea that true heroism is achieved not only through physical strength but also through wisdom, humility, and moral discipline.[7] Through such characters, the Arthurian cycle presents the knight as both a warrior and a spiritual seeker.

Supernatural beings and magical elements, strongly connected with Celtic culture, also play an essential role in Arthurian narratives. The stories contain fairies, enchanters, dragons, shapeshifting creatures, and mystical powers, all of which are characteristic of Celtic mythology. These supernatural motifs create an atmosphere of mystery and connect the Arthurian cycle with ancient pagan beliefs.[3] Magical interventions often guide the heroes, protect them from danger, or test their morality and courage.

For example, the character of Morgan le Fay is linked to Celtic traditions of powerful women associated with magic, healing, and knowledge of the Otherworld. Morgan is portrayed both as a healer and as an ambiguous supernatural figure whose magical abilities influence the fate of Arthur and his knights.[1] Similarly, the Lady of the Lake reflects Celtic water deities and mystical female figures connected with nature and sacred power. Her gift of Excalibur to Arthur symbolizes divine approval of his kingship and reinforces the sacred nature of royal authority.

Another important result of the study is that Celtic mythological motifs survived through their adaptation into medieval Christian culture. Although many supernatural and pagan elements were reinterpreted within Christian ideology, their symbolic meanings remained preserved. The Holy Grail, for example, evolved from Celtic myths about magical cauldrons into a Christian symbol of salvation and divine grace.[6] This

transformation demonstrates how Celtic mythology continued to shape medieval literature while adapting to new religious and cultural contexts.

The stories of the Celts were transformed significantly during the Middle Ages under the influence of Christian culture and medieval literary traditions. Many pagan beliefs and mythological motifs were adapted to Christian philosophy, which allowed ancient Celtic traditions to survive in a new religious and cultural environment. Celtic ideas of magic, supernatural beings, sacred kingship, and prophecy gradually became integrated into Christian moral concepts.[1] As a result, elements that originally belonged to pagan mythology were reinterpreted as symbols of divine will, spiritual struggle, and moral testing.

This transformation is particularly visible in the figure of the Holy Grail. In early Celtic mythology, magical cauldrons symbolized abundance, immortality, wisdom, and supernatural power. Medieval Christian writers transformed these mythological objects into the Holy Grail, which became associated with Christ, salvation, and spiritual purity.[6] Thus, the Grail evolved from a pagan symbol into one of the most important Christian relics in medieval literature. This adaptation demonstrates how Christianization preserved ancient myths while assigning them new theological meanings.

The Christian reinterpretation of Arthurian legends also influenced the portrayal of heroes and morality. In Celtic traditions, heroes were admired primarily for their bravery and martial strength, whereas medieval Christian literature emphasized humility, loyalty, purity, and spiritual devotion.[3] Knights such as Galahad became symbols of moral perfection and religious faith. Therefore, the Arthurian cycle combined the heroic values of Celtic mythology with the ethical ideals of Christianity and medieval chivalry.

The literary development of the Arthurian tradition was strongly shaped by writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes. Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, created one of the first coherent narratives about King Arthur by combining historical records, folklore traditions, and Celtic mythological themes.[5] His work established Arthur not only as a legendary warrior but also as a symbol of British unity and national identity.

Later, Chrétien de Troyes introduced new literary and cultural elements into the Arthurian cycle, especially the ideals of courtly love and knightly behavior. His romances focused on individual knights and their personal quests, emphasizing moral development, loyalty, and emotional refinement.[7] Through his works, Arthurian literature became connected with medieval European aristocratic culture and gained popularity throughout France and other parts of Europe.

Another important aspect of the discussion is the transition of the Arthurian tradition from oral storytelling to written literature. Originally, Celtic myths and heroic tales were preserved through oral tradition by bards and storytellers. Medieval writers transformed these oral narratives into literary texts, which allowed the legends to survive for centuries

and become part of European literary heritage.[1] This process also contributed to the standardization of Arthurian characters, symbols, and themes.

The lasting influence of the Arthurian cycle can be observed in later British literature and modern popular culture. Writers such as Alfred Tennyson and T. H. White reinterpreted Arthurian legends for modern audiences, presenting Arthur as both a heroic king and a tragic symbol of lost idealism.[3] In addition, Arthurian motifs continue to appear in films, television series, novels, and fantasy literature, demonstrating the enduring appeal of Celtic mythological traditions.

Modern interpretations of Arthurian legends often focus on themes such as leadership, identity, morality, and the conflict between tradition and change. The figure of Arthur remains an important cultural symbol associated with justice, unity, and national heritage. Consequently, the Arthurian cycle not only reflects the historical transformation of Celtic mythology but also continues to influence contemporary cultural and literary imagination.

Conclusion. In conclusion, Celtic mythology played a major role in shaping the Arthurian epic cycle and its central themes, characters, and symbols. Ideas such as sacred kingship, heroism, magic, the Otherworld, and supernatural quests became essential parts of Arthurian legends and reflected ancient Celtic beliefs. Medieval writers adapted these mythological elements to Christian and chivalric culture while preserving their symbolic meaning.[6] As a result, the Arthurian tradition became an important part of British and European literary heritage and continues to influence modern literature, films, and cultural identity today.[3]

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