

Myths & Tales:

“Excalibur”, today, has become a widely used icon, metaphor and allusion, not to mention a business and advertising tool. It sprang, of course, from the stories of King Arthur...or did it? Additionally, anyone well acquainted with the Arthurian body of literature wouldn't get their respective swords mixed up, here, but many others confuse Excalibur with the sword drawn from the stone, and, to be sure, there's some reason for such confusion. Read on...

Excalibur is the legendary sword of King Arthur, sometimes attributed with magical powers or associated with the rightful sovereignty of Great Britain. Sometimes Excalibur and the Sword in the Stone (the proof of Arthur's lineage) are said to be the same weapon, but in most versions they are considered separate. The sword was associated with the Arthurian legend very early. In Welsh, the sword is called Caledfwlch.

The name *Excalibur* apparently derives ultimately from the Welsh *Caledfwlch*. Geoffrey of Monmouth Latinized this to *Caliburnus*, the name of Arthur's sword in his 12th-century work *Historia Regum Britanniae*. *Caliburnus* or *Caliburn* became *Excalibur*, *Escalibor*, and other variations when the Arthurian legend entered into French literature.

In Arthurian romance, a number of explanations are given for Arthur's possession of Excalibur. In Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, Arthur obtained the throne by pulling a sword from a stone. In this account, the act could not be performed except by "the true king," meaning the divinely appointed king or true heir of Uther Pendragon. This sword is thought by many to be the famous Excalibur and the identity is made explicit in the later so-called *Vulgate Merlin Continuation*, part of the Lancelot-Grail cycle.

However, in what is sometimes called the *Post-Vulgate Merlin*, Excalibur was given to Arthur by the Lady of the Lake sometime after he began to reign. She calls the sword "Excalibur, that is as to say as Cut-steel." In the *Vulgate Mort Artu*, Arthur orders Girflet to throw the sword into the enchanted lake. After two failed attempts he finally complies with the wounded king's request and a hand emerges from the lake to catch it, a tale which becomes attached to Bedivere instead in Malory and the English tradition.

Malory records both versions of the legend in his *Le Morte d'Arthur*, and confusingly calls both swords Excalibur. The film *Excalibur* attempts to rectify this by having only one sword, which Arthur draws from the stone and later breaks; the Lady of the Lake then repairs it.

In Welsh legend, Arthur's sword, Caledfwlch, is one of Arthur's most valuable possessions and is used by Arthur's warrior Llenlleawg the Irishman to kill the Irish king Diwrnach while stealing his magical cauldron. Caledfwlch is thought to derive from the legendary Irish weapon Caladbolg, the lightning sword of Fergus mac Roich. Caladbolg was also known for its incredible power and was carried by some of Ireland's greatest heroes.

Though not named as Caledfwlch, Arthur's sword is described vividly in “The Dream of Rhonabwy”, one of the tales associated with the Mabinogion: “Then they heard Cadwr Earl of Cornwall being summoned, and saw him rise with Arthur's sword in his hand, with a design of two chimeras on the golden



Excalibur!

hilt; when the sword was unsheathed what was seen from the mouths of the two chimeras was like two flames of fire, so dreadful that it was not easy for anyone to look. At that the host settled and the commotion subsided, and the earl returned to his tent.”—*From The Mabinogion, translated by Jeffrey Gantz.*

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* is the first non-Welsh source to speak of the sword. Geoffrey says the sword was forged in Avalon and Latinizes the name "Caledfwlch" to Caliburnus. When his influential pseudo-history made it to Continental Europe, writers altered the name further until it became "Excalibur". The legend was expanded upon in the Vulgate Cycle, also known as the Lancelot-Grail Cycle, and in the Post-Vulgate Cycle which emerged in its wake.

The story of the Sword in the Stone has a parallel in some versions of the story of *Sigurd* (the Norse proto-Siegfried), whose father, Sigmund, draws the sword Gram out of the tree Barnstokkr where it is embedded by the Norse god Odin.

In several early French works, such as *Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval*, the Story of the Grail and the Vulgate Lancelot Proper section, Excalibur is used by Gawain, Arthur's nephew and one of his best knights. This is in contrast to later versions, where Excalibur belongs solely to the king. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excalibur>]

Historically, as with Arthur, himself, no sword has ever been found and verified as the true Excalibur, but Richard the Lion-Hearted, at one point, made a treaty with Tancred of Sicily, and it was sealed with an exchange of gifts. Richard gave the famous sword "Excalibur," the "Singing Sword," England's most precious item from the past, to Tancred. Some years earlier, a great tomb had been discovered in England where, it was claimed, Joseph of Arimathea had brought the Holy Grail. When the tomb was opened, the monks who were there claimed to have discovered the bones of the legendary King Arthur and a sword that could only have been his famous Excalibur. Whether it was or not, the English people thought it was, and Richard's giving it away showed how little he thought of his English subjects (He was from Normandy).

