

# **King Arthur's Children**

## **A Study in Fiction and Tradition**

**Tyler R. Tichelaar, Ph.D.**

The Reflections of Camelot Series

M o d e r n     H i s t o r y     P r e s s

King Arthur's Children: A Study In Fiction And Tradition  
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From the Reflections of Camelot Series

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## ***Introduction***

The subject of King Arthur's children is not widely known even to the legend's most avid readers. Mention of these children may make readers pause for a moment, say to themselves, "What children?" and then add, "Well, of course there's Mordred, but sometimes he is King Arthur's nephew rather than his son."

My reaction was similar when I first found mention of King Arthur having any children other than Mordred. The fact is, however, that King Arthur has traditionally had children almost since the legends were first told. Over the centuries, these children were lost amid the continually increasing number of new stories, many springing up without any source in the tradition, only to be added to the legend, while the original Celtic stories were largely forgotten. Occasionally, when scholars came across obscure references to one of Arthur's children in the earlier sources, they were unsure what to make of this curiosity. As Arthurian studies have progressed, particularly over the last century, however, efforts have been made to understand the historical time period in which King Arthur lived, around the fifth to early sixth centuries; this research has resulted in many discoveries and even more theories, some of which will now allow us to make more accurate statements about King Arthur's forgotten children.

With the continual increase of interest in the Arthurian legends, it is time that a study finally be made of King Arthur's children. If we wish to discover who the historical King Arthur was, perhaps we might find out something about him by studying his children. The need to study King Arthur's children is almost as important as the study of King Arthur himself because King Arthur's children, as we will see, are what help connect us to King Arthur's time period. The

concept of King Arthur and the golden age he established fulfills a psychological yearning for many people. Comfort and satisfaction can be derived from believing in King Arthur's ethical code. People have a need to believe in a golden age as we saw during John F. Kennedy's presidency when attempts were made to compare Kennedy and the United States to King Arthur and Camelot. By discovering Arthur's children and descendants, we find a link between the age of Arthur and our own time.

At the end of *The Discovery of King Arthur*, Geoffrey Ashe asks why the spell of King Arthur continues to excite us and capture our imaginations (189). Ashe suggests King Arthur's popularity in the United States may be based in Americans' tendency to speak about their "roots." But then he comments, "I doubt if this is the whole answer, since most Americans are not British descended" (189).

Actually, estimates of Americans of British (English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh) descent run from 50-80% depending on the study. The number of studies and results on the Internet of how many Americans have British ancestry is too many to detail, but they can easily be found. Even people who identify themselves as African American often have Caucasian blood—and those descended from slaves with white blood will generally find that the Southern white slave owner in the family tree was of British descent. If we consider that King Arthur likely lived about the year 500 A.D. and we then consider how many descendants he had and how they migrated across the globe over fifteen hundred years, it is not much of a stretch to suggest that nearly everyone on earth can potentially be a descendant of King Arthur—provided he lived and did have children. DNA analysis recently has proven that everyone of European descent alive today can claim descent from anyone who lived in Europe prior to the year 1200 A.D.

In fact, as Steve Olson demonstrates in *Mapping Human History: Discovering the Past Through Our Genes*, if we go back just ten generations, we each would have 1024 ancestors, so thirty generations ago that number would be  $1024 \times 1024 \times 1024$ , which equals over one billion. Since that many people did not live in the world thirty generations ago—estimates for the year 1400 were 375

million—many of our ancestors repeat, meaning our ancestors married distant cousins and shared similar ancestors. In any case, we can probably all claim descent from such famous ancient people as Confucius, Queen Nefertiti, and Julius Caesar (Olson 46-47). Furthermore, even people today of predominantly Asian or African descent could be descended from King Arthur. African-American poet Elizabeth Alexander, for example, is a descendant of King John of England (reigned 1199-1216 A.D.), as recently revealed on the PBS show *Faces of America with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.* broadcast in 2010. As Steve Olsen notes, “suppose an emissary from Ethiopia married a woman in the court of Henry II and had children. Today, all Europeans are descended from that Ethiopian” (46).

Anyone interested in genealogy knows that “race” does not really exist. In researching my own ancestry, I have found myself descended not only from people in every country in Europe but even China, India, and Persia. The human race is itself a melting pot. With these statistics, based in fact, not merely fancy, if King Arthur were a historical person, he is very likely ancestor to all of us. Our descent from King Arthur is obviously through his children, so we should learn more about them.

My own interest in King Arthur began when I first read *The Boy’s King Arthur* at the age of fourteen. At twenty-one, I also began to take an interest in genealogy and traced my family back to King Edward III of England, among whose ancestors, of course, was Cerdic, King of Wessex, credited with being one of Arthur’s greatest enemies. Imagine my surprise and interest when I read Geoffrey Ashe’s suggestion that Cerdic was a possible son of King Arthur (199). If this relationship were true, then I would be a direct descendant of King Arthur! Something of a boyish pride swelled up in my heart, something that perhaps non-genealogists or non-lovers of Arthurian literature would not understand, but who would not like to claim descent from King Arthur? Later, I will discuss whether or not Cerdic is a possible son of King Arthur, but Geoffrey Ashe’s suggestion was enough to spark my interest, especially when I learned King Arthur also had other children. The descendants of these other children must have multiplied so that by the 1600s,

when Americans' British ancestors began journeying to the New World, several of them may have been carrying Arthurian blood over the seas with them. Not only I, but thousands if not millions of other Americans, would therefore be descendants of King Arthur!

If there were a King Arthur, then his descendants are probably more numerous than can ever be thoroughly traced. We may never know whether Arthur's descendants are living among us (or are us), as we may never know whether Arthur was a real person. However, both are pleasant thoughts, and I personally believe both may be more than just possibilities.

Even if it is not through blood, then through culture Americans are the descendants of Arthur and his times. The popularity of Arthurian literature can quickly transport anyone who reads a book or watches a film back to the Arthurian age. The ideals with which we credit Arthurian times, whether the period received those ideals from our time, or our time from the past, still serve to connect us.

Arthur's children are of interest to us, whether it is through genealogy or by cultural heritage. In *King Arthur's Daughter*, Vera Chapman makes this point nicely when she writes about the growth of Arthur's descendants:

Not by a royal dynasty but by the spreading unknown and unnoticed, along the distaff line—mother to daughter, father to daughter, mother to son. Names and titles shall be lost, but the story and the spirit of Arthur shall not be lost. For Arthur is a spirit and Arthur is the land of Britain.  
(144)

Anyone who would be a descendant of King Arthur need not have a fifteen hundred-year-old pedigree to prove it; we need to tell the tales about Arthur, and when people hear these stories, he will then live on in their hearts and his line and descendants will continue to grow.

In the following pages, I will attempt to explore all the figures said to be descended from King Arthur, from the legend's earliest versions to the most modern novels. Often these modern novels are based on earlier traditions, or they are making their own interpret-

ations of what could have happened. Arthurian studies always leave us the problem of trying to separate what is fact from fiction, and even the most respected Arthurian stories of the Middle Ages often become as suspect as the modern novels, and the modern novels today often try to be more authentic than their medieval counterparts; therefore, we must consider all interpretations and possibilities considering Arthur's children, whether they appear believable or not. In many cases, we will discover that what might have happened if Arthur were a historical person is not as important as how people have chosen to interpret or even rewrite Arthurian literature.

This book represents the first time King Arthur's children will all be assembled together, along with the various tales about them, as the subject of study. After looking more closely at the children of King Arthur, we will come to a better understanding of the purpose Arthurian literature has served over the centuries and perhaps we will even become more closely connected to King Arthur and his times.

## **Part I:**

### **The Earliest Children in the Welsh Legends**

Before Mordred made his appearance in the Matter of Britain and began to dominate it as the only son of King Arthur, just as he had tried to dominate Arthur's kingdom, the Welsh may have had the tradition that King Arthur had three sons. These three sons could be the earliest of Arthur's children to appear, but we have the least information about them, doubtless because much of it has been lost. Only one son, Llacheu, has any clear lines drawn as to where he may rightfully be integrated into the Arthurian legends. Another son, Amr, may have been the original of Mordred, while Gwydre's story comes down to us as faint as his ending is grim.

At times, scholars have either ignored or at least brushed these three sons aside as unimportant since no scholar has known what to think of them. Those scholars in the past who did not believe in a historical Arthur were more interested in studying the traditions and mythological background that went into forming the Matter of Britain. Since Arthur's three Welsh sons had such sketchy legends, little mythology survived for scholars to study the sons' origins. Furthermore, tradition says all three sons died before Arthur's passing, so none of them inherited his kingdom, and therefore, they have been considered of little importance. However, the belief in a historical King Arthur has continued to grow in recent years, and if there is any historical basis for his having had children, it seems only obvious, that if these are the earliest sons, they are the most likely to have existed in history. By closely exploring the traditions surrounding each of these sons, we may find a more solid place for them in Arthurian tradition.