

1. Record Nr.	UNINA9910149428703321
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Titolo	Arthur of England : English Attitudes to King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance // Christopher Dean
Pubbl/distr/stampa	Toronto : , : University of Toronto Press, , [2017] ©1987
ISBN	1-4426-5365-5 1-4426-3814-1
Descrizione fisica	1 online resource (242 pages)
Collana	Heritage
Disciplina	942.01/4
Soggetti	Knights and knighthood - England - Public opinion Arthurian romances - Appreciation - England Chivalry - Public opinion Britons - Historiography Public opinion - England Great Britain History To 1066 Historiography England Civilization 16th century England Civilization 1066-1485
Lingua di pubblicazione	Inglese
Formato	Materiale a stampa
Livello bibliografico	Monografia
Nota di bibliografia	Includes bibliographical references and index.
Nota di contenuto	Frontmatter -- Contents -- Preface -- 1. Arthur and the Historians -- 2. Arthur and Chivalry -- 3. Arthur and the Common Folk -- 4. Middle English Arthurian Romances -- 5. Malory -- 6. Arthurian Literature in the Renaissance Period -- 7. Arthurian References in Non-Arthurian Literature -- 8. Conclusions -- Appendix: Texts without Arthurian References -- Abbreviations -- Notes -- Select Bibliography -- Index
Sommario/riassunto	Today, popular imagination peoples the Middle Ages with damsels in distress and knights riding to their rescue. Of such knights, King Arthur and his companions are the most celebrated. It is certainly true that this is the time when the Arthurian story took shape and Arthurian literature flourished, and that most medieval historians included him in their histories of Britain, though some did so with a considerable

degree of scepticism. But how widely was this literature known in its own day? How much credence did people generally place in this king who supposedly once ruled England? To answer these questions, Christopher Dean looks at medieval and Renaissance Arthurian literature in detail, and also examines contemporary chronicles and histories, chivalric theory and practice, popular myths and legends, folk-lore and place-names. The result is to show dramatically that Arthur was not at all as well known as popular belief today fancies. As a historical figure he was early discredited; had it not been for his artificial revival by the Tudor monarchy and the furor caused by the attack upon him by the 'foreigner' Polydore Vergil, which incensed many patriotic Englishmen, his credibility might have disappeared much sooner than it did. Except for Malory's work, medieval Arthurian literature, which often exists in no more than single manuscripts, did not have large audiences. And after 1500, only Edmund Spenser and Thomas Hughes attempted to write seriously on Arthurian themes. Among the ordinary citizens of England, Arthur was hardly known at all, any popular knowledge of him being almost entirely restricted to Wales, Devon, and Cornwall. Elsewhere in Britain the much more familiar figure was Robin Hood. For all the strength of the Arthurian legend as the ultimate medieval knight, he is essentially a modern hero.
