

Excalibur: A Novel of Arthur Study Guide

Excalibur: A Novel of Arthur by Bernard Cornwell

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Excalibur: A Novel of Arthur Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun.....	4
Part Two, Mynydd Baddon.....	10
Part Three, Nimue's Curse.....	15
Part Four, The Last Enchantment.....	19
Characters.....	24
Objects/Places.....	31
Themes.....	36
Style.....	39
Quotes.....	42
Topics for Discussion.....	45



Plot Summary

Excalibur by Bernard Cornwell is the last in a series of three books, which deal with a fictionalized account of the legend of King Arthur in sixth-century Britain.

The narrative is written by a monk in the Christian monastery of Dinnewrac in the Kingdom of Powys in what is modern Wales. As the tale unfolds, the identity of the monk is revealed as Derfel, once a great warlord and warrior in the court of King Arthur. He describes how Merlin tries unsuccessfully to summon the ancient gods of Britain to come to the aid of the Britons.

Arthur is still suffering the pain and dishonor of having discovered his Guinevere in the arms of Lancelot, who betrayed Arthur by leading a Christian rebellion against him. Guinevere has been imprisoned and Lancelot has fled to his kingdom in the lands of the Belgae, where he plots against Arthur and allies himself with the Saxons in Eastern Britain.

When spring arrives in the south of Britain, the expected invasion of the united Saxon kingdoms takes place, unexpectedly early, before the Saxon feast of Eostre and from the south instead of along the Thames valley. Derfel and his party, including the ex-queen Guinevere are trapped near the city of Aquae Sulis on an ancient, pre-Roman, earth fortified hill called Mynydd Baddon. The Saxons surround Derfel's position believing Arthur is with the group. Eventually, Arthur and the other British warlords arrive to reinforce Derfel and, together, though vastly outnumbered, the British warriors defeat the combined armies of the Saxon kings Cerdic and Aelle.

In the aftermath of the battle of Mynydd Baddon, Arthur relinquishes the throne of Dumnonia and crosses the Severn Sea to take up residence in the kingdom of Siluria; there he passes a peaceful life, practicing the craft of blacksmithing. Derfel often visits Arthur and when he and Arthur believe that King Mordred, the titular ruler of Dumnonia, has died on an expedition to wage war across the sea in France, Derfel returns to Dumnonia to acclaim Arthur's son Gwydre as king.

However, King Mordred is very much alive and kills all the warriors in Dumnonia who are loyal to Arthur. Derfel barely escapes to return to help Arthur embark from Siluria towards Dumnonia. Nimue, Merlin's vicious priestess, attacks the embarking warriors with her army of Bloodshields and, as they escape, executes Merlin on the shore.

In Britain, Arthur's loyal warriors defend him against the army of King Mordred. In the battle of Camlann, at the mouth of the river Exe, Arthur kills King Mordred in single-handed combat but is mortally wounded. He embarks on the ship called Prydwen and sails off into the setting sun, through a silver sea mist, thus fulfilling Merlin's prophesy.



Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun

Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun Summary

Excalibur is the account of the final years of King Arthur's rule of the British kingdom of Dumnonia in the early years of the 6th century AD. Excalibur is the sword that Arthur uses in battle and is also one of the Treasures of Britain, a powerful emblem in the magic rites of the Druid Merlin. After defeating the combined armies of the Saxon kings, Cerdic and Aelle, at the battle of Mynydd Baddon, Arthur relinquishes the throne of Dumnonia and takes up a peaceful life in Siluria with Guinevere with whom he is reconciled. His British enemies, however, threaten him and he has to fight a final battle on the shores of Britain when he embarks for France. In this final battle Arthur kills his enemy, the King Mordred, but is, himself, mortally wounded. He is last seen, sailing in the ship Prydwen towards the setting sun surrounded by a magical sea mist. Excalibur is consigned to the waves by Derfel, Arthur's faithful warlord. The story is told from the point of view of Derfel, the last surviving warrior leader of Arthur's court.

In the small monastery of Dinnewrac in the kingdom of Powys a monk labors on writing a manuscript in the language of the Saxons. Bishop Sansun, who runs the monastery and hates the memory of Arthur, thinks the Saxon scribe is writing the Life of Lord Jesus Christ, but as he is illiterate, especially in the Saxon tongue he is not aware that the scribe is, in fact recording the history of Arthur, the late Emperor of Britain. The scribe was once a personal friend of Arthur and in the days before he became a scribe at the monastery of Dinnewrac, he had been known as Lord Derfel Cardon.

Now he recalls how, during the rebellion when Arthur's supposed friend Lancelot tried to seize the throne of Dumnonia with the help of the Christians, Arthur found his wife Guinevere naked in Lancelot's arms. Since that moment it seems to Derfel the sun vanished from his sky. Lancelot, in the year 500, allied with the Saxon king Cerdic, launched a fierce attack along the valley of the Thames, in an effort to split the British kingdoms of the south from their allies in the north. But a terrible plague ravaged the Saxon army, and they were defeated by Arthur's forces and forced to flee, with Lancelot returning to his land of the Belgae. Guinevere, instead of being executed as custom demanded, was locked away in Morgan's shrine in a living grave.

Derfel's history continues with the account of the activities of Merlin the Druid at the great empty palace at Lindinnis. Derfel is waiting to be joined by his companion Ceinwyn and his daughters, but the local people tell him the pagans are about to hold an event to match the superstitions of the rebellious Christians and he joins the throng. The people have come from all over the kingdom of Dumnonia and gather in the outer courtyard of the now-deserted Roman hall.

As night falls, the gates of the inner courtyard open and the nearly hysterical crowd goes silent as a beautiful young white warrior appears between two lighted torches. He addresses the crowd and tells them that the Treasures of Britain are within the walls and



that they will be unleashed soon and the power of their Gods will speak to the people. Then a slender, delicate, and naked young woman appears. Her skin glows in the dark and she carries a bunch of lilies in one hand and a narrow-bladed sword in the other. Her face is shrouded by her long black hair and she passes quite close to where Derfel and his warrior companion Issa are standing and then her glistening body disappears.

When the crowd has dispersed Derfel meets Merlin who introduces the young white warrior as Gawain, son of the King of Broceliande, and a nephew of Arthur. Derfel knows that a lot of what he has seen has been stage managed by Merlin but the appearance of the beautiful young woman leads him to hope, beyond reason, that Merlin really will be able to summon the ancient Gods to help the Britons in the forthcoming struggle with the combined Saxon armies. As Derfel departs Merlin invites him to come to Mai Dun at Samain and witness the appearance of the Gods.

Slowly a relative peace descends on Britain; the Saxons retire behind their frontiers, and Derfel takes up residence at Dun Caric with his beautiful companion Ceinwyn and their two daughters. On a visit to Dun Caric Arthur discusses the possibility of bribing one Saxon king to fight the other. He wants to offer the Saxon king Aelle a proposal in which Arthur will offer Aelle a permanent peace; he can keep all the lands he has occupied and as much land as he can take from Cerdic, the other Saxon king, if he will side with the Britons in the forthcoming war. Aelle has sworn to kill outright any emissaries from Arthur but Arthur asks Derfel to carry the message to Aelle, because, in fact, Derfel is Aelle's son and Arthur does not believe the Saxon king will kill his own son. Derfel agrees to the mission, but in his heart he thinks that Arthur has condemned him to death.

In the autumn Derfel goes on his mission, as Arthur wants an answer, even before Merlin's attempt to intervene with the Gods at Samain, might make war avoidable. A war band would be no use against the Saxon army of Aelle, so Derfel travels alone with only his sword and his shield. When Derfel finally arrives at the winter quarters of King Aelle, he is dismayed to find that Cerdic has come to confer with Aelle and with him is Lancelot, Arthur's sworn enemy.

When Derfel enters the great hall he finds about three hundred Saxon warriors, eager to kill him. Aelle takes control of the warriors and when he learns that Derfel has a message from Arthur he agrees with Cerdic that he has to fight Cerdic's champion, Liofa, before he can deliver his message. Derfel is warned by Bors, Lancelot's champion, to watch out for Liofa's trick of pretending to slip and then striking his opponent. This advice is instrumental in Derfel defeating Liofa, whose life he spares, which in turn leads him being invited to dine with Aelle and his guests at the table in the feasting hall

At the end of the feasting Aelle takes Derfel to his own quarters where, in the presence of two of his other sons, he refuses Arthur's offer of a perpetual gift of land if he will join the Britons against Cerdic. Derfel realizes that the two sons are meant to witness the refusal and to pass that news to the other Saxon kings. That night Derfel sleeps in a narrow space outside his father's door.



Before Derfel leaves next morning Aelle gives him a ring with a square stone, which he had once thought of giving to Erce, Derfel's mother, but now he says for Derfel to give it to his Princess of Powys.

Four days after Derfel returns to his home at Dun Caric, Arthur visits him. Derfel tells Arthur that Aelle refused Arthur's proposal and then he adds that Merlin has asked for the sword Excalibur, one of the Treasures of Britain so that it can be used in the forthcoming rites at Mai Dun. Arthur gives Derfel the sword and tells him to take it to Merlin.

When Derfel arrives at Mai Dun, he finds that the huge earthwork structure is guarded by Black Shield spearmen who he has to persuade that he has business with Merlin. They let him through and he is greeted by the young Gawain, who explains that the immense system of spirals of hedges and wood piles will be lit on the eve of Samian and the Gods will come down to reoccupy Britain and the Great God Bel will step again in Ynys Prydain, the isle of Britain. Gawain shows Derfel to the small temple of Mithras, which had been left on Mai Dun by the Romans when they sacked the huge earthwork protected fortress many years ago. Derfel waits in the temple for Merlin, but while he is waiting he examines the objects in the temple, particularly the barrels of sea salt and one barrel of clams gathered from the sea. Accidentally he discovers that the clams secrete a substance which makes his hand glow in the dark, and he realizes he has discovered the secret of the glowing skin of Olwen the Silver.

With his last illusion as to the efficacy of Merlin's magic destroyed, Derfel prays to Mithras to help the British Gods. When Merlin finally arrives, Nimue accompanies him and Derfel gives Merlin the sword Excalibur. Merlin kisses the sword and calls it the "Sword of Rhydderch."

On Samian's Eve, Derfel joins Arthur's party at Durnovaria to witness Merlin's rites. When Arthur finds his son Gwydre has been brought by Issa, Derfel's aide, Arthur is so delighted that Derfel realizes that the eleven-year-old boy is truly the source of great joy to his father. In Arthur's party is the Bishop of Emrys, a Christian, who remained loyal to Arthur in the recent rebellion. As the group waits for the fires to be lit, a discussion starts on the prevalence of human sacrifice among all religions, even Christianity, which celebrates the death of the Son of God, though only in ritualized form. The Druids have always used human sacrifice, especially the sons of kings and princes. The group recalls the sacrifice made by King Cefydd when he faced the Roman army before they seized Ynys Mon in the Black Year and destroyed the Druidic religion. Arthur asks what was Cefydd's sacrifice, and the Bishop tells him Cefydd sacrificed his own son, but despite the sacrifice the Romans massacred Cefydd's army and destroyed the Druids' groves on Ynys Mon.

It is at this moment that Derfel comprehends the role Merlin has chosen for Gawain, the son of King Budic and also for a small boy named Mardoc, who he met near the temple of Mithras, and who is the son of King Mordred and Cywylllog. Arthur, with the same dread conclusion in his mind casts about to find his son Gwydre, but he is nowhere to be found.



Arthur blames Derfel for persuading him to allow his son to come to Durnovaria and suspects he knew the danger to his son. Derfel protests his innocence and rides with Arthur and the others to the center of the fires and through the ring of Black Shield guards.

Accompanied by Issa, Galahad, and the others, Derfel leads them and Arthur through the spirals of fire, overcoming the resistance of the Black Shield spearmen, to where Merlin and Nimue and Black Shield spearmen are holding Gwydre. The boy breaks free and is gathered by Arthur on to his saddle. The young boy Mardoc is also about to be killed. Arthur refuses to allow the sacrifice to continue despite the threats and curses of Merlin. As Galahad cuts down the boy Mardoc, Arthur strikes Nimue with the flat of his sword and sends her to the ground. Then as the onlookers watch, Merlin, with the help of Black Shield spearmen packs the body of Gawain into the Sacred Cauldron with the ice from the barrels. Merlin seems calm and resigned. He says he does not know if the Gods came but the ritual is over. The sword Excalibur is in the southernmost fire spiral and Arthur has to wait until dawn before retrieving it.

Later in the year, as a bitter winter settles on the land, Arthur sends instructions for Derfel to deliver a sealed letter to Guinevere who is imprisoned in nearby Ynys Wydryn. In the letter Arthur states he has renounced their marriage and is wedding Argante, the daughter of Oengus mac Airem.

Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun Analysis

The story begins in a "stream of conscious" mode with the writer commenting about the history he is writing and philosophizing as to the role of women in the history he is about to relate. The exposition gradually unfolds that it is about Britain and the British King Arthur. As such, it is a rather rambling discourse with no systematic account of either the historical epoch with which the writer is dealing or the geographical details of the Britain in which Arthur existed as ruler. It is as if by simply mentioning the name Arthur the reader is expected to be cognizant of the historical and geographical environment of the tale. This may be a valid assumption, but for the uninitiated, the story sweeps on in an informal, conversational way and the reader is expected to fill in the inferences and details. . From the outset of the story the reader is faced with a plethora of Saxon and Celtic names and expressions that are prevalent throughout the story. The book lists places and names at the beginning, which is of critical use for the reader.

Thus it is not too difficult to deduce that the expression "Mordred ap Uther" signifies "Mordred son of Uther" but the introduction of the kingdoms referred to as "Powys" and "Dumnonia," even if the reader is supplied with the modern day location in Great Britain, leads to an abrupt and total immersion into Saxon and Celtic Britain. This is not necessarily a defect as the total effect is probably the intention of the author, but it assumes a certain amount of mental agility or uncritical acceptance on the part of the audience. A map of Britain in the sixteenth century accompanies the places names and is very welcome.



The exposition of certain aspects of the historical background of Guinevere's betrayal of Arthur is provided by the conversation between the narrator and his patron, Queen Igraine. This affords the opportunity to record a woman's opinion of the reaction of Arthur to the infidelity of his Queen, in opposition to the point of view of the narrator. In this way the gradual exposition reveals the details of the unsuccessful rebellion by Lancelot, the betrayal of Arthur by his Queen Guinevere, and the role played by the Christians in the struggle for control of the kingdom of Dumnonia.

When the story switches to the account of Merlin's activities, there is a subtle change in the point of view of the narrator, who, up to this point fills the role of Saxon scribe in a Christian monastery, and whose identity is now revealed as Lord Derfel Cadarn, Warrior of the Cauldron. From this point on it is Derfel's account of the events that follow that predominates. Arthur's feelings and motives are presented as those inferred by Derfel.

In the course of the next section the reader is informed of many of the details of the Druidic religion and ritual and also, almost incidentally, that the action is taking place in 500 AD, the turn of the sixth century.

The effect, on Derfel, of the theatrical phenomena devised by Merlin at the palace of Lindinnis serves to delineate the role of religion and theistic beliefs of a British Lord and companion to Arthur. Both men display a certain skepticism as to the importance of the Druid religion and the "old gods," but it is Derfel who, almost desperately, clings to a final faith in the efficacy of Merlin's magic for saving Britain from the threat of Saxon invasion in the coming year. This faith is based on his reaction and amazement at the beautiful, naked, and glowing girl who appears, almost as an apparition, at the gathering at Lindinnis.

When Arthur prevails on Derfel to undertake an almost suicidal mission to try and subvert the Saxon King Aelle from his alliance with the other major Saxon King, Cerdic, more details of Derfel's upbringing are revealed. He is a Saxon, in origin and culture, being the son of Aelle the Saxon king, but having been reared as a Briton, he is loyal to Arthur and feels no kinship with the "Sais," the Saxons, though he is fluent in their language. This leads to his solo journey across Britain, through the lands of the Christianized Gwent, where they still use Roman armor for their warriors, to the East Coast where the Saxons have established their kingdoms. This is an exceptional factual description of the lands comprising Britain of that time but, again, lacks a descriptive map to complement the textual account.

After Derfel has successfully defeated Cerdic's champion and he is made welcome by Aelle, there is a very revealing announcement by Aelle that he, and therefore Derfel, are in fact "Aengles" (Angles) and their land will be "Aengeland". This unheralded reminder of the origin of the word England and the significance of the role of the invasions by the Angles (and also the Vikings) in opposition to those of the Saxons is one of the continuous revelations, which is a feature of this fictional account of the British Isles.

Back from his mission to Aelle's kingdom, Derfel, finds out from Ceinwyn, how Arthur tentatively tried to propose to her when Derfel was away on his possibly suicidal quest.



She dismisses it as a sign of Arthur's loneliness and desperation, but the surprise is that Derfel, completely confident in the fidelity of his princess, also accepts this indication of treachery on the part of Arthur. As Derfel and Ceinwyn are not formally married the reader is left to speculate, that if Arthur had persisted, would Derfel's loyalty to Arthur have extended to sacrificing his love of Ceinwyn for his king?

The climax to the Druidic ritual at Mai Dun, when Arthur and his companions intervene to prevent the killing of the children, is preceded by an intriguing exposition of the role of human sacrifice in various religions. The Bishop Emrys, safe in the knowledge that in the Christian liturgy, the re-enactment of the death of the Son of God is purely symbolic, makes a very good case for the universal origin of this element of religious ritual and provides a significant clue as to the course of evolution of all religions particularly the Christian churches.

When Derfel, as instructed by Arthur, takes the message to Guinevere announcing his renouncement of their marriage and his betrothal to Argante, the account of Derfel's and Guinevere's conversation provides a revealing portrayal of her motives and feelings both towards Lancelot and to Arthur. There is no explanation, however, of what led her to betray Arthur, if indeed she does despise Lancelot. The reader is left with the only possibility that she is driven by insatiable political ambition. Arthur's equivocation in dealing with her and his obvious continuous infatuation with her, can only lead to tragic consequences, as several members of his own entourage have pointed out, notably Merlin and Aelle who both, for different reasons, regard his course of action as stupid.



Part Two, Mynydd Baddon

Part Two, Mynydd Baddon Summary

As the countryside emerges from winter with the coming of spring, Arthur sends Derfel an invitation to a special convocation at Lindinnis for the feast of Imbolc. All Arthur's leaders attend, including Arthur's new wife, Argante, Princess of the Uì Liatháin. Fergal King Mordred's Druid, officiates at the ceremony, which in fact is another fertility rite, which he calls Nantosuelta. This involves maidens leaping through a large circular fire struck arch. Fergal startles everyone, including Arthur, by ceremoniously slaughtering lambs and then entices Argante, who appears to be in a trance, to leap through the giant hoop. She does so and also dips her fingers into the blood of the newly slaughtered lambs, suggestively licks her blood stained fingers and then places her hand up her robe to put the blood on her thighs. When Arthur refuses to join in this ritual by leaping through the fire, Argante is incensed but is eventually calmed by Fergal.

The next day all the warriors meet, and Arthur outlines his plan to defeat the Saxon threat. His basic assumption is that the combined armies of Aelle and Cerdic will advance along the Thames valley to the Severn estuary. Arthur will make his stand at Corinium. He believes the Saxons will not invade until after their festival for their Goddess Eostre, which falls after the British spring festival of Beltain.

Derfel returns home with Ceinwyn and his daughters and they celebrate the festival of Beltain, but at the end of their festivities, beacon fires warn of the advance of the Saxon army. The Saxons have invaded before their feast of Eostre and from the south instead of from the East.

Derfel evacuates Dun Caric, takes Guinevere from Ynys Wydryn, and is joined by Argante who arrives with an escort of Black Shield warriors carrying Arthur's sword. Before long Argante is collected by some of Arthur's horsemen and Derfel proceeds north to Corinium along the old Roman Fosse Way. Near the old Roman city of Aquae Sulis he encounters Saxon horsemen. Derfel organizes his men to defend a nearby ancient fortress, which has grass ramparts and ancient earth walls where he and his men are now trapped. This ancient fort is called Mynydd Baddon

As more and more Saxons come to the base of Mynydd Baddon, Derfel realizes he and his party are trapped and now face the combined armies of the Saxon kings Aelle and Cerdic. He sends a message to Arthur in Corinium to tell him of his plight and then prepares to defend the position against the inevitable Saxon attack.

When the Saxons do attack, Guinevere arranges for oxen carts, loaded with burning wood and bristling with spears to be pushed down the slope towards the advancing Saxon shield wall. The Saxons are unnerved and the shield wall is broken allowing the defenders to charge down the ramparts and repulse the attack.



The next day the Saxons advance in twenty columns and Derfel and his warriors prepare to die, as they are so heavily outnumbered, but before the Saxon columns reach the battlements Arthur appears, leading a band of his heavily armed cavalry. He attacks the advancing Saxon spearmen by riding along the rampart slopes and decisively routs them. After this second successful defense, Arthur comes into the earth fort and congratulates Derfel for his valiant defense. He tells Derfel that Cluneglas and Culhwch are coming with their armies and also his own spearmen are following behind. Then Arthur, to everyone's surprise, disappears only to return two days later with a red cross on his shield. He explains that he has arranged an alliance with the Kingdom of Gwent for their support. The price is that all Arthur's warriors must put Christian crosses on their shields. Reluctantly they do so and make their preparations to attack the two Saxon armies of Aelle and Cerdic spread out beneath them on the valley floor.

The Britons begin their campaign on a beautiful summer's day with Arthur and the army of Gwent attacking Aelle's army from the west, Sagramor and his warriors coming in from the north, and Derfel and Cluneglas charging down the ramparts to mount an assault between Aelle's army and Cerdic's forces.

The Britons spring their trap on a beautiful summer's day, and Derfel and the other warriors are in their armor before dawn. As always, plans can be made but reality changes everything. The Saxons are also on the move, preparing to travel eastward along the Fosse Way; their scouts now discover the presence of Arthur and quickly form a Shield Wall to face Arthur and the Gwent army. The warriors of Gwent, resplendent in their Roman armor, attack without any preliminaries but are stopped by the sheer weight of Aelle's forces.

After an initial success, because of their unexpected attack, Derfel's men are then severely pressed by Cerdic's warriors, but before the Saxons can press their advantage of numerical superiority, a new group of warriors appears charging down from the earthen ramparts. They are Oengus mac Airem's Black Shield warriors led by a grotesque figure on a horse, which turns out to be the pickled corpse of Gawain who was sacrificed at Mai Dun. In the face of these combined assaults Cerdic's shield wall is broken and his men try to escape from the battlefield. Cerdic and his bodyguard escape in the high ground to the east, but Arthur and his warriors have saved Britain and fulfilled his dream of breaking the power of the Sais.

Part Two, Mynydd Baddon Analysis

Again this part of the book starts with a conversation between Derfel and his patron Queen Igraine which reinforces the readers' curiosity as to how this War Lord of Arthur's has ended up as a scribe in a small Christian monastery under a bishop, who is only released from prison by Arthur shortly before the great battle of Mynydd Baddon. As if to underscore the multi-faceted religious aspects of the story, Derfel now recounts how he takes his aide Issa to the caves west of Dun Caric to induct him into the Mithras Sect. By his account, many of Arthur's warrior lords, including Arthur himself, are adepts of Mithras. Arthur does not attend the Mithraic rites, but his lieutenants discuss amongst



themselves the new queen he has wed and the fact that Arthur does not believe in any gods, only in himself.

All Arthur's men are now summoned to Lindinnis palace to attend the Druidic rite of Nantosuelta to be administered by Argante's Druid, Fergal. Unlike the details of the Mithraic rite, which are not described, this time the bloody and horrific fertility rite is portrayed. Although Derfel and the other warlords know that the main purpose of the convocation is to receive their orders from Arthur concerning the forthcoming campaign, Druidism is recognized as the official religion of Britain and they and their wives all attend the ceremony. These paragraphs also serve to delineate the character and personality of Arthur's new queen Argante and, as such, they serve a threefold purpose.

In the course of the next day's hunt Arthur instructs Derfel that if Guinevere is in danger in the forthcoming campaign, he, Derfel, is to deal with her, though Derfel understands this to mean, not to kill her, but to protect her. He is horrified by the responsibility he has been given. In all the ramifications of the subsequent campaign this exchange is to govern Derfel's actions as regards Guinevere with significant consequences.

Arthur's plan of action and its justification is thoroughly presented, as are also the underlying assumptions which, in fact, are based on false premises, but it is difficult to fault the logic, even though the timing, the major flaw, is based on spies within Aelle's and Cerdic's armies. There is a map of Aquae Sulis and Mynydd Baddon at the beginning of Part Two, but the supplementary map of Southern Britain showing the courses of the Rivers Thames and Severn, helps the reader understand the main strategic objectives of both the Britons and the Saxons.

The section describing the coming of spring and the festival Beltain that greets the coming of life in the New Year is another bead in the necklace of pre-Christian festivals described in the story. The Saxon counterpart of Beltain, the festival of Eostre, only plays a part in the expected delaying of the Saxon assault. The sudden realization by the hung-over celebrants at Dun Caric that some of the Beltain bonfires, are, in fact, beacons warning of the coming of a Saxon army lends an air of drama and urgency to the confusion that Derfel and his people now experience.

As the news arrives that the Saxons are approaching along a southern route instead of the expected assault along the Thames valley, Derfel has to act quickly and energetically to fulfill his job as guardian of Argante, and Morgan, Arthur's sister and jailer of Guinevere. In dealing with these responsibilities, various pieces in the final scenario drop naturally into place. Morgan flees to the Severn Estuary, where boats will take her to safety, Argante is rescued by horsemen from Arthur's base at Corinium, and Derfel is left with a contingent of Black Shield warriors, Argante's banner and with the now-released Queen Guinevere.

As Derfel and his band move north to Corinium and pass through the old Roman city of Aquae Sulis, they suddenly encounter a large band of Saxons and are forced to take refuge in the high ground of the earth works of an old, pre-Roman fort. Initially, his intention is to break out of the surrounding Saxon forces but as the Saxons become



steadily more numerous, Derfel is forced to the conclusion that he will have to stand, and probably die, at the place called Mynydd Baddon. Thus, like shards of pottery dropping into drying cement, the hitherto mobile groups of warriors and opposing armies suddenly become static and immobile in a place that neither side has chosen.

The Saxons, knowing they have the British war band trapped, are in no hurry to attack them. Instead, as is the custom of the time, they challenge the British to individual duels and finally provoke Derfel into single-handed combat, which he wins with the death of the Saxon champion but is unable to save the lives of the children they are threatening. This cold blooded act of murder is a harbinger of what is to come and presages the inevitable fate of the women and children Derfel and his warriors are trying to protect.

Throughout these scenes, the personality and character of Guinevere begins to emerge as a respectful friendship between herself and Derfel slowly develops. In a poignant conversation between Ceinwyn and Derfel, they discuss her and the children's likely fate and whether or not his surrender will make any difference at all. The rehabilitation of Guinevere in the eyes of Derfel and his men is climaxed when her brilliant tactic of rolling fire-torched oxen wagons down the slopes into the oncoming Saxon shield wall proves to be the critical element in the defender's success on the first day of the Saxon assault.

As a sign of appreciation Derfel has a makeshift version of Guinevere's standard planted on the ramparts next to his own and to the one that Argante left behind. It is only when Lancelot's cousin Bors deserts to the British side that the significance, to the Saxons, of Arthur's standard on the ramparts, becomes clear and another piece in the puzzle is explained.

The next day, as they prepare for their inevitable defeat and death at the hands of the twenty columns of warriors that Cerdic sends to overwhelm the defenders of Mynydd Baddon, Derfel and his men display dignity and courage in the face of their fate. This only serves to amplify the dramatic relief and excitement when Arthur and his heavy cavalry appear suddenly and ride down the advancing columns as they try to advance up the slopes of the earthworks. In all the comings and goings that coincide with the arrival of Arthur and his reinforcing spearmen, never once does Arthur approach Guinevere, and, she in her turn seems to be deliberately avoiding any proximity to him, and so the tension, as to what will be the outcome when they do meet, is steadily reinforced.

The gradually building drama of the battle is maintained when the British warriors attack the separated Saxon armies from both flanks with Derfel and Cluneglas taking the critical and most dangerous role of attacking in the center between the divided Saxon armies. The arrival of the army of Gwent, replete in vestigial Roman armor, forming a phalanx almost identical to that used by the Roman legions of yore, is an intriguing detail in the unfolding scene. In addition, the significance of the acquiescence of Arthur's warriors to place Christian crosses on their shields, as a price for this new alliance, is a foreshadowing of how the story's narrator becomes a scribe at a Christian monastery.



The final rout of both Saxon armies and the triumph of the now-united British kingdoms, is only portrayed after a brilliant and realistic description of the hand-to-hand fighting when shield wall meets shield wall. This includes the emotions and thoughts of the combatants, personified by Derfel's first person account, not only of his thoughts and emotions when he faces near death at the hands of his enemies, but the animal like exultation as he wades through the bloody charnel house of his fallen enemies. The climax to the battle comes when a horse carrying the pickled cadaver of the dead Gawain is used by the horde of uncontrollable and unstoppable Black Shield warriors to lead their charge down from the ramparts of Mynydd Baddon into the crumbling Saxon shield wall.

And so Part Two ends with the salvation of Britain from the power of the Sais and the realization of the dreams of King Arthur.



Part Three, Nimue's Curse

Part Three, Nimue's Curse Summary

On the battlefield below Mynydd Baddon, Tewdric's Christian warriors have trapped Aelle's army but the spearmen of Gwent are reluctant to attack. Aelle is so badly wounded he cannot hold his shield but stubbornly refuses to surrender. Arthur sends for Derfel but Derfel cannot persuade his natural father to become an honorable prisoner to Arthur. Aelle begs Derfel to finish him off. He is Aelle, the Bretwalda of Britain and will not yield his sword. The warriors of Gwent and spearmen in the Saxon shield wall watch in silence as Derfel embraces his father and plunges a spear into his side so that he can die as a warrior, his sword in his hand and on his feet as his honor requires.

In the aftermath of the great British victory, Derfel and Sagramor have to use their warriors to restore order in the city of Aquae Sulis where the warriors from different groups are quarreling and fighting. Derfel and the other of Arthur's warlords enjoy the old Roman baths, and while they do so a plan is concocted so Arthur can annul his marriage to Argante and be reunited with Guinevere. Argante will wed Mordred, the titular king of Dumnonia.

A few days later Derfel and his men apprehend the fugitive Lancelot who fought with Cerdic's Saxon warriors. Derfel challenges him to a duel and despite Lancelot's surprising skill disarms him. Derfel still remembers Dian, his daughter who Lancelot's men killed during the Christian rebellion, and he orders his men to hang Lancelot like a common felon. Derfel keeps only Lancelot's enameled sword belt, which had been a gift from Arthur. When later Derfel tells Arthur, who has returned from pursuing Cerdic, that Lancelot has been hanged and shows him the belt, Arthur simply says "Good" and tells Derfel to throw the belt in the river.

Later at a council in Aquae Sulis, Arthur announces the marriage of Argante and Mordred and his intention to renounce his rule of Dumnonia and live in the town of Isca in Siluria, across the Severn Sea from Dumnonia. Derfel and Sagramor will maintain control of Dumnonia and guard its frontiers while Mordred will be the official king.

In the following years of peace, Derfel and Ceinwyn often visit Arthur and Guinevere. Gwydre, Arthur's son, marries Morwenna, Derfel, and Ceinwyn's daughter and soon they have a son whom they call Arthur-bach.

One winter Mordred takes an army to Armorica but is defeated and entrapped by Clovis the High King of the Franks. The rumor is that he is seriously wounded in the leg, which is putrefying, and that he will soon be dead. Because Mordred and Argante are childless, the succession to the throne of Dumnonia will be available to claim when Mordred's death is announced. Arthur's son Gwydre tells his father that, yes indeed, he would welcome being King of Dumnonia, and Derfel embarks for Dumnonia to proclaim Gwydre king when the death of Mordred is announced.



On reaching Dumnonia and Dun Caric, Derfel finds that all his people and Issa, his chief aide and all his men have been massacred. As he is contemplating this horror he and his eleven spearmen are surrounded by horse warriors who slaughter all the spearmen but keep Derfel captive. They cut off his beard and humiliate him in anticipation of torturing him to death, but he is saved by the intervention of the bard Taliesin and succeeds in escaping back to Siluria.

At Isca, Derfel discovers that Ceinwyn is sick and no druidic spells or Christian prayers seem to be able to cure her. One day a cloaked woman approaches the sick room where Ceinwyn lies. The shrouded woman tells Derfel that he must go with the woman if he wants Ceinwyn to live. In desperation he follows her into the mountains. She calls herself the dancer, but when they come to a small stream she washes away the ashes on her face and Derfel recognizes an older but still beautiful Olwen the Silver, who he had last seen at Mai Dun. After days of travel into the uplands of Powys, they come to a sacred grove where they meet Nimue. She asks Olwen if she invited Derfel to lie with her and if he did so, and Olwen answers yes and no to the questions. It is Nimue who has been casting spells on Ceinwyn and demands that Derfel deliver to her, Gwydre, Arthur's son, and Arthur's sword, Excalibur, if he wants Ceinwyn's agony to end.

Olwen then leads Derfel to what he initially thinks is a beast in a cage but then he realizes it is Merlin. Most of the time Merlin is incoherent but, in rare moments of lucidity, he tells Derfel that Nimue has blinded him and forced him to reveal all his Druidic magic. When he wakes and, before he leaves, Merlin tells Derfel that he has saved the last enchantment from being revealed to Nimue, and it is to find Caddwyg the boatman and take Arthur to seek the silver mist.

Olwen leads Derfel back by a different path and it takes him two days to return home to Ceinwyn. Derfel straps on Hywelbane and tells Arthur all that Nimue told him. They finally prevail on Morgan, Bishop Sansum's wife, to counter the spell of Nimue's Otherbody on Ceinwyn. Morgan mixes clay and forms a figure like the one that Derfel had seen in Nimue's grove in Upper Powys. She walks round the figure three times, raises her arms and wails to the heavens. Then she tells Derfel that the source of evil is within him and he must sacrifice his hand, which bears Nimue's mark. Derfel agrees, and Arthur uses Excalibur to sever Derfel's hand, which bears the red scar marking his bond to Nimue. Morgan takes the severed hand and draws it through the clay figure's birth canal and tosses it into the brazier.

That, as Derfel writes in his story, is how he lost his hand how he became a Christian.

Part Three, Nimue's Curse Analysis

The interludes at the beginning of each section start with the narrator discussing his story with his patroness Queen Igraine. This becomes a vehicle for the gradual exposition of the person of the narrator, who is markedly different from the main character Lord Derfel of Cadarn. In this interlude the reader suddenly discovers that



Derfel has only a stump for a left hand, which heightens the curiosity as to how this came about and how the story will develop to reveal this.

In the aftermath of the defeat of the Saxons the various British elements begin fighting among themselves over seemingly unimportant issues, and Derfel and Sagramor have to intervene to calm the combatants. This, of course, presages the problem defined in Part Two, where the Saxons are able to remain united while the British feud among themselves. It seems that Arthur's dream of a peaceful and united Britain will, in the long term, remain just that, a dream.

Cerdic escapes with his bodyguard, but Aelle remains, trapped by the Gwentian warriors and though Arthur intervenes and tries to get him to surrender he refuses. When Derfel is brought to plead with him he prevails on his natural son, to deliver the final spear thrust, which dispatches him to the nether world with his sword in his hand and on his feet in battle. This description of iron-willed conformity with ideals of honor and bravery, to the point of insanity, contrasts with the abject groveling of Lancelot who is discovered hiding among the dead trees by the river. Derfel, even remembering the image of his daughter mercilessly killed by Lancelot's men, for a moment, considers sparing him, but then condemns him to the disgrace of being hung like a common criminal.

Merlin's re-emergence with the corpse of Gawain, to spear head the Black Shields assault, not only leads Derfel to the hiding Lancelot but also gives a forewarning of Nimue's desire for revenge for the aborted ritual at Mai Dun. In this way, the climax of Part Three is foreshadowed while the principal protagonists deal with the practical aspects of the new Britain liberated from the heretofore permanent threat from the Saxon kingdoms to the east of the British Isles. Arthur's reconciliation with Guinevere and his retirement from the power behind the throne of Dumnonia, bears the seeds of the future disintegration of the peace he so longs for. Leaving Derfel to administer Dumnonia while Mordred, now wedded to Argante, plots against him only cements the threat to permanent peace. It is all very well to seek domestic tranquility in Isca and to indulge in what can only be described as a hobby (blacksmithing), but the objective observer might label Arthur's actions as self-indulgent and irresponsible.

The actions taken by Arthur and his allies to secure the throne of Dumnonia when they, erroneously, assume the childless King Mordred is trapped and dying in Armorica, bear the stamp of common grasping for power. It is only the difficulty of implementing his plans rather than high ideals of eschewing nepotism, which makes Arthur hesitate. As it is, it is the faithful Derfel and his lieutenant Issa who pay the price for the tactical blunder in the premature declaration of their intentions.

Since the return of Merlin after the battle of Mynydd Baddon a new character has entered the story. Taleisin is described as a superbly accomplished bard but also has the ability of prophesying the future and, more significantly, tells Derfel that he communicates with Merlin in his dreams. It is as a full Druid, recognized as such by Mordred's Druid Fergal, that he is able to engineer the escape of Derfel when he is captured by the returning King and faces death by torture. This part of the story, with



Loholt, Arthur's illegitimate twin son, whose arm was cut off by Arthur and Derfel, as a potential executioner, leads the reader to anticipate the loss of Derfel's arm, a fact revealed in the opening of Part Three. A device that could be described as a red herring but which is so neatly woven into the tale that the reader scarcely notices the development.

The title of the chapter soon becomes apparent when Derfel escapes back to Isca only to find Ceinwyn experiencing a horrid, protracted and possibly mortal sickness. The mysterious woman who, eventually comes to lead Derfel to the sorceress Nimue in the upper reaches of the remote country of Powys, is revealed as Olwen the Silver. She has remained a loyal sycophant to Nimue since the druidic rituals at Mai Dun. As seductive as ever, she unsuccessfully tries to seduce Derfel, and, as before at Mai Dun, parades before him completely and unashamedly naked.

The description of Nimue in her secret grove, surrounded by an army of grotesque and misshapen outcasts is as fascinating as it is dramatic. The use of clay effigies to embody the victims of the spells suggests a connection with universal witchcraft from possibly before the development of the Druids and their religion. Forced to acquiesce to Nimue's demands for the sword Excalibur and Gwydre, Arthur and Guinevere's son, Derfel spends some time with the blinded and incoherent Merlin, who is also being subjected to torture by Nimue. Merlin's injunction to Derfel, in one of his few lucid moments, involves seeking the silver mist, which he describes as being the last enchantment, a reference to the title of the next chapter in the book.

Returning to Isca, now that they know Ceinwyn is the victim of Nimue's witchcraft, Derfel, Arthur, Guinevere, and the others persuade Morgan, Bishop Sansum's wife, to put aside her Christian beliefs and perform the ritual to lift the spell. As the story describes it, one of the elements in the ritual requires Derfel sacrificing his left arm, which bears the scar, signifying his connection to Nimue. Derfel accepts this brutal and ghastly price he has to pay for Ceinwyn's survival and it is Arthur, with Excalibur, who performs the amputation. That, as Derfel's narrates, is how he lost his arm and became a Christian!



Part Four, The Last Enchantment

Part Four, The Last Enchantment Summary

Queen Igraine has ceased being Derfel's critic and editor as he completes his tale of Arthur. She has successfully given birth to a son, but now there is smoke on the horizon and it signals the advance of Saxons as Derfel continues his story.

The news reaches Arthur that Mordred is marching to defeat him and is coming across the kingdom of Gwent with Meurig's permission. Arthur and his people are prepared for war but not for the speed with which Mordred is moving. Their plan is to embark on twenty-seven fishing boats moored beneath the Roman bridge at Isca. One hundred and sixty-three spearmen, all Arthur's treasure, and the wives and children are embarking when Nimue's horde of mad people rushes into the city. Arthur's men manage to take their boats out into the estuary by beating and spearing Nimue's men who have plunged into the river, but Bishop Emory's boat is overcome and he and his wife perish. As they proceed down the estuary the channel takes them close to the shore where it turns and goes out to sea. Nimue and her horse warriors are waiting on that shore and she has a prisoner with her. It is Merlin. As the boat with Arthur's banner passes close to the shore Nimue kills Merlin and his body falls into the waters. Nimue shrieks out that they shall live, but she will meet them again. As Balig the boatman raises the sail to catch the wind, which will take them across to Dumnonia, the white-shrouded, blood-stained corpse of Merlin follows them in the estuary currents.

A sudden very fierce storm arises before Arthur's fleet can reach the other shore and in it all the boats, except Arthur's are lost and the occupants drowned. Eventually the survivors reach the shore and make their way to a place called Camlann where Merlin's boatman, Caddwg, looks after a boat which can take Arthur to refuge in Armorica where King Budic is married to Arthur's sister.

Camlann is at the end of a spit of sand formed where the river Exe flows into the sea. It is here that Derfel finds Caddwg and tells him to prepare his boat to take Arthur to the safety of the sea. Caddwg tells Derfel that it will take a full day to prepare the boat and launch it when the waters of the high tide allow it. He also tells Derfel that Merlin instructed him to take Arthur to another place, not Broceliande, and that Merlin left gold for him to give to Arthur. Meanwhile, Arthur and the rest of the group take refuge at the end of the sand spit in a small fort erected long ago by the Romans when they occupied these lands.

While the boat Prydwen, still without a mast is being worked on halfway down the slip, Sagramor arrives with eighty-three men. He and his horses are exhausted but confident that they can march to Kernow after Arthur leaves for Broceliande and rejoin him by boat from there. Until Arthur sails, they will guard him here at Camlann. An hour later a band of sixty or seventy of Mordred's horsemen arrive at Camlann, and Derfel knows that they will have to fight.



Leaving a score of men to guard the women and children, Derfel and Sagramor's men hide in the dunes that are formed at the edge of the beach. When they are concealed, Arthur leads his thirty men along the beach close to the breaking waves. The sound of hooves on the hard sand tells Sagramor and Derfel that Arthur is being pursued by Mordred's horsemen. When they judge the moment that the enemy horsemen are passing their hiding place, they rush over the sheltering dune and attack the pursuers. Arthur also turns and charges his pursuers. They slaughter the confused enemy without mercy and take no prisoners. Before they die some of the enemy warriors tell them that Mordred is leading them but has escaped from the battlefield.

Arthur and his men build a huge funeral pyre at the end of the sand spits. Prydwen now has her mast raised and will be floated by the tide in another hour. Knowing that Mordred will return with reinforcements they also build a ghost fence with thirty-six enemy heads rammed on to the ends of buried spears.

Mordred's reinforcements arrive in the early afternoon; they number at least a hundred spearmen. Their Druid, Fergal, makes short work of the ghost fence and breaks it with a howl of triumph. Arthur and his men gather their spears and shields and prepare to fight while fishermen are recruited to carry the women and children to Prydwen, which is now afloat. Derfel and his companions form their shield wall at the very end of the spit where the shortened shield wall will stretch to both edges of the spit with the balefire behind. Arthur's men drown the curses of the enemy Druid Fergal with the war song of Beli Mawr. Mordred has to cajole his men to advance, but eventually the two shield walls close together to begin the brutal business of hand-to-hand combat. Arthur men throw burning logs from the balefire at the enemy and gradually Mordred's men fall away in the face of the ferocity of Arthur's warriors.

Derfel sees Mordred's men are now being reinforced by Bloodshields and realizes that Nimue's forces have also arrived at the battle. Mordred himself now joins the battle line, screaming with rage at the sight of the boat with its sail carrying the emblem of Arthur's great Bear. He realizes that his mortal enemy might escape by sea. The two exhausted battle lines break into individual groups of fighting warriors

In the middle of the fighting, Arthur and Mordred finally confront each other. They are now isolated from their men and engage in an epic single-handed duel. Mordred succeeds in wounding Arthur by piercing his sword through his armored coat and then, in a final effort to kill his hated enemy, pushes his sword over Arthur's shield and pierces the eye hole of Arthur's face armor. As he does so, Arthur brings Excalibur down on Mordred's head with the strongest stroke of his life and the sword slices into his helmet and his brain.

Mordred falls dead and Arthur, still on his feet, utters a moan. Derfel shouts for his men to form a shield wall but the enemy retreat; their leader is dead and the Britons are still resisting. Derfel and Galahad remove Arthur's helmet and bind his wound, which missed his eye by less than an inch. Prydwen's bow scrapes on the beach and Arthur gives Excalibur to Derfel and asks him to promise to throw it in the sea. Unwounded warriors lift Arthur into the boat and Guinevere makes a pillow of Arthur's cloak. She asks Derfel



if he will come into the boat, but he tells her he must stay and lead the surviving warriors while she must take as many of the wounded as she can. He persuades Gwydre to join his father and tells him to tell his father that he loved him till the end. As Prydwen edges into the deep water Ceinwyn jumps from the boat into the shallows to join Derfel.

Behind the remnants of Mordred's defeated army Derfel sees Nimue on a white horse dressed in a white cloak. He calls for a horse, and putting Excalibur under the stump of his left arm, he gallops towards Nimue and the shore. As he passes close to Nimue, he raises Excalibur in his right hand and also the stump of his left arm so that she can see how he broke her spell. Then he gallops furiously into the waves and, when the water is at his horse's chest, he throws Excalibur as far as he can into the swirling waters of the deep channel. Nimue wails in rage as she watches the brilliant blue blade of Excalibur disappear into the deep water. Derfel gallops back to his small band of remaining warriors but he is unmolested. Nimue's army of madmen is retreating, as also are the defeated Mordred warriors, for a new force has entered the arena. It is Meurig's army from Gwent, their red cloaks and scarlet plumes glow black in the failing light.

Derfel takes Ceinwyn to the top of a large dune and together they watch Arthur's ship sailing west into the sea way, a silver ship driven by a scarlet sail of the finest linen, with a white bow wave as it plunges westward into the setting sun. As Derfel and Ceinwyn, now in the evening shadows, watch, a silver mist spreads across the water, glowing in the glinting sea, and Arthur is gone forever.

Part Four, The Last Enchantment Analysis

As with all the preceding sections, this begins with a preamble in which Derfel, the narrator of the story, discusses the tale so far and the motives of Arthur in renouncing the throne of Dumnonia. This time however, Queen Igraine, his patroness, is replaced by the translator Dafydd, as Igraine has successfully given birth to a son, whom she calls Arthur. As Derfel completes the last part of Arthur's story, the Saxons are again approaching Dumnonia and fires are visible from monastery at Dinnewrac. Bishop Sansum returns Derfel's sword Hywelbane to him so he can guard the monastery gates. The aged and weakened Derfel thinks this is ludicrous, but as he recounts the last chapter in Arthur's saga, he cradles Hywelbane in his arm and recalls his youth and prime. This foreshadowing of the resurgence of the Saxon invaders and a weakened Briton serves as an ominous backdrop to the end of Arthur's story.

The resumption of the tale starts with Derfel's recovery from the amputation and Ceinwyn's return to good health. The scene of the action is now Isca in Siluria, the place that Arthur and Guinivere have been living a tranquil life. Inevitably, Arthur, Derfel, and Galahad get drawn into the struggle for the succession of Dumnonia on the anticipated death, in France, of Mordred the titular king. Derfel's second in command, Issa has been left in charge, but this has not been a successful arrangement and Mordred and Argante have been actively plotting against Arthur. To them, Arthur, living in Isca, represents a continuous threat, especially as Arthur's son Gwydre, married to Derfel and



Ceinwyn's daughter, Morwenna, has produced a son, while Mordred and Argante are childless.

The disastrous trip to Dumnonia by Derfel dramatically demonstrates how badly Arthur and his followers have misjudged both Mordred's ability and his ruthlessness to pursue his aims. Derfel's narrow escape from execution by Mordred and his new allies, Amhar and Loholt who last appeared in the battle of Mynydd Baddon, is accomplished by a brand new character, the bard Taliesin. Taliesin's ability to communicate with Merlin through dreams, and his realistic assumption of the role and office of a Druid, are key factors in the structure of the plot.

The ethical basis for Arthur's attempt to recover the throne of Dumnonia for his son is rather weak. At best it gives the impression of indecisiveness. Why did he relinquish the throne when he could have kept it and handed it to his son? Alternatively it displays naked nepotism on Arthur's part, or more probably on the part of Guinevere, who now echoes the motivation for her betrayal of Arthur with her misalliance with Lancelot. The repeated invocation of Arthur's oath to Uther seems to elevate a perfectly normal piece of political maneuvering to the level of a sacred oath.

The news that Mordred is marching across the Kingdom of Gwent towards Arthur initiates a plan, which has been in place for sometime, and incorporates an embarkation and escape by sea toward Sagramor, who has remained strong and loyal to Arthur. One of the features of the story is the complete inexperience of Arthur and his warriors in matters marine. It suggests a rather arrogant dismissal of a whole means of transportation at least, if not a method of war, on the part of the Britons. Their greatest enemies, the Saxons and Angles have crossed to Briton by sea as witnessed by their fleets of boats on the East coast. As it is, almost overcome by the sudden and unanticipated appearance of Nimue and her army of madmen, Arthur's boat is the sole survivor after a sudden storm sweeps across the Silurian fleet. It is the skill of the boatman, Balig, and his use of the sail and spar as a sea anchor, which saves them. Later, as they struggle towards Camlann and the boat kept by Caddwyg, their lack of foresight in warning him early enough, leads to the delay in flight to Broceliande, while Caddwyg has to prepare the hull and raise the mast and sail.

The sequence of actions which comprise the battle of Camlann while Sagramor's reinforcements fight with, first of all Mordred's cavalry and then his spearmen, represent a tour de force of depiction of the details of hand to hand fighting in the shield walls of this period. The ruthlessness of Arthur's men, who question their prisoners, and having extracted what they wanted to know, then kill them, is matched only by their use of the ghost fence. It amply illustrates the callous disregard for life, which was obviously prevalent in this time in history.

The climax of the epic comes in the final duel between Arthur and his mortal enemy Mordred. Mordred, who has surprised many by becoming a successful leader and warrior, is a resolute match for Arthur and his sword Excalibur. In the end Mordred's helmet is no protection against a mighty blow from Excalibur and his skull is split, but



not before Mordred's sword has pierced the faceplate of Arthur's helmet and mortally wounded Arthur.

With the mortally wounded Arthur transferred to the boat Prydwen and the survivors of Arthur's forces saved from extinction at the hands of Nimue's Bloodshields by the arrival of King Meurig's men, the last elements of the myth are completed when Derfel throws Excalibur into the sea as Arthur instructed. The final image is that of the scarlet sail of Prydwen driving the silver hued boat into the seaway from which, in fulfillment of Merlin's last enchantment, a silver mist enfolds the craft.



Characters

Derfel

Lord Derfel Cadarn is the narrator of the story of Arthur. As narrator he is portrayed as a scribe living in a small cell in the Christian monastery of Dinnewrac in the British kingdom of Powys working under the patronage of Queen Igraine.

In the tale of Arthur, Lord Derfel Cadarn is one of Arthur's most loyal and long time warriors. He is also, initially at least, a personal friend of the Druid Merlin and Merlin's companion Nimue. Derfel goes into the many battles in, which he participates, with his sword Hywelbane, and with the armor breastplate and face masked helmet of a warrior king.

Derfel's prowess as a swordsman is exemplified when he is challenged to single-handed combat by the Saxon King Aelle's champion as he goes to negotiate with the Saxons on behalf of Arthur. He is able to avoid the tricks of the champion and disarms him with a mighty blow of Hywelbane. Instead of dispatching his fallen opponent Derfel spares him and is invited to join the Saxons at their feast.

Derfel is a natural son of the Saxon king Aelle and this stands him in good stead when he has to deal with the Saxons after they have invaded the British kingdoms. When the British finally overcome the invading Saxons at the battle of Mynydd Baddon and Aelle is trapped with his men, he entreats Derfel to kill him instead of surrendering. Derfel reluctantly does so after an emotional farewell to his father. In doing so Derfel is fulfilling the prophesy of his mother who predicted Aelle would be killed by one of his sons.

After the triumph at Mynydd Baddon, Derfel is put in charge of the kingdom of Dumnonia by Arthur though theoretically the kingdom is ruled by the titular king Mordred. Derfel and his lifetime companion Ceinwyn have two daughters, Morwenna and Serfen. Morwenna marries Gwydre the son of Arthur and Guinevere and Serfen dies in childbirth. Derfel is a constant companion of Arthur and Guinevere when they go to live in Isca, Siluria, and it is here that Derfel is led to the sacred grove in Powys where Nimue has cast a spell on Ceinwyn who is suffering horribly under the spell. To cast off the spell Derfel has to sacrifice his left arm, which is amputated by Arthur, and after which Derfel has to convert to Christianity.

After the battle of Camlann, Derfel and Ceinwyn watch the mortally wounded Arthur leave on his final voyage into the Severn Sea in the ship Prydwen. The boat sails out to sea into a silver sea mist and the setting sun. Derfel then falls into the hands of the Christian king Meurig, whose bishop Sansum oversees his supposed Saxon version of the life of Christ which is, in fact, the story of Arthur.



Arthur

Arthur is the leader of the British kings facing the continued encroachment of the invading Saxons. Arthur is the illegitimate son of Uther the original king of the British kingdom of Dumnonia and has sworn a solemn oath to Uther to help Mordred remain the titular king of Dumnonia. Arthur, however, is the ruler of Dumnonia. He has united the British kings against the Saxons and kept them out of the British territories in south and southwest Britain. His closest friend Lancelot joined in a rebellion by the Christianized Britons in Dumnonia and also seduced Guinevere, Arthur's queen. Arthur suppressed the rebellion and incarcerated Guinevere at his sister's castle at Ynys Wydryn, instead of having her executed as custom required.

As the story unfolds, Arthur is still brokenhearted by Guinevere's betrayal. He incurs the enmity of the Christians in his kingdom by endorsing the Druidic religion and the Druids by not agreeing to the child sacrifices required by the Druids.

Arthur continuously strives to unite the British kings against the renewed assault by the Saxons, which is expected in the spring. The Saxons are united, but the British continue to quarrel among themselves. When the Saxons do invade the British kingdoms, Arthur, with the help of fiercely loyal warriors like Derfel, Sagramor and allies like Oengus mac Airem, defeats them at the battle of Mynydd Baddon. Arthur's most potent weapon is the heavily armed cavalry, which he leads into battle.

In order to cement the alliances with other kings which led to the victory at Mynydd Baddon, Arthur, following his own wishes, abdicates from his position as warlord of Dumnonia and settles across the Severn Estuary, at Isca in Siluria. He takes Guinevere with him as they are now reconciled after her valiant participation in the battle of Mynydd Baddon.

With no ambition for his own power, Arthur, nevertheless participates in an effort to place his own son, Gwydre, on the throne of Dumnonia when it is rumored that Mordred has died on a campaign in Amorica. The arrival of the still very much alive Mordred to attack Arthur at Isca causes Arthur to flee to Camlann where he intends taking a boat to Broceliande whose king is married to his sister. The final confrontation between Arthur and Mordred takes place at Camlann where Arthur kills Mordred during the battle in single-handed combat. Mortally wounded Arthur is taken onboard the boat and sails off into the sunset never to be seen again.

Guinevere

Guinevere is Arthur's wife and queen. She betrayed him by allowing herself to be seduced by Lancelot, who, in turn, betrays Arthur's trust by joining in the Christian rebellion against Arthur. When Arthur quells the rebellion he has Guinevere jailed at his sister's castle Ynys Wydryn. Arthur is still deeply in love with Guinevere and assigns Derfel to look after her when the Saxons invade. As Guinevere explains to Derfel, she never really did love Lancelot and found his infatuation tiresome. Her real motivation for



the betrayal of Arthur was hunger for power. When she is trapped with Derfel by the Saxons at Mynydd Baddon Guinevere takes an active part in the defense of the old citadel, devising a plan to destroy the advancing Saxon shield wall with burning ox carts. Then she dresses in the costume of a British warrior and joins them in the battlefield. Derfel devises a banner for her and flies it from the ramparts, next to his own and Arthur's. Arthur, fully aware of Guinevere's presence at the battle, nevertheless avoids speaking to her until after the victory when, out of sight of all, they are reconciled.

Ceinwyn

Ceinwyn is the sister of King Cuneglas of Powys. She has never formally married Derfel but they have been lifetime companions and Derfel, despite many temptations, has always remained true to her. Their first daughter Dian is killed by Lancelot's men during the rebellion, and they have two others, Morwenna and Serfen. Morwenna marries Gwydre, Arthur's son.

Ceinwyn is the victim of Nimue's sorcery and suffers untold agony as the black magic takes hold. Derfel does not hesitate to have his left arm amputated to help a magic charm to lift Nimue's curse. Ceinwyn demonstrates her loyalty to Derfel by leaping from the boat carrying Arthur to safety at Camlann, to join Derfel as he bids farewell to his King.

Merlin

Merlin is the Druid at Arthur's court. His abiding ambition is to bring back the ancient gods of Britain. He is a wise but sometimes unkind wizard and does not hesitate in creating false illusions and stagecraft type magic to achieve his ends.

His major effort is at Mai Dun, the pre Roman earthwork citadel at the feast of Samian when he lights huge bonfires as a prelude to inducing the ancient gods to return to Britain and save the country from the Saxon threat. He and his priestess, Nimue, are only prevented by Arthur and his warriors, at the last moment, from carrying through with the sacrifice of the sons of various rulers.

Merlin is instrumental in using the pickled corpse of the sacrificed Gawain as a talisman to lead the charge of Oengus mac Airem's Black Shields in the final moments of the battle of Mynydd Baddon.

When Derfel is brought to the sacred grove in Powys, where Nimue holds court, he finds Merlin has become Nimue's prisoner. She has blinded him and keeps him in a cage of wooden boughs. As Arthur escapes by boat from Isca, Nimue cuts Merlin's throat and throws his body into the waves. Derfel believes that the subsequent storm, which destroys all of Arthur's fleet except his own craft, is due to Merlin's death as evidenced by the floating Druid's corpse, which follows the boats in the storm.



Nimue

Nimue is Merlin's priestess. Derfel refers to her as a former friend and lover and carries a scar on his left wrist as a souvenir of their tryst. Nimue never forgives Derfel for stopping the sacrifice of the children at the great ritual at Mai Dun. Nimue is responsible for the suffering inflicted on Ceinwyn when Nimue casts a spell on her in Isca in an effort to get Derfel to deliver Excalibur and Arthur's son Gwydre to her. She overcomes Merlin and extracts all his magic except for one last enchantment. Now at the head of a vast horde of misshapen and outcast warriors, the Blood Shields, Nimue tries, unsuccessfully, to prevent Arthur from escaping from Mordred's clutches.

Lancelot

Lancelot was a very close friend to Arthur and one of his loyal warriors. Becoming infatuated with Guinivere, he seduces her and leads an unsuccessful rebellion against Arthur. When the rebellion is quashed he flees to the kingdom of Belgae from where he forms an alliance with the Saxon king Cerdic. At the battle of Mynydd Baddon he flees from the battlefield and is captured by Derfel. Derfel defeats him in single-handed combat and then orders him to be hanged like a common criminal.

Amhar and Loholt

Amhar and Loholt are the twin illegitimate sons of Arthur. They are mortal enemies of Derfel and ally themselves with Mordred in his quest to destroy Arthur. Amhar is killed by Derfel when he retrieves Hywelbane in his escape from Mordred's camp. Loholt is killed by Sagramor in the battle of Camlann.

Gawain

Gawain is the son of King Budic of Broceliande. He is promised the hand of Olwen the Silver in return for remaining pure and cooperating with Merlin in the rituals at Mai Dun. He is sacrificed to the old gods by Merlin, who places his corpse, packed in salt, in the Cauldron of Clyddno Eiddyn. At the battle of Mynydd Baddon it is this corpse, bound to horse with the banner of the Red Dragon, that leads the charge of the Black Shields

Galahad

Galahad is one of Arthur's warriors. He has been converted to Christianity but still remains friends with Derfel.



Issa

Issa is Derfel's right hand man and is inducted into the Mithraic religion by Derfel. He is slaughtered at Dun Caric with all his men by Mordred's horse warriors in an ambush while Derfel is visiting Arthur and Guinevere in Isca.

Sagramor

Sagramor is one of Arthur's most fearsome warriors. He guards the kingdom of Durnovaria when Arthur abdicates the throne of Dumnonia. A Numidian, his armor and shield are all black. He dies at the battle of Camlann after slaying Loholt.

Cluneglas

Cluneglas is the King of Powys and brother to Ceinwyn. He dies at the battle of Mynydd Baddon after being provoked into single-handed combat by Liofa, Cerdic's treacherous champion.

Culhwch

Culhwch is one of Arthur's warriors. He guards the frontier for Arthur. A blunt uncomplicated warrior, he is one of those who attends the rites of Mithras. He dies fighting at the battle of Camlann.

Aelle

Aelle is a powerful Saxon king in alliance with Cerdic. Derfel is his natural and first-born son. Aelle tells Derfel that, in fact, he, and, therefore, his progeny, are Aengles. With the defeat of his army at Mynydd Baddon, he refuses to surrender, though promised a safe and honorable captivity and prevails on Derfel to dispatch him to his blessed home in the sky.

Cerdic

Cerdic is a great and powerful Saxon king whose lands lie adjacent to those of Aelle on the east coast of Britain. He escapes from the defeat of the Saxons at Mynydd Baddon and eludes Arthur who follows him as he flees eastwards.

Mordred

Mordred is the legitimate son of King Uther of Dumnonia and, therefore, the titular king. He does not have the power of Arthur but weds Arthur's wife Argante when Arthur



reconciles with Guinevere. To everyone's surprise he grows up to be an effective and successful warrior. At Camlann he tries to overcome Arthur but dies at Arthur's hand when he challenges Arthur to mortal combat.

Meurig

King Meurig rules the kingdom of Gwent. He and his men have converted to Christianity and wear vestigial Roman armor and weapons.

Oengus mac Airem

Oengus mac Airem is king of Demetia, the land to the north, which has been settled by people from Ireland. His men are characterized by the black shields they use. Oengus is the father of Argante who weds first Arthur and then Mordred.

Uther

Uther was the original king of Dumnonia. Arthur is his illegitimate son and Mordred his legitimate son.

Argante

Argante is one of the daughters of Oengus mac Airem. She marries Arthur at first and then Mordred. A dark haired beauty she is, nevertheless, infertile. She vehemently hates Guinevere and plots against Arthur with her husband King Mordred.

Olwen the Silver

Olwen the Silver is an acolyte of Merlin and Nimue. She appears as a naked glowing spirit at Merlin's demonstration at Lindinnis when he organizes the rituals at Mai Dun. It is she who places the spell on Ceinwyn for her mistress Nimue. When Olwen leads Derfel to Nimue's grove she tries, unsuccessfully, to seduce him by parading naked in front of him.

Taliesin

Taliesin is a bard in the court of Arthur. His songs and poetry are superior to all others and he can foretell the future. He also communicates with the absent Merlin through his dreams. Masquerading as a bard, he engineers Derfel's escape when Derfel is captured and about to be executed by Mordred.



Caddwyg

Caddwyg is the boatman who looks after the boat Prydwen at Camlann. He has been warned of Arthur's coming by Merlin, before Merlin was enslaved by Nimue.

Gwydre

Gwydre is the son of Arthur and Guinevere. He is saved from being sacrificed at the Druidic rites of Mai Dun by Arthur and his warriors and later joins in the battle of Mynydd Baddon. He marries Morwenna, the daughter of Ceinwyn and Derfel. Arthur schemes for him to assume the throne of Dumnonia when they believe Mordred to be dead,

Liofa

Liofa is the champion of the Saxon king Cerdic. He fights with a slender blade and relies on parrying thrusts rather than the sweeping strokes of other warriors. He is defeated in a duel by Derfel, who spares his life only to see him challenge and kill Cluneglas at the battle of Mynydd Baddon.

Bishop Emrys

Bishop Emrys is the Christian bishop of Durnovaria and later Bishop of Silurian Isca. He is killed by Nimue's horde of mad men while Arthur escapes by sea from Isca.

Bishop Sansum

Bishop Sansum is the Christian bishop in Dumnonia and is married to Morgan, Arthur's sister. He joins Meurig the king of Christian Gwent and runs the monastery of at Dinnewrac where Derfel pens his story of Arthur.



Objects/Places

The Kingdom of Dumnonia

Dumnonia is the kingdom for which Arthur is the warlord while Mordred is the titular king and ruler. The name comes from Roman times; it incorporates the counties of Somerset and Devon in modern Britain

Lindinnis (Dumnonia)

Lindinnis is the palace where Merlin performs his magic to recruit people for his rites for the return of the old gods. It is at Ilchester in the county of Somerset, in modern day Britain

Mai Dun (Dumnonia)

Mai Dun is the site of an ancient, pre-Roman earthwork fortification. It is here that Merlin summons every one to witness the return of the old gods when he carries out his fires and sacrifices. The site is Maiden Castle, Dorset in modern day Britain

Ynys Wydryn (Dumnonia)

Ynys Wydryn is the castle where Morgan, Arthur's sister, keeps the errant Guinevere incarcerated. The modern location is Glastonbury in the county of Somerset

Dun Caric (Dumnonia)

Dun Caric is the home estate given to Derfel by Merlin, after the display at Lindinnis. Its is assumed to be at Castle Carey in the modern day county of Somerset

Durnovaria (Dumnonia)

Durnovaria is the home of Arthur and is located at the town of Dorchester, Somerset in modern Britain

Aquae Sulis (Dumnonia)

Aquae Sulis is the town founded by the Romans and where they built temples, shrines, and their baths. Derfel considers it to be indefensible. The present day location is at Bath, in Avon.

Mynydd Baddon (Dumnonia)

Mynydd Baddon is an ancient earth rampart defense site from pre-Roman times. When Derfel and his party seek refuge there to escape Saxon horsemen he is unable to escape and is later joined by Arthur and his allies who are surrounded by the combined armies of the Saxon Kings, Cerdic and Aelle. It thus becomes the site of a major battle,



which results in great victory for Arthur and the British armies. Its location today is postulated as being at Little Solsbury Hill, near Bath, Avon

Camlann (Dumnonia)

Camlann is the point on the coast where Arthur embarks to escape the forces of Mordred, Nimue, and Meurig. It is the scene of the final battle where Arthur slays Mordred in single-handed combat but is, himself, mortally wounded. One suggested modern day location is Dawlish Warren, in county Devon.

The Kingdom of Lloegyr (Aelle's Land)

The Kingdom of Lloegyr is the area in the east of Britain, which has been invaded and settled by Angles and Saxons from across the German sea. It is ruled by King Aelle, whose first-born, natural son is Derfel. It comprises the modern day British counties of Essex, Suffolk, and Norfolk.

Thunreslea (Aelle's Land)

Thunreslea is the location of King Aelle's headquarters and feasting hall. It is here that Derfel goes, at great risk, to treat with Aelle. Its present day location is Thundersly in the county of Essex.

Pontes (Aelle's Land)

Pontes is the old Roman name for a spot on the river Thames where the Saxons gather supplies to invade to the west. Its location in modern day Britain is the city of Staines.

The Kingdom of Gwent

Gwent is the kingdom to the north of Dumnonia. It is ruled by King Meurig who has converted to Christianity. It borders Siluria to the west and King Aelle's kingdom to the East. In modern day Britain it would cover south west Wales and the county of Gloucestershire.

Glevum (Gwent)

Glevum is the town to which the refugees from the Saxon advance flee. In modern day Britain it is the city of Gloucester in the county of Gloucestershire.

Corinium (Gwent)

Corinium is the town where Arthur plans on meeting the combined Saxon armies, which he assumes will advance up the Thames valley. This is now known as Cirencester in the county of Gloucestershire



The Kingdom of Siluria

The Kingdom of Siluria is where Arthur goes after he has relinquished the ruler ship of Dumnonia. It abuts the kingdom of Gwent. Its location in modern day Britain is South East Wales, bordering on the Severn Estuary.

Isca (Siluria)

Isca is the town in Siluria where Arthur takes up residence when he leaves Dumnonia. It was built by the Romans and has an amphitheater and a Roman bridge. The location in modern day Britain is the town of Carleon in the modern British county of Gwent.

Kingdom of Powys

The Kingdom of Powys is to the north of Siluria. It is ruled by Ceinwyn's brother King Cluneglas. It is also, in the wild part of Powys that Nimue establishes her sacred grove where she controls the horde of madmen and the Bloodshields. In modern day Britain it comprises Central Wales and the English Midlands.

Dinnewrac

Dinnewrac is the name of the Christian monastery where Derfel writes his narrative under the patronage of Queen Igraine of Powys. In today's Britain the assumed location of Dinnewrac is the town of Welshpool in Wales.

Kingdom of Demetia

The Kingdom of Demetia is ruled by Oengus mac Airem and is settled by former raiders from Ireland. In modern Britain it is the area of South West Wales facing the Irish Sea.

Amorica

Armorica is the land across the sea in France, which in modern times comprises the French Department of Brittany.

Kingdom of Broceliande

The Kingdom of Broceliande in Amorica is ruled by King Budic whose son is Prince Gawain. It is also where King Mordred is captured and ransomed.

Excalibur

Excalibur is Arthur's sword. It is also regarded by the Druids as one of the treasures of Britain. It is also known as the Sword of Rhydderch. Nimue places a curse on Ceinwyn



to get Derfel to return Excalibur to her, but after the battle of Camlann. Derfel, on Arthur's instructions, throws it into the sea.

Hywelbane

Hywelbane is Derfel's sword. It has magic emblems in the hilt. Derfel risks his life to recover Hywelbane when he escapes from Mordred at Dun Caric and it is returned to him by Bishop Sansum when he wants the aged Derfel to guard the gates of Dinnewrac monastery.

The Cauldron of Clyddno Eiddyn

The Cauldron of Clyddno Eiddyn is one of the Treasures of Britain. It is a huge silver bowl decorated with a golden tracery of warriors and beasts. It is used in the rituals at Mai Dun and at the end of the rituals contains the body of the sacrificed Gawain packed in salt.

Shield Wall

The Shield Wall is an interlocking line of shields used defensively and offensively by both the Saxons and the Britons in their battles.

Ghost Fence

A Ghost Fence is a line of skulls, charmed by a Druid, through which ordinary mortals are afraid to pass. Derfel and his men use one in the defense of their position at Camlann.

Prydwen

Prydwen is the name of the boat kept at Camlann to be used by Arthur to escape to sea as prophesied by Merlin.

Wraithstone

The Wraithstone, a magic stone in the prow of the boat Prydwen, placed there at Merlin's behest, to ensure Arthur sails to his destiny, despite all attempts to change the course.

Banners

Arthur's Banner



Arthur's banner comprises a bear on a white background. It is left behind by Argante when she is rescued from Derfel's party and which causes the Saxons to think that Arthur is with the group taking refuge at Mynydd Baddon.

Guinevere's Banner

At the battle of Mynydd Baddon, because of her help and leadership, Derfel places an improvised version of Guinevere's banner on the ramparts. It comprises a moon-crowned stag.

Merlin's Banner

Merlin's banner, signifying the ancient gods of Britain, is a fiery red dragon on a white background. It is carried by the horseback supported corpse of Gawain in the lead of the Blackshields at the conclusion of the battle at Mynydd Baddon.

Derfel's Banner

Derfel's banner shows the white star of Powys in honor of Ceinwyn.

Piddocks

Piddocks are shell fish gathered and used by Merlin to cause the skin of the naked Olwen to glow with a supernatural light.

Aelle's Agate ring

Aelle's Agate ring is given to Derfel for his Ceinwyn by Aelle when Derfel takes leave of his natural father at Thunreslea.

The Last Enchantment

The Last Enchantment is the magic saved from Nimue's grasp by the dying Merlin. It includes a silver mist.



Themes

Names as Cultural Emblems

From the onset of the story, the reader encounters names of people and places, which sound and look strange and exotic. The setting of the tale is sixth century Britain, two hundred years after the Romans left Europe. Now the Celtic kingdoms fight among themselves while the invading Angles and Saxons settle in the eastern part of the island and push to overwhelm the Celtic Britons.

It is the name of a place which gives a clue as to in which region of Britain it falls and its history. Thus Powys is the Celtic name for a large area of what is now Wales.

Dumnonia, as with all names ending in "ia" or "um" is a Roman name, as are Glevum and Pontes. The complication arises when Roman names have survived, in situ, and often contain references made by the Romans to the original British kingdoms in which they established their cities or fortifications. Thus Siluria is the Roman name of the area in modern South Wales to which Arthur and his court retires after he leaves Dumnonia.

The eastern part of Britain where the Angles and Saxon invaders have settled is called Lloegyr by the British, a typical Celtic name with the double "ll" beginning of the name, and Aengeland by King Aelle. By the same token, when Derfel is trapped near Aquae Sulis there is no doubt that Aquae Sulis is a Roman town with baths, temples, and amphitheatres, while Mynydd Baddon is the name of a pre Roman Earth-Rampart fortification nearby.

Though never explicitly explained in the tale, the reader cannot help noticing the preponderance of "Caer" and "Ynys" in places names in the south and west of Britain and correctly deduces that these indicate Celtic locations.

A similar theme runs through the names of the various characters whose names are sprinkled throughout the text. Ceinwyn, a Princess of Powys, and Derfel's companion is obviously of Celtic origin as well as is Guinevere, a Princess of the Henin-Wyren, though the former has golden hair and the latter flaming red hair. Names such as Cywwlog, Culhwch and Cuneclas and Clyddno Eidyn all carry the unmistakable stamp of the Celtic culture while Oengus mac Airem denotes the origin from further afield, in this case the Ui Liatháin people of Ireland.

In this way the tale carries the cultural emblem of the person or place by the form and enunciation of the name.

The Transformation and Evolution of Religion

The variegated patchwork of kingdoms which have grown up over the ruins of the abandoned Roman Territory of Britain, exhibits an equally multifarious mosaic of different religions and religious practices. The depiction of the Britain that Arthur saves



from the invading Saxons is that of a melting pot of different religions and belief systems. More to the point is the beginning of the emergence of one dominant religion and the portrayal of the corresponding decline of the religions which are being displaced. The underlying mechanism by which this transformation takes place is alluded to in several places in the story.

King Arthur is blamed, first by the Druids, the official religious leaders of the British, because he prevents Merlin from practicing the sacrifice of young boys who are the sons of ruling monarchs and secondly by the Christians, whose rebellion, under the leadership of Lancelot, he crushes. The propagation of the Christian faith is strongly prevented by Derfel who has no sympathy for it even though he is highly skeptical of the Druids and their practices. Merlin's lack of success at Mai Dun confirms his failure to bring back the ancient gods and consequently to save Britain from the threat of Saxon invasion. By now many of the towns people in the British kingdoms are becoming Christian, and there are Christian bishops in Arthur's and king Mordred's courts who seek to counter the influences of the official druids.

At Dunrovia, while Arthur and his warriors wait for the fires of Mai Dun, it is Bishop Emrys who explains the universality of the concept of animal and human sacrifice in all religions from those of Egypt, to the current Druidic rites, and, significantly, the Christian belief that God sent his only son Jesus to be sacrificed for all mankind. This is the underlying form of the sacrifice of the Christian mass, though, as Emrys is quick to point out, the ritual is now bloodless.

The Saxon and British gods and festivals have a common basis. The festivals coincide with the summer and winter solstices and with the spring and autumn equinoxes, all combined with various gods and goddesses of war. The displacement of one religion by another is, therefore, largely a result of victory in war. Derfel and others of Arthur's warriors go into battle invoking the aid of Bel and Mor and their men sing the ancient battle songs of the Death Song of Werlinna but privately they still practice the worship of the god Mithras and sacrifice a bull once a year in one of the Mithraic temples left behind by the Romans.

The successful propagation of a religion is exemplified by Arthur ordering Christian crosses on his men's shields as a political price for King Meurig's alliance at Mynydd Baddon. Then Derfel, himself, agrees to being baptized a Christian as part of the price he has to pay to lift Nimue's curse on Ceinwyn. Both conversions are fairly superficial but as the tale ends and Arthur and Mordred have succeeded in destroying each other and their armies, it is the warriors of the Christian King Meurig who, with their Roman swords and armor, inherit the battlefield and advance, without Druids to precede them, carrying the Christian cross on their shields.

Loyalty and Leadership

The leadership and the web of power which forms the basis for the nations occupying Britain at the beginning of the sixteenth century rests primarily on the pyramid of loyalty



and leadership extending down through society. At the top of the pyramid are the warlords, the warrior kings, respectfully addressed by their equals as "Lord King." Below them each warrior king commands his own group of warriors who are loyal to him and him alone. Each warrior king rules his own domain, his lands and peasants who till the land for him and his warriors. The warlord maintains his position as leader by looking after the interests of his subordinates and by leading them into battle. His skill and bravery in battle must be evident and constant, though, as in the case of Cerdic, the Saxon king at Thunreslea, he can designate a champion to fight personal duels for him.

Even so a warlord has to earn the respect and loyalty of his followers, even when, as in some cases such as King Mordred's, there were incentives such as the promise of plunder, booty and treasure. It is significant that at the battle of Camlann, Mordred has difficulty persuading his men to attack Arthur's shield wall and almost as a last resort, joins in the battle only to lose his life in the final single-handed duel. In battle the warlords, with their superior armor, flamboyant helmet crests, and shields are an attractive target for the enemy warriors. When the opposing leader is killed, or disabled, it is often the case that his entire army retreats from the battle. This is probably the significance of Arthur trying to obtain the surrender of King Aelle at the conclusion of the battle of Mynydd Baddon and Aelle's staunch refusal to do so and his insistence on death at the hands of his natural son, Derfel, as the only honorable way for him to die.

Arthur and Derfel obviously have such a strong bond between them that Derfel can accept the almost suicidal mission to negotiate with King Aelle. As the tale unfolds, it appears that Arthur seems to take advantage of Derfel's loyalty though Arthur trusts Derfel enough to take care of Guinevere, without specifying whether it is to protect her or execute her.

Guinevere's betrayal of Arthur's trust is, on her own admission to Derfel, based largely on a desire for power, rather than romantic involvement with Lancelot, though being caught "in flagrante delictu" with Arthur's closest friend would normally be the death knell for both of them. Arthur's ability to forgive his enemies seems almost a fault of character and in his surrender of the throne of Dumnonia to pursue a peaceful life in Siluria can be taken as a betrayal of his responsibilities. Certainly some of his loyal warlords and especially Merlin, think he should have executed Guinevere and then killed Mordred for plotting against him and in this way ensured the security of Britain.

The rationale for his refusal to do so is his sworn oath to Uther, which seems strange, given the fact that Uther never really wanted Arthur to sign the oath that binds him to protecting the throne of Dumnonia for Mordred. Arthur's two sons by his Irish mistress Aillean turn against him and join Mordred in trying to destroy Arthur and yet he persists in installing Mordred in Lindinnis and then arranging for Mordred to wed Argante, the daughter of Oengus mac Airem.

In this tangled weave of love, betrayal and broken oaths the constant fidelity to each other of Ceinwyn and Derfel stands out like a beacon of integrity and true love.



Style

Point of View

The story of King Arthur is narrated from the first person point of view of Derfel. However, there are two Derfel's. The first is a scribe in a monastery cell recalling the events of Arthur's life and deeds; he is writing on parchment in the Saxon language. The second Derfel is Lord Derfel of Cadarn, Warrior of the Cauldron, and one of King Arthur's most powerful and trusted warrior kings.

Each part of the story begins with a preamble as the monk Derfel discusses his unfolding narrative with his patroness, Queen Igraine. This device allows the narrator to discuss various aspects of his story and to foreshadow events in the subsequent pages of the chapter.

The switch to the recollections of Lord Derfel, the warrior king is made without any overt indication to the reader, but the exposition of the narrative makes it clear when the scene has changed from the monastic cell at Dinnewrac to the developing narrative.

Both the monastic scribe and the warrior king elicit the feelings and thoughts of other characters by dialogue and by his reaction and commentary on the dialogue. Thus the reader gains knowledge of Arthur's motives and plans for dealing with the Saxon invasion and subsequently his personal reasons for going to live in Siluria. In a similar fashion, Derfel, during a rare intimate conversation with the disgraced Queen Guinevere, learns her stated reasons and motivation for her betrayal of Arthur.

Interspersed with the main narrative, which is given from the first person point of view, the occasional, omniscient third person point of view is used for exposition of the action and description of the general environment. The depiction of the countryside and rural scenes during different seasons is used effectively as an introduction to the action in general.

The preambles at the start of each chapter gradually develop details of the monastic Derfel. The reader learns he is a Christian and that he has lost his arm. The foreshadowing of the final convergence of the one armed, monastic Christian scribe with the powerful warrior King, is an additional incentive for the reader to continue with the narrative of the life of King Arthur.

Setting

The setting of the story is Britain at the end of the sixth century (500 A D). The Roman occupation has been over for at least a hundred years, and the British kingdoms and tribes, left behind after the departure of the Romans are being invaded by Saxons and Angles who have seized and settled large swathes of Eastern Britain.



Prior to the opening of the narrative of this part of Arthur's reign as king of a united Britain, Arthur has successfully crushed a rebellion by Christian elements of the kingdom of Dumnonia. His most trusted warrior warlord, Lancelot, not only led the rebellion, but also seduced Arthur's Queen Guinevere. At the opening of this narrative, Guinevere is imprisoned in a castle and Lancelot has fled south to the Belgic lands in southern Britain.

The actions described take place in locations which range from Arthur's kingdom of Dumnonia, to the Eastern Kingdoms of the invading Saxons, to the epic battle at Mynydd Baddon and then to the area called Siluria, which is in present day southern Wales.

Language and Meaning

The language of the narrative is straightforward modern English, but the frequently occurring place names and characters are modern spellings of Celtic and Saxon nomenclature. There are lists of place names and characters at the beginning of the book and a critically important map of the political boundaries of Britain in 500 AD.

Part of the dramatic impact of the book is the abrupt, total immersion of the reader in sixth century Britain as exemplified by the encounter with unfamiliar and exotic names, such as Ynys Wydryn and Ceinwyn of Powys. Unless the reader is familiar with the still-existing Welsh language, this represents something of a cultural shock. Apart from the very limited lists at the beginning of the book, the reader is given no assistance by the author, but after a dozen or more pages becomes familiar with the cultural environment and probably is able to correlate specific names with the underlying cultural origin.

Coupled with the depiction of post-Roman occupation Britain, most readers will be familiar with the romantic Victorian legend of King Arthur and his knights. This account of a fictionalized, but probably much more realistic and accurate version of the story, will undoubtedly raise the interest of the reader. Woven into the realistic depiction of life and conflict in this era of British history, there is still an element of magic and wizardry in the tale, particularly at the conclusion of the chapter entitled "The Last Enchantment."

Structure

The book is divided into four Parts or chapters. Each Part is titled, but within each Part there are only blank spaces to denote a change of scene and the occasional blank page to denote a major break in the story within a named Part. There is no table of contents, but at the beginning of the book there are two lists, one of characters and one of place names. The place name list differentiates between fictional names and those which refer to existing places in modern day Britain. These are followed by a critically important map of the Kingdoms of Britain in 525 AD.

At the end of the book there is a three-page Historical Note. This provides a very welcome bridge between historical research and the story developed by the author.

Here the historical sources which substantiate important events in the story, such as the Battle of Mynydd Baddon, are given and discussed.



Quotes

"History is a story told by men and of men's making, but in this tale of Arthur, like the glimmer of salmon in peat-dark water, the women do shine." Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun, p 3.

"Children of Britain,' he said, and he had a voice to match his beauty, a gentle voice, full of warmth, 'pray to your Gods. Within these walls are the Treasures of Britain and soon, very soon, their power will be unleashed, but now, so that you can see their power, we shall let the Gods speak to us.'" Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun, p 11.

"One battle,' Arthur said grimly, 'we may only have one battle. When the Saxons come, Derfel, they will outnumber us. Even if Powys and Gwent send all their men, we shall be outnumbered.'" Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun, p 27.

"A scar, Liofa,' I said, 'to remind you that you fought the Lord Derfel Cadarn, son of Aelle, and that you lost.'" Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun, p 48.

"His son, of course. It was ever thus, Lord. Our own God sacrificed His Son, Jesus Christ, and even demanded that Abraham kill Isaac, though, of course, He relented that desire. But Cefydd's Druids persuaded him to kill his son. It didn't work, of course. History records that the Romans killed Cefydd and all his army and then destroyed the Druid's groves on Ynys Mon.'" Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun, p 99.

"But I am the lord of the land both sides of the stream,' I said, 'and all of the land southwards to Caer Cadarn and northwards to Aquae Sulis and you do not preach here without my permission.'" Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun, p 117.

"The first attack will be on the Thames, and that will be large enough to make you think it is their main attack. And once Arthur has gathered his forces to oppose that army, Cerdic will march in the south. He'll run wild, Derfel, and Arthur will have to send men to oppose him, and when he does, Aelle will attack the rest.'" Part One, The Fires of Mai Dun, p 126 - 127.

"Mordred's task,' I said to Dyrrig, 'is to whelp an heir of a proper wife, but once he's given us a new King he would be well advised to wear an iron collar.'" Part Two Mynydd Baddon, p 169.

"Have you ever seen the Saxons attack?" I asked Cildydd. 'They send big war-dogs first and they come behind with axes three feet long and spears on eight-foot shafts. They're drunk, they're maddened, and they want nothing but the women and the gold inside your city. How long do you think your levy will hold?'" Part Two Mynydd Baddon, p 187.

"It's named like the city, Lord,' he said, apparently bemused that I should even want to know the name.



'Aquae Sulis?' I asked him.

'No Lord! The old name! The name before the Romans came.'

'Baddon,' I said.

'And this is Mynydd Baddon, Lord,' he confirmed. " Part Two Mynydd Baddon, p 196

"His reference to Arthur puzzled me, but it was not my judge to disabuse the enemy if they thought Arthur was on Mynydd Baddon. 'Arthur has better things to do than to kill vermin,' I said, ' So he asked me to slaughter you, then bury your fat corpse with your feet pointing south so that through all time you will wander lonely and hurting, never able to find your Otherworld.'" Part Two Mynydd Baddon, p 207.

"She smiled. 'Then you don't need my advice after all. Go and fight, Derfel, and if I don't see you till the Otherworld, then know that you cross the bridge of swords with my love.'" Part Two Mynydd Baddon, p 233.

"'It wasn't me, Lord,' I said, 'but her.' I jerked my head towards Guinevere's flag. 'It was all her doing, Lord. I was ready to die, but she had other ideas.' 'She always did,' he said softly, but asked nothing more." Part Two Mynydd Baddon, p 236.

"A terrible hate wells up in battle, a hatred that comes from the dark soul to fill a man with fierce and bloody anger. Enjoyment, too. I knew that Saxon shield wall would break. I knew it long before I attacked it. The wall was too thin, had been too hurried in the making, and was too nervous, and so I broke out of our front rank and shouted my hate as I ran at the enemy." Part Two Mynydd Baddon, p 256.

"For we had won. We had turned the fields beside the river into slaughterhouse. We had saved Britain and fulfilled Arthur's dream. We were the kings of slaughter and the lords of the dead, and we howled our bloody triumph to the sky. For the power of the Sais was broken." Part Two Mynydd Baddon, p 273.

"'I think Merlin knew he had failed when the Cauldron did not revive Gawain. Why else did he bring the body to Mynydd Baddon? If Merlin had thought, for even one heartbeat, that he could use Gawain's body to summon the Gods then he would never have dissipated its magic in battle.'" Part Three Nimue's Curse, p 353.

"' What do you understand?' she snapped. 'Of course it flows through you. You have been close to Nimue, have you not?'" Part Three Nimue's Curse, p 412

"' The hand that binds you to Nimue,' Morgan said. ' How else do you think the evil is channeled? You must cut it off, Derfel, and give it to me.'" Part Three Nimue's Curse, p 414

"' True,' he admitted, 'and when I agreed to Meurig's demand I thought Mordred would rot away in Durnovaria. I thought he'd rink himself into the grave or fall into a quarrel and fetch a knife in the back,' He shook his head. 'He should never have been King, but what choice did I have? I had sworn Uther's oath.'" Part Four The Last Enchantment, p 441.



"Go with your father,' I said, 'for my sake. And tell him I was true to the end.'" Part Four
The Last Enchantment, p 473.



Topics for Discussion

What is Merlin trying to achieve in the Druidic rituals incorporated in the Fires of Mai Dun. How does he expect the ancient Gods to help against the Saxon invaders? Is it to somehow unite all the people of Briton in an unconquerable mass, or is the magic intended to have an effect on the Saxons? Discuss Merlin's motivation for the fires of Mai Dun.

At Dunrovia, before Mai Dun, Bishop Emrys compares the principle of human sacrifice incorporated in the Christian faith with those of other religions, particularly the Druid religion. What is the commonality among all religions and why is the Christian faith fundamentally different? Discuss.

Current festivals, mostly Christian are based on the solstices and equinoxes of the earth's rotation around the sun. Which festivals or feasts still exist in the modern world and obviously originated in pre-Christian Briton, either by name or by location on the calendar? Discuss the legacy of pagan religion in the modern, western calendar.

Arthur has been betrayed by his closest friend Lancelot, his wife Guinevere, and his natural sons, Amhar and Loholt, by his Irish mistress Aillean, are his mortal enemies. Yet, except for Lancelot, he tolerates their continued existence. Is this almost saintly forbearance or is it a defect in character, which inevitably leads to calamity? Discuss King Arthur's attitude towards his enemies.

Arthur's relationship with the ever-loyal Derfel seems to become distant, despite Derfel's undertaking, almost suicidal missions for Arthur. What could be the reasons for this and does Derfel's loyalty ever waver? Does Arthur's coldness to Derfel have anything to do with Derfel's witnessing Arthur's betrayal by Guinevere? Discuss.

Before a battle, the opposing armies traditionally hold meetings on the field of battle. What is the underlying reason? Is it to give the combatants a chance to negotiate peace to avoid the bloodshed of a full-scale battle? Why does Cerdic feel insulted when Arthur is not present at the pre-battle meeting at Mynydd Baddon? Describe and analyze the pre-battle formalities in Saxon warfare.

Guinevere, in a frank discussion with Derfel when he liberates her from her imprisonment at Ynys Wydern, explains that her motivation for joining with Lancelot in betraying their loyalty to Arthur was more to do with political ambition than romantic love. Subsequently she seems to have a change of heart and with personal courage on the field of battle eventually is reconciled with Arthur. What assurance does Arthur have that she does genuinely reciprocate his true love for her? Discuss Guinevere's relationship with Arthur and his attitude towards her.

Arthur continually seeks allegiances with other kingdoms and cynically agrees to conditions, which he knows he might not keep. Yet his oath to Uther, promising to give the titular throne of Dumnonia to Mordred, both he and Derfel consider to be sacred and

Arthur never considers breaking it. Why is this, and why, when he finally kills King Mordred in single-handed combat does he feel justified in breaking the oath?