

THE MYTH OF KING ARTHUR AND ITS CZECH RECEPTION

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ABSTRACT

The article outlines the growth of the myth of King Arthur in old British chronicles and examines the reception of the myth in Czech literature. The myth of King Arthur began with the historian Nennius in the late 8th century and developed through the Middle Ages to the Modern Age, with increasing embellishment and ramifications of the story. The myth of King Arthur has been present in Czech literature since 1319. The essay lists and analyzes the brief and rather marginal references and allusions to it. Closer attention is paid to an original drama adaptation of the King Arthur myth by Jaroslav Vrchlický, one of the major 19th-century Czech poets.

KEYWORDS

King Arthur; Merlin; Arthurian myth in Czech literature; Badon Hill; Jaroslav Vrchlický

The purpose of this article is to examine the development of the myth of King Arthur and to outline the perception of King Arthur in Czech literature. Arthur gradually became a point of departure for a string of other stories, with characters linked in some way to him as the central figure, but in this essay the Knights of the Round Table and the complex ramifications of their adventures will be left aside and the focus will be only on Arthur and Merlin the prophet and magician.

Those who are interested in the whole range of the Arthurian tradition are referred to *The Arthurian Annals: The Tradition in English from 1250 to 2000* (2004), a definitive bibliography of over 600 years of Arthurian literature and related material in English.¹ The book covers over 11,000 works in all media: fiction, poetry, drama; editions and translations of medieval works; children's literature; history and folklore; Arthurian art, music, films, television, and comics.

I. THE MYTH OF KING ARTHUR IN BRITAIN

King Arthur is largely a creation of romance but historians believe there is a hard core of fact in it. In the conflict between the Romano-Celts and the Germanic invaders, which culminated between 450 and 500, it is very likely that the former, when faced by the imminent danger of Germanic subjugation, made a unified effort at resistance and forgot about their tribal enmities.

1. See Daniel P. Nastali and Phillip C. Boardman, *The Arthurian Annals: The Tradition in English from 1250 to 2000*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

A leader was chosen to lead the Celts at the battle of Mount Badon. This event is a historical fact, reported in the oldest Welsh chronicle dating back to the 540s and written by Gildas, a British monk born c. 500. The Latin text of *De Excidio Britanniae* (The Ruin of Britain) presents the story of Britons losing their rule over the British island.² The author believes that they brought disaster on themselves by their sins. He was not a historian but due to his good education was familiar with much of Roman and post-Roman Britain. In spite of numerous blunders in the chronology of events, his version of events is generally correct. In his allusion to the battle of Badon Hill (its place in the south of Britain has not been identified yet), he does not name the military commander—as a matter of fact, he is generally reluctant to name specific persons. Among the exceptions are the Saxon chieftain Vortigern and the organizer of the Celtic resistance, Ambrosius Aurelianus—the latter is the only Briton he names.³ So the *dux*—this is the term Gildas used for the warrior leader at Badon Hill (Mons Badonicus)—may have been Arthur, but his name was left out, either because he did not fit Gildas's monastic ideal, or Arthur may have been a local chief who was linked with the battle only later and whose role was exaggerated. Ambrosius Aurelianus is presented as a Roman, the son of parents who were killed by the Saxons, but he is not named as the commander at Badon Hill.⁴ His name entered Welsh culture—changed into Emrys⁵ it became a frequent first name for Welshmen.

It is said that Badon Hill meant a decisive victory over the Saxon invaders.⁶ But this armed conflict actually had the character of a siege and sorties, rather than full-scale fighting in the field. It started as a Celtic counterattack against the Saxons, and the outcome could not have put a long-term stop to the expansion of the Saxon population. The word “mons” in the Latin text probably refers to a hill fort rather than a mountain and there are several candidates for that place because the element “bad-” may have originated from the name of a Celtic deity or a folk hero called Badda and associated with hill forts. The date of the battle was identified fairly closely by Gildas—he says it took place in the year of his birth and that nearly forty-four years had passed since.⁷ The findings of archeology also agree with Gildas, who claims that afterwards a quiet period followed, with few skirmishes.⁸

Arthur is presented for the first time as the victor at Mount Badon by a monk in the north of Wales, Nennius, known as the compiler of *Historia*

2. See Gildas, *De Excidio Britanniae / The Ruin of Britain*, in *Gildas De Excidio Britanniae, Fragmenta, Liber de Paenitentia, Accedit et Lorica Gildae / Gildas: The Ruin of Britain, Fragments from Lost Letters, The Penitential, together with The Lorica of Gildas*, ed. Hugh Williams (London: David Nutt, 1899), 1–252.

3. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 61.

4. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 61.

5. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 60.

6. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 62–63.

7. See Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 63.

8. See Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The Arthurian Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1986), 38.

Brittonum (History of the Britons), written in the late 8th century and based on a work a century older, but surviving in an early 12th-century copy.⁹ His history starts with the legend of a party of Trojans coming, after the defeat of Troy, to Britain. He mentions a few Roman emperors who were concerned with the island—among them Maximus, proclaimed Emperor in Britain in 383. Nennius says that Britons killed several Roman commanders and thus became independent, until in the 5th century Horsa and Hengist and their Saxons entered the island and later took hold of it.¹⁰ Nennius names twelve victories won by Arthur—the “dux bellorum” (leader in battles)—the last one being at Badon Hill (“the hill of Badon”), where Arthur “personally killed 960 of the enemy.”¹¹ Most of the other place-names are obscure and cover a large region, including southern Scotland and Chester.

Nothing suggests that the military leader was also a political leader. The mention of southern Scotland implies that Arthur fought Saxons in the south and Picts in the north. Arthur’s single-handed performance at Badon Hill shows that the Arthurian legend is already growing. The name of Ambrosius appears in Nennius too, but in a somewhat different context than in Gildas, namely that Vortigern gave him the overlordship of western Britain; by this he probably means Wales.¹² The date appears to be the 430s, which implies that at the time of Badon Ambrosius would have been too old to fight or even to be alive. So that settles the Ambrosius–Arthur competition. Unfortunately, there is no historical evidence of Ambrosius having had such an important position.

As for the etymology of Arthur, it is the Welsh form of the Roman name Artorius—in the 5th century Britons often gave children Roman names. A revival of the name in the late 6th century suggests that perhaps another Arthur became a national hero.¹³ Scholars agree that Arthur was a real person, not a myth—a British god would not be given a Roman name.¹⁴

The next chronicle with reference to Arthur is that by Geoffrey of Monmouth (in Latin Galfridus Monumetensis; he died in 1154 or 1155), author of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain). It really put Arthur on the scene and became the basis for the Arthurian romance. The town of Monmouth is on the Welsh border, and the name of Geoffrey’s father is said to have been Arthur. Geoffrey started as a minor cleric at Oxford, and later he got an appointment in London and became bishop of the Welsh see of St. Asaph. Historians say that Welshmen were not normally

9. See Nennius’s *History of the Britons*, in *Six Old English Chronicles*, ed. John Allen Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 381–416.

10. See Nennius’s *History of the Britons*, 395–96.

11. Nennius’s *History of the Britons*, 407–9.

12. See Nennius’s *History of the Britons*, 403–4.

13. See Norris J. Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland, 1997), 29.

14. See Lacy and Ashe, *The Arthurian Handbook*, 32–33; Lacy, *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 24.

made bishops, so originally he may have come from Brittany. His first work was *Prophetiae Merlini* (Prophecies of Merlin), a series of prophecies of Merlin (or rather Myrddin in the Welsh language; Merlin is a Cornish variant), which were later incorporated as Chapter 7 in a much larger work, the *Historia*, completed about 1136. Geoffrey, like Nennius, starts with the Trojans, who founded a New Troy (later renamed London) on the River Thames—the basis of the legend and the name of the British Troy may have been the Celtic tribe the Trinovantes, residing north of the Thames. Geoffrey's account of the early history of Britain has no relevance to our theme. On the other hand, one should point out the author's high degree of patriotism; he refuses to admit a full conquest of Britain by ancient Rome and therefore he never mentions the heroic leaders of anti-Rome resistance, the chieftains Caratacus and Boudicca. We hear more about Vortigern, Arthur, and Merlin.¹⁵

Vortigern, a British overlord, invited the heathen Saxons to settle in Britain as his mercenaries and even married the daughter of Hengist, the Saxon chieftain. After Hengist arranged a massacre of British noblemen, Vortigern was rejected by the Britons, fled to Snowdonia, and tried to build a fortress there. It kept collapsing and the magician Merlin (here conflated with Ambrosius¹⁶) told him why: in the ground beneath it there was a pool with two sleeping dragons, one red, the other white, who, when the underground pool was drained, woke up and began a fight. They represented the Britons and Saxons. He foretold that the rightful prince Uther would soon return to Britain from his exile and Vortigern's reign would be over.¹⁷ And really the usurper Vortigern got killed and the new king, Uther, called Pendragon, with the assistance of Merlin's magic begot a son, Arthur. While still in his teens, Arthur became king and, armed with his sword Excalibur, he defeated the Saxons, though he was unable to drive them out completely. His decisive victory was at Bath (Geoffrey's equivalent of Badon). Much of this is already familiar to 20th-century readers and film-goers. When peace was brought to Britain, Arthur held court at Caerleon (i.e., "fort" + "legion")—Geoffrey's description of this place became the basis for the fabulous residence of Camelot.

Geoffrey, besides presenting a well-developed story with Arthur as a major character, introduced Merlin (Myrddin), the prophet and magician. Some inspiration was obtained from local traditions. Geoffrey's Merlin was born to a nun, daughter of the king of Demetia, who in her sleep had intercourse with a beautiful demon, an incubus. That made him half-human, half-supernatural. His name comes from a toponym, Caermyrddin ("Myrddin's town"), which is a Welsh form of the city of Carmarthen, where Merlin was born. Geoffrey,

15. See Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Aaron Thompson, rev. J. A. Giles (Cambridge, ON: Medieval Latin Series, 1999).

16. Geoffrey of Monmouth refers to Merlin: "Merlin, who was also called Ambrose." *History of the Kings of Britain*, 110.

17. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 110–11.

besides “collecting” Merlin’s prophesies, wrote one work devoted completely to him, *Vita Merlini* (c.1150). Geoffrey’s authority explains why Merlin soon became accepted as a prophet in western Christendom, particularly in France—see, e.g., the Old French poem *Merlin* (c.1200) by Robert de Boron, who was heavily indebted to Geoffrey. The legend was also well known from the French version named *Le Roman de Brut*, by Wace. Thus in the 12th century writers in England were already trying to embellish their historical accounts with stories.

William of Malmesbury (c.1095–1143), a monk in the abbey of Malmesbury, wrote the *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, in which he said that Arthur should be commemorated for his achievements in authentic history and not in romances. But he only mentions Arthur twice: as the man who helped Ambrosius Aurelianus to hold back the Saxon barbarians, and who at the battle of Badon defeated, single-handed, nine hundred of the enemy, partly because of the image of the Virgin Mary on his armor.¹⁸

Wace’s *Le Roman de Brut* (c.1155) has 15,000 verses, of which nearly one third is about Arthur, a paraphrase of the history by Geoffrey. Wace, however, enriched the legend with new elements in the Round Table. He became the source for the *Brut*, a composition by a patriotic village priest, known as Layamon, from west-central England.

Next, an English translation of Wace’s *Le Roman de Brut* was made by Robert Manning, as part of his verse chronicle *The Story of England* (1338), where the legends of King Arthur and Merlin occupy some 7,000 lines. In all these romances Merlin not only predicts events but through his magical powers changes history. Merlin is also behind the installation of the Round Table. Between the second half of the 13th century and 1471, when Thomas Malory, author of *Le Morte d’Arthur*, died, there were three other English tales with Merlin, including a long poem (*Arthour and Merlin*) and one prose work. In the 19th century Merlin stops being a prophet and functions only as a magician (wizard).

In addition to the association of Merlin with Arthur (Merlin takes care of Arthur’s education, reveals his royal parentage to him, and points to Excalibur stuck in the stone), new links are formed between Merlin and the Lady of the Lake, who also bears the name Viviane or Niviene or Nimue. She received Arthur’s sword Excalibur back after he died in the battle of Camlann, while fighting his treacherous nephew Mordred. In another variant of the story, Arthur was not killed, only seriously wounded, and was carried away by the Lady of the Lake in a boat to the island of Avalon (Insulla Avallonis), Avallach in Welsh.

Arthur also appears in Welsh texts but the account of medieval English authors who introduced King Arthur and Merlin may end with Thomas

18. See William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Lacy, *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 630.

Malory (c. 1408–71). His *Morte d'Arthur* was completed in 1469—the title was devised by Caxton, who printed the book in 1485. This cycle of eight prose legends on such themes as love, honor, courage and faithfulness is linked with the character of Arthur and his knights and makes a coherent account. The king's death and the fall of the Round Table is a symbol of the disappearance of the chivalric epoch. What the modern reader finds strange about the story is that it describes Arthur's victories in Italy and his crowning in Rome as Emperor, a complete fantasy, but nothing at all about his victorious battles against the Anglo-Saxons, the historical basis of the legend.¹⁹

One major stimulus for the survival and spreading of the Arthurian legend must have been the discovery of his reputed tomb at Glastonbury, a place identified with Avalon. In 1191 the monks exhumed "Arthur's remains" in Glastonbury Abbey's graveyard, between two memorial pillars. Gerald of Wales offers the following account:

. . . his body was discovered at Glastonbury, in our own times, hidden very deep in the earth in an oak-hollow, between two stone pyramids that were erected long ago in that holy place. The tomb was sealed up with astonishing tokens, like some sort of miracle. . . . A lead cross was placed under the stone, not above as is usual in our times, but instead fastened to the underside. I have seen this cross, and have traced the engraved letters—not visible and facing outward, but rather turned inwardly toward the stone. It read: "Here lies entombed King Arthur, with Guenevere his second wife, on the Isle of Avalon."

Gerald states that the bones were enormous,

the skull was broad and huge, as if he were a monster or prodigy, to the extent that the space between the eyebrows and the eye-sockets amply encompassed the breadth of one's palm. Moreover, ten or more wounds were visible on that skull, all of which had healed into scars except one, greater than the rest, which had made a large cleft—this seems to have been the lethal one.²⁰

The tomb did not survive the vandalism accompanying the dissolution of the monasteries (the last abbot was hanged on Glastonbury Tor). Historians no longer deny that the monks found a grave, but do not know whose grave it was. Some speculate that a proof that Arthur, the Celtic champion, was dead, weakened Welsh resistance and thus served the English king.²¹ As regards the inscription, it might be a 12th-century forgery but for the fact that "Arturius" on the cross is a very early form of the name, found in the

19. See Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, ed. Janet Cowen, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

20. Gerald of Wales, "The Tomb of King Arthur: Gerald of Wales on the Finding of King Arthur's Tomb," trans. John William Sutton, in *The Camelot Project at the University of Rochester: Arthurian Texts, Images, Bibliographies and Basic Information* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 2010), <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/gerald.htm>; see also Charles T. Wood, "At the Tomb of King Arthur," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 8 (1991): 1–14.

21. See John William Sutton, introduction to "The Tomb of King Arthur: Gerald of Wales on the Finding of King Arthur's Tomb," by Gerald of Wales.

7th century (in the *Life of St Columba* it refers to Prince Arthur of Argyll), whereas in the 12th century (e.g., in Geoffrey) it appears as “Arturus.”²²

The strength of the Arthurian myth is manifested by the existence of the Round Table in Winchester (in Geoffrey of Monmouth Arthur fights Mordred at Winchester and Aurelius Ambrosianus is said to have died there). It was probably Edward I who had it made—he was enthusiastic about Arthur and was fond of aristocratic festivals known as Round Tables. He attended five of them, and organized one himself in 1299 to celebrate his second marriage. Nobles banqueted and competed in jousts.

The Arthurian enthusiasm of King Edward has a continuation in Tudor days (Henry VII gave his eldest son the name Arthur). In Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590–96) Prince Arthur symbolizes the virtue of “magnificence,” by which is meant magnanimity and gentlemanliness. After his vision of Queene Gloriana he seeks her and thus gets involved in various adventures of the knights. In the twelve poems of *Idylls of the King* (1891), by Alfred Tennyson, King Arthur is one of the main protagonists, e.g., in “The Coming of Arthur” and “The Passing of Arthur.” Arthurian legends undergo a revival in the Pre-Raphaelite movement of the late 19th century and in literary retellings of the Arthurian story and in Arthurian film romances in the 20th century. That the name of Arthur still has some magic is shown by the fact that one of the four “first” names of both Prince Charles and his son Prince William is Arthur.

II. HISTORY OF THE PERCEPTION OF KING ARTHUR IN CZECH LITERATURE

The first mention of King Arthur in Czech literature is found in *Zbraslavská kronika* (The Chronicle of Zbraslav) in an entry relating to the year 1319:

In that year King John of Luxembourg was visited by several young men, sons of noblemen, who, light-minded rather than brave, said to him: “Your Majesty, with tournaments and jousting and other knightly exercises your glory will spread and your name will be admired in the whole country. Will you proclaim a “Round Table,” that is King Arthur’s court, and it will gain you notable unceasing fame . . .” Therefore in the game park near Prague, Přemysl Otakar II had a wooden structure built, which was suitable for holding public games. And so the day of St John the Baptist arrived, which was set for this great festivity. But no foreign noblemen arrived.²³

The Czech medieval poem of nearly 9,000 verses, *Tristram a Izalda* (Tristan and Iseult), based on German models, is close to the Arthurian cycle.

The next reference to King Arthur is also medieval. In a chivalric story entitled *Tandariáš a Floribella* (Tandariáš and Floribella)—the full title is *Řeč velmi pěkná o králi Artušovi a Tandariášovi* (A Very Nice Speech on King Arthur and Tandariáš)—a rhymed tale of the 14th century, we read (rendered in prose English):

22. See Lacy, *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 241.

23. *Zbraslavská kronika: Chronicon Aulae Regiae*, trans. František Heřmanský and Rudolf Mertlík (Prague: Svoboda, 1976), 321. Translated into English by Jaroslav Peprník.

There was a king, whose name was Arthur, and everyone liked to listen to him. He was so good and so powerful, and ready to deal justice to one and all. It was his custom to hold court once a year. This large assembly always started at Whitsuntide and went on for two weeks. . . . He was also accustomed to abstaining from food each day until he was told some news.²⁴

It is worth pointing out that medieval Czech writers were more inspired by Alexander the Great from the 4th century BC than by King Arthur, nearly one thousand years later. The Czech composition of c. 1300, *Alexandreida* (Alexandreis), originally had some 8,500 verses but now only two fifths are known. Alexander became an ideal sovereign for the Czechs—like Arthur for the British people. His greater appeal may be due to the fact that Czechs in those days needed a strong king—and Arthur was not exactly a strong ruler; moreover, he did not set out on the quest himself but delegated his best men, whereas Alexander was always found in the thick of the battle, and was not aided by magic. The general European interest in Alexander must also have been stimulated by the contemporary interest in the Orient, which resulted from the Crusades that had been undertaken since the 11th century.

After an interval of several centuries, Arthur's name reappears in various contexts in the middle of the 19th century, but mostly in marginal references. An ironic allusion is found in the novel *Pekla zplozenci* (Offspring of Hell, 1853, 1862) by Josef Jiří Kolár (1812–96).²⁵ In this sensational and melodramatic novel a group of friends meet regularly in a restaurant and always sit at the same table—they call it Arthur's table—and no one else is allowed to sit there. In the same tale, a man with a long gray beard is given the nickname King Arthur.²⁶ The Arthurian motif is not further elaborated there.

The poet and playwright Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912) wrote one play, *Král a ptáčník* (The King and the Fowler, 1898), on the Arthurian theme. Acts 1 and 3 are set in the Broceliand Forest, Act 2 in Artuš's castle. The story goes like this: Artuš confides to Merlin that his nephew Mordred is courting Queen Ginevra (Guinevere). In the next scene Mordred, accompanying the Queen, kisses her in a deserted fowler's hut. Fowler Perper surprises the couple and is given a purse by Mordred and a bracelet by the Queen to buy his silence about what he saw. In Act Two, Merlin brings Viviana (Viviane), the Lady of the Lake, into the castle. At the round table are seated Artuš (Arthur), Ginevra (Guinevere), Mordred, Lancelot, Elaine, Gavein (Gawain), Ereka, and Parcifal (Percival). The King sends knights to keep watch over the Queen and to prevent Mordred from being with her. Soon afterwards, the fowler brings quails to the castle and, when he is searched, the money and the bracelet are found on him. He refuses to say where they come from and is put into jail.

24. *Rytířské srdce majíce: česká rytířská epika 14. století* (Having a Chivalrous Heart: Czech Knightly Epic Poetry of the 14th century), ed. Eduard Petruš and Dagmar Marečková (Prague: Odeon, 1984), 259. Translated into English by Jaroslav Peprník.

25. Josef Jiří Kolár, *Pekla zplozenci* (Prague: I. L. Kober, 1890), 108.

26. See Kolár, *Pekla zplozenci*, 109.

Ginevra disappears when Lancelot leaves his sentry post in order to meet his beloved Elaine. Artuš receives an intercepted message in which Mordred asks Ginevra to abscond with him. The King now understands that the valuables found on the fowler were a bribe for his silence. Mordred gets killed in an attempt to flee from the castle. Viviana disappears too and Merlin believes that she has deserted him and left with Lancelot. The deserted Artuš comes to see the deserted Merlin and the following dialogue ensues:

King: Give me your hand for I have no other faithful friend.

Merlin: My unfortunate king, we are so small, so small when we face women.²⁷

In the end, however, it comes out that neither woman had lost her virtue and Artuš says to Merlin: “Viviana was not unfaithful to you and my Ginevra did not betray me either.” The penitent Ginevra explains to the king what happened at the meeting with Mordred:

I said no but he—oh, how ashamed I am—took a kiss from my lips and before I could prevent it he took another two or three. That is my whole guilt.²⁸

The deeply tragic Arthurian plot of failing ideals and clashing values is remade by Vrchlický into a sentimental comedy with a single, not very competent villain.

Elsewhere in Czech literature there are scattered brief references to King Arthur but there are not so many as one might assume, given the general knowledge of King Arthur in the Czech lands. In the memoirs of Edmund Konrád (1889–1957), a young writer on a visit to two grand persons of Czech literature, the critic F. X. Šalda and the woman writer Růžena Svobodová (1868–1920), compares his position to that of a page at King Arthur’s round table.²⁹ The feat of Arthur pulling out the sword Excalibur from the rock is referred to in a simile by Daniela Hodrová, a writer of the second half of the 20th century.³⁰

These brief references show that King Arthur and his knights are alive in contemporary Czech culture but rather on the margins. The medieval story is being passed on to modern generations by Jan Caha’s translation of Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* (1960, though translated during World War II—Vilém Mathesius, the founder of academic English Studies at the university in Prague in 1912, wrote a preface to the edition as early as in 1944),³¹ by translations of British books on the Arthurian theme (Mary Stewart, T. H. White), the film versions (*Camelot*, 1967; *Monty Python and*

27. Jaroslav Vrchlický, *Král a ptáčník* (Prague: F. Šimáček, 1898), 77. Translated into English by Jaroslav Peprník.

28. Vrchlický, *Král a ptáčník*, 108.

29. See Edmund Konrád, *Nač vzpomenu* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1957), 102.

30. See Daniela Hodrová, *Théta* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1992), 12.

31. A new translation by Ivory Rodriguez appeared in 1997. See Thomas Malory, *Artušova smrt*, trans. Ivory Rodriguez, 3 vols. (Brno: Jota, 1997).

the Holy Grail, 1975; *Excalibur*, 1981; *King Arthur*, 2004), and the retelling of the stories for young readers.³² There is even a modern Czech opera, *Lancelot*, by Luboš Fišer (b. 1935).

Recently the King Arthur imagery became popular in Czech genre fiction. Some references or retakes could surely be found among Czech fantasy and sci-fi writers, for instance in the science fiction tetralogy, *Divocí a zlí* (The Wild and Cruel, 1999–2000), written in a style close to splatter punk by Jiří Kulhánek, where Merlin, as an alien, plays an important role, but this genre was not included in this study. Michal Lázňovský has written several radio plays on King Arthur's cycle, but his plays have not been published yet.

CONCLUSION

The history of the Czech reception and adaptations of King Arthur's legends begins surprisingly early, in an entry in *Zbraslavská kronika* (The Chronicle of Zbraslav) in 1309. The familiarity with King Arthur is documented by allusions in Czech literature (scattered references in fiction), one drama by the renowned Czech poet Jaroslav Vrchlický, and an opera by Luboš Fišer. But the main sources of the popularity of the myth of King Arthur are to be found outside Czech literature, in American films, in Czech translations of Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* or of novels by T. H. White or Mary Stuart, and most of all in children's illustrated adaptations and compilations. While in the Middle Ages the reason for this relatively scarce employment of the Arthurian myth in Czech literature is the Czech preference for Alexander the Great, the reasons for the small number of references in modern Czech literature need further investigation, especially in view of its strong presence in the popular imagination.

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