

Uther Pendragon

“Uther” redirects here. For the Royal Navy submarine, see [HMS Uther \(P62\)](#).

Uther Pendragon (/ˈjuːθər pɛnˈdræɡən/,^[1] Welsh:



Uther Pendragon, by *Howard Pyle* from *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*. (1903)

Uthyr Pendragon, *Uthyr Bendragon*) or King Uther is a legendary king of sub-Roman Britain and the father of King Arthur. A few minor references to Uther appear in Old Welsh poems, but his biography was first written down by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), and Geoffrey's account of the character was used in most later versions.

He is a fairly ambiguous individual throughout the literature, but is described as a strong king and a defender of the people. According to *Arthurian Legend*, Merlin magically disguises Uther to look like his enemy Gorlois, enabling Uther to sleep with Gorlois' wife Lady Igraine. Thus Arthur, “the once and future king,” is an illegitimate child (though later legend, as found in Malory, emphasizes that the conception occurred after Gorlois's death and that he was legitimated by Uther's subsequent marriage to Igraine^[2]). This act of conception occurs the very night that Uther's troops dispatch Gorlois. This theme of illegitimate conception is repeated in Arthur's siring of Mordred by his own half-sister Morgause in the later prose romances. It is Mordred who mortally wounds

King Arthur in the Battle of Camlann.

1 Epithet

Uther's epithet *Pendragon* literally means “Chief-Dragon”, but in a figurative sense, “foremost leader” or “chief of warriors”.^[3] The name was misinterpreted by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the *Historia* to mean “dragon's head”,^[3] and further misinterpreted in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* to mean “hanging dragon”. According to Geoffrey and works based on his version, Uther acquired the epithet when he witnessed a portentous dragon-shaped comet, which inspired him to use dragons on his standards. According to Robert de Boron^[4] and the Grail cycle based on his work, it was Uther's older brother (elsewhere called Aurelius Ambrosius) who saw the comet and received the name “Pendragon”, Uther taking his epithet after his death.

2 Early Welsh poetry

Though the Welsh tradition of the Arthurian legend is fragmentary, some material exists through the *Welsh Triads* and various poems. Uther appears in these fragments, where he is associated with Arthur and, in some cases, even appears as his father.

He is mentioned in the circa-10th century Arthurian poem “Pa gur yv y porthaur?” (“What man is the gate-keeper?”), where it is only said of him that Mabon son of Modron is his servant. He is also memorialized with “The Death-song of Uther Pen” from the *Book of Taliesin*.^[5] The latter includes a reference to Arthur, so the marginal addition of “dragon” to Uther's name is probably justified. “The Colloquy of Arthur and the Eagle,” a poem contemporary with but independent of Geoffrey, mentions another son of Uther named Madoc, the father of Arthur's nephew Eliwlo.^[3]

In Triad 28, Uther is named the creator of one of the Three Great Enchantments of the Island of Britain, which he taught to the wizard Menw.^[6] Since Menw is a shapeshifter according to *Culhwch and Olwen*, it might be that Uthyr was one as well. If this is so, it opens up the possibility that Geoffrey of Monmouth's narrative about Uther impregnating Igraine with Merlin's help (see below) was taken from a Welsh legend where Uthyr changed his own shape, Merlin possibly being added to the story by

Geoffrey.^[7]

Uthyr's other reference, Triad 51, however, shows influence from Geoffrey's *Historia*. It follows Geoffrey's description of Uther as son of Constantine II, now called "Custennin the Blessed", and brother of both Aurelius Ambrosius ("Emrys Wledig") and Constans II ("Custennin the Younger").^[8]

3 *Historia Regum Britanniae*



Uthr Bendragon. A crude illustration from a 15th-century Welsh language version of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae

Uther is best known from Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136) where he is the youngest son of King of Britannia Constantine II. His eldest brother Constans succeeds to the throne on their father's death, but is murdered at the instigation of his adviser Vortigern, who seizes the throne. Uther and his other brother Aurelius Ambrosius, still children, flee to Brittany. Vortigern makes an alliance with the Saxons under Hengist, but it goes disastrously wrong. Aurelius and Uther return, now adults. Aurelius burns Vortigern in his castle and becomes king.

With Aurelius on the throne, Uther leads his brother in arms to Ireland to help Merlin bring the stones of Stonehenge from there to Britain. Later, while Aurelius is ill, Uther leads his army against Vortigern's son Paschent and his Saxon allies. On the way to the battle, he sees a comet in the shape of a dragon, which Merlin interprets as presaging Aurelius's death and Uther's glorious future. Uther wins the battle and takes the epithet "Pendragon", and returns to find that Aurelius has been poisoned by an assassin. He becomes king and orders the construction of two gold dragons, one of which he uses as his standard. He secures Britain's frontiers and quells Saxon uprisings with the aids of his retainers, one of whom is Gorlois,

Duke of Cornwall. At a banquet celebrating their victories, Uther becomes obsessively enamoured of Gorlois' wife Igera (Igraine), and a war ensues between Uther and his vassal. Gorlois sends Igera to the impregnable castle of Tintagel for protection while he himself is besieged by Uther in another town. Uther consults with Merlin who uses his magic to transform the king into the likeness of Gorlois and thus gain access to Igera at Tintagel. He spends the night with her and they conceive Arthur, but the next morning it is discovered that Gorlois had been killed. Uther marries Igera and they have a daughter called Anna (in later romances she is called Morgause and is usually Igera's daughter by her previous marriage). Morgause later marries King Lot and becomes the mother of Gawain and Mordred.

Uther later falls ill and the wars begin to go badly against the Saxons. He insists on leading his army himself, propped up on his horse. He defeats Hengist's son Octa at Verulamium (St Albans), despite the Saxons calling him the "Half-Dead King." However, the Saxons soon contrive his death by poisoning a spring which he drinks from near Verulamium.^[9]

Uther's family is based on some historical figures; Constantine on the historical usurper Constantine III, a claimant to the Roman throne from 407–411, and Constans on his son. Aurelius Ambrosius is Ambrosius Aurelianus, mentioned by Gildas, though his connection to Constantine and Constans is unrecorded.

4 Other medieval literature

In Robert de Boron's *Merlin* Uther Pendragon kills Hengest after an assassination attempt by the Saxon leader and Merlin creates the Round Table for him. In the *Prose Lancelot* Uther Pendragon claims to have been born in Bourges. He takes an army to Brittany to fight against King Claudas of Bourges, a situation resembling that of the historical ruler Riothamus who went to Brittany to fight ravagers based in Bourges.

There is an alternative account of Uther Pendragon's background in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. A certain Mazadân went with a fairy named Terdelaschoye to the land of Feimurgân. (This looks like a garbling of some source that told of Mazadân's alliance with the Fay Morgan in Terre de la Joye; the "Land of Joy"). Mazadân becomes father of two sons, Lazaliez and Brickus. Brickus becomes father of Utepandragûn, father of Arthur, while the elder son, Lazaliez, becomes father of Gandin of Anjou, father of Gahmuret, father of Parzival (Percival). Uther Pendragon and Arthur here appear as the scions of the junior branch of an unattested House of Anjou.

Uther appears in the chivalric romance *Sir Cleges* as the king to whom Sir Cleges brings the Christmas cherries, obtained by miracle.^[10]

5 Modern literature

Uther Pendragon remains a widely used character in modern Arthurian literature. In T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, Uther the Conqueror is the Norman King of England. Mary Stewart's first two books in her Arthurian saga, *The Crystal Cave* and *The Hollow Hills*, feature Uther Pendragon as Merlin's uncle, Merlin being his brother Ambrosius' illegitimate son. Uther is depicted as a mostly decent but rather oversexed character, who becomes impotent in later life because of a groin injury, a Fisher King figure. In Bernard Cornwell's *The Warlord Chronicles*, Uther is the King of Dumnonia as well as the High King of Britain. In Jack Whyte's *The Camulod Chronicles*, Uther is King of the Pendragon, the Celtic people of South Cambria, cousin to Caius Merlyn Britannicus and Ambrose Ambrosianus Britannicus. Whyte's novel "Uther", written in 2000, revolves around a fictionalized version of Uther's life. In contrast to traditional versions, Stephen R. Lawhead's *Pendragon Cycle* makes Uther's brother Aurelius, whose widow (Ygera) he marries, Arthur's true father. In Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*, Uther is the nephew of Aurelianus instead of his brother; while Aurelianus is the son of a Roman Emperor, Uther has no Roman blood. In Valerio Massimo Manfredi's *The Last Legion*, Uther is himself the last Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustus. While the real Romulus Augustus disappeared from history after being deposed by Goths, in the novel he escapes to Britain, where he adopts the name Pendragon and eventually sires Arthur. In D. J. MacHale's *Pendragon* series, the main character, Bobby Pendragon, is the reincarnation of either Uther or his son Arthur.

6 In popular culture

- In John Boorman's film *Excalibur*, Gabriel Byrne plays an ambitious but somewhat obtuse Uther Pendragon, whose uncontrollable lust for Ygraine, while necessary for the birth of Arthur, proves also his own undoing.
- In the BBC television series *Merlin*, Uther, played by Anthony Head, has banned magic in Camelot and slaughtered any who openly practise the art. It is revealed his wife Ygraine was unable to conceive, so Nimueh, a sorceress and friend, helped in the conception of Arthur. However, to keep balance in the world, a life had to be taken in exchange. Thus, Ygraine died at Arthur's birth, and Uther's guilt spurred him to purge all magic from Camelot. His wanton cruelty eventually causes his ward Morgana, who possesses magic herself, to turn against him. She is later revealed as his illegitimate daughter, and covets control of Camelot from then on. In series 4, Uther is wounded during an assassination attempt

on Arthur. Merlin tries to heal him but due to Morgana's meddling, the spell instead kills him.

- In the television series *Camelot* Uther is poisoned by Morgana in the first episode. Here she is his daughter, but was sent to the convent after he married Igraine.

7 See also

- List of Arthurian characters
- Pendragon Castle

8 Notes

- [1] Longman Pronunciation Dictionary, 3rd ed., s.v. "Uther", "Pendragon".
- [2] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/MaloryWks2/1:3.6?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>
- [3] Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 512–513
- [4] de Boron, Robert. *Merlin and the Grail*. Tr. Nigel Bryant. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001.
- [5] "The death-song of Uther Pendragon"
- [6] The Hergest Triads
- [7] Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 56
- [8] Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, pp. 132-133
- [9] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae* 6.5-9, 8.1-24
- [10] Laura A. Hibbard, *Medieval Romance in England* p79 New York Burt Franklin,1963

9 References

- Bromwich, Rachel (2006). *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain*. University of Wales Press. ISBN 0-7083-1386-8.

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