

The Lost Tomb of King Arthur

by

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CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1 - The Discovery](#)

[Chapter 2 - The Burial of Arthur](#)

[Chapter 3 - Other Tombs of Arthur](#)

[Chapter 4 - Avalon](#)

[Chapter 5 - The Archaeology](#)

[Conclusion](#)



[Introduction](#)

Glastonbury in Somerset is now a pleasant market town, dominated by its ruined abbey and the Arthurian links that it has encouraged. Even the official town name signposts add that the place is "the ancient Avalon".

Indeed, Arthurian romance and history are something of a local industry. There are Arthurian souvenir shops, Celtic tea rooms and a wide range of new age knick-knacks from crystals to dragon figurines to serious books about Celtic Christianity. A visitor might be forgiven for thinking that if it were not for the town's links to King Arthur the entire place might close down.

Despite the mass of Arthurian links and lore at Glastonbury, the only really solid link to

the historical Arthur that the town can boast is the claim made by monks in about 1190 that they had found the tomb and skeleton of Arthur in their graveyard - along with the remains of Guinevere and Mordred as well.



The modern signpost and concrete blocks that mark the site of King Arthur's tomb at Glastonbury Abbey.

Those claims are, to put it mildly, controversial. Many modern historians do not believe that Arthur existed at all, and so it follows that the monks cannot have found his body - still less those of his queen Guinevere and his nemesis Mordred. Even among those historians who do accept the historical reality of Arthur, most discount the story of the tomb at Glastonbury.

The whole story of the discovery of the tomb of Arthur is written off as a fraud perpetrated by monks in desperate need of cash to rebuild their abbey after a devastating fire. The monks, so most historians argue, concocted the whole thing. They dug in their graveyard until they found an old burial of some unknown man, then hauled the bones out and declared them to be those of Arthur - faking evidence to back up their claims.

King Henry II, it is said, had a motive for publicising the fraud. He was having trouble with his Celtic subjects, many of whom firmly believed the old legend that King Arthur was not dead but merely waiting for the call to come for him to ride again to save the Celts from the English. If Henry could produce Arthur's body it would destroy the legend forever, along with the political troubles it was fostering.



A 19th century painting by Edward Burne-Jones showing Arthur asleep in Avalon where he awaits the call to return to defend his people.

And so the story has been written out of the usual histories of Arthur and his times. It has become accepted by most historians that the "find" of 1190 was a fake, that Arthur was not buried at Glastonbury and that, indeed, Arthur never existed.

But is this the truth?

At the time, the find of Arthur's grave was accepted as being genuine. So far as everyone in Britain was concerned in 1190, and for some centuries afterwards, the monks really had found the body of Arthur. Who is right, and who is wrong?

I have gone back to the original accounts to find out exactly what did happen in Glastonbury back in 1190. And I have studied the period when Arthur died to see if Glastonbury would have been a likely place for him to be buried. It is a journey through controversy and argument, history and legend, myth and reality. But by the end of it, I think that I have reached the final answer as to what really happened at Glastonbury all those years ago.

And I found it to be a most startling truth indeed.



[Chapter 1](#)

The Discovery

In dealing with the mystery surrounding Arthur's Tomb, it is best to go back to the discovery of Arthur's tomb by the monks of Glastonbury. In itself this poses a bit of a problem as there are three contemporary accounts of the events, and each is slightly different. The three accounts are those by Ralph of Coggeshall, Giraldus Cambrensis and Adam of Dormerham. Strictly speaking Adam's account is not contemporary as he was writing a century later, but he wrote his account at Glastonbury and drew on the official records of the monastery. There are several other accounts written at about this time, but they all seem to be variations on a theme, and most are shorter than these three.

The first discrepancy is the date when the find took place. The dates vary between 1189 and 1193. The variations can be explained, and perhaps the discrepancy solved, by understanding the way in which news was disseminated in the later 12th century. There were no newspapers, radio or television then. If you had a piece of news that you thought people should hear about, you had to go and tell them yourself. For the king this was easy. Proclamations about new taxes, musters for war or other matters were sent out by way of a regular royal distribution system to whatever sheriffs, nobles or bishops needed to have them.

For a monastery such as Glastonbury things were a bit more haphazard. The monastery would produce a missive in the form of an open letter addressed to anyone interested. Several copies might be made, and then handed to travelling pilgrims, monks or merchants going in the right direction. Such a letter would be read, then passed on to the next monastery, bishop or other recipient who might be interested. How far and how fast such a missive travelled would depend on if a recipient were interested enough to pass it on and when, or if, a traveller could be found willing and able to carry it onward.

The dates recorded by the different monks and scribes might refer to when they received the missive, not when the find was made. The earliest date, 1189, was recorded by Adam of Dormerham. Since he had access to the Glastonbury monastic library, he should be considered the most accurate.

A second difference regards the reasons why the monks decided to dig where they did. Giraldus says that the monks were ordered to dig up the body by King Henry II. Henry, Giraldus says, was travelling in Wales on state business. Being interested in the tales of King Arthur, Henry asked his hosts a wide range of questions about Arthur and his knights. One of these questions was to ask where Arthur was buried. A Welsh bard who happened to be present told the king that Arthur was buried at Glastonbury, south of the Old Church, between two stone markers. Henry then sent a messenger to Glastonbury to order the monks to dig up his illustrious predecessor, but he died before the work could be done.

The other writers don't really explain why the excavation was made, though Ralph hints that it was because a worthy monk had died and his body needed burying.

All writers agree that the dig took place in the old cemetery, south of the Old Church between what are called two "pyramids". The Old Church in question was the reason why Glastonbury was so famous. It was the oldest standing Christian Church in Britain. Exactly how old the building was is somewhat obscure. The Glastonbury monks firmly

believed that either it was the church dedicated to St Mary built by Joseph of Arimathea in ad63, or at least stood on the same site. It was, in any case, very old and had been built of wattle and daub, strengthened with stout timber framing.



The site of the excavation carried out in 1189 lies to the right of the footpath in the foreground. The building beyond is the Lady Chapel, built on the site of the Old Church in the later 12th century. Photo: Notfromtrecht.

The problem for the monks at Glastonbury was that this church was no longer there. In 1184 a devastating fire had swept through the monastic precincts and the wooden Old Church had gone up in flames. Even as the dig got underway, a new Lady Chapel, also dedicated to St Mary, was being built in stone on the same spot. The workmen and their clutter had to be hustled out of the way.

The two "pyramids" were more in the shape that we today would call an obelisk. They may have been the battered remains of the sort of high cross commonly erected some five centuries earlier, or perhaps of prehistoric monoliths. In either case, they were described by William of Malmesbury, who saw them, thus:

"That which is almost wholly unknown would I gladly tell, if I could shape out the truth of it: namely, the meaning of those pyramids which stand at a few feet from the Old Church in the cemetery of the monks. The nearest to the church is twenty-six feet high, and has a number of names, which perhaps may refer to persons buried beneath. The second is eighteen feet high, and on it can be read 'Hedde episcopus', 'Bregored' and 'Beoruuard'. The last of these was abbot after Hemgisl. Of these abbots, and of the whole series of abbots and what gifts they obtained for the abbey from various kings, we propose from this point onward to speak in detail."

The three names recorded by William of Malmesbury are among the earliest abbots of Glastonbury whose names have survived. Bregored died in 667, Hemgils in 701 and Beoruard in 710. The other names were, presumably, too badly weathered to be deciphered by the time William of Malmesbury visited in the 1130s.

At a depth of seven feet the monks found a stone slab. Fixed to it was a leaden cross with Latin writing on it. Our three main sources give three different versions of the precise wording. Ralph of Coggeshall says it read "Here lies the famous King Arthur, buried in the isle of Avalon". Adam records "Here lies interred in the isle of Avalon, the renowned King Arthur". Gerald Cambriensis agrees with Adams version, but says that after the words "Arthur" the inscription continued "with Guinevere his second wife".



The leaden cross found by the monks in 1189, as drawn by William Camden in the 16th century.

The monks continued digging and at a depth of 16 feet they found three bodies. Two of these were male, one female. The female skeleton was at once identified as that of Guinevere. The two male skeletons were of a large man, and one of average height. The monks decided that the larger skeleton was that of Arthur, and that the smaller one was that of Mordred.

According to most versions of the death of Arthur, he was killed at the Battle of Camlann

fighting against his treacherous nephew Mordred, who was also killed in the battle. Presumably it was this that persuaded the monks that the second male skeleton had to be that of Mordred, but they may have had some other reason that has not come down to us.

The larger skeleton was seen by Gerald. He said the thigh bone was three inches longer than the shin of any man in the small group who viewed the remains with him. This does not give us an absolute size for the man, but clearly he was remarkably - but not impossibly - tall. The head, Gerald says, had several wounds upon it. These had all healed except for one which seemed to have been caused by a weapon that had punched through the skull and inflicted a fatal wound. He also recorded that the eyes were as wide apart as the width of the palm of his hand. Again this indicates the individual was big, but not so large as to be impossible.

Ralph says the bodies were in a very old sarcophagus, but does not make it clear if they were all placed together or if there were separate compartments. Gerald, however, says that the skeletons of Arthur and Guinevere were in a hollowed out oak log, which was divided into two sections, one for each body. He does not record where the second male skeleton was found.

When Gerald visited in about 1192 the skeletons were being kept in a temporary casket while a new tomb was prepared for them. They were placed in their new tomb in 1194. In 1278 King Edward I visited Glastonbury. He was very keen on the stories of King Arthur and decreed that the tomb of 1194 was unworthy of such a great ruler. He paid for a new tomb of black marble to be built in front of the High Altar, and the bones were moved once more.

In 1539 Glastonbury Abbey was closed down on the orders of King Henry VIII, who seized its vast lands and treasures for himself. The lead was stripped from the roof and the valuable glass removed and sold. The buildings then fell into ruin and the stones were stripped by locals who used them to build their own houses and barns. Quite what happened to the black marble tomb of Arthur and Guinevere, and the bones they contained, is unknown. Nobody bothered to record what took place.

Such is the story of the discovery of the tomb of King Arthur. At the time nobody doubted the truth of the claims. It is only more recently that doubt has been cast on the honesty of those involved and the discovery denounced as a fake and a fraud.

But what really did happen?



Glastonbury Abbey ruins. Photo: Nilfanion.



Chapter 2

The Burial of Arthur

This is not the place to go over once again the arguments for or against the historical reality of Arthur, nor to debate the precise position he occupied in late Romano-British society and governmental structures. These have been discussed at great length in a wide variety of places, so most readers will have already formed their own conclusions on such matters. For the purpose of this chapter it is enough to assume that the British forces at the epochal Battle of Badon Hill were led by a man named Arthur, who was a famous war leader against the invading Germanic settlers and that he died some time in the first half of the 6th century.

Assuming that to be the case, it is crucial to the debate about the reality or otherwise of the finding of Arthur's grave in 1189 to decide whether or not Glastonbury was a likely

place for him to be buried.

All the sources agree that Arthur was a Christian. This was at a time when Christianity was a fading religion in the British Isles. The Germanic incomers were pagans, worshipping an array of deities including Woden, Thunor, Freya and Tiw. Nor had paganism died out among the Romano-Britons. Christianity was undoubtedly the dominant religion among the elite, the educated and the wealthy, but the worship of local gods and goddesses persisted in rural areas and among the poor.

So for Glastonbury to be a credible place for the Christian Arthur to be buried, it would at the very least need to have been a place used for Christian burial. More realistically it would need to have been a place where high status Christian individuals were buried. And that brings us back to the Old Church and the question of its age.

The records and archives of the monastery of Glastonbury were lost long ago. Even when the monastery was closed down in the 16th century most of the original books had been lost. The English takeover in the 7th century saw some damage, as did the Viking wars and the Norman occupation. Generally, however, it seems to have been time and neglect that wrought the damage.

Manuscripts do not last forever and no matter how well cared for they might be, they eventually fall to bits. Only manuscripts that are copied out afresh survive the centuries. For a manuscript to be copied out, rather than simply tossed in the bin, it needs to be considered to be important by those in a position to decide its fate. The monks of Glastonbury had two main priorities over the centuries. The first was to worship Christ by ritual and prayer. Manuscripts which helped them do this - Biblical writings, theological essays and learned treatises - would therefore stand a good chance of surviving.

The second priority of the Glastonbury monks was to preserve and enhance the wealth and possessions of the monastery so that they had the funds needed to continue their work of praising God and caring for Christ's flock of Christians. To this end charters that confirmed the monastery's ownership of land, granted them lucrative privileges or confirmed gifts were likely to survive the centuries.

Documents that did not help the monks do either of these tasks would usually survive only by chance or if an abbot had an interest in the subject in hand. Histories and other records of essentially secular activities fell under this heading and so were very often thrown out when they fell apart.

In 1125 Abbot Henry of Blois recognised that the historical records of the great Abbey were in a mess. He hired one of the foremost historians of the time, William of Malmesbury, to come to Glastonbury. His task was to sort through all the old, mouldering manuscripts and use them as source material to produce a new History of Glastonbury Abbey. William did his work well and the History he produced was widely regarded as a master work. He included in it not only dry dates and names, but also anecdotes and amusing incidents that made the work very readable.



William of Malmesbury, as shown in a stained glass window at Malmesbury Abbey where he lived most of his life.

Unfortunately the History as produced by William has itself not survived either. We have two versions of it to refer to. The first consists of a number of extracts included in William's own later work *The Story of the Kings of England*. These extracts comprise more than half of the original, but much is left out. The second version is a manuscript copy produced about a century after the original. It contains a large number of later additions from other sources, some of them clearly legendary and of doubtful accuracy. Some additions are clearly untrue.

In writing his History, William had a clear purpose. A few years earlier Osbern of Canterbury had written a biography of St Dunstan. Dunstan had been both Abbot of Glastonbury and then Archbishop of Canterbury. Osbern declared that Dunstan had been the very first Abbot of Glastonbury. This meant that Glastonbury had been founded as a monastery in the 10th century. This conveniently meant that Osbern's own Canterbury, founded in 598, was the older of the two and, indeed, the oldest monastery in England.

Everyone in Glastonbury knew this was not true, and William's main task was to use the archives to prove that Glastonbury was an older monastery than Canterbury.



St Dunstan as depicted in a 20th century stained glass window at Holy Cross Monastery, West Park, New York. Photo: Randyohc

We do not now know what sources William used. He was, however, a highly regarded and respected historian. It is inconceivable that he would have simply made things up simply to please his employer. There can be no doubt that there was evidence for everything that William wrote about Glastonbury, though how reliable that evidence might have been we cannot know.

William gives three different versions of how Glastonbury was founded, presumably because the archives contained these accounts.

According to William, the earlier founding took place in ad67. St Philip the Apostle and Joseph of Arimathea, uncle of Christ, came to Gaul to spread the Christian faith in around ad50. Having established themselves in Gaul, the missionaries decided it was time to take Christianity to Britain. They recruited 12 men willing to undertake the task under the leadership of Joseph.

This team arrived in Britain and preached the new religion to an unnamed ruler who gave them "an island on the borders of his country, surrounded by woods and thickets and marshes, called Ynys Witrin". There the Christians built houses for themselves and a small church of wattle, daub and timber. They failed in their primary task of converting the locals to Christianity. When they died their mission died with them and their homes fell into ruin.

The second founding took place in ad166 when Pope Eleutherius sent a team of 12

missionaries to King Lucius of Britain. These missionaries split up into teams of two, who travelled the land preaching their religion. Two of them, Phagan and Deruvian, came to the island of Avalon where they found the old ruined church left by the earlier missionaries. They restored the crumbling structure and summoned 12 converts to join them. This time the mission was more successful. Neighbouring villages were converted and the community of holy men on the island survived. Whenever a man died he was replaced by a new recruit, so that there were always 12 holy men present.

The third version states that St Patrick, after his long work converting the Irish, returned to Britain, the land of his birth. Now an old, sick man, Patrick wanted to withdraw from the hard work of preaching to pagans and retire to live among holy Christian men. He chose the community of 12 hermits on the island of Glastonbury. There Patrick found the old wooden church, but added a small stone chapel. He organised the loose group of 12 hermits into a proper monastery of which he became Abbot before his death. The date of his death is not certain, but is usually thought to have been in about 590.

From Patrick an unbroken succession of abbots continued down to William of Malmesbury's own day. William does not give the names of all the abbots, and quite clearly there are gaps in his account of the later years. Most of these gaps occur before the English conquest of the area in 658. Once the English were in control the records were better preserved and William's account is reasonably full.

It is almost certain that the English monks who gradually ousted the Britons from Glastonbury were not terribly interested in the earlier records. They allowed the old manuscripts to crumble to dust, preserving only their own. This means that events before 658 were only poorly known even at Glastonbury. It is likely that William of Malmesbury was working from second hand or slightly unreliable records for the earlier period. Certainly he uses phrases such as "men say that" or "it is written that" in this section which might be taken as indicators of his own uncertainty of the information.

In seeking to decide if Glastonbury were a suitable place for the burial of such an important Christian as Arthur in the early 5th century it is necessary to take a closer look at William's writings.

First there is the insistence that Glastonbury was an island. Although today the town is surrounded by dry land, it was most certainly an island. What are now the richly fertile farmlands of the Somerset Levels were, until Tudor times, a vast marsh dotted with a few islands of firm ground. Glastonbury was one of the largest of these islands. Even today severe floods can sometimes cover the modern farmlands with water and turn Glastonbury back into an island for a day or two.

Second there is the fact that William calls the place by three different names. First it is Ynys Witrin, then Avalon, then Glastonbury. The first two are Celtic names, the third is English. Of the three it is only for the third that we have unequivocal documentary proof. The earliest form of the name is Glestingaburg, which is found in documents used from the 680s onwards.

The element "burg" means "walled place", and presumably refers to the enclosure around the monastery. "Glesting" is almost certainly a personal name, either an individual or a family. The only known historical figure from about the right place and time with a

similar name is Glastening. This Welsh prince was one of the sons of the famous warrior Cunedda who ruled northern Wales and adjacent areas in about the 460s.

It is far from clear if it was this prince who gave his name to Glastonbury, what little is known about him seems to indicate that he lived further north around Lichfield. However the likely dates for his life do fit in with the tale that St Patrick founded a monastery here. Perhaps the island was granted by Glastening, and so took his name.

While with a date in the 490s for the founding of Glastonbury by St Patrick on land donated by Glastening we are on fairly solid historical ground, the same cannot be said of the two other stories given by William of Malmesbury.

The tale of King Lucius and Pope Eleutherius is a well known medieval legend, but it is almost certainly untrue. It became widely known after it was repeated by the historian Bede in the 8th century, but his version comes from an early history of the Popes in which the section dealing with King Lucius is clearly corrupt. Almost certainly the event referred to someone else in another part of the Roman Empire.

As for St Philip and Joseph of Arimathea, there is no evidence that either of them moved very far from the Holy Land. Certainly neither came to Gaul, still less to Britain. The source for this tale is unknown and several historians have, on stylistic ground, doubted that William of Malmesbury included it in his book. It seems to have been inserted some years afterwards by someone else.

Although William of Malmesbury is our earliest source for any of these versions of how the monastery was founded, we have ample proof that Glastonbury was very old indeed. There are numerous manuscripts and documents dating to before the Norman Conquest of 1066 that refer to Glastonbury's great age and that it is much older than other monasteries. Although they give no firm date, they do make clear that Glastonbury was believed to be one of the oldest Christian sites in Britain.

The most reasonable way to interpret this evidence is to conclude that there was a group of Christian hermits living on the island during the 5th century. Around the year 490 or so they were organised into a regular monastery, either by St Patrick or by someone else. How the hermits got there and who founded the little community is best described as "obscure".

This would mean that there was a Christian monastic community on the island by the time Arthur died. And so there would have been a Christian cemetery for him to be buried in.

That leaves the riddle of the two alleged early names for the place: Ynys Witrin and Avalon. Taking the earlier name first, Ynys Witrin means "Island of Glass". The form is in medieval Welsh, as it was spoken in William of Malmesbury's day, not the sort of language spoken centuries earlier by the Britons of the date alleged for the arrival of Joseph of Arimathea and his men.

Where this name came from is not clear, and William's works are our only source for it. One idea is that the English monks of Glastonbury knew that their monastery had been founded by the Britons and so sought a Welsh translation of the name. Mistakenly thinking the name meant "Island of Glass", they translated that and so produced Ynys Witrin.

The other name, Avalon, might come from either of two sources. The most often repeated theory is that it comes from the Old Welsh word "afal", meaning "apple". Thus Avalon would mean "the place of apples". Alternatively, the name might also derive from the name Avaloch. In this case Avalon would mean "the place belonging to Avaloch".

The actual derivation of the name Avalon may not be important in this context, but what is important is whether or not the name was current. There is no clear evidence that this section of William of Malmesbury's book is a later interpolation. In any case there are several other documents that purport to be from the early, British period that also call the place Avalon. Admittedly these survive only in later copies, and at least one is a clear fake, but even so it is circumstantial evidence that before the English conquest the island was, indeed, called Avalon.

Taking all this together, it is clear that an important Christian monastery was in existence at Avalon/Glastonbury at the time that Arthur was killed in battle. But there is more supporting evidence.

At the time of Arthur's death the Somerset marshes were in a sort of political no man's land. The details are obscure, but the overall picture is clear. When the iron fist of imperial rule from Rome was removed, the individual local government structures set themselves up as self-governing states which in time would develop into independent kingdoms and principalities. How far this process had gone by the time of Arthur's death is unclear, but almost certainly the civil war in which he perished was a conflict fought between two or more of these emerging states.

In western Britain the newly emerging states were based to a large extent on the pre-Roman Celtic tribes. To the north of Somerset was the Dobunni who ruled the lower Severn basin and adjacent areas. To the southeast lay the lands of the Durotriges, which ran south to the Channel and embraced all of modern Dorset along with parts of Wiltshire and Somerset. To the southwest were the Dumnoni ruling what are now Cornwall, Devon and parts of Somerset.

The island on which the monastery stood lay more or less at the point where the boundaries of the three states met. This may have given it an added political importance to add to its undoubted religious significance. If, as some have postulated, Arthur died trying to keep some form of central control going over the unruly local states then such a place might have seemed ideal for his burial.

Even the precise positioning of the grave gives credence to the idea that Arthur was buried here. In 1962 an archaeological dig took place in the old cemetery south of the Lady Chapel, built in the site of the Old Church. This covered the area where the monks were said to have found Arthur's body in 1189.

The dig revealed a great deal about the pre-Norman monastery. Of especial significance to Arthur is the fact that the dig unearthed the bases of the two stone "pyramids". Between the two of them were two features of note. The first was a deep hole that had been dug and then filled in again. The infill included stone chippings and debris that certainly came from the construction of the Lady Chapel.



The interior of the Lady Chapel as it is today. The lower arches formed a crypt dug out below ground in the 12th century. This work destroyed any archaeological traces of the Old Church that once stood on this site and so all evidence of how old that building might really have been. Photo: IDS.

Since the chapel was being built when the monks found Arthur's body, the large hole must have been dug and filled in then. Undoubtedly this was the hole dug by the monks. Quite clearly the monks really had dug a hole where and when they said they had. Not only that but at the base of the hole lay a stone-lined grave of the type used in the 5th century. It was large enough to hold two bodies, perhaps three. So the monks had found the bodies that they said they had.

Adjacent to where the hole had been dug, the archaeologists found the remains of a mausoleum. The mausoleum may have contained a small shrine and was built at some date before 600, though it was not possible to be any more precise. Certainly the mausoleum had been demolished during the extensive building works carried out by St Dunstan in the 940s. By the time the monks were digging in the 1180s there would have been no sign above ground that the mausoleum had ever existed.

However, it was probably standing in the 6th century, when Arthur died. Such a structure would certainly have contained the burial of a holy man of outstanding fame and importance. It is tempting to identify this as the tomb of St Patrick - though the Irish are adamant that he lies buried at Downpatrick in Co. Down. Perhaps it was the tomb of whoever really did found the monastery of Glastonbury. Whoever's tomb it was they would clearly have had to have been very holy and highly respected persons.

The conventions of the 6th century were that only people of great importance could be buried close to a person of such sanctity as was buried in the demolished mausoleum at Glastonbury. This might be an abbot of the monastery, but only if he were of unblemished reputation and record. Equally it might be a secular person who had donated

large estates of land or huge sums of cash to the monastery. Finally it might be a person of great fame and reputation whose burial would enhance the fame and reputation of the monastery. Arthur might fit into either of the last two categories.

The monks of 1189 had no way of knowing it, but the spot where they said they had found the body of Arthur was in exactly the place where a man of his importance would have been buried in the 6th century.

None of this is to say that the body unearthed in 1189 actually was the body of King Arthur. It does, however, indicate that the body had been buried in precisely the sort of place where Arthur could be expected to be buried.

But if Arthur were not buried at Glastonbury, where was he buried? It is time to look at some other possibilities.



Chapter 3

Other Tombs of Arthur

Scattered across Britain are dozens of places which folklore asserts have a connection to Arthur. There are Arthur's Castles, Arthur's Bridges and Arthur's Seats in plenty. There is even an Arthur's Bed up on Bodmin Moor. The vast majority of these are either natural features, like Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh, or prehistoric monuments such as the fallen Bronze Age monolith now dubbed "Arthur's Bed" by the Bodmin folk. But there are only four places outside Glastonbury associated with Arthur's burial.

The first is Arthur's Stone, just outside Dorstone in Herefordshire. This monument stands on a high, windswept ridge overlooking the small River Dore, but behind which lies the Wye Valley. This stone takes the form of a massive granite slab, originally 18 feet long and 8 feet wide but now cracked in two. It rests on half a dozen smaller upright stones and other stones stand nearby.



Arthur's Stone near Dorstone. Photo:UKgeofan.

The legend tells how Arthur fought against a giant here. The reasons for the fight are unknown, but Arthur won. Two clear indentations on the slab are sometimes said to be the marks left by the giant's elbows as he fell dying. Other versions say they were caused by Arthur's knees as he knelt in prayer to give thanks to God for his victory.

Although the details of this ancient fight are not recorded, the story fits into a well known class of folk tale current in western Britain. The battle is usually between a Christian figure and a giant who has been terrorising the local peasants. Where it is possible to check the facts, the giant usually turns out to be a dimly remembered echo of a pagan god. In other words the "battle with a giant" legend relates to the struggle of Christian missionaries against a local pagan cult. In this instance it is likely that Arthur was invoked into the legend as a suitably famous Christian warrior. There is no real evidence he ever came here.

The stone structure itself is actually a Bronze Age burial chamber. Originally it would have been covered by an earthen mound, but centuries of wind and rain have stripped that away and left the rocks revealed.

This is not a 6th century burial and there are no archaeological signs that the ground was disturbed at that time. Arthur does not lie here.

The second place to claim Arthur's body is Bedd Arthur, high on the slopes of the 1,500 foot high Foel Cwmcerwyn in the Prescelly Mountains of Dyfed. This is a natural rock formation - a huge boulder standing on top of a rocky outcrop. The name means "Arthur's

Grave" in Welsh. According to early medieval tales, and local legends, Arthur came to the Prescelly Mountains to hunt the magical boar Twrch Trwyth.



The boulder of Bedd Arthur. Photo: Ceridwen.

All accounts agree that Arthur survived his boar hunt, so why local lore has it that he is buried here is unknown. In any case the thin soil and bare rocks of Foel Cwmcerwyn have not been disturbed by any burial. Arthur does not lie here.

The third claimed location for the much sought for grave is at Warbstow in Cornwall. On the great hill overlooking the village stands an Iron Age hillfort. Inside the hillfort is a long, low mound about 70 feet long and 10 feet wide. The hillfort was built in pre-Roman times by the Dumnonii tribe, but the long mound is of unknown date. Some think it is a much worn down neolithic long barrow burial mound, others that it is a medieval rabbit warren.



The mound at Warbstow that is sometimes said to be Arthur's grave.

The folklore here is equally confused. In the 1830s an historian recorded a local as telling him that the mound is the grave of a giant who lived in the hillfort many centuries ago. That giant is said to have had a dispute with another giant who lived on Condolden Hill, visible about 8 miles to the west. The two giants began throwing things at each other. A hammer thrown by the Condolden giant hit the Warbstow giant on the head and killed him instantly. The local humans, who had suffered from the tyrannical rule of the giant, were mightily pleased and buried him where he fell. Another historian in 1907 found several tales of "mighty warriors of long ago" being told locally.

Interestingly no mention of Arthur in connection with the place can be found before nearby Tintagel took off as an Arthurian tourist hot spot in the mid-20th century. The conclusion must be that the Giant's Grave as was, became dubbed Arthur's Grave to cash in on the tourist trade. Arthur does not lie here.

Finally there is a stone memorial at Slaughter Bridge, over the River Camel near Camelford in Cornwall. According to the historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing in about 1140, it was here that the great battle of Camlann was fought at which Arthur was killed along with his nephew and enemy Mordred. Traditionally the battle was fought for control of the river crossing, with the main action taking place around the bridge itself.

About half a mile upstream from the bridge there lies on the river bank a square stone column about 10 feet long and 2 feet wide. It is inscribed with heavily weathered letters, the last four of which can be read as "Atry". Since at least 1602, when local gentleman Richard Carey wrote about the place, this Atry Stone has been pointed out to visitors as being the gravestone of King Arthur.



The Atry Stone as it lies today beside the River Camel. It originally stood upright on the banks of the river but fell in the 17th century. Photo: Babelstone.

In fact the inscription is partly buried, but recent investigation has revealed it in full. The Latin inscription reads "Latini hic iacit filius magari". What appears to be "Atry" is in fact "agari". It is the weathering and the peculiarities of the script used on the stone that have caused the confusion. That script dates this stone to the 6th century. The translation of the inscription is "Latinus, here he lies, the son of Magarus".

There is no record in either history or legend of Latinus nor of Magarus. Whoever Latinus was his family had the money to pay for this highly prestigious monument. Given the date of his monument, Latinus must have died within 40 years or so of the Battle of Camlann. Perhaps he was killed in the battle itself, we do not know.

We do know that Arthur was killed at Camlann, but if that battle was fought here there is no trace of his tomb on the banks of the Camel. Arthur does not lie here.

However, the same historian who tells us that the Battle of Camlann was fought on the banks of the Camel does tell us where Arthur was taken. After detailing the Battle of Camlann, Geoffrey of Monmouth continues "the renowned King Arthur was borne thence unto the island of Avalon for the healing of his wounds, where he gave up the crown of Britain unto his kinsman Constantine, son of Cador, Duke of Cornwall, in the year of the Incarnation of Our Lord five hundred and forty-two."

It is a clear statement. Unfortunately it is taken from the writings of one of the most unreliable of medieval historians. It is time to search for Avalon.



A 19th century painting by Frank Williams showing the wounded Arthur being carried over the sea to the isle of Avalon while Camelot burns in the distance.



Chapter 4

Avalon

Although it has featured in innumerable legends, romances and myths, there are only three sources that indicate that Avalon was ever a real place at all.

In terms of date the earliest of these sources is William of Malmesbury's history of Glastonbury, written about 1125. This records a legend that in the early 2nd century a group of Christian missionaries sent from Rome settled on the island of Avalon, thus founding the monastery of Glastonbury. As described above there are good reasons to

doubt whether this story is, in fact, true. However, this is not the same as doubting that Avalon was the name used for Glastonbury before that name came into use.

It is interesting here to note that much later in his book about Glastonbury, William includes a chapter about the famous and impressive tombs to be seen in the abbey in his day. He starts this chapter with a list of famous people buried at Glastonbury, but who have no visible tomb that has survived to his day. Among those named is King Arthur.

Taken together these two sections would seem to state very clearly that Glastonbury was once known as Avalon and that Arthur was buried there. Unfortunately things are not that simple. The section about Avalon is repeating a clearly untrue story, while the short sentence about Arthur's unmarked grave appears only in a later copy that was made after the discovery of 1189. It might be that whoever copied out the original added in the name of Arthur because he knew of the discovery of what was said to be Arthur's body.

If the entry about Arthur really does date back to William of Malmesbury's original work of 1125 it would be proof positive that the monks of 1189 did not fabricate the entire event. It was known, at least in legendary form, that Arthur was buried there.

The next source is Geoffrey of Monmouth who wrote the monumental 12 book epic History of the Kings of Britain in about 1140. In Chapter 2 of Book 11, Geoffrey recorded that after being mortally wounded, Arthur was taken to Avalon to have his wounds cared for. Arthur never returned from Avalon. The rational conclusion of this statement is that he died of his wounds, though later legend would have it that Avalon was a magical island where Arthur remains immortal.

In his monumental History of the Kings of Britain, Geoffrey treats Arthur very much as if he were a real monarch, and Avalon as if it were a real place.

Unfortunately although he was writing a history, Geoffrey did not stick to the facts. He included anecdotes, legends, myths and, at times, simply made things up. He drew on many sources for his History. Some of them have survived to this day and can be detected in Geoffrey's work. Other sources have not survived, but undoubtedly did exist. There are several facts given in Geoffrey which we now know to be true, but from evidence that was not available in medieval Britain. Clearly Geoffrey was using some sources that although accurate have not survived.

The problem for an historian reading Geoffrey's work is to distinguish between a statement for which there is no corroborating evidence, but which is true as it came from a now lost source, and a statement for which there is no corroborating evidence, and is false as Geoffrey simply made it up.

Nearly all of what Geoffrey writes about Arthur falls into this category. We know that Geoffrey had access to a vast mass of documentation and old manuscripts that have not survived to the present day. He also had access to a wide range of legends, some of them grounded more or less in fact, which again have not survived. It is thought that in producing his lengthy account of Arthur's life and reign Geoffrey collected together a mass of different facts and legends and stories, which he wove together by inventing linking sections.

Where Avalon came into all this is anybody's guess. Presumably Geoffrey had heard the name from somewhere, and probably in a context that indicated Arthur had been taken

there to die.

What is certain is that Geoffrey did not know of the link between Avalon and Glastonbury. His History was so popular that Geoffrey later wrote a number of other books on a similar theme. One of these was The Life of Merlin. This did not really pretend to be history, but instead was a collection of legends and fanciful tales picked up by Geoffrey and woven together to give a spurious biography of the great wizard. In this book Geoffrey gives a detailed description of Avalon.

"The island of apples which men call "The Fortunate Isle" gets its name from the fact that it produces all things of itself; the fields there have no need of the ploughs of the farmers and all cultivation is lacking except what nature provides. Of its own accord it produces grain and grapes, and apple trees grow in its woods from the close-clipped grass. The ground of its own accord produces everything instead of merely grass, and people live there a hundred years or more." He also states that it is necessary to go to sea to get there.

If the fantastical description of the island were not enough to shift it from reality into fairy tale status, the statement that a sea voyage was needed means that it could not be Glastonbury, which was an island of firm land in the marshes.

The third piece of evidence to indicate that Avalon was a real place is the leaden cross found in 1189 by the monks digging for Arthur's tomb. The inscription on it read "Here lies interred in the isle of Avalon, the renowned King Arthur", perhaps with the additional words "with Guinevere his second wife".

Taken at face value this inscription not only proves that Avalon was a real place, but also that it was Glastonbury. But was the cross a genuine artifact, or did the monks manufacture it themselves to give credence to their hoax discovery of Arthur's tomb?

The timing of the discovery of the cross is interesting. Geoffrey of Monmouth's astonishingly popular History had appeared 50 years earlier. By 1189 it was widely read, widely imitated and had spawned a host of other tales about King Arthur and his court. The fact that Arthur had been taken to Avalon was, therefore, widely known. If the monks had wanted to fake a tombstone of some kind then it would have been natural for them to include some reference to Avalon. What at first sight was a piece of genuine evidence for Avalon, might merely be evidence of the clever fraud carried out by the monks of 1189.

The leaden cross presented by the monks in 1189 as evidence of their find was carefully reinterred with the bones when a new tomb was built for them. When the abbey was closed in 1539 the cross was moved to the local parish church, where it was stored securely along with the communion chalice and plate. It remained there until around 1650 and by 1730 was owned by William Hughes, Chancellor of Wells. Thereafter it vanished from the written record. So far as anyone knows it has been destroyed.

However, in 1609 the historian William Camden went to Glastonbury and saw the cross in the parish church. He did a drawing of it, which he published in a subsequent book. Camden is highly regarded as a reporter and whenever his drawings and illustrations can be checked they are accurate. Most historians have, therefore, concluded that his drawing of the cross is an accurate facsimile, at least of one side of it.

The cross as shown by Camden is at first sight an odd object. The shape is irregular, with

a splayed upper limb and a lower limb that is not only splayed but has an odd protrusion at the bottom. Moreover the inscription is neither neat nor regular but runs haphazardly in 14 lines with words split between lines.

The translation of the inscription shown would read "Here lies interred in the isle of Avalon, the renowned King Arthur". This accords with the majority of the contemporary accounts, but misses off the reference to Guinevere. However, as has been pointed out, the words about Guinevere may have been on the reverse of the cross, which Camden does not illustrate.

The cross is not only unusual in its shape, but also in the wording and layout of the inscription. It does not really fit either of the usual ideas put forward about the events of 1189 - that the monks faked the entire thing or that they found the genuine tomb of King Arthur.

Taking the hoax theory first. The cross is not of a shape used in the 12th century. Nor are the letters written as they would have been written in the 12th century. In particular writing an N as an H or a C with squared corners was simply not done then. Nor is a small cross of lead some 8 inches long particularly impressive.

Medieval monks were not above hoaxes or fakes, indeed in more recent and less trusting times they have become famous for them. But when monks set about creating a fake they did so with the intention of misleading their contemporaries, and had the skills to do so. Anyone seeking to fake a royal tomb in the 1180s would have set about making the fake look as an educated person of the 1180s would have expected it to look.

For some generations, royal tombs had been elaborate affairs constructed inside churches. They almost always had an effigy of the dead person interred within, and certainly had lengthy and elaborate inscriptions extolling the virtues of the dead monarch. Often these tombs were studded with semi-precious stones, at least with enamel, and liberally decorated with elaborate carving. To a person of 1189, that is what a royal tomb looked like and what they would expect to see.

A pathetic little leaden cross marking the site of an otherwise anonymous grave in the open air simply did not fit the bill. If the cross was a hoax, it was a most peculiar one for it would seem to have been designed not to convince anyone it was genuine.

In any case, the grave of King Arthur was an odd thing for monks to manufacture. The usual explanation given in modern times for a hoax to have been carried out was that the fire of 1184 had been a disaster for Glastonbury. The work needed to rebuild the abbey was going to be enormously expensive and the monks were desperately short of money. They therefore faked the discovery of the famous King Arthur to tempt a horde of visitors to the Abbey, who could then be fleeced of their ready money by the sale of souvenirs, blessings and food.

As theories go it is not bad, but nor does it really stand up to scrutiny. Medieval England was not awash with tourists on holiday keen to visit tombs, monuments and architectural wonders. The real money was to be found in catering to the pilgrimage trade. Pilgrims visited religious sites to see, or even better to touch, the relics of holy saints and martyrs, and to say prayers while kneeling in front of their shrines. There was a very good reason for this. By making the effort to journey to a distant shrine, the pilgrim was

demonstrating commitment to Christ and his saints. This in turn was believed to count as a good work, that would give the pilgrim rewards in the afterlife, most obviously his time in purgatory would be reduced. Time off for good behaviour, as it were.

The main impetus of a pilgrimage was to visit a holy saint. Seeing the tomb of a famous king while there might be interesting but would not tempt a pilgrim to visit. If the monks wanted to lure pilgrims to Glastonbury they would have been much better off "discovering" the grave and relics of a holy person. Glastonbury had plenty of them to choose from, starting with St Patrick and working down through St Dunstan to a string of abbots and local saints. Discovering a fraudulent tomb of King Arthur was not the thing they should have done.

In any case, Glastonbury was not short of cash. Rebuilding the majority of monastic buildings was certainly going to be a financial strain, but this was the second wealthiest abbey in England at the time. If not actually wallowing in money, the abbey was hardly poor.

Turning to the idea that the leaden cross is proof of a 6th century burial of Arthur, the cross does not fit the idea that the monks found the real tomb of Arthur either. If the shapes of the letters are not those used in the 1190s, nor are they those of the 6th century. The closest match to the letters on the lead cross are the few manuscripts to have survived from the 10th century.

Nor was a lead cross the usual way that mourners of the 6th century marked the grave of a dead nobleman. As shown by the tombstone of Latinus at Slaughter Bridge, it was more usual to erect a stone and put on it a very short inscription.

The lead cross supports neither the idea of a genuine 6th century grave, nor that of a 12th century hoax. And yet there it is.

So what can possibly be the solution to the enigma of the Glastonbury find of 1189. The answer almost certainly lies in archaeology and an understanding of how the medieval mind worked.



[Chapter 5](#)

The Archaeology

From the point of view of determining the truth about the events of 1189, the key archaeological dig is that carried out at Glastonbury in 1962. As we have already seen, this dig revealed that a large hole had been dug in 1189 exactly where the monks claimed to have dug, and that at the bottom of that hole was a grave of perhaps 6th century date. It revealed much more than that.

The site of the cemetery was always said to have been on the south side of the Old Church. This has never really been in doubt. What has been in doubt is the age of the Old Church itself. The monks of Glastonbury for many generations claimed that it had been originally built by Joseph of Arimathea in the 1st century AD. More realistically, they claimed that when the monastery itself was founded in around 590 or so the Old Church was already there, along with some hermits, and that a new stone chapel was built alongside it. In 712 a proper stone church was built for the first time by King Ine of Wessex who also added some other monastic buildings. The foundations of this church have been found under the west end of the current nave, so it was built just east of the Old Church.

In the 940s St Dunstan became Abbot of Glastonbury and set about a massive building programme. His main works were to rebuild Ida's church in more luxurious form, build stone cloisters, erect a stone wall around the monastery's boundary, construct a range of working structures such as kitchens and a scriptorium and to reshape the cemetery to the south of the Old Church. The main purpose of these works was to make the physical structures of Glastonbury Abbey suitable for the imposition of the Benedictine Rule on the monks of Glastonbury. This was part of Dunstan's lifetime goal of reforming the Church in England to make it more modern, more disciplined and more in line with the prevailing orthodoxy of Rome. There was no room for local customs or traditions in Dunstan's shining new vision of Christianity.

The signs of Dunstan's works were revealed by the 1962 dig. As regards the old cemetery, it was clear that Dunstan had fairly effectively cleared the entire area. A stout stone wall had been erected along the southern side which acted as a revetment. The ground level in the cemetery was then raised and levelled to form a smooth green sward stretching from the new wall to the Old Church. The old mausoleum found in 1962 was not the only monument dismantled at this time. It would seem that the only old memorials to remain were the two "pyramids" or obelisks. Perhaps they survived as they were inscribed with the names of former abbots. Everything else went.

It was into this raised and smoothed platform that the monks dug in 1189. The archaeologists found that the hole they dug was deep, but narrow. The excavation had not been a haphazard digging here and there to see what might be found. It looked very much as if the monks knew exactly where to dig and what they were going to find.

It is difficult now to be precise, but it would seem that the leaden cross had been placed below the original ground surface with its inscribed face upward. The mass of earth piled up by Dunstan then lay on top of the original ground surface. This is most peculiar. As we have seen an original 6th century tomb marker for a high status secular individual would almost certainly have been a stone slab, probably standing upright. On this would have been carved a short memorial sentence, in Arthur's case probably something along the lines of "Here lies Arthur".

But the leaden cross would appear to have been underground, even before Dunstan piled his earth on top of the site. It would therefore have been invisible, even when first installed. That makes it a very strange memorial indeed. The whole point of a monument or memorial is that it should be seen. Yet, the leaden cross could not be seen.

At this point the direct evidence of archaeology runs out. It is time to take draw some conclusions.



Conclusions

Thus far I have tried to present the evidence for and against the Tomb of King Arthur at Glastonbury as fairly and impartially as I have been able.

The vast majority of historians believe that the discovery of the tomb in 1189 was a fraud. Some take this view because they think Arthur never existed, and so therefore his tomb could not exist either. Others who do accept the reality of Arthur believe the discover of the tomb was more to do with the need of Glastonbury to raise funds than to the existence of a real grave. And then there are some who prefer the mystery of the "Once and Future King" to the a real grave of a dead warrior. More cautious historians prefer to give the facts, but not to be drawn on a conclusion as to what it all means.

For what it is worth, here is what I think happened at Glastonbury. I am happy to concede that I could be wrong, but this is, I believe, the most likely explanation for all the facts and records that have come down to us.

First, I hold to the view that there was an Arthur in the early 6th century who led the Romano-Britons into battle against the Germanic invaders who would become the English. It seems likely that he was killed at a place called Camlann in a war fought against fellow Romano-Britons as the political and governmental structures of post Roman Britain collapsed.

Where Camlann was must here be left an open question, but Arthur's body must have been taken somewhere to be buried. The evidence points to the fact that Glastonbury was at this date an important Christian site, home to highly revered hermits. The evidence for Glastonbury being called "Avalon" at this time is rather weaker, but not as weak as the name "Ynys Witrin" which has been widely accepted by modern scholars intent on debunking the Arthurian legends. It seems to me to be a distinct possibility that Arthur's

body was brought to Glastonbury to be buried. On the evidence of the scant writings to survive from the 6th century, however, it is very far from being proven.

But for now let us accept that Arthur was taken to Glastonbury for burial. The body of such an illustrious secular person would have been buried outside the church, but close to a holy site. Next to the mausoleum or shrine of a highly revered saint would have been the right sort of place to put his body. The grave would have been marked by an upright stone engraved with words such as "Here lies Arthur".

We know that after the English takeover of Glastonbury the older, British documents were poorly treated. Most were thrown away when they crumbled with age and hardly any survived. When William of Malmesbury came to write his History of the abbey he found a good deal of written records from about 680 onwards, but very little from before that date. Detailed knowledge of Arthur and his time was therefore lost at Glastonbury, though his tomb stone remained standing into the years the abbey was run by English monks.

Then along came St Dunstan with his ruthless reforming zeal. No doubt there was much about the Church in Britain that did need reforming. Equally obvious is the fact that many of the reforms were aimed not at putting right abuses but at imposing the rule of the Pope in Rome over independent bishoprics and abbeys. The Pope claimed to be the representative of Christ on Earth, to be the successor to St Peter who had been given the keys to Heaven by Christ himself and so to be able to command and demand the obedience in spiritual matters of all Christians. Any bishop, abbot or institution that disputed this was to be put right in no uncertain terms.

Glastonbury, it will be remembered, claimed to have been founded by Joseph of Arimathea on the instructions of St Philip, another disciple of Jesus Christ. Depending on how the stories were told, Glastonbury may have been founded before St Peter moved to Rome and so became the first Pope. Such claims to precedence had to be quashed by the reformers. It is probably this that helps to explain the zeal with which St Dunstan swept away the older buildings at Glastonbury. He was seeking to impose his version of papal Christianity on what he viewed as a deviant variant. It may be that the mausoleum-cum-shrine that we know he demolished might have been linked to Joseph of Arimathea himself, certainly it would have housed the relics of a very early saint associated with Glastonbury. That is probably why it had to go.

Demolished along with the mausoleum in the general rearrangement of the old cemetery were any monuments to anyone not approved of by St Dunstan. Arthur, if Dunstan spared him any thought at all, would have been viewed as a long dead ruler of a defunct state and, moreover, as a national enemy of the English. His gravestone could go along with all the others.

But it seems that at least one monk at Glastonbury was not going to take the reforms and changes lying down. The small leaden cross engraved with an untidy inscription looks very much as if it were an unofficial effort to mark the grave. The fact that it was most likely buried beneath ground level indicates that it was not intended to be seen. In fact it may have been deliberately hidden.

A monk, perhaps of Welsh nationality, may have thought that some form of memorial for

Arthur should survive. When the upright stone was dragged off and destroyed, this monk slipped the small cross into the ground where the stone had stood. The shape of the letters on the cross, as recorded in Camden's drawing, seem to be of 10th century date, which is when St Dunstan's work was being carried out. Dunstan's workmen then moved in to pile up the earth that levelled the ground surface a few feet above the old ground level.

A few generations later and the situation at Glastonbury would have been that the monks knew that Arthur was buried somewhere in the old cemetery, but not precisely where. This is exactly what William of Malmesbury tells us the situation was in 1125 - assuming of course that this section is not a later interpolation. On balance it seems to me more likely that this section is a genuine account of the state of knowledge in Glastonbury at the time William was writing.

But if knowledge of Arthur was lost among English monks in Glastonbury, it remained very much alive among the bards of Wales. The bards were trained to remember things. Their main source of income was entertaining nobles or crowds with stories, epics and poems. The amount of material a bard was expected to learn by heart - they could not read or write - was staggering. A total repertoire of stories and songs totalling over a million words was by no means unusual. They were also expected to remember the genealogies and ancestors of noblemen and royalty. People would also turn to bards for information on the history of places and people. To help them remember all this the bards had recourse to a vast store of mnemonics, though it was training and practice that really gave them their skills. They lived in what was basically a non literate society. Small children were taught to remember just as much as children are today taught to read and write. The bards were better at it than others, but it was a widespread skill.

We know that the bards of Wales had at their fingertips a vast stores of material. Of this only a tiny fraction was ever written down. Historians and folklorists pore over the fragments that remain for signs of past events, pagan gods or early Christian saints. The few tales, mnemonics and genealogies to survive are invaluable, but they are a mere fraction of what once existed.

The location of the grave of a famous person is exactly the sort of thing that a bard would be expected to know. So if in the 1180s King Henry II of England was going to find out where Arthur was buried, it was going to be from a Welsh bard. And that is exactly what he is said to have done. Presumably he was told that Arthur was buried at Glastonbury in the cemetery south of the Old Church between two standing obelisks. Henry then sent the good news to Glastonbury with instructions to dig up the bones and treat them with due reverence.

Armed with the new knowledge that confirmed their own, the monks began digging. When they got down to the original ground level they found the leaden cross. Thus certain that they were digging in the right place, the monks kept on digging until they found a stone-lined grave containing three skeletons. The presence of three skeletons must have come as a bit of a surprise. The monks would have quickly concluded that the female skeleton must have been that of Arthur's queen, Guinevere. The second male skeleton could have been anyone, so the identification of Mordred was probably a mere guess.

Once the bones were out of the ground they were, as King Henry had decreed, treated

with reference. A new tomb was made for them. This was replaced by King Edward I with a grand black marble structure. The signpost found in the ruins of Glastonbury today mark the site of this, the third tomb to hold the bones unearthed in 1189. The original site of the burial is unmarked, but lies some 30 feet south of south door of the Lady Chapel.

So was Arthur buried in Glastonbury? Yes, I think he was. And I think the grave exhumed in 1189 really was his.

And the most persuasive evidence for this is something that never happened. When the monks made their announcement that they had found Arthur's grave and his skeleton absolutely nobody denounced them. There were many people in Wales and Cornwall who had very good reasons for Arthur's grave not to be found, and no doubt many others who for nationalistic reasons did not want it to be found in England. But none of them said a word. It is as if they accepted the find as genuine because they already knew that Glastonbury is where Arthur was, in fact, buried.

Where his bones lie now nobody knows. Mostly likely they were simply thrown out during the reformation to be broken and ignored. But that must mean that those poor, battered remnants of Arthur's skeleton still lie somewhere in Glastonbury.



Glastonbury Abbey ruins. Photo: Nilfanion.



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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