

Lyonesse – A fabled land. Was it Avalon?

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Cornwall is a land full of myths and legends.

Probably the most famous, is the marvellous tale of King Arthur, with characters such as Guinevere, Merlin and Lancelot and including the enticing area known as Avalon.

There have been many, many written opinions and interpretations of this legend, but, after stumbling across some relevant information recently, my subsequent research took me in an interesting direction.

I became aware of Lyonesse. Have you ever heard of it?

Neither had I. And I was intrigued.

So, I started to look into it, to find out more. When I had finished, it led me to ask this question...

Was Lyonesse the location of Avalon?

It fits. In a lot of ways.

According to Cornish folklore, Lyonesse was a prosperous land that used to stretch from Land's End to the Scilly Isles.



This is an old Spanish map showing the potential location of mythical island Lyonesse (Image: Robin222 / Wikimedia)

Lyonesse was a kingdom of wealth and culture, inhabited by a race of strong and handsome people who worked its fertile plains.

They built many churches and there was a beautiful city called Lions.

Local folklore talks of a great cathedral, or some say a castle, which was located on the top of what is now the Seven Stones reef, half way between Land's End and the Scilly Isles.

But, on one dreadful night, Lyonesse was hit by a catastrophic storm.



At the height of this incredibly powerful storm, a huge wave totally engulfed this fairytale land.

In just under an hour, the Land of Lyonesse with all its people and animals, tragically disappeared below the waves, never to be seen again.

There were only two survivors – a man and a white horse.

Stories abound of a man furiously riding his white horse ahead of a gigantic wave.

It is said that he had been out hunting and had fallen asleep under a tree.

The storm shocked him awake and he rode the horse furiously eastward trying to stay ahead of the wave.

They finally made it to the higher ground around Marazion.

The name of the man is thought to have been Trevelyan or Trevilian.



When people stand on the dramatic cliffs at Land's End and look out to sea towards the Scilly Isles, little do they know that there is a fairytale kingdom now lying beneath the waves in front of them.



Local legend has it, that on certain days, you can catch sight of the lost domes and spires of Lyonesse, a stunning land of fertility, with villages, towns and over 100 churches.

And on calm nights, the bells of the long-submerged churches of Lyonesse can still be heard ringing beneath the waves.

Fisherman near the Scilly Isles regularly tell tales of retrieving pieces of buildings and other structures from their fishing nets. They also say they can see remnants of a forest when the sea is at low tide.

I have been told, that if you take a boat out on a calm day, walls beneath the water are clearly visible, as are the remains of field boundaries, which show up at low tide along the sands of the Sampson Flats between the isles of Tresco and Sampson.

Lord Tennyson wrote about Lyonesse in one of his poems – *Idylls of the King* – suggesting it was where King Arthur fought his final battle.

*"Then rose the King and moved
his host by night, and ever push'd
Sir Mordred, league by league,
back to the sunset bound of
Lyonesse*

*A land of old upheaven from the
abyss, by fire, to sink into the
abyss again; where fragments of
forgotten peoples dwelt and the
long mountains ended in a coast
of ever-shifting sand, and far
away the phantom circle of a
moaning sea."*



Lyonesse is part of Arthurian legend, particularly in the story of Tristan and Iseult and it was the kingdom of Tristan's father.

Sir Tristan, whose name means "sorrow", got his name because his mother died giving birth to him. He became a noble knight and a highly celebrated hunter. He also excelled in jousting, dancing, and harp playing.

Tristan had a love affair with Isolde (sometimes referred to as Iseult).

His uncle, King Mark of Cornwall, was due to marry Isolde who lived in Ireland. So, Tristan was sent over there to escort her back to Cornwall.

She was stunningly beautiful.

On the voyage back to England, Tristan and Isolde were taking wine together, but drank a love potion by mistake.

They fell hopelessly in love.



Upon returning to Cornwall, Isolde married King Mark, but the love affair with Tristan continued after her wedding.

The King eventually discovers the affair. He forgave Isolde, but exiled Tristan from his land. Tristan moved to the court of King Arthur and became a Knight of the Round Table.

He eventually married, but continued to love Isolde.

When King Arthur went to war against Lucius Tiberius, the Roman Leader, Tristan was by his side, as were all of his famous Knights, including Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad.

Arthur and his army defeated the Romans.

Arthur had left his nephew Mordred in charge of Britain. But, while he was away, Mordred secretly married Arthur's wife Guinevere - and took over the throne.

Arthur returned and he faced Mordred in battle at Camlann.



It was to be Arthur's final battle. The date was said to be 537.

Many were killed, including Mordred – following a fatal blow delivered by Arthur.



Only Arthur, Sir Bedivere and another knight were left alive after the battle.

But Arthur was mortally wounded and he was taken to Avalon.

During the journey, he instructs Sir Bedivere to throw Excalibur into a lake.

The location of the lake – and the legendary sword - has never been found.

Was this last journey of Arthur to Avalon, really a journey to Lyonesse?

Did King Arthur die in Lyonesse?

Was Excalibur's lake in Lyonesse?

When the sea took Lyonesse, did it take Avalon as well?

We will never know, of course.

Arthurian historians will probably scream – ‘that’s nonsense’.

A lot of Cornish folk will probably shout, too.

No problem. Shout away...

Arthur’s legend has always been open to interpretation. Even Tintagel – a favourite choice for the location of Camelot and Avalon, is now getting serious scrutiny.

Legend has it, that Avalon was a magical kingdom.

A utopian paradise where the legends of English knights and political wholeness united. It was where, according to legend, apples grew all year round.



So, after all my research and the construction of this article, I have finally decided.

I’m going to believe that Avalon was Lyonesse, or at least a part of it.

How wonderful that sounds. The more I think about it, the more I love it.

I am, of course, now a very proud adopted Cornishman. And, to know I just might be a few miles from the paradise of Avalon, makes me feel rather excited.

After all, like a lot of you, I’ve been looking for it all my life...

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