

**Lancelot - The Truth behind the Legend**

by

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### [Introduction](#)

Of all the Knights of the Round Table, none is so famous as Sir Lancelot. He is both the finest of the Arthurian knights, and the worst. He is the champion of the Round Table, and the reason for its destruction. He is loyal, yet treacherous. Noble, but base. His is a complex character that combines the best and worst of the world of chivalry in one person.

It is Sir Lancelot who features in every modern adaptation of the old stories. Be it an historical novel, a Hollywood movie or a British TV series, Lancelot is centre stage. He is usually shown as a romantically flawed hero doomed to eventual disgrace by the same talents and skills that earn him fame in the first place. Sometimes his portrayal is darker, sometimes almost comic. But Lancelot is always there.

If Sir Lancelot is ambiguous and contradictory, his background is no less uncertain. While historians are able to trace the background to many of the characters in the

Arthurian cycle, Lancelot remains enigmatic. Some of the companions who have gathered around Arthur in later romances and legends can be traced back to real historic figures, pagan gods or legendary figures, Lancelot has not yet been traced with anything approaching certainty.

I have decided to go back into the murky background of this problematic figure to try to track him down once and for all. What I have found might surprise you.



Lancelot wins a joust during a tournament in front of Arthur and Guinevere.



[Chapter 1](#)

## Lancelot the Legend

Perhaps the fullest account of Lancelot's character and story is given in *Le Morte d'Arthur* "The Death of Arthur" by the English knight and scholar, Sir Thomas Malory. Certainly most modern versions of Lancelot's story draw on this epic, eight book publication, either directly or indirectly.

Malory's vast work includes a lot of Arthurian story matter quite apart from Lancelot. The sword in the stone, Merlin, the Battle of Camlann, the evil enchantments of Morgana la Fay and much more besides are included by Malory. Malory made no secret of the fact that he did not create the stories himself. He was basically producing a modernised and updated version of earlier stories, woven together into a single coherent whole.



Morgana la Fay works her evil enchantments.

As well as producing a single long story out of what had previously been separate tales



and adventures, Sir Thomas Malory was updating them for his own audience, their expectations and assumptions. Like all authors, Sir Thomas Malory wanted his story to be popular, and he wrote it accordingly.

Sir Thomas Malory was born in about 1415 into a family of minor gentry who owned land near Newbold Revel in Warwickshire. By the 1450s Malory had got himself involved in the brutal feuds that tore the nobility of England apart at this period and laid the ground for the Wars of the Roses that were to follow. Accused of robbery, affray and rape, Malory was thrown into prison. He languished there for several months, perhaps as long as two years, before he was released as part of a general amnesty proclaimed by King Edward IV in 1461 as an effort to end the feuding.

It was while in prison that Malory had begun writing stories about King Arthur. The way in which he updated the tales made them hugely popular. Once free, Malory turned to completing his epic work. He had finished by 1468 and died in 1471. His work was copied out into several different versions on manuscript both while he was alive and immediately after his death. It was, however, the invention of printing that ensured the fame of his work. In 1485 William Caxton printed the book in English, and it has rarely been out of print since.

In Malory's work, Lancelot first appears in Book 2 when he appears among the knights enjoying a feast. He is described as being a man who does not have a name. He was orphaned as a baby and brought up the Lady of the Lake. He is therefore referred to as "The White Knight of the Lake". He does not really feature until Book 3 when he leaves Arthur's court at Camelot to have a look around the kingdom.

Before leaving, the White Knight declares his love for Arthur's wife, Queen Guinevere. Lancelot is portrayed as being totally and utterly smitten, though Guinevere's feelings are left in doubt. She recognises that the White Knight is brave, handsome and noble but whether her feelings for him go beyond admiration is not clear.

This section of the story is part of Malory's modernising of the stories. The theme of an illicit love, which the two lovers deny out of duty to a higher ideal, is a major theme of fiction in the later medieval period. At this time the Catholic Church was at last gaining success in its long struggle to lay down the law on morality and marriage. Earlier practice had been that a marriage was simply a contract between two adults - much like a contract of employment or land rental. The marriage could include a host of terms and conditions affecting property held jointly or separately, inheritance, titles and how and when the marriage might end. The Church believed that a marriage should be for life and should include the joint holding of all property of the married couple. Marriage and morality was therefore a hot topic both politically and morally, so it featured in many works of fiction.

In declaring his deep and lasting love for a woman he could never marry, the White Knight allowed Malory to include all sorts of allusions and topical comments that played well to his 15th century audience.

Having left Camelot, Lancelot at once embarks on a round of wonderfully exciting adventures. He comes across a mighty castle beside the sea named the Dolorous Garde, held by the wicked Copper Knight. The White Knight decides to oust the Copper Knight and so free the hapless peasants who live in dread. He attacks the first wall, overcoming

ten knights. He then attacks the second wall, defeating ten more knights. Next to be assaulted is the keep, but it turns out to be deserted as the Copper Knight has fled.

The delighted local peasants ask the White Knight what his name is, but he confesses he does not know it. They then take him to the graveyard of the chapel of Dolorous Garde where they show him a mighty tomb. They tell him that the tomb is reserved for the finest knight ever to hold the castle. The name of this knight, they say, is inscribed on the underside of the stone slab that tops the tomb. The tomb has a magical spell cast on it which means that only the finest knight can lift it.

The White Knight grabs hold of the slab and heaves. He lifts it up and sees the name "Lancelot" clearly engraved on its underside. Having thus discovered his own name, Lancelot changes the name of his new home from Dolorous Garde to Joyous Garde.

Lancelot then hears that a group of Knights of the Round Table are being held prisoner by the wicked Sir Turquine. Riding out, Lancelot dashes into battle, defeats Sir Turquine and frees his friends. Next Lancelot goes to visit his old friend King Bagdemagus of Gorre. There he takes part in a tournament of great splendour, which is described in exhaustive detail.

This is another section greatly expanded by Malory for the benefit of his 15th century noble audience. Tournaments had begun in the 11th century as a way for rich young men to compete and show off the military skills that they needed in their roles as knights and warriors. The early events were rough and ready affairs, which involved a great deal of injury even though blunted weapons were used. Rules were few and the emphasis was on victory, skill and honour.

By the 15th century the traditional skills of the knight were of fading importance in warfare as guns, longbows and artillery began to dominate the business of war. The tournament continued as a prestigious opportunity for rich young men to show off their horsemanship, physical skills and wealth. The events drew vast crowds to watch the dashing young knights dressed in opulent gilded armour, parade around and compete against each other. The rules of these later tournaments were designed to allow the display of skill, with minimum risk of injury. Imagine a cross between the World Cup final, the Milan fashion catwalk show and Celebrity Come Dancing, and you will get some idea of the excitement and appeal of these events.

Malory spends a lot of his book describing tournaments, and Lancelot is the most successful knight in his book. This was putting Lancelot at the very top of the glamour stakes in the world of the 15th Century.

One of the jousts, that to modern readers seem interminable, takes place at the Castle of Astolat by the invitation of Duke Bernard. Lancelot arrives early and stays in Astolat. There Duke Bernard's daughter Elaine falls hopelessly in love with him, though Lancelot fails to notice since he is himself besotted with Guinevere. Lancelot does, of course, triumph at the tournament, though he is wounded. Elaine nurses him back to health, sighing and moaning about her love in a number of lyrical passages. As soon as he is fit again, Lancelot rides off still oblivious to the feelings of Elaine.

The abandoned Elaine of Astolat then dies of a broken heart. Before she dies she leaves instructions that her body be put into a boat together with a single lily, traditional symbol

of virginity, and a letter to Sir Lancelot. The boat is then to be pushed off into the stream that flows past the Castle of Astolat and left to drift where it will. The body is found by Arthur, who reads the letter and angrily demands an explanation from Lancelot. The incident causes Guinevere to think that Lancelot has fallen out of love with her.



The body of Elaine, The Fair Maid of Astolat, is discovered by King Arthur.

After further assorted adventures rescuing damsels and defeating evil knights, Lancelot falls foul of Morgana Le Fay, Arthur's wicked half sister. Morgana was the daughter of Arthur's mother and her first husband, Duke Gorlois of Cornwall. Gorlois had been killed by Arthur's father Uther and Morgana never forgave either Uther or Arthur for that murder.

Morgana lusts after Lancelot and tries to seduce him, but he resists. Morgana thus starts to hate Lancelot. As he makes off Lancelot leaves behind a picture he has drawn of Queen Guinevere that convinces Morgana that his love for her is far from platonic. Seeing in this a chance to strike a blow at her hated half-brother, Morgana sets about trying to prove that adultery has taken place between Lancelot and Guinevere.

Unaware of the danger he has stirred up, Lancelot embarks on other adventures and then invites Arthur, Guinevere and the court to visit him at his new fortress of Joyous Garde. Thereafter Lancelot drops out of the story as other knights take centre stage and have various adventures.

In Book 6 Lancelot reappears. A magical cup, the Holy Grail, miraculously appears to the Knights of the Round Table. The Holy Grail appears covered in shimmering white samite cloth since many of those present are guilty of sin. As the Grail vanishes, Sir Gawain leaps up to declare that he will go on a quest to find the Holy Grail and see it uncovered. Other knights follow, including Sir Lancelot, Sir Percival, Sir Bors and Sir Galahad.

There then follows a lengthy series of adventures as the knights travel the land seeking spiritual enlightenment, Christian virtue and the Holy Grail. In the end only Galahad sees the Grail uncovered.



The Holy Grail appears to Arthur and his knights.

Book 7 takes the tale back to Camelot. After various interludes of domestic noble life aimed again at Malory's contemporary audience, adventure returns. The evil Sir Mellyagaunce kidnaps Queen Guinevere and holds her in his castle with, presumably, dishonourable intentions. Lancelot gallops off to rescue Guinevere. However, his horse is killed so he has to hitch a lift on a passing cart. Arriving in this decidedly unknightly transport, Lancelot fights his way into Mellyagaunce's castle and rescues Guinevere. The two fall into each other's arms and then into bed. For the first and only time they commit adultery. Mellyagaunce realises what has happened and sets off to tell Arthur. He is caught by Lancelot who defeats him. At Guinevere's insistence Lancelot then kills Mellyagaunce, even though he begs for mercy. For a contemporary audience this is a shocking move as it went against all the rules of chivalry as understood in the 15th century.

Meanwhile, Morgana has recruited Mordred to her cause. Malory describes Mordred as the son of Morgeuse, sister to Morgana and half-sister to Arthur, who is married to King Lot of Orkney. Mordred is not the son of King Lot, but of his own uncle King Arthur who has an affair with Morgeuse unaware of their family links and before his own marriage to Guinevere. Due to this tangled family background, Mordred has a claim on the throne itself to add to his naturally jealous and wicked temperament.

Morgana and Mordred learn that Lancelot has had sex with Guinevere, and reveal this to Arthur. Arthur orders the immediate arrest of both Lancelot and Guinevere, condemning them both to death. Lancelot fights his way to freedom and takes with him several Knights of the Round Table who are either his allies or believe he has been badly treated. Lancelot and his army return, rescue Guinevere as she is on her way to be executed and



then flee to France. Arthur raises an army and crosses to France to pursue Lancelot.

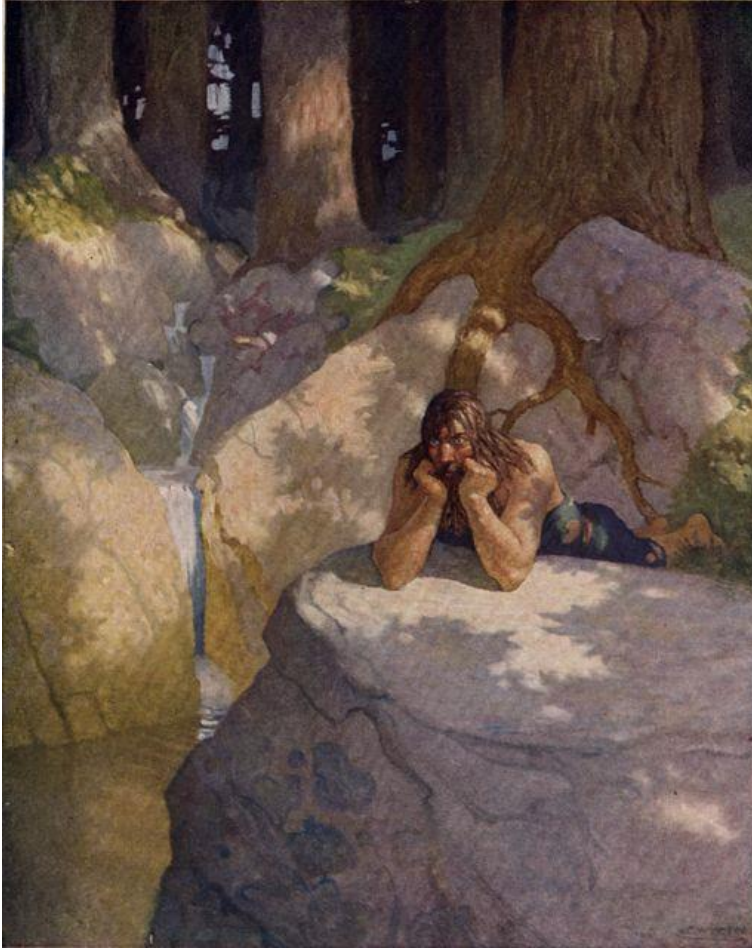


Lancelot escapes with Guinevere, who he has saved from execution.

As soon as he is out of Britain, Mordred and Morgana strike. They declare that Arthur is no longer fit to be king as he has forsaken his duties to pursue a private quarrel with his wife and her lover. Mordred is declared King and begins putting his supporters into positions of power.

Arthur returns to Britain with his much depleted army. Hearing what is going on, Lancelot and Guinevere agree to part. Guinevere will return to Arthur, while Lancelot takes his men to support Arthur against Mordred. By the time they get back to Britain, Arthur and Mordred have been killed fighting each other at the Battle of Camlann. The various nobles of Britain have taken the chance to grab independence for their realms or to make a bid for power and the kingdom has collapsed into civil war and anarchy.

Lancelot gallops to Guinevere, but she refuses to have anything to do with him. She declares that it was they who destroyed Camelot and the Round Table when their chivalric love turned to lust. She sends Lancelot away, refusing even a parting kiss. Despairing of the wickedness of humanity, Lancelot seeks final redemption in Christian religion. He becomes a hermit in a wild and lonely place where he can contemplate the glories of God.



Lancelot as a hermit towards the end of his life.

It is this story of Lancelot and his doomed love that is best known today. In 1953 MGM made a lavish version of the story as "Knights of the Round Table" starring Robert Taylor as Lancelot and Ava Gardner as Guinevere. The only significant change, other than missing out many of the assorted adventures on the road, was that the single act of adultery was omitted so that the pair were guilty only of unrequited love. The 1981 epic "Excalibur" again made the Lancelot-Guinevere love story central and restored the single episode of adultery, with Nicholas Clay and Cherie Lunghi playing the doomed lovers. The adultery was again reduced to a kiss for "First Knight" in 1995 with Richard Gere and Julia Ormond starring alongside Sean Connery as King Arthur.

But if this is the Lancelot that has come to us from Malory by way of modern books and movies, what lies behind this figure? To find the answer it would be best to start where Malory started.

Malory based many episodes in his epic work, and nearly everything about Lancelot, on a manuscript known as the Vulgate Cycle which was written in about 1230 in France.



## [Chapter 2](#)

### Lancelot in France

The Vulgate Cycle is composed of five books, written in French and completed by about 1230. Historians have argued long and fiercely about who wrote it. For many years it was thought that the Franco-Welsh monk and diplomat Walter Map was the author, but he is now known to have died some years before the Vulgate Cycle was completed.

Whoever wrote it, the Vulgate Cycle starts with a short Book 1 which describes the Holy Grail and how it came to Britain. An equally short Book 2 is mostly about Merlin but also describes Arthur's rise to power as King of Britain. Book 3 is by far the longest book of the five. It is almost exclusively about Lancelot and his adventures. The same adventures as feature in Malory are in the Vulgate Cycle, though in a different order. The adulterous love between Lancelot and Guinevere is covered here. Unlike the single outbreak of lust in Malory, the Vulgate Cycle shows the love affair as a lengthy one of frequent sex in a variety of locations and of untempered passions. The fourth book covers the quest for the Holy Grail, and its completion by Galahad. Book 5 is again short and deals with the treachery of Mordred and the death of Arthur.

The Vulgate Cycle includes a lot of information about Lancelot that is either ignored or downplayed by Malory. Most of these are either elements of the story that do not fit well with a 15th century concept of a good knight, or that are magical in tone. Outstanding among these elements is the story of Lancelot's birth and upbringing.

In the Vulgate Cycle, Lancelot was born the son of King Ban and Queen Elaine of Benwick (Benoic in some versions). Exactly where Benwick might have been is not made clear, but it bordered on to the lands of King Claudas. This Claudas crops up in a number of medieval French romances and folktales. He is generally thought to be based on the Merovingian kings of the Franks, several of whom had names such as Clovis or Clodio. It is assumed, therefore, that the Vulgate Cycle envisaged Benwick as being somewhere in France.

Within a few weeks of Lancelot's birth, Claudas invaded and conquered Benwick. Ban, Elaine and Lancelot escape the military disaster, but Ban is badly wounded in the fighting. As they fled alone into the woods, Ban collapsed by a stream. Elaine put the baby Lancelot down to tend her husband's wounds. As soon as Elaine's back was turned Lancelot was taken by the Lady of the Lake and whisked off to her watery, magical home



to be cared for.



The Lady of the Lake whiskes away the baby Lancelot.

Lancelot grew up tall and strong, becoming the perfect, chivalrous knight. The Lady of the Lake then took him to the court of King Arthur, declaring it to be the perfect place for him to perform deeds of valour and honour. The career of Lancelot in the Vulgate then covers the same ground as in Malory.

It seems that Malory used the Vulgate Cycle for the main points of Lancelot's career, updating them for his modern, 15th century audience. In particular he played up the chivalry and the tournaments, but played down the magic and the adultery.

But the Vulgate Cycle was itself based on an earlier work, again one produced in France. This was a long epic poem produced by the great French troubadour, Chretien de Troyes. We do not know the real name of this man. His name translates from medieval French as "The Christian from Troyes". It seems to have been a nickname or pen name adopted to distinguish him from the then famous Jewish theologian and scholar Shlomo Yitzchaki, widely known as "The Jew from Troyes". Internal evidence from his writings indicates that Chretien may have been of noble birth. It has been surmised that he adopted his pen name to save the blushes of his noble relatives who may not have appreciated being linked to a man famous for minstrelsy.

Whoever Chretien de Troyes actually was, he produced a number of massively popular and highly influential epic poems. These mostly dealt with adventures among the nobles for whom he worked. Only some of his work has survived, mostly those works dealing with King Arthur and his knights. Three of these are of relevance to our quest to find Lancelot.

Most attention has focussed on *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, "The Knight of the Cart". It is this story that introduces Lancelot in the character he keeps throughout the later



versions. He is a brave, virtuous and bold knight brought down by his adulterous love for Guinevere. The poem takes its name from the incident where Lancelot rescues Guinevere from Sir Mellyagaunce after arriving in a cart. This poem is very clearly the basis for all the later versions as it includes most of the incidents repeated by the Vulgate and Malory.

Interestingly, Chretien calls Lancelot "Launcelot du Lac", or "Lancelot of the Lake" but makes no reference to his life before he arrives at Camelot. Lancelot's birth and upbringing by the Lady of the Lake is not mentioned at all.

Chretien mentions Lancelot in two earlier Arthurian poems, "Erec and Enide" and "Cligès". In both poems he is mentioned only in passing, but in terms that indicate that Chretien expected his audience to have heard of Lancelot and to know all about his story. The passages read rather as if a modern novelist had a section set in a bar in which a character named "James Bond" is seen sipping on a dry martini. The novelist would not need to explain who this character was, for most readers could be expected to know.

The impression left by these tales is that Chretien expected his noble French audience to know who Lancelot was. Most scholars believe that Lancelot was the central figure of a well known story, or stories, at the time which have not survived to the present day. We know that a vast amount of medieval literature has been lost. These minstrel tales were generally considered to be mere entertainment and not worth the bother of being written down. Only a few got recorded and preserved.

If this were the case, then Lancelot and his womanising would originally not have been set in the court of King Arthur. That this is the case can be deduced from the way Arthur behaves over Lancelot in Chretien's story and later versions. Arthur is shown as being weak, vacillating and puny. Yet in the Arthurian tales that come down to us from before Chretien's time he is a very different character - bold, noble, fearless and very definitely not the sort of man to put with another man messing about with his wife.

To take the stories literally we would have to see Arthur as a wise, bold and courageous action hero who suddenly turns weak and pathetic as soon as Lancelot arrives at Camelot. It is easier to believe that the king in the Lancelot tale was originally another king altogether who had nothing to do with Arthur, Camelot or the Round Table. It has been suggested that in the original story he may have been Claudas. In this way Lancelot would have gained revenge for the death of his father by seducing the wife of the killer.

The evidence that can be gleaned from Chretien de Troyes and the Vulgate Cycle indicates that Lancelot was in the early 12th century a well known figure. He probably had an independent storyline that conformed to standard concepts of tragedy - a great hero brought down by a flaw in his character. In this case, a mighty knight destroyed by his womanising.

Chretien appears to have grafted this story on to the already established Arthurian cycle. In Chretien's hands, Lancelot's adultery with Guinevere gives Mordred and Morgana the opportunity they need to undermine the unity of Arthur's kingdom, provoke civil war and so destroy Camelot and the idealised kingdom over which Arthur ruled. He thus enhanced the tragedy of Lancelot since his character flaw not only destroyed himself, but an entire kingdom.

Living as he did in France, Chretien de Troyes was able to take these sorts of liberties

with Arthur and his story. In Britain the various stories about King Arthur were so well known that nobody would have dared to make such a fundamental change to the main storyline. Plenty of fictional adventures were set at Camelot, or at least began there. Arthur was popular, so a minstrel or bard would be tempted to begin his story "There was a knight at the court of King Arthur who..."

For much of the medieval period, Arthur's court was a favoured location for fictional tales, much as Hollywood set a large number of fictional stories in the very real Wild West of cowboys, rustlers, marshals and sheriffs. Nobody in the 20th century believed that John Wayne was acting out a real story, but they accepted the background to the tale as being real because it was. Much the same was true of audiences in medieval times listening to tales of knights and damsels set in the time of King Arthur.

So if Chretien de Troyes took an existing story and placed it in the court of King Arthur for dramatic effect, the question arises of where he got that story from. It is time to go in search of the hidden origins of Sir Lancelot.



### [Chapter 3](#)

#### Lancelot in Britain

In the works of the French medieval poets, Lancelot is a Frenchman. He is born in the Kingdom of Benoic, located somewhere on the borders of the Frankish kingdom, and only later goes to Britain. Many historians and folklorists have suspected that this was a mere literary invention of the French minstrels to make Lancelot more relevant to their French audience. By saying that Lancelot was born in France, the poet ensured that the audience was more likely to identify with him and be interested in his story. However, all of Lancelot's career after the age of about 6 months takes place in Britain. To find the original Lancelot on whom the French troubadours based their character, therefore, it must seem that we should go to Britain.

This idea is strengthened by one episode in the stories about Lancelot, the time when he rescues Guinevere from the evil Sir Mellyagaunce. This incident is well known from earlier British sources, but in these it is not Sir Lancelot who rescues the queen from Sir Mellyagaunce, but Arthur who rescues her from King Melwas of the Summer Lands.

The tale is given in its fullest form in a Life of St Gildas written in the monastery of

Llancarfan some centuries after the event. We know that Gildas was born at about the time that the real Arthur won his great battle at Mount Badon and so their lives overlapped. In the *Life*, Gildas was credited with arranging a truce in a war between Arthur and Melwas, in the course of which Melwas had kidnapped Guinevere.

The monk of Llancarfan placed the stronghold of Melwas at Glastonbury and had the treaty brokered by Gildas being agreed in the Church of St Mary. How much faith can be put on this version of events is unclear. Medieval monks writing biographies of saints were notoriously prone to include fabulous miracles and to give their hero the credit for things that they did not, in fact, do.

This incident would seem to be a case in point. The Summer Lands may have been an historic kingdom located in Somerset and ruled by King Melwas. But equally they are known from other sources to have been a pagan realm inhabited by supernatural beings and heroes. The story of a war between Arthur and Melwas may, therefore, have been a folkloric memory of a dispute between the undoubtedly Christian Arthur and some of his pagan contemporaries.

Whatever the truth, the fact remains that the French poets took a British story about King Arthur and made it into a French story about Sir Lancelot. Glastonbury is not the only place to have a link to Lancelot. There are several places in Britain that can claim a direct link to Lancelot.

Chronologically in Lancelot's career, the earliest of these is Bamburgh in Northumberland. According to Malory, this was the site of Lancelot's castle Joyous Garde. The massive castle that stands on the coastal knoll at Bamburgh today is a 19th century renovation of a 12th century castle. However, we know that Bamburgh was a heavily fortified centre of power right back to the Dark Ages.



The coastal fortress of Bamburgh, sometimes said to have been the castle Joyous Garde ruled by Lancelot.

In 547 the English mercenary Ida seized the fortress and used it as the powerbase from which to build up a kingdom that would dominate northeastern England for centuries. The name of "Bamburgh" is an English one, but its pre-English name was "Din Guayrði". This name is similar to "Garde". Whether this is because Lancelot actually lived there, or because Malory made the link between the two names and so put Lancelot there we cannot now know.

In Malory's version the Castle of Astolat is placed at Guildford in Surrey. The reason for this is unclear, but it may be because at this stage in his book Arthur is living at Westminster so Malory had to choose a place from which a barge carrying a dead body might drift down to Westminster.

Having established himself in Joyous Garde, Lancelot had gone off on a string of adventures. One of these was to kill the evil Sir Turquine who was holding 64 Knights of the Round Table prisoner in a cave. Brougham Castle in Cumbria claims to be the site of this adventure. The castle that stands here today dates to only 1170, and so is too late to have been the lair of Sir Turquine.



Brougham Castle, reputed lair of the evil Sir Turquine. Photo: Mauldy.

However it stands beside (and gets its name from) the ruins of the Roman fort of Brocavum. Roman fortifications were highly prized in the Dark Ages, so this may well



have been a stronghold of some local ruler. Perhaps some local folktales of a brutal lord came down through the ages and were later associated with Sir Turquine. Again, however, the link to Lancelot appears to have come late.

Brougham Castle is not alone in claiming to be the site of this combat. Back in the 17th century a Lancashire gentleman recorded that the fight had taken place at a ford over the River Irwell close to the ruins of another Roman fort, Mamucium. This entire area is now built over by the city of Manchester.

Another of these adventures came when Lancelot rescued Guinevere from Sir Mellyagaunce. Malory places this event at Lambeth, on the banks of the Thames near London. Apart from Malory's work there is no known link between Lambeth and the Arthurian tales. Earlier versions such as the Vulgate Cycle or Chretien de Troyes had put Mellyagaunce's fortress on an island off the coast of Britain.

In Malory, Arthur condemns Guinevere to be executed at Carlisle for her adultery, and it is here that Lancelot rescues her. Why Malory set this episode at Carlisle is unclear. Carlisle had long been the site of a major fortress, right back to Roman times when it formed the western end of Hadrian's Wall, but before Malory it was strongly linked to Sir Gawain, not to Sir Lancelot. Perhaps because Sir Gawain was, in medieval times, considered to be a rival and enemy to Sir Lancelot it seemed to Malory a natural place for the execution site.

After fleeing to France with Guinevere, Lancelot later came back to Britain in an effort to aid Arthur against Mordred. He and his army landed at Dover, at least according to Malory. This is probably an invention of Malory. In his day Dover was the main official port of entry to England from France and it would have seemed natural to him to locate Lancelot's landing here. There seems to be no link between Dover and Lancelot earlier than Malory, though again several earlier tales did place Gawain here.

After arriving too late to take part in the disastrous battle at Camlann, Lancelot rides off to find Guinevere. Before the battle Arthur had put her for safekeeping in a convent famous for the fact that the nuns had a perpetual choir. According to early Welsh sources there were only three places where a relay of singers kept up a constant choir praising God. Of these only one was made up of nuns - the convent at Amesbury in Wiltshire. Malory therefore makes Amesbury the location of the last meeting between Guinevere and Lancelot.

Having been spurned by Guinevere, Lancelot himself decides to turn to a religious life. According to Malory he went to Glastonbury, already famous as a holy Christian site. Rather than settle in Glastonbury Abbey itself, Lancelot went to live as a hermit "in a vale between two hills nearby". There are not many hills in the famous flat terrain around Glastonbury, so Lancelot's final retreat is usually reckoned to be the dell between Chalice Hill and Glastonbury Tor.



Glastonbury Tor. Photo: Josep Renalias.

It would therefore seem that all the places in Britain that claim a link to Lancelot can be dismissed from study. All them seem to have acquired these links long after Lancelot shot to international fame in the writings of Chretien de Troyes.

Some historians have turned to other elements of the Lancelot story to try to track down his origins. In particular his upbringing by the Lady of the Lake has attracted attention. This lady is an enigmatic figure. She appears in numerous legends and tales from Celtic lands. She seems to be a fairy or mythical figure who takes a particular interest in the feats and lives of heroic men. In Arthurian legend it is the Lady of the Lake who gives Arthur the magical sword Excalibur, and who reclaims it after his defeat at Camlann. This is typical of her appearances. She steps forward, helps a hero at a critical moment, then disappears again.

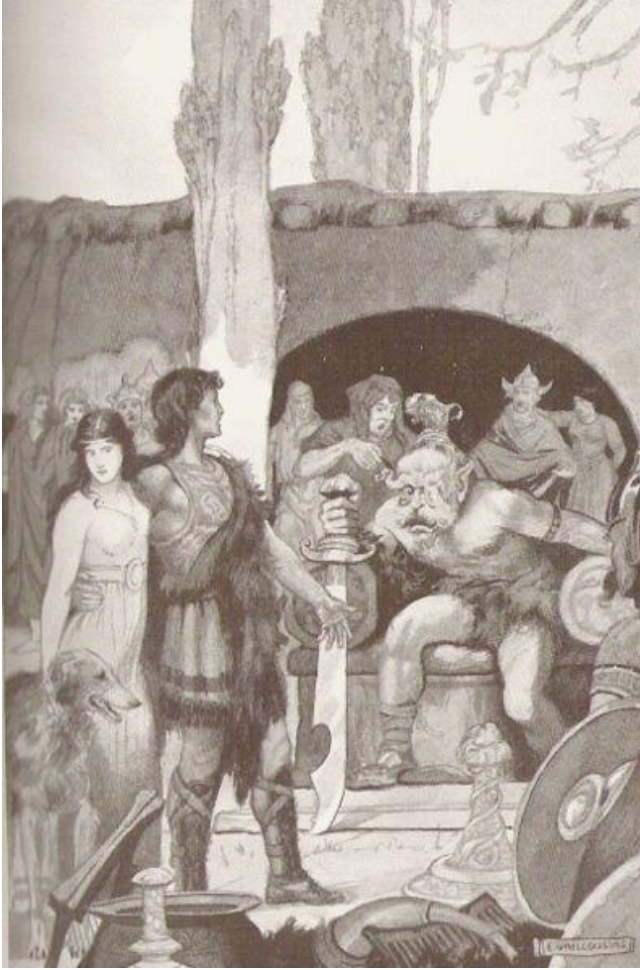


Sir Bedivere returns Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake after the Battle of Camlann.

Celtic pagan mythology is not fully understood, particularly that of the British, but it is known that water had a strong role to play. Many lakes and rivers were considered to be holy and attracted large quantities of sacrificial offerings. It would appear that the vast majority of water deities were goddesses. Some of them were ferocious. A water goddess in Northumberland demanded three human victims each year, and another in Surrey lured young men to their watery deaths.

If the Lady of the Lake is a figure of Celtic paganism, the thinking goes, perhaps Lancelot is too. One figure put forward as the prototype for Lancelot is the Welsh hero Llwhch Llenlleawg, or "Llwhch of the Striking Hand". He appears as a minor character in a Welsh story known as Culhwch and Olwen. This is a love story set in the times of King Arthur and while there is strong evidence that it is based on a much earlier tale the current version is of 11th century date.





Culhwch and Olwen.

In this tale Llwch Llenlleawg is one of the warriors sitting at Arthur's table during a feast. He is described as a mighty warrior with a rash temper who has at his side a sword able to burst into flames when used in battle. The name and skills mean that this character is almost certainly a version of the Celtic god better known in his Irish form as Lugh Lámfhada, or "Lugh of the Long Hand".

This god is a god of war and of light. He features in many stories as a wonderfully powerful warrior equipped with supernatural weapons, prodigious strength and great cunning. Parallels with Lancelot do exist, but are not particularly strong.

Lugh is born as one of triplets predicted by a seer to grow up to cause the death of their grandfather, Balor who is himself one of triplets. The three babies are thrown into a whirlpool to kill them, but one is rescued by a fairy. This parallels Lancelot's upbringing by the Lady of the Lake. Lugh later travels to Tara to join the court of Nuada, king of the gods, similar to Lancelot's arrival at Camelot. He proves to be the best fighter at Tara, as Lancelot is the finest knight at Camelot. The fact that he does cause the death of Balor may be reflected in Lancelot's destruction of Arthur. Finally Lugh had a string of wives and mistresses by whom he had numerous children, a successful career of womanising



that perhaps finds an echo in Lancelot's disastrous adultery.

However, there is no real evidence that Lugh or Llŵch had anything to do with Lancelot, nor that Chretien de Troyes had ever heard of them. There is, however, a way to square the circle. But the solution is not to be found in Britain.



### Conclusion

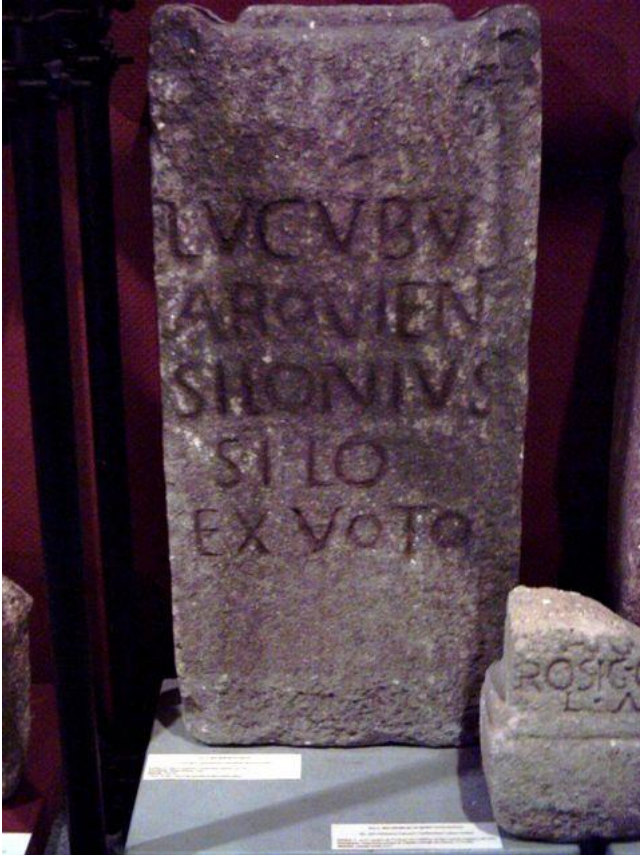
Lancelot as we know him today was a creation of Chretien de Troyes. The riddle of his origins must be sought with the writings of Chretien.

Chretien was born in Troyes, a town in the Champagne region of France. He lived at least some of his life at the court of Marie, Countess of Champagne, but seems to have travelled around France. His writings are original, inventive and unique for their time, but scholars have long known that he took most of his characters and stories from other sources. These included ancient Greek and Roman writers as well as British and Germanic folktales.

It seems clear, however, that Chretien had versions of the British material that are not those that have survived to today. We have sources that are mostly Welsh or English, but Chretien's versions differ from these in a number of minor but noticeable ways. Several historians have suggested that Chretien was drawing on Breton sources. We know that Arthurian and other British tales were widely circulated in Brittany, though none of these versions have survived. It would make sense for them to be basically the same as those in Britain itself, but to be slightly different.

If Chretien was working from Breton sources perhaps we should look there for Lancelot's origins. And when we do, we can find him.

The god known in Britain as Llŵch and in Ireland as Lugh was known in northern France, and in Brittany, as Lugus. He had similar attributes and tales about him in Brittany as in Ireland. The only version of the story to survive to the present day has him being rescued from a river when a child by a water fairy, and as an adult rescuing a princess from a fairy kingdom. The story ends with him marrying the princess.



An ancient altar dedicated to the god Lugus.

The parallels between the modern surviving story and the tale of Lancelot are not exact. But in the 11th century Chretien may well have heard an older version of the story that was closer to that of the Irish Lugh. It is worth noting that Brittany was periodically attacked by the Franks, as Benwick was attacked by Claudas. In seeking the original story of Lancelot we may find a lost epic about some Breton hero facing up to a Frankish invasion. If so, it is here that Chretien found the inspiration for Lancelot.

Assuming this trail of evidence is correct, then Lancelot was in origin a version of the ancient pagan god Lugus / Lugh / Llwh. But it was really Chretien de Troyes who took the womanising warrior and made him into the tragic Lancelot we know today.



## About the Author

Historian Rupert Matthews is an established public speaker, school visitor, history consultant and author of non-fiction books, magazine articles and newspaper columns. His work has been translated into 28 languages (including Sioux). Whatever type of history work you need completed, Rupert can provide a professional and reliable service on time and to budget.



## About the Talks

Rupert's talks are lively, informative and fun. They are carefully tailored to suit audiences of all backgrounds, ages and tastes. Rupert has spoken successfully to WI, Probus, Round Table, Rotary, U3A and social groups of all kinds as well as to lecture groups, library talks and educational establishments.

All talks come in standard 20 minute, 40 minute and 60 minute versions, plus questions afterwards, but most can be made to suit any time slot you have available. All talks involve a screen presentation, objects to handle, costume changes - or all three! Rupert can bring all his own equipment, but can as easily use your facilities.

Rupert offers not only general history talks, but also talks specifically highlighting local areas, such as Surrey, Sussex, Kent, Hampshire or Berkshire or dealing with season events including Christmas, St George's Day, St Patrick's Day and St David's Day. See the listings below.

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The Coronations of King Henry VIII  
Jack the Ripper  
Jane Austen and the Military  
The Kingdom of Lindsey [Lincolnshire]  
The Kingdom of Sussex  
The Kingdom of Mercia  
Magna Carta in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
The Pagan Gods of England  
The Female Pope  
The Lost Railways of Berkshire  
Richard III – Hero or Villain?  
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**Also:**

A Brexiteer in Brussels – Rupert spent two years as a Member of the European Parliament



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