**Notes – History of The Arthurian Legend**

The legend of King Arthur exists largely in myth handed down from generation to

generation for nearly 1500 years, but it also exists, at least to some degree, in actual history.

King Arthur’s origins are **Welsh** – the earliest mention of him can be found in an

ancient book of poetry entitled ***The Black Book of Carmarthen***, named for the old

Cornish town of Carmarthen in southern Wales – supposed birthplace of **Merlin**.

There are numerous references to Arthur in this and another book entitled ***The Red***

***Book of Hergest*** (14th century) which tells of Arthur’s famous victory over the

Saxons at Mt. Badon – the work also makes mention of two of Arthur’s companions,

**Cei** and **Bedwyr**, who would become **Kay** and **Bedivere.**

In the Welsh **triads** or the Medieval collections of groupings of three that make up

a major portion of Welsh literature and folklore, many references are made to Arthur,

including his final battle, the ***Battle of Camlann***, where, in *The Annales Cambriae*

(The Annals of Wales) it says, “…where Arthur and Medraut perished…”

The famous Medieval cleric **Geoffrey of Monmouth** is the first great chronicler of

the Arthurian legend – it is from Geoffrey that the character of **Merlin** receives its

fullest development – according to Geoffrey, Arthur’s magical sword is known as

***Caliburn***, possibly based on the famous Irish sword *Caladbolg* and was forged

on the **Isle of Avalon**.

The 9th century monk **Nennius**, in his ***Historia Brittorium***, places Arthur in a time

period that can be verified and gives details of Arthur’s military career – he lists 12

battles won by Arthur and gives their locations – Nennius reports that in the famous

Battle of Mt. Badon, Arthur single-handedly killed 940 men! He also says that Arthur

went into one of his 12 great battles with the sign of the Virgin on his shield – we,

of course, have learned that this was probably an attempt on the monk’s part to

Christianize Arthur – Welsh tales, after all, were quite pagan!

Influenced by the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, a French author named **Wace**

wrote his own history of the English kings. His ***Roman de Brut*** gives us the first

glimpse of **courtly love**, as well as the earliest reference to the **round table** and

the naming of Arthur’s sword, **Excalibur**.

These sources, along with Sir Thomas Malory’s famous ***Le Morte D’Arthur*** (1470)

are the basis for the King Arthur legend as we know it today.