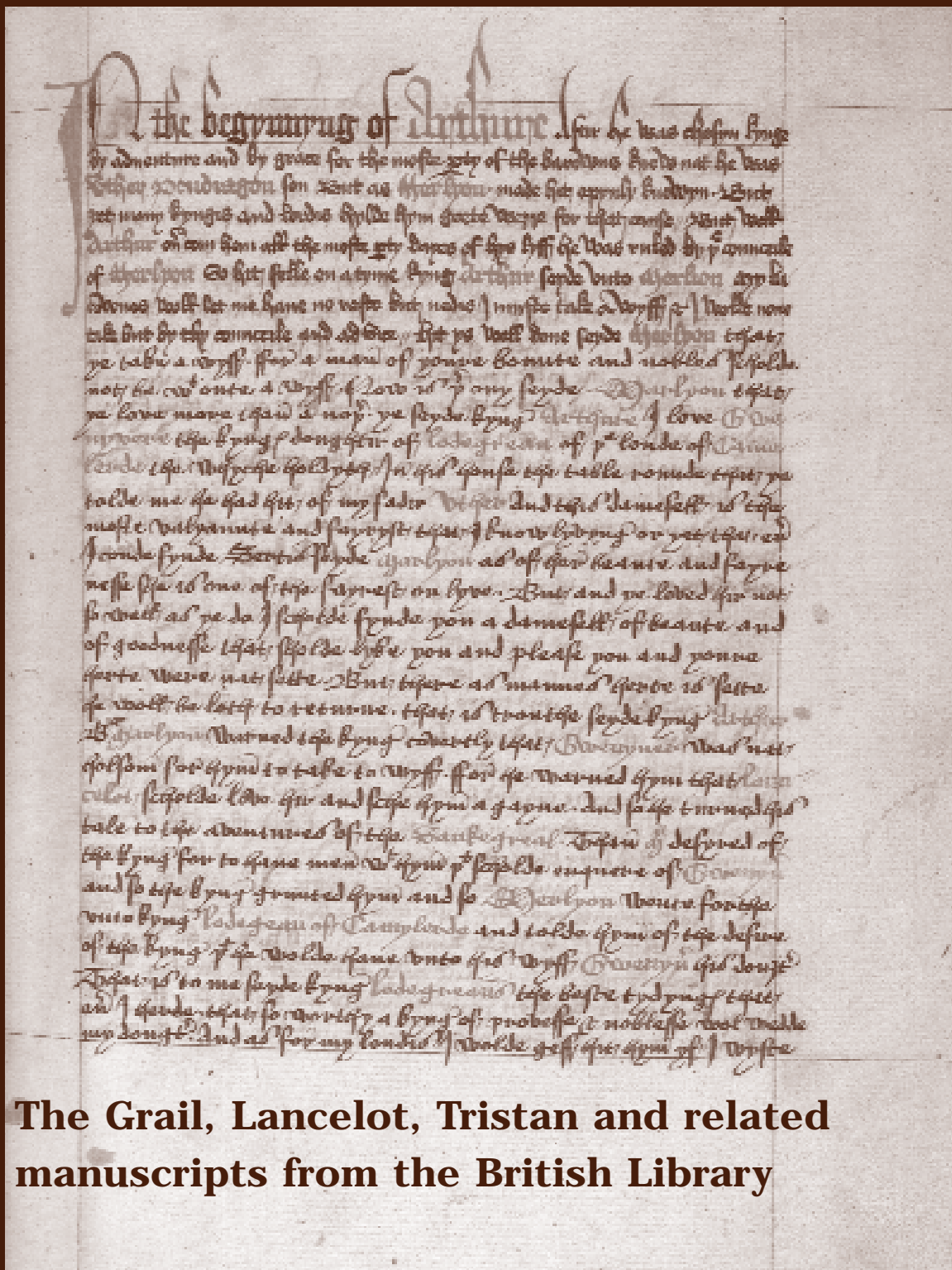


Arthurian Legends

and the influence of
French Prose Romance



The Grail, Lancelot, Tristan and related manuscripts from the British Library



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“French romances occupy a central position in the development of medieval European literature. Their most popular subject matter by far was the Arthurian legend, which, though it had its origins elsewhere, was first cast in romance form in France: the Round Table, the tragic love story of Lancelot and Guinevere, and the notion of the Grail quest were all French innovations. So too was the very genre of romance, a sophisticated and complex form that dramatized quests and tests and explored the connections - and often the conflicts - of love and adventure.”

*Professor Norris J Lacy, Penn State University
Consultant Editor*

Tales of King Arthur and his knights have exerted a remarkable hold over popular consciousness for at least 800 years. Arthurian legends represent the largest and most influential body of secular literature in the Middle Ages, and writers and film-makers today continue to explore the richness of these stories.

This project brings together 52 manuscripts from the British Library, dating from the 12th to the 16th centuries, which show the evolution of the Arthurian saga. We focus on romances in prose, since it was largely in prose that versions of the legend proliferated, beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth (c1138) and continuing in French. It then spread to other languages and cultures. Although Chrétien de Troyes and Robert de Boron initially developed the Grail theme in verse texts, it was in prose that the thorough integration of Arthurian and Grail material was accomplished and elaborated, beginning in the 13th century. Similarly, prose romances fused the Arthurian and Tristan legends, which had originally been entirely distinct bodies of narrative.

We commence with 20 variant manuscripts of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* (History of the Kings of Britain), which stands at the head of the Arthurian chronicle tradition. In addition to tales of Arthur, it is also the source of the stories of Cymbeline and King Lear, as well as Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas, founder of Britain, and King Lud, after whom London is named. Part chronicle and part invention, the *Historia* brilliantly weaves together earlier Celtic legends and borrows freely from Bede, Nennius and Gildas.

Contemporary writers adapted and translated Geoffrey's text, from the Anglo-Norman poet Geffrei Gaimar to the Channel Island cleric Robert Wace, who presented a copy of his new work to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1155.

As the French court flourished and a fashion conscious elite created new ideals of chivalric behaviour, so too were the Arthurian sagas 'romanced' and transformed. Both Chrétien de Troyes (c1135-c1183) and Robert de Boron (c1200) are represented in 26 manuscripts covering the French prose tradition. These include tales of Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, the Saint Graal, Lancelot and Tristan.

We have intentionally chosen a mixture of early and later manuscripts in order to illustrate the constant rewriting, expansion, and recombination of material. We also include a single verse manuscript that preserves Chrétien's *Perceval* and its continuations, which provide a point of departure for assessing the development of Grail material in our prose text.

We conclude with the famous Winchester manuscript of Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (1485), which bears printer's marks and shows the transition of the Arthurian legends from



manuscript text to printed form. Lancelot is now firmly at the centre of the story, and universal issues of destiny, revenge, love and treachery are explored alongside the quest for the Grail and the establishment of democracy and justice in the court of Camelot.

This collection will enable scholars to explore this extraordinarily popular and important body of medieval literature. Such a wide variety of texts will provide a firm basis for much research and project work.

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