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Iranian Roots of the Legends of
King Arthur

Baccalaureate Thesis

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Brno, July 2006

I declare that I have worked on this baccalaureate thesis independently, using only primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Brno, July 2006

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor doc. Mgr. Milada Franková, CSc., M.A. for her patience, kind and valuable advice.

Let me thank once again to Petr Preclík who provided me with valuable sources, professional help and advice and in the first place with the topic of my paper.

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INTRODUCTION

The story of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table is perhaps the best known and the most influential legend in the world. No other legend or myth has had greater influence on modern culture. As John Colarusso says in his foreword to Littleton and Malcor's book "no one writes plays or musicals based on the *Rg Veda*, on the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, on *Beowulf* or, with the exception of Wagner, on the Norse tales."¹ Yet there is a number of stories, theatre plays even computer games based on the Arthurian cycle, directors still shoot movie about Arthur and there are Arthurian societies all around the world – The International Arthurian Society or Casque and Gauntlet to name a few². In other words, the legend today is still alive. For most of us Arthur and his knights represent the embodiment of chivalry and as the common wisdom has it, nothing could be more English than the story of Camelot and the Holy Grail. His name evokes a wide range of other characters and motifs from Merlin, the wizard or the fair queen Guinevere to the tragic love story of Tristan and Isolde; it also makes us think of the Round Table and Arthur's noble followers; we think of Camelot, his royal city; of Excalibur, the amazing sword...

We often consider Arthur to be one of the first Christian knights, the pure derivate of Roman and Christian culture, moreover, the ideal and prototype of European nobility and Christian ethics. But to think of about exotic origins of the myth? Connecting King Arthur with the Middle East and the vast Iranian steppes? That would seem absurd. However in my thesis I will try to show that the legend of King Arthur may have completely different roots than most of us believe. I aim to show the similarities between the Arthurian legends and the legends of a remote European region and its ancient civilization – the Caucasus and the Scythians.

The starting point of my thesis is the controversial work by C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor *From Scythia to Camelot*, considered by a lot of scholars the most important book written on this topic. Victor H. Mair in his essay *C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor's From Scythia to Camelot* even claims that "it is also quite simply one of the most significant scholarly works on any subject in the humanities

¹ Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000. p xiii

² If interested see < <http://www.dur.ac.uk/arthurian.society/>> for the IAC or Johnatan Good's article on the Casque and Gauntlet at < http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/Library_Bulletin/Apr2000/Good.html>

written during this century”.³ In their book the authors prove that the very core of the Arthurian cycle derives from ancient Iranian peoples who came from the Eurasian steppes, approximately the place of present-day Georgia. However, they do not claim that the Arthurian cycle is exclusively Scythian. Several important figures are transparently Celtic, such as Arthur's father Uther Pendragon (in Welsh, the name means “Glorious Head of the Troops”) or Queen Guinevere (Irish Finnabair meaning “Born on the White”). There are also apparent influences such as Christian, Germanic and other, but the Scythian ones remain the main focus of my thesis.

I should also mention that Littleton and Malcor were not the first to come with the discovery of the Scythian connection. Throughout my work I will mention other names, such as Kemp Malone, J. P. Mallory and other scholars whose ideas and propositions made it possible for the book to be written. What makes it so important among all other paper, essays or books dealing with this topic, is its complexity and thoroughness.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will mention the concept of mythology, its position in culture and answer the question how is it possible that Arthurian myths were influenced by such a distant source but we fail to notice it. In the second chapter I will outline three theories of origin of historical King Arthur. One of the theories, the “Sarmatian connection” will be then analyzed in greater detail in the third and final chapter and I will conclude the whole paper with outlining a position Littleton and Malcor’s work takes among other works on this topic.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of my paper I am going to use the descriptive and comparative analysis. I aim to describe the theoretical concept presented by Linda Malcor and C. Scott Littleton, portray King Arthur under their perspective and depict the Iranian models imported to European mythological framework.

Afterwards, I would like to compare Malcor and Littleton’s theory with other theories and try to critically evaluate its position within Arthurian discourse.

³ Mair, Victor M.: *C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor’s From Scythia to Camelot. The Heroic Age*. 1999. <<http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/2/ha2tf.htm>>. Last seen 27 June 2006

THEORETICAL CONCEPT OF MYTHOLOGY

Before getting to the main point of my paper I would like to write a couple remarks on mythology as such. Being an important part and as indicated in the introduction one of the most influential legend in the whole world, I think the whole Arthurian cycle deserves a closer look at the theoretical background of myths. In this short contribution I will have a look at what mythology is, what is its function and how does it change through the ages.

The word itself can be said to have several meanings but generally it refers to any invented story, something which is untrue. Mostly it is used to indicate a traditional story dating way to the past with some moral or social significance trying to interpret some aspect of the world we live in. "Professionals distinguish between mythology, legend and folktale. Very briefly, myths are considered true by the people who tell them; they are usually set near the beginning of time and often concern the origins of things. Legends are also regarded as true, but are set later in history when the world was much as it is today. Folklore is considered false by the people telling it, and its setting in time and space is usually irrelevant. Myths are considered sacred, legends are more often secular, and folktales aren't taken seriously, at least not literally."⁴ Still there exist lots of overlaps in between the categories and the terms are often used interchangeably.

All these concepts are rooted in culture and therefore are subordinated to the rules of given culture framework. As Jurij M. Lotman claims culture does not exist independently on its observer, we are always part of some culture. Lotman says: "Culture does not exist outside observer's mind, traditional model of subject (culture) and object (observer) is just one-sided and conventional abstraction."⁵ Jiří Pavelka adds: "Culture does not create men. Men create culture. Culture conserves meanings men give to world surrounding him."⁶

These meanings are saved in so called concepts of world – organized archive of historical memory, which are bounded in space and time and which are controlled

⁴ Isaak Mark: *Sources for mythology*. January 1998. <<http://home.earthlink.net/~misaak/mythsrcs.html>> last seen 27 June 2006

⁵ Lotman, Jurij M.: *Kultúra ako subjekt a objekt-sama-pre-seba*. In L.,M.J.:*Text a kultúra*, Archa, Bratislava 1994.

⁶ Pavelka, Jiří: *O kulturních paradigmatech, paradoxech a předpokladech dorozumívání*. In: Nosek, Jiří – Stachová, Jiřina, ed.: *Myšlení v paradoxu, paradox myšlení*. Filosofía, Praha 1998. p 307

by dominant power structures of that time. These world view complexes are preserved in mythology, religion, tradition, philosophy or even science.⁷ We are born to given space-time, which determines which concepts we can acquire; moreover, the knowledge of common and dominant concepts is essential precondition of successful communication act. The process of creating new concepts and forgetting the old ones is never ending.

The question remains how we can explain interdigitation of mythical elements derived from different concepts of world unifying in completely new concept. What is the mechanism of such unification?

We can use Lotman's explanation⁸ based on Leibnitz's concept of Monas. Monas are elementary unit of meaning which is intangible and is comprised only by "semiotic-informational being". Different Monas can interact among themselves and create higher multipolar units. Monas are isomorphic. Every Monas is an entity as a whole and at the same time it constitutes a part of a higher level unit.

However, having created such higher unit Monas is not destroyed or transformed. New text does not destroy the old one; both can exist at the same time.

For example: Antic culture had been transformed by Christianity and therefore reshaped into Christian Middle Ages culture. However, Antic model had not been destroyed by this remodeling; it had survived as a minor "text" and was rediscovered during the time of Renaissance. Analogically, heathen culture had not been destroyed by Christianity, only forced to become minor and was rediscovered in 20th century by anthropologists and archeologists. Many Celtic feasts are once again being celebrated.

Under the Lotman's perspective we perceive culture as a system comprised by Monas, whose interaction creates higher meaningful units. Therefore, we can consider whole Arthurian cycle to be created from different Monas from different cultures unified in one complex set. In the same time all these Monas exist in other units and interactions so that we are able to find them, describe and compare them.

Description of myths and legends means description of different Monas constituting it.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Lotman, Jurij M.: Kultúra ako subjekt a objekt-sama-pre-seba. In L.,M.J.:Text a kultúra, Archa, Bratislava 1994.

DEALING WITH THE HISTORICAL KING ARTHUR

In this chapter I will try to outline a few theories concerning historicity of King Arthur and suggest a couple answers to the question whether any real Arthur existed. It is definitely not a complete list of all the existing theories and approaches, which was not the purpose of this work. It only wants to show bigger or smaller differences in individual approaches and compare them to the one I consider the most probable of them all. At this point it is necessary to say that none of the existing can be taken as completely right or wrong. Working with historical material will never bring us absolute certainty, we can only say what is more probable and what is less probable and try to bring as much evidence and support to our claim as we can.

Arthur became popular in the 12th century when Geoffrey of Monmouth published his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136 or 38). The character of Arthur himself was mentioned in other works before,⁹ but *Historia* was the first to elaborate his whole biography. Then other authors came¹⁰ adding their ideas and motifs, expanding and elaborating the story, making it a tangle impossible for us today to untangle. So the first question that comes to mind is: Did King Arthur really exist? Although having only two possible answers, there is no clear onefold solution the academic society today would agree on. In the next paragraphs I am going to show a couple theories put forward by Arthurian scholars.

Geoffrey Ashe's Riothamus theory

According to Geoffrey Ashe the question of Arthur's existence is not even the right one to ask. The story was created by medieval romancers who did not care much about the credibility of their stories, they "told stories that their patrons and readers could understand, stories about things belonging to their world, however anachronistic the result."¹¹ According to this statement we might say that the legend is a medieval fiction with no real basis whatsoever. Yet on the other hand, Ashe claims that the Middle Ages creators of the legend would "deny simply inventing out

⁹ Arthur first appeared in an early Welsh poem *The Gododdin* (ca. AD 594). Another reference can be found in the *Historia Britonum* (ca. AD 830), attributed to the Welsh monk Nennius. Then he is mentioned in the *Annales Cambriae* written in the 10th century and he also appears in a number of *vitae* of 6th century saints, most of them written in the monastery of Llancarfan in the 12th century.

¹⁰ E.g. Chrétien de Troyes, a Frenchman of the 12th century; Wolfram from Eschenbach, a German knight and poet on the turn of the 12th century and of course Sir Thomas Malory.

¹¹ Ashe, Geoffrey. Lacy, Norris J.: *The Arthurian Handbook*. Garland Publishing, Inc. New York & London, 1997.p 3

of nothing.” They believed that a long time ago, Arthur was a real person. So the fruitful question to ask is not whether King Arthur existed or not, but “What facts is the legend rooted in, how did it originate?”¹² Ashe argues that King Arthur was a historical King in Brittany known to history as Riothamus¹³, a title meaning “Greatest-King”.

According to Ashe, the legend is rooted in Britain’s post-Roman history when the Britons recovered from the Roman supremacy and for a brief period of time went through an era of fragile unity (before the Anglo-Saxon tribes came). In these days Britain is said to be in the hands of a ruler called Vortigern.¹⁴ It was him who invited Saxons to Britain as auxiliary troops to help him fight against his enemies. As more and more Saxons came, he lost control over them and was taken over by Hengist, the Saxon leader who afterwards ravaged and plundered the country. This would go on were not for the new Briton leaders who recovered the country and confined the Saxons to a limited area. Arthur is said to be the greatest among them. Yet after his passing there was no one to stop the Saxon advance. This is a very simplified version of the story. Although the history of those days is shadowy and vague, Ashe still manages to find some historical basis to the story. First of all there is no doubt that Vortigern existed since he is mentioned by Anglo-Saxon writers who were certainly not influenced by British legends. Some allusions about him may also be found in the work of Gildas, a monk living in the 6th century, who speaks about Britain in the post-Roman period being led by a superb tyrannus, who invited the Saxons in. Second, between the years 440 and 460 the number of Saxons immigrating to the country increased, their demands could not be met and they mutinied. Nevertheless towards the end of the period indicated they withdrew and the Britons were looking for new leaders. Gildas also speaks about the increasing migration of Saxons to Brittany, their eventual withdrawal and victorious battle of Badon but he does not mention a word about Arthur. The same is true for Bede’s history written in 731 and for the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* published later.

¹² Ashe, Geoffrey. Lacy, Norris J.: *The Arthurian Handbook*. Garland Publishing, Inc. New York & London, 1997.p 4

¹³ A military leader, active c. 470, called “King of the Brittones” by Jordanes in *The origin and deeds of the Goths*. He led an army into the heart of Gaul "by way of the Ocean" (Jordanes) where he confronted the Visigoths in a battle but lost and disappeared into Burgundy.

¹⁴ A Celtic title for “over-chief” or “over-king”

There is also a second clue Ashe gives to show when the story started and that is Arthur's name. As he claims the name "Arthur" is a Welsh form of the Roman Artorius and a man of this name "whether real or invented, cannot be dated much later than the post-Roman period when Britons were still being called by Roman names."¹⁵

However the main source for Ashe is a text that has "long been dismissed as Arthurian evidence, on the ground that the date (1019) was spurious and it was merely copied from the later and greater book of Geoffrey of Monmouth."¹⁶ The text is called *Legend of St. Geoznovius* and it was written by a person stating his name as William. In this text, that is by genre history more than anything else Arthur appears among other events that are correct according to our present knowledge. William takes Arthur as the King of Britons and Vortigern's successor fight to Gaul. And there the cycle gets full – a man referred to as Riothamus, King of Britons can be also found in other sources. The man whom Jordanes, a 6th century historian calls Riothamus, the King of Brittones is the same person whom William calls Arthur. The reality of that person is also being proved by a letter written to Riothamus around the year 460 by Sidonius a 5th century Gaul bishop and author.

As to this point, Ashe's theory sounds convincing. The time, the events and the characters of the story seem to correspond to historical facts as we know them. But there is still a little catch. And that is the meaning of the term Jordanes and Sidonius use the "King of "Brittones." Does it mean Bretons or Britons? If the word means Britons, people from the island nation of Britain, then the implication is that a British king crossed the English Channel and was holding court in Gaul. Taken in conjunction with the sixth century testimony of Jordanes' work *Gothic History* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's quasi-historical *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a reasonably convincing case can be made that Geoffrey's Arthur and Jordanes' and Sidonius' Riothamus are really the same person. On the other hand, if "Brittones" means Bretons, natives of the land of Brittany, then the Arthur-Riothamus equation begins to unravel So, which is it, Britons or Bretons? The meaning really depends on the translation you read and so either meaning is possible and in conclusion the whole

¹⁵ Ashe, Geoffrey. Lacy, Norris J.: *The Arthurian Handbook*. Garland Publishing, Inc. New York & London, 1997. p 29

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p 33

true-letter-case is not much helpful to us. It only proves that there existed some Riothamus but was he the model for Arthur Ashe speaks about?

Thomas Green's No-real Arthur theory

In his essay Green claims all theories that assume a historical figure behind King Artur are completely unjustified. He writes that the process of "historicization" of mythical figures as he calls it occurs very often in medieval literature.¹⁷ So in his words stating whether a figure is in origin historical, mythical or fictional is not justifiable before evaluating all the material we have. It is thus important to have a look at the sources and their credibility. In the case of Arthur he seeks the model in pre-Galfridian texts¹⁸ stating that "Geoffrey's *portrayal* of Arthur, he has nothing at all in common with the insular traditions"¹⁹. And from these texts he chooses four which may contain information of historical value. The texts are: the *Annales Cambriae*; the *Historia Brittonum*; the collection of heroic death-songs known as *Y Gododdin*; and the four or five occurrences of the name Arthur in 6th- and 7th-century contexts. As he works further, he refuses the latter source since the appearance of these names is supposed to reflect the commemoration of an earlier historical figure. "However such a commemoration by name of an earlier historical hero would be totally unparalleled in the Celtic world and as such cannot be at all supported as an explanation of these names."²⁰

He then does almost the same with the collection of heroic songs *Y Gododdin*. He claims that despite the efforts of some scholars²¹ the date of the composition of the poem remains unclear. It can be the 6th century as well as the 10th and this insecurity does not make it a reliable source. He also deals with the Arthurian stanza appearing in the text²². The common argument is that in *Y Gododdin* all the figures

¹⁷ As an example he gives e.g. the Norse Siegfried who was historicised by being associated with a famous historical battle between the Huns and the Burgundians dated 437AD, in the *Nibelungenlied*.

¹⁸ "Galfridian" comes from the name of Geoffrey of Monmouth, which is in Latin *Galfridus Monemutensis*. Galfridian, or post-Galfridian literature refers to Geoffrey's own works and those later sources which are clearly derivative of his work (most especially the *Historia Regum Britanniae*). Pre-Galfridian literature is that which is generally agreed to date from before Geoffrey wrote his *Historia*; that is around the year 1138.

¹⁹ Green, Thomas: *The Historicity and Historicization of Arthur*. [Arthurian resources](http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthur.htm). 2006. <<http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthur.htm>> . Last seen 27 June 2006

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ Here he touches the attempt of John Koch to reconstruct the original text of *Y Gododdin* as it might have looked in the 6th or 7th century. Green does not take it as a reconstruction rather as a translation which is useless.

²² In the poem the following line can be found "fed black ravens on the rampart of a fort, although he was no Arthur".

mentioned are believed to be historical and Arthur as well. According to Green this is also the problem of it – it is only an assumption, nothing else. So as well as assuming all the figures being historical, we might think about them as historicized only. Therefore this cannot be taken as evidence for Arthur’s real existence and therefore Green refuses the heroic death-songs as evidence.

At this point there are only two sources left that could prove the reality of Arthur. Green first deals with the anonymous *Historia Brittonum*²³. Stating the points of David Dumville²⁴ he finds the method of *Historia* dubious, the author uses synthetic and interpretive procedures and thus does not encourage us to be confident about the information provided. The author of *Historia* did not write history as we know it today and it would be wrong to read it as such. Thus we can see Green’s skepticism about the third source and there is now only one left. The *Annales Cambriae*, a Welsh chronicle of events between the years 447 and 954, compiled around 950 AD. Arthur is here mentioned twice. In 516 AD in an entry talking of the “battle of Badon, in which Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights, and the Britons were the victors” and in another entry in 537 AD concerning “the battle of Camlann, in which Arthur and Medraut fell.” Discussing the dates of the events, Green comes with the idea that “the *Annales Cambriae* to 613 is basically a version of the “*Chronicle of Ireland*”, with the sections from 613 to 777 being based on North British materials; there is absolutely no justification for thinking that any of the pre-613 British entries are drawn from contemporary or even near-contemporary sources.”²⁵ Green also states one important point: that the two latter sources (e.g. *Historia* and *Annales*) are not independent especially when it comes to the description of the battle of Badon in the *Annales*. According to Green, it is clearly related to the *Historia Brittonum*’s account (Chapter 56) of Arthur’s eighth battle at *Guinnion* Castle. Thus “neither of the works can be seen as a reliable witness to historicity, both being late in date and suspect in content, with one very probably being derivative of the second.” - and so these sources cannot in any way prove that there was a historical Arthur in the 5th century and on the other hand there are no contemporary sources that would mention him.

²³ The ascription to Nennius is now seen by some (e.g. David Dumville) as false.

²⁴ David Dumville is a British medievalist and Celtic scholar, currently the Professor of History and Palaeography at the University of Aberdeen.

²⁵ Green, Thomas: *The Historicity and Historicization of Arthur*. [Arthurian resources](http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthur.htm). 2006. 2006 <<http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthur.htm>> Last seen 27 June

Even when he restricted his research to the best sources we can find today, he did not manage to find any clear evidence for the real King Arthur. By denouncing all the works, the only answer he got is that it can tell us virtually nothing certain about any possible historical Arthur. The sources he questioned did not manage to give him a clear answer to the question of Arthur's real existence; they can only say "perhaps" or "maybe". They cannot say "no there wasn't" but equally they cannot say "yes there was."

Littleton and Malcor's Iranian theory

As indicated above, Littleton and Malcor seek Arthur's roots and origins in the ancient Caucasus and the lost civilization of the Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans and their surviving descendants, the Ossetians. According to them it is clear that the core of the Arthurian legends is not to be found in the Celtic tradition²⁶ but rather in the tradition of Northeast Iranian epic. They say that the Celtic elements in the legends are obvious (e.g. the figure of Guinevre whose name links her to Irish Finnabair) but all of them are later addition to a material with a completely different origins.

The initial idea came from J. P. Mallory (then a doctoral candidate at the University of California, now a senior lecturer at the University of Belfast), who in conversation with C. Scott Littleton mentioned his observations that a contingent of heavily armed Sarmatian troops was sent to Britain at the end of Marcomannian War in the year 175 AD. According to Mallory, descendants of these soldiers survived in Britain at least until the fourth century, maybe even longer. Littleton happened to have read some articles by a French medievalist Joël Grisward pointing out the parallels between Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* and an old saga told by the Ossetians about their most important hero, Batraz. Remarkable resemblances could be found especially in the deaths of both heroes. Both, Batraz and Arthur, possess a magical sword, that is to be thrown into water before their deaths. They are both cheated at first but in the end their servants obey, cast the sword in the water, than something extraordinary happens and when the happening is reported to them, both heroes can die peacefully. There are of course discrepancies in details (e.g. there is

²⁶ E.g. Roger Sherman Loomis (1887-1966), professor at Columbia University, believed that King Arthur was not an Englishman but a Celtic warrior. See for example *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (1927), *Wales and the Arthurian Legend* (1956) or *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (1963).

no hand rising from the water in the Batraz legend) but the parallels are so close that it is impossible to ignore them.

Knowing that Ossetians are the last surviving descendants of the ancient Alans, who were almost indistinguishable from Sarmatians, it was then obvious for Littleton to come with the conclusion of the “Sarmatian Connection”. In the *Roman History* by Dio Cassius Littleton found a passage about the Marcomanian War. Leading a nomadic way of life various groups of northern Iranians spread to surrounding areas “including the Mediterranean littoral and Europe. In the course of their wanderings, they came into contact, and eventually conflict, with the Romans.”²⁷ The main conflict was the above mentioned Marcomannian War in 175 AD when the Sarmatians were defeated by the troops of Marcus Aurelius. Afterwards around 8,000 Sarmatian cavalymen from a tribe called the lazyges had to join the Roman legions and 5,500 of those were sent to Britain as auxiliary troops to help defending Hadrian’s Wall. After their service these warriors settled in Roman veterans’ colony near modern Ribchester in Lancashire. And this is how, according to Littleton, the first traces of Arthurian legends were brought to Britain.

Littleton also found information about their first commander, a Roman officer Lucius Artorius Castus commissioned to guard the Hadrian’s Wall in the 2nd century AD. In his book he follows the idea of Kemp Malone²⁸, who as the first suggested Castus as the historical basis for King Arthur²⁹. Then other similarities between the Sarmatian and Arthurian heroes came with one exception that resisted interpretation within the scope of the suggested “Sarmatian connection”, and that was the figure of Lancelot.

And this is the place where Linda Malcor comes on stage. Although Littleton accepted the idea of Lancelot being a major Celtic component of the legend, Malcor did not agree and tried to find the Iranian connection that had shaped Arthur for Lancelot as well. Eventually she came with the “Alano-Sarmatian connection” and the

²⁷ Mair, Victor M.: *C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor’s From Scythia to Camelot. The Heroic Age*. 1999.. <<http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/2/ha2tf.htm>> Last seen 27 June 2006

²⁸ Malone was a medievalist, etymologist, philologist, and specialist in Chaucer who worked as a lecturer and then professor of English Literature at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, U.S. from 1924 to 1956. He was the first to suggest Castus as Arthur in 1924.

²⁹ This idea is depicted in the 2004 *King Arthur* movie. Here Arthur – his full name is Artorius Castus – is a Roman cavalry commander leading a group of Sarmatian cavalry guarding the Hadrian’s Wall. He is not the first Arthur to do that, he was given the name of his ancestors who fulfilled the same task thus indicating the connection to Lucius Artorius Castus.

etymology of names, and she proposed *(A)lan(u)s--Lot for Lancelot. The Alans were one Iranian nomadic group among the Sarmatians, the first cousins of the lazyges, who together with Germanic tribes settled in Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula in the beginning of the 5th century. They “had brought with them an independent reflex of the common Northeast Iranian steppe epic tradition. In addition, the Lot region of southern Gaul was a center of Alan activity, as well as power.”³⁰

Since this theory comprises the basis of my work, I will elaborate the above mentioned ideas in a broader context in the core chapter of the paper.

CAUCASUS CONCEPTION OF ARTHURIAN CYCLE

In the following chapter I will show the parallels between the Nart and Arthurian legends and heroes. First, I will have a look at Littleton and Malcor’s interpretation of Arthur’s historicity, then the parallels between Arthur and Batraz and Batraz and Lancelot will be shown on illustrative examples taken from the Nart sagas and Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* (in the case of Arthur) and on the similarities of the lives of the two heroes (in the case of Lancelot). And towards the end of the chapter some surprising facts about the figures of Arthur and Lancelot will arise. But let me start this chapter with a little glossary of terms that might be found confusing or cause misunderstanding. The terms listed below are only brief descriptions of the terms that come up in chapters of this paper. They are arranged in alphabetical order.

Terminology

Alans – an Iranian warlike nomadic group, one of the Sarmatian peoples, speaking Iranian language. According to some Chinese chronicles they had supremacy over the tribal union creating a powerful confederation of Sarmatian tribes from the second half of the 1st to the 4th century.

lazyges – a nomadic tribe speaking Iranian language; a branch of the Sarmatian people who around the year 200 BC, swept westward from central Asia onto the steppes of what is now Ukraine. In 175, after an unsuccessful clash with the Roman Empire, they made peace with Marcus Aurelius and were forced to provide the Romans with 8,000 cavalry to serve in the Roman army as auxiliaries. Some

³⁰ Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000. p xxvii

5,500 of these were shipped off to Britain, where (according to some theories) they played a part in the development of the Arthurian legend.³¹

Nart sagas³² – a series of tales originating from the ancient Caucasus Mountains. Forming the basic mythology of the four tribes living in that area, they can be equated to Greek myths (with which they share some motifs). According to Littleton and Malcor they are the derivation base for the Arthurian legends brought to Britain by Alans settled in northern France.

Ossetians – people living in the region of Ossetia in the northern Caucasus, speaking Iranian language, descending from Iranian tribes such as Alans, Sarmatians and Scythians. Their territory is currently divided into two parts: the North Ossetia-Alania in Russia and South Ossetia in Georgia. “Though threatened politically, militarily, and culturally from many directions, they still maintain their surprisingly archaic Iranian language and with it a body of oral narrative referred to as the Nart sagas.”³³ The Ossetians consider themselves as a separate ethnic group. In 1989 after the collapse of the Soviet Union the two Ossetias declared union. But Georgia disagreed claiming South Ossetia as its integral part which provoked a civil war. Today South Ossetia is still considered a part of Georgia but some parts of the region are politically independent. Minor fights are continuing till present days.³⁴

Sarmatians – a multi-ethnic confederacy, or a federation of Iranian nomadic tribes occupying the area on the plains between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, north of the Caucasus. That confederacy endured until the arrival of Huns in the 4th century. Afterwards the union disintegrated.

Scythians – ancient nomadic peoples speaking Iranian language inhabiting an area in Eurasia called Scythia the location and extent of which varied over time. They represent a kindred tribe to Sarmatians who gradually overwhelmed them during the 4th century. They are described by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th century BC as a wealthy and prosperous tribe residing in the steppe between the Dnepr and Don rivers that were menace to the Greek Black Sea colonial ports.

³¹ Wikipedia, *the Free Encyclopedia*. 2006. < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page> Last seen 28 June 2006

³² Texts in Russian are available online at < http://biblio.darial-online.ru/text/narts/index_rus.shtml>

³³ Nettleton, Stuart: *The Alchemy Key: The Mystical Provenance of the Philosophers' Stone*. Sydney, 2002. p 72

³⁴ For more information you can visit < <http://ossetia.cjb.net/>> or < <http://ossetia.ru/>>

Littleton and Malcor's two models for King Arthur

How do Littleton and Malcor deal with the existence of King Arthur was suggested above. In this paragraph I will elaborate their theory in greater detail.

According to the name Arthur they suggest it was actually a title, not a name as such. The title originated with the person of Lucius Artorius Castus, the first commander of lazyges troops in the 2nd century AD who was charged with defending the Hadrian's Wall against the tribes of Picts living beyond it. The auxiliary troops of lazyges were well treated and the probability has it they were also elite within the military system. "In short these lazyges probably came to idolize Castus, and the leader of the community at Bremetennacum Veteranorum³⁵ may have taken Castus's gentilic name (i.e. Artorius) as a title, which he passed on to his successors."³⁶ Adapting this theory is supported by the Roman practice of adoption³⁷ and by Alans, who saw themselves as being adopted by the people who defeated them. Thus Castus may have chosen a Sarmatian successor who then adopted his gentilic name and was referred to as such. According to Littleton and Malcor although speculative, this theory is not at all improbable since Roman military forces were sometimes known by the name of their leaders.

However they do not take Castus as the one and only established fact concerning Arthur's model. They do not reject Ashe's Riothamus theory as described above. In the year 468 AD Riothamus came to Gaul "by the way of ocean" as Jordanes writes with 12,000 ship-borne troops to take part in the Roman campaign against Euric, the King of the Visighots. Littleton and Malcor propose that the descendants of the first lazyges may have been among Riothamus's troops. On the other side, Euric called to his help the Alans serving in Gaul. Thus the two long-parted tribes, the lazyges and the Alans met on the battlefield. After loosing a battle with Euric, Riothamus disappeared and "with the loss of their leader many of these troops probably never returned to Britain. After three hundred years of separation the lazyges and the Alans were reunited, and for the first time each group's derivative of

³⁵ Roman fort near modern Ribchester, the city where veterans settle after their service was over.

³⁶ Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000. p 63

³⁷ By adopting the Romans satisfied their need for a male heir, it was also the best way of acceding the throne and so this practice was very popular among Roman emperors. The adopted son would than acquire the name of his new father.

the legends from the steppes had an opportunity to meet on a large scale. The result of this meeting may well have been the birth of the Arthurian tradition.”³⁸

So to conclude Littleton and Malcor manage to find two Arthurs – the Roman commander who gave the legend his name and the “real” Arthur in the figure of Riotharmus, who gave the legend his military adventures.

The Arthur – Batraz Connection

Perhaps the best known story of the Arthurian cycle is that about his death. And it is also the one story where we can find the most apparent parallels with the legend of Batraz, the mythical leader and the greatest warrior of the Narts. Let me sum up the Batraz story first.

After slaughtering a vast number of Narts in revenge for their complicity in his father’s death and after resisting all the afflictions that God could throw at him, Batraz takes pity on the handful of survivors. He tells them that he has satisfied his need for vengeance and that he himself is ready for death, adding that “I cannot die until my sword has been thrown into the sea.” This latter stipulation causes great concern among the Narts, as the sword is so heavy that only Batraz can wield it with ease. In desperation they decide to deceive him. Hiding the sword they report back that it has been disposed of in accordance with his instructions. But when Batraz asks, “What prodigious things did you see when my sword fell into the sea?” they reply, “Nothing” - an answer that Batraz recognizes as a lie, since he alone knows what will happen when his sword enters the water. When the Narts finally manage to drag the wondrous weapon to the coast and consign it to the water, the sea becomes turbulent, boils, and turns blood-red. As soon as this is reported to

³⁸ Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000. p 66

Batraz, he dies, secure in the knowledge that his last wish has been fulfilled.³⁹

Before pointing out the obvious I attach a somewhat longer excerpt from Malory's *Le Morte* speaking about the death of Arthur.

Therefore, said Arthur unto Sir Bedivere, take thou Excalibur, my good sword, and go with it to yonder water side, and when thou comest there I charge thee throw my sword in that water, and come again and tell me what thou there seest. My lord, said Bedivere, your commandment shall be done, and lightly bring you word again.

So Sir Bedivere departed, and by the way he beheld that noble sword, that the pommel and the haft was all of precious stones; and then he said to himself: If I throw this rich sword in the water, thereof shall never come good, but harm and loss. And then Sir Bedivere hid Excalibur under a tree. And so, as soon as he might, he came again unto the king, and said he had been at the water, and had thrown the sword in the water. What saw thou there? said the king. Sir, he said, I saw nothing but waves and winds. That is untruly said of thee, said the king, therefore go thou lightly again, and do my commandment; as thou art to me lief and dear, spare not, but throw it in. Then Sir Bedivere returned again, and took the sword in his hand; and then him thought sin and shame to throw away that noble sword, and so he hid the sword, and returned again, and told to the king that he had been at the water, and done his commandment. What saw thou there? said the king. Sir, he said, I saw nothing but the waters wap and waves wan. Ah, traitor untrue, said King Arthur, now hast thou betrayed me twice. Who would have weened that, thou that hast been to me so lief and dear? and thou art named a noble knight, and would betray me for the richness of the sword. But now go again lightly, for thy long tarrying

³⁹ *King Arthur*. [Ancient Wisdom New Millenium](http://groups.msn.com/AncientWisdomNewMillenium). 2005.
<<http://groups.msn.com/AncientWisdomNewMillenium/page2.msnw>> Last seen 27 June 2006.

putteth me in great jeopardy of my life, for I have taken cold. And but if thou do now as I bid thee, if ever I may see thee, I shall slay thee with mine own hands; for thou wouldst for my rich sword see me dead.

Then Sir Bedivere departed, and went to the sword, and lightly took it up, and went to the water side; and there he bound the girdle about the hilts, and then he threw the sword as far into the water as he might; and there came an arm and an hand above the water and met it, and caught it, and so shook it thrice and brandished, and then vanished away the hand with the sword in the water. So Sir Bedivere came again to the king, and told him what he saw.⁴⁰

The parallels are striking – the needs to throw the sword into the water, the attempts to deceive their ruler and the magical happening when the deed is finally done are all too similar to be accidental. The death scene is usually preceded by a battle between Arthur and Mordred which in some cases has particularly Sarmatian overtones as Littleton and Malcor claim. During the battle as Arthur and Mordred fight, they keep on knocking off an adder-like creature that sits on their helms. When it is knocked off Arthur's helmet, it sits on Mordred's and vice versa and it is said to prove the worthiness of the combatants. "The two warriors fight under these emblems in much the same manner as the Sarmatian leaders fought under the serpent banner."⁴¹ The important note here that clarifies the connection is that a serpent is one of the earliest objects that peoples of Sarmatia worshipped and, as already mentioned, it was the sign they carried on their banners and shields.

The episodes speaking about the deaths of the heroes are not the only connecting element of Arthur and Batraz. There is also the "Sword in the Stone" episode that indicates the two heroes originated from one source.

Looking for the image of the sword in the stone in the early Arthurian works (such as Welsh romances or Geoffrey of Monmouth) would be unsuccessful as well as it is not included in the Nart sagas. The episode as such appears later in almost

⁴⁰ Malory, Sir Thomas: *Le Morte Darthur: Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of his Noble Knights of the Round Table, Volume 2*. New York. The Macmillan Company. 1903. p 490-492

⁴¹ Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000. p 70

every medieval Arthurian text (e.g. Malory's *Le Morte* and for the very first time in Robert de Boron's *Merlin*). Yet the image of a sword is a strong binding element of the two stories – both Arthur and Batraz are associated with a magical sword. In the case of Arthur, it is necessary to distinguish between his two swords; Caliburnus being the first and Excalibur the second. According to the tradition Arthur broke Caliburnus in a battle against a knight defending a fountain (modern tradition replaces the fountain with a river or a stream) and was then instructed by Merlin to throw the pieces into the water. Arthur does as instructed and he gets Excalibur⁴² from the Lady of the Lake. Batraz like Arthur got his sword with the aid of his stepmother. Although having no name, it is a clear counterpart of Excalibur and both the swords must be eventually returned to where they came from, the water.

That is the “water-sword” connection but is there also a parallel talking about the “sword in the stone”? Ammianus Marcellinus, a Roman historian of the 4th century AD, is not the only one⁴³ to describe the “primitive” religion of the Alans as follows “their only idea of religion is to plunge a naked sword into the earth with barbaric ceremonies, and they worship that with great respect, as Mars, the presiding deity of the regions over which they wander.”⁴⁴ The cult of the sword seems to be deeply rooted in the steppe cultures. The Scythias for example worshiped Ares at his temple which consisted (as Herodotus describes) of heaps of brushwood piled up, flat on the top, steep on three sides, sloped on the fourth and at the top of the pile and ancient sword is planted as an image of the god. So the idea of the sword embedded in a stone may come from the Alanic sword cult itself or – as Littleton suggests – and it is only a theory as he writes a “yet unattested ritual in which young men proved themselves worthy of being members of the war band.”⁴⁵ By pulling the sword out of the stone, Arthur demonstrates not only that he is a legitimate heir to the throne but also that he is ready to be a knight. Let me once more emphasize that it is a motif reconstructed by Littleton but that the same motif of extracting a sword or a spear from the earth or even a tree is found in the Nart sagas as well.

⁴² Excalibur being “ex Caliburnus”, e.g. made from Caliburnus

⁴³ The idea of worshipping a sword can be also found in the works of Herodotus or Claudius Marius Victor, a 5th century rhetorician.

⁴⁴ Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000. p 184

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p 186

The Lancelot – Batraz Connection

As the authors indicate both heroes, Arthur as well as Lancelot, were derived from the same person – the Scythian hero Batraz. The connection is even easier to recognize in the case of Lancelot, since he has his prototype in the legends of ancient Alans, who are closer to modern Ossetians than the Scythians just for the pure interval that separates the two tribes' departure for the west. The lazyges came to Britain in the 2nd century AD and so had more time to assimilate and accept the culture of the Celts than the Alans who came to Gaul some three hundred years later.

Littleton accepted the figure of Lancelot as being of pure Celtic origins, the reflection of the Celtic figure Lug.⁴⁶ The Arthurian legends – claims this hypothesis – originated in Wales and in the 6th century were carried by Celts fleeing from the Saxons. However, Linda Malcor came with the idea that these traditions originated with the Alans of Gaul and she supports her claim with etymological and other evidence I will mention below. During her examination interesting parallels were discovered not only between Batraz and Arthur and Batraz and Lancelot, but also between the two Arthurian heroes, Arthur and Lancelot. Therefore she suggests that both, Arthur as well as Lancelot developed from the same prototype and that Lancelot is the “continental version of the figure represented by Arthur in the insular legends.”⁴⁷

The first thing Littleton and Malcor had to do is to show the gaps and mistakes in the Welsh connection of Lancelot to Lug. They agree that there are some parallels between the stories about the two men but on the other hand there are many more differences. In this place it is important to mention one fact. The legends of Lancelot are clearly of continental origin. The name Lancelot du Lac first appears in Breton stories and legends, then his figure emerges in the work of Chrétien de Troyes and sometime later (between 1194 and 1205) a Swiss poet, Ulrich von Zatzikhoven writes a story called *Lanzelet*. And last there is the narrative *Lancelot* attributed to a Welsh cleric (but this attribution is believed to be false). The work is written in French but what is most important; the author has little knowledge of the geography of southeast

⁴⁶ The most popular and widely worshipped of the Celtic gods. He is the sun god and hero god, young, strong, radiant with hair of gold, master of all arts, skills and crafts.

⁴⁷ Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000. p 81

Britain and almost no knowledge of the geography of Wales. And at this point the Welsh connection fades away. But despite these facts there still exist supporters of the Welsh hypothesis, Roger Sherman Loomis (mentioned in note 13) being one of them.

One reason Loomis gives to support his Welsh theory is the water-fairy Lancelot is connected with. Loomis claims that mainly Celtic fairies are attached to water, but he misses the fact that in the 6th century AD the Celts were fleeing to continent and they definitely brought their traditions with them. The second problem is that – being of a continental origin – the legend of Lancelot is more probable to have taken the water-fairy from other than Celtic tradition, e.g. Teutonic. Although we cannot claim for sure from which source was the figure of water-fairy really taken, both eventualities are possible, the above mentioned idea at least weakens the “only-Welsh” origin.

Second reason of Loomis is also disputable. He claims that the Arthurian material originating on the continent exhibits knowledge of Welsh geography. Well, this is true for some sources, others and among them the legends of Lancelot, lack in identifying the exact places and if there are some geographical names mentioned, they are impossible to locate.

And thirdly there is the etymology of Lancelot’s name. Loomis suggests the Welsh Llŵch Llawynnawc as the model. There is a problem though. He relies solely on the written form of the name and on its written transmission neglecting oral tradition. Malcor proposes following etymology:

Alanus à Lot
→ Alans à Lot
or
Alanz à Lot
→ (A)lanz à Lot
→ (A)lanç-à-lot

→ (A)lancelot⁴⁸

The theory is then as follows: the *lanc-* sequence might be derived from the Latin *Alanus* (*Alan* plus the Latin singular ending *-us*) which was then Gallicized into *Alanus à Lot*. Due to a long contact between the Alanic tribes and the Teutonic tribes in the north the place-names tend to use the Germanic possessive *s* (*Alezon* meaning *Alans' town*). whereas in the south, where the contact is not only with Teutonic tribes but also with Roman culture, they tend to use the Germanic possessive together with Latin one, e.g. *à* or *de*. This would then bring the meaning *Alans of Lot* and raise the question where was such a place? Littleton and Malcor manage to find answer to this question as well. The Alanic settlement in Gaul was densest in the region surrounding the Lot River, thus Lancelot then bears the meaning *Alan of the Lot* (river).

I am now getting to the connection of Lancelot and Batraz. As Littleton and Malcor state there is a bigger number of similarities that can be found between those two heroes than between Batraz and Arthur. Batraz is a member of the Boratæ family; Lancelot's uncle and cousin are both named Boort. Both Batraz and Lancelot (unlike Arthur) are associated from birth with a female guardian. Batraz is born near the Black Sea soon after his father is murdered, Lancelot's place of birth is unknown but he is found as an infant near a lake while his father is dying. Thus both Lancelot and Batraz are often given the epithet *of the Lake* (*du Lac*) in the case of Lancelot or *of the Sea* in the case of Batraz. Both get their swords from a woman who is somehow connected to water; Arthur on the other hand receives his sword from the Lady of the Lake only in the story retold by Malory. And other parallels could be found connected to the Holy Grail and its Ossetic counterpart the Nartamongæ. Despite all those connections Littleton and Malcor are not able to find a historical person behind Lancelot. The "real" Arthur has a real history, the one of Riothamus, also for example the figure of Tristan has his historical counterpart (the son of King Mark Conomar), but there is nobody for Lancelot. "The lack of a clear cut man-behind-the-legend may have worked in our favor," write Littleton and Malcor. "The stories told by the Alans would have developed freely until they were recorded in writing during the 12th

⁴⁸ Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000. p 98

century. Arthur and Lancelot thus become reflections of the same hero.”⁴⁹ When the descendants of the lazyges met Alans in Gaul, the two stories intertwined and were adapted. And that is why we can find a lot of similarities in the tales of the two knights.

Other influences

However, the Iranian heroes did not affect Arthur and Lancelot only. There are parallels to be found even among the Sarmatian characters and other Knights of the Round Table. For example although having no clear onomastic evidence, the name Kay (one of the first Arthur’s knights) sounds much alike Iranian name for a warrior “Kai”. There is in fact a legendary Iranian figure of this name, Kai Khosraw, the warrior-king in whose early life parallels can be found for the life of Perceval, one of the best known among the medieval knights of the Round Table. And in the fate of another knight, Gawain, who is trained by the Roman Emperor as a cavalry officer and given a task to defend Hadrian’s Wall, the whole fate of the lazyge tribe comes to mind. Also the story of Tristan is not to be found in Celtic tradition earlier than in the 13th century but there is a half-Alan, half-Celt historical figure, Alan Judual, living in the 6th century, in whose faith some similarities to Tristan’s story can be discovered.

If I am to mention women characters very briefly, there is one who is almost completely of Celtic origin, Guinevere, the Fair Queen. But other women heroes Lady of the Lake, the most prominent among them, resemble in many cases the main female of the Nart sagas, Satana.

Besides many Arthurian and Nart heroes sharing the same or similar life or events, there are also resemblances in individual motifs. It is not only the Sword in the stone episode (see p 22), it is also the image of a serpent (or dragon) that can be found as a symbol in both the traditions. In the battles Arthur emerges fighting under a serpent (or dragon) banner and the same image is very often found on Sarmatian artifacts; even the translation of the Greek word the “Sauromatae” used by Herodotus the “Lizard People” supports this idea.

These were only a couple shorts notes to show that the influence of the Sarmatian and Alanic heroes is far reaching and that it may be discovered in most

⁴⁹ Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000. p 105

tales of the Arthurian sagas. To elaborate the ideas scetched above would ask for a closer and more detailed study, maybe even studies, which is not the purpose of my paper.⁵⁰ But it is necessary to see the “Sarmatian connection” in broader context that is the context of my paper.

POSITION OF LITTLETON AND MALCOR’S WORK IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

There have been many attempts to find either the historical Arthur or the person serving as a model for his legend. Finding the real Arthur has always been ineffective and unconvincing; there is no clear evidence if there ever was a King Arthur. The efforts to find a model for him seem to be more successful, there are some prominent theories; two of them discussed in this essay – Geoffrey Ashe’s Riothamus theory and Littleton and Malcor’s “Sarmatian connection.” The latter being highly praised especially by Victor Mair, a Professor and a Consulting Scholar at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, and by John Colarusso, a professor of modern languages and linguistics at McMaster University in Ontario specializing in the Circassians and other Caucasian peoples.

Both reviewers agree that the book *From Scythia to Camelot* will shake many of the claims and arguments used by academics so far and all the future discussions about King Arthur will never be the same. But as far as other academics and works published later are concerned, Littleton and Malcor’s theory does not seem to have substantial influence. Instead of becoming the key groundwork for next discussions (as Colarusso and Mair anticipated), it is either taken as one of many possible answers to the question of origins of Arthurian legends⁵¹ or a ground on which other authors delimit their own works.

The authors themselves seem to be aware of the controversial nature of their work, they do not try to promote their theory to extremes, their argumentation is balanced, they incorporate counterarguments that might arise from those who, with the words of Victor H. Mair, “take a more narrow approach to cultural history.” They

⁵⁰ If interested, read Littleton, C. Scott; Malcor, Linda A.: *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail*. Revised edition. New York and London: Garland. 2000, especially pages 125-151.

⁵¹ E.g. Geoffrey Ashe or John Matthews

also manage to steer clear from skipping to hasty conclusions even if it would validate their theory, they do not go on “walking on the thin ice” when they do not find enough evidence.

However what I find a little far fetched is the idea Victor H. Mair gives, the East Asia influence. It is beyond doubt that the “Sarmatian influence” does not limit to the area of Britain only. Mair claims to have discovered “clear evidence that some of the same unmistakably Iranian motifs found in the legend of King Arthur also turn up in old Chinese stories.”⁵² He presents a 8th century Chinese popular tale where the motif of a sword rising out of water appears. The parallel with Arthurian / Sarmatian motif is clear and it may be possible that the Sarmatian tribes spread not only westwards but also eastwards carrying their stories and legends with them. According to Mair, there is archeological evidence that the Iranian tribes were active in China, thus the intertwining of local stories with the ones brought by them is inevitable. But Mair does not stop this influence in China, he follows Littleton and Malcor’s suggestion and goes on to Japan and Japanese reverence for swords and swordsmanship, indicating that it may derive from the same origins as those which underlay the key role of the sword in the Arthurian cycle.

What we are lacking today is a more global view of history. The cultures around the world did not arise from nothing and did not develop in complete isolation that is a fact. I do not deny that there may be Iranian influences apparent even in the legends of such an exotic place as China or Japan (after all it seems exotic for me as a European) but suggesting that all the legends of the Euro-Asia arise from one source only feels as an awkward Utopianist theory

⁵² Mair, Victor M.: *C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor’s From Scythia to Camelot. The Heroic Age*. 1999. <<http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/2/ha2tf.htm>> last seen 27 June 2006

CONCLUSION

This paper wants to present one of the most prominent theories concerning the historicity and origin of the legend of the Arthurian cycle, the so called “Sarmatian connection” presented in a book *From Scythia to Camelot* by C.Scott Littleton and Linda Malcor.

This theory is described in detail in the third chapter from its “Sarmatian“ form as presented by C. Scott Littleton to its “Sarmatian-Alanic” form as elaborated by Linda Malcor. The chapter is opened by a short glossary of terms that could cause misunderstandings and/or discrepancies. The glossary is followed by chapters talking about the connection of the Iranian hero Batraz and King Arthur (the parallels are supported by two examples that make the connection obvious: the deaths of the heroes and the motif of a magical sword) and about the connection of Batraz and Lancelot. In the latter case the connection is more obvious than the former one. The chapter concludes with the idea that Arthur and Lancelot are two images of the same hero. One of them gaining the shape in isolation on the British Isle under the influences of the Iranian tribe of the lazyges who came in the 2nd century AD (Arthur), the second being shaped on the continent, in Gaul under the influences of another Iranian tribe, the Alans who came in the 5th century AD. Finally other Sarmatian influences are mentioned briefly.

The author draws the conclusion that the Littleton Malcor theory is one of those getting to the very core of the matter, removing the layers of other characters, tales and motifs that covered the legend during the centuries.

The theory is accepted by the academics society as one of the many theories on this topic.

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ANOTACE

Cílem práce „Íránské kořeny krále Artuše“ je prezentovat jeden z posledních pohledů na původ tohoto cyklu legend: domněnku, že jejich jádro pochází od kočovných kmenů Skýthů a Sarmatů, kteří ve Starověku obývali íránské stepi. Práce si klade za úkol představit čtenáři knihu S. Littletona a L. Malcorové a v ní zpracované téma íránského vlivu na konstituování legend, které dnes v naprosté většině považujeme za ryze anglické.

První kapitola se zabývá stručnou teorií mytologie, další kapitola naznačuje několik teorií o původu postavy krále Artuše - teorii Geoffryho Ashe, teorii Thomase Greena a teorii C. Scotta Littletona a Lindy Malcorové, kterou podrobně rozpracovám ve třetí kapitole.

Iranian myths and legends incorporate a variety of traditions. The many precise parallels between Iranian mythology and much early Indian imagery clearly reflect their common heritage—for example, the respective myths concerning the first human being and parallels between Ir. Yima and Ind. Yama, the god of death in Vedic thought. Eastern Iran appears to have had especially rich traditions of myths and legends. This article cannot cover all the many bodies of material which flourished in Iran, such as the Ossetic tradition or Manicheism. The mountains all grew from the roots of Alborz, the mountain of divine destiny, which grew to the sky. From its peak is the Bridge of Judgement. The Iranian Revolution of 1978–79, like many revolutions, united several groups, classes, and parties with disparate ideas who were against the old regime. As in many revolutions, the coalition did not long outlast victory. Iran's revolution also had distinctive features, especially the unique leading role of clerics. Some revolutions have had religious ideologies, but clerical rule after a revolution was new. Most nonclerics in the opposition underestimated both the probability of clerical rule and the ability of the clergy to rule—this was true of Khomeini's Islamic but nonclerical Paris adversary Zahhak is an evil king who conquers Iran and who has serpents growing out of his shoulders. This story comes from the Shahnameh book. His armies terrorised all the people of the land. All had been well before Zahhak's rule in Mesopotamia. It was during the reign of a king called Jemshid that things started to go wrong. He thought himself above the sun gods and began to lose favour with his people. A spirit called Ahriman the Evil, seized the chance to take control. He chose Zahhak to take over the throne, who then killed Jemshid and cut him in two. The Emergence of Snakes. The evil spirit, disguised as a cook, fed Zahhak with blood and the flesh of animals and one day Ahriman merely asked to kiss Zahhak on his two shoulders,