

Myths & Tales:

In the medieval tales of King Arthur, Arthur is said to have ruled from a magnificent city called Camelot. Unfortunately, writers disagree on its location, and its whereabouts has long remained a mystery. However, wherever it was, the city would not have been called Camelot during Arthur's time. That name was an invention of the twelfth-century French poet Chrétien de Troyes. As the name of Arthur's city had been forgotten by Chrétien's time, the name Camelot became adopted in the popular imagination. No records survived of what Arthur's capital was really called, so where exactly was this mysterious city?

The Romans conquered Britain in AD 43 and ruled the country until AD 410, when the Roman Empire in western Europe collapsed. When the Romans left to defend Rome, the native Britons were left defenseless against a number of invaders. The Picts, who inhabited Scotland, attacked the north of England; the Angles from Denmark crossed the English Channel and defeated the Britons in the east; and the Saxons, a tribe from northern Germany, conquered much of south-east England. Only central and western England and Wales remained in British hands. Within a century, the native Britons had fragmented into several, smaller kingdoms ruled by local warlords who squabbled so much they could not organize a united defense against the invaders. By AD 500, the Angles and Saxons, collectively called the Anglo-Saxons, were poised to take over all of England and Wales. Strangely, archaeology has shown that around this time the Britons united under a single leadership and not only halted the Anglo-Saxon advance, but managed to push the enemy back to the south and east.

Few records have survived, and there is no contemporary documentation which reveals the name of this leader. However, three centuries later, the writings of the British monk Nennius and others relate that this man was Arthur.



Camelot!

Whoever Arthur was, it is logical to assume that he was the leader of Britain's most powerful kingdom. This was the kingdom of Powys, in central England and Wales, and its capital, the Roman city of Viroconium, became the most prosperous in the country. Well before AD 500, the other larger cities had been overrun by the invaders, effectively leaving Viroconium as Britain's capital.

Over the last 35 years many archaeological excavations have taken place at Viroconium to reveal that, unlike most other Roman towns that had been abandoned for more easily defended hilltop fortifications, the city was still a thriving, walled town. The latest excavation at Viroconium took place in the 1990s and revealed that there was a major rebuilding of the city around AD 500. The nerve center was a massive winged building that appears to have been the palace of an extremely important warlord. Since it was begun at the very time the Britons began defeating the Anglo-Saxons, it may well have been the capital for the British chieftain who led the Britons at the time - the historical Arthur.

It just so happens that the man who ruled the kingdom of Powys from the city of Viroconium at this time, a warlord called Owain Ddantgwyn, was given the title or battle name, the Bear, or "Arth" – Arthur meant "The Bear". After Owain's death, the alliance of British kingdoms fell apart (c. 520) and the Anglo-Saxons eventually pushed the Britons back into what is now Wales. Powys was defeated: all that remained of it was a small country in central Wales and Viroconium was abandoned to the elements. The ancient city was virtually forgotten until excavations began in the 1960s. Unlike London, Lincoln and York, that are still thriving cities today, all that remains of Viroconium are its ruined walls in quiet countryside outside the Shropshire village of Wroxeter. Situated some five miles south-east of Shrewsbury, the site is now open to the public where a small museum displaying artifacts found during the excavations is open all year round. [http://www.grahamphillips.net/Trail/3_Camelot.htm]

