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Historiography: Fictionality vs. Factuality

The origins of medieval Arthurian romance lie in Latin histories of early Britain in which Arthur is located as a historical figure belonging to a distant Romano-British past at the time of the Anglo-Saxon settlements of the fifth and sixth centuries. Yet these Latin histories were written long after the events of that time, and our only surviving contemporary work, the *De excidio Britanniae* [Concerning the Ruin of Britain] of Gildas, written in the sixth century AD, does not mention Arthur at all. The historical Arthur is therefore pseudo-historical, the product of a generic merging of legend and folklore into what were presented as historical chronicles.

This merging of fiction and non-fiction is characteristic of medieval chronicles in general, and particularly those which were written in Britain (a term which I am using here to signify the island of Britain comprising the medieval kingdoms of Scotland and England and the territory of Wales). In this chapter I will consider some of the ways in which Arthur was presented as a historically real person by medieval historians who routinely used legend and fantasy as part of their historical method. They constructed a discourse of historical naturalism that claimed authority from earlier, often unnamed, sources and elided the boundaries between what we now think of as fiction and history. From the twelfth century onwards in Britain, this elision became hotly contested as historians argued about where to draw the line between historical fact and sheer fantasy, a debate that rumbled on into the Tudor period when the establishment of a definitive and authoritative version of British history was politically necessary to endorse Tudor power and justify their right to rule. In this debate, the figure of Arthur was central. Presented by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century as one of a line of historical kings legitimized by prophecy and the supernatural, Arthur's status – was he historical or legendary? – was the subject of competing claims until the eighteenth century.

1 Models of medieval historiography

For much of the twentieth century, medieval history was regarded by modern historians as something not to be taken very seriously, a mixture of fact and fantasy,

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hearsay and plain error. Real history, in the modern sense, began with the Tudors, as Peter Burke (1969) argued in his book, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*. Contrasting medieval history unfavourably with the more rigorous standards of evidence-based reporting adopted by humanist writers of the Renaissance, Burke (1969, 1) suggested the main features of earlier medieval historiography were the juxtaposition of events paratactically, without causative links, a sense of anachronism and a lack of interest in documentary evidence.

For a modern historian, these are serious failures. In the medieval context, however, this approach to writing history simply reveals a different set of priorities and ideologies, an alternative epistemology. Medieval historiography was largely controlled by the church, which viewed history as simply the gradual revelation of God's will. Apparently anachronistic references to Christian worship, for example, when writing about pagan peoples, are not errors so much as examples of external focalization, conscious attempts to link past and present as part of a continuum ordained by God. At a time when the concept of absolute truth was defined entirely in terms of the word of God, medieval writers were free to explore the possibilities of all kinds of relativities of time and meaning.

It is, moreover, not strictly true to suggest that medieval historians had little regard for facts or evidence. Many monastic chronicles were kept as ongoing records of the major events of each year, with the deaths of kings, significant wars and the deeds of aristocratic landowners featuring alongside the more mundane activities of the monastery and its inhabitants. Official documents produced by royal governments were often copied into chronicles as evidence of contemporary events, and although this might be considered as "an attempt [by the government] to create an 'official' national history" (Ruddick 2013, 173), it seems clear that both monastic chroniclers and central governments shared a sense of what history was for.

If the point of medieval history was to record human interaction with God's created world with a view to understanding God's will as it was revealed to human society, the apparent flaws in the medieval historical method can be re-interpreted as logical consequences of the medieval world view, particularly that of the dominant literate class within the church. We can in fact identify two main strands of historiography, the linear and the circular. The first approach, exemplified by Augustine, writing in the fourth century AD, was a universalizing model that brought all local and regional histories into an alignment with the Christian chronology and which led ineluctably and teleologically to the day of judgment (Allen 2003). Drawing partly on classical Latin histories whose path led climactically to either the greatness or the fall of Rome, this linear model formed the basis of what became Tudor history, celebrating the teleological progress of the English nation and its monarchs towards modernity.

But in between classical and Renaissance historiography, medieval writers experimented with a different kind of history, one proposed by Boethius in his *De consolazione philosophiae* [The Consolation of Philosophy] of the sixth century (Boethius 1999). According to Boethius, history is not linear but circular. What goes around comes around. Boethius explained this movement of time as the workings of fortune or fate, which acted as the agent of divine providence to bring individuals to the destiny that God has laid down for them (Marenbon 2003). Just as the operations of Fortuna were conceptualized as a wheel, raising people up only to cast them down again, so the process of history was theorized as a circular movement of recurring events, anticipated by God, prefigured in history and revisited on human society in precise relation to its merit.

This is the model of history that most influenced Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia regum Britanniae* (c. 1138) [The History of the Kings of Britain], which provides our earliest most complete biography of Arthur (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007). Though Geoffrey is working towards the triumph of the Normans as the true rulers of Britain (Ashe 2007; Faletra 2007; Gillingham 2000), he achieves this purpose through a series of “wheels” representing the rise and fall of individuals and peoples. As Troy falls, Rome rises; as each British king dies, another replaces him; the British are for many generations in the ascendant, but then their own moral faults betray them and the Anglo-Saxons conquer them. Arthur himself becomes a legitimate king, rises high in triumph, but is brought down by the treachery that was his destiny.

In both these historical models, fiction and fantasy play their part, just as in the Bible, the ultimate model of both universal and dynastic historiography, supernatural and legendary material supplements and often authorizes the truth-claims of the narrative. The aura of the supernatural that surrounded Arthur from his earliest appearance in Welsh and Latin texts did not, therefore, detract from the claim that he was a historical figure but, if anything, enhanced it.

2 Arthur in early chronicles

The earliest work of history in which Arthur appears as a historical character is the chronicle once attributed to a monk called Nennius, whose authorship is now doubted (Field 1996). The *Historia Brittonum* (Morris 1980) was written in the ninth century, though the earliest surviving manuscript dates from about 1100 (Dumville 1977–1978; Charles-Edwards 2013, 437–452). The chronicle seems to have been written by a Welsh cleric or someone familiar with the political context of the Welsh resistance to the Saxons on the borders of Wales in the early ninth

century (Higham 2009). The *Historia Brittonum* was a key source for Geoffrey of Monmouth, who took his account of the prophecy of the two dragons, white and red, fighting for control of Britain, from the *Historia Brittonum* but changed the name of the boy-prophet from Emrys (Latin: Ambrosius) to Merlin, thereby introducing the figure of the Welsh wizard, known in earlier Welsh poetry as Myrddin, to the wider European world (Knight 2009).

Arthur appears in the *Historia Brittonum* as a great battle-leader of the British people, fighting twelve battles across the length and breadth of the island. Carrying a shield bearing the image of the Virgin Mary, Arthur functions as a Christ-like figure with supernatural powers, winning every battle and killing nearly a thousand men single-handedly in one day. Though the precise locations of each of the battles is not known, and many of the place-names may be fictional, the last battle is said to take place at Badon, a place-name mentioned by Gildas as the site of a battle between the British and the Saxons, though Gildas does not mention the name of Arthur. It seems that the author of the *Historia Brittonum* has inserted the figure of Arthur, presumably known to him already from early Welsh legend, into a historical context of warfare, creating from various sources a series of battles which display Arthur's heroic leadership of the British people under threat from the Saxons.

Into this amalgam of history and legend, the chronicle's author has added an element of topographical folklore. Among a list of *mirabilia*, or "marvels", Arthur is associated with a number of place-names, such as Carn Cabal, supposedly named after Arthur's hound, and Llygad Amr, said to be the grave of Arthur's son, Amr, a grave whose length changes each time it is measured (Morris 1980, Ch. 73). Nicholas Higham argues that this folkloric Arthur "seems to precede the warrior Arthur of the *Historia*" (Higham 2009, 34), suggesting an ancient folklore tradition dating back to Roman Britain where the Latin name Artorius [Arthur] was known. What seems clear is that at some stage between Gildas' sixth-century history of Britain and the *Historia Brittonum* of the ninth century, the figure of Arthur as a British leader and hero of various legends emerged into the context of early medieval history (cf. Meyer, *supra*).

This would also explain the appearance of Arthur in two of the annals listed in the *Annales Cambriae* [Annals of Wales], written in the middle of the tenth century (Morris 1980; Charles-Edwards 1991). The first reference, dated to the year 516, describes Arthur at the battle of Badon, "in which Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ for three days and three nights on his shoulders" (Morris 1980, 85), a reference similar to that in the *Historia Brittonum* where Arthur carries an image of the Virgin Mary on his shield at one of the other battles (not at Badon). The second reference, dated as 537, describes Arthur's death at the battle of Camlann, along with Medraut (Medrawd or Mordred), at a time of great plague.

This is possibly the earliest reference we have to Mordred, or at least the earliest datable reference (the name occurs in early Welsh poetry and triads which cannot be dated with great accuracy though the poetry is likely to pre-date Geoffrey of Monmouth). As Rachel Bromwich has pointed out (2014, 455), “The early sources do not claim either that Medrawd was Arthur’s nephew or that he was his opponent”; on the contrary, “[t]he early bardic references indicate that Medrawd was looked upon as a paragon of valour and courtesy.” The story of Mordred’s relationship to Arthur and his treachery which led to the deaths of both of them was almost certainly an invention of Geoffrey’s, a dramatic narrative that may well owe its origins to early French romance.

Fragmentary and allusive as it is, the evidence of the *Historia Brittonum* and the *Annales Cambriae* indicates that there was enough interest in Arthur as a supposed battle-leader of the sixth century to include him in accounts of early British history. Whether information about Arthur circulated orally or in written texts, or both, we cannot be certain, but the surviving evidence points clearly to a religious purpose behind the early historical accounts of British downfall and Saxon triumph. As Thomas Charles-Edwards says, the significance of the list of twelve battles in the *Historia Brittonum* lies with “divine providence rather than with human heroism in war” (1991, 28), reminding its readers that the Saxons were divinely ordained to be the rulers of what became England. In the case of Arthur’s death, as recorded in the *Annales Cambriae*, “the arrival of plague in the same year implies that the author was presenting Arthur’s death as something for which the Lord had punished the Britons.” (Higham 2009, 37) In both texts, the biblical model of providential history drives their narratives of Christ-like leaders and the fight for power.

The inexorable rise of the Saxons and the eventual destruction of British sovereignty on the island of Britain emerges as a much more explicit theme in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*. By the end of his history, the British are a broken people; following civil war, a great plague, and the exile and death of their last king, Cadwallader, the country is left almost deserted and ripe for occupation by the Saxons. Though Geoffrey has a lower opinion of the Saxons than he does of the British in their prime, his real contempt is for the descendants of the British people, the Welsh:

As their culture ebbed, they were no longer called Britons, but Welsh, a name which owes its origin to their leader Gualo, or to queen Galaes or to their decline. The Saxons acted more wisely, living in peace and harmony, tilling the fields and rebuilding the cities and towns; thus, with British lordship overthrown, they came to rule all Loegria [England], led by Athelstan, who was the first of them to wear its crown. The Welsh, unworthy successors to the noble Britons, never again recovered mastery over the whole island, but, squabbling

pettily amongst themselves and sometimes with the Saxons, kept constantly massacring the foreigners or each other. (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 280)

The “noble Britons” so much admired by Geoffrey are represented in his history by the kings of the British who trace their descent from the survivors of Troy. Among these British kings, described in a long chronological line, Arthur is the clear favourite who is given considerably more space than any of the others. When he inherits the crown from his father, Uther Pendragon, Arthur is described by Geoffrey as “a youth of fifteen, of great promise and generosity, whose innate goodness ensured that he was loved by almost everybody.” (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 192) On his death in battle against the treacherous Mordred, his nephew, Geoffrey reports: “The illustrious king Arthur too was mortally wounded; he was taken away to the island of Avallon to have his wounds tended and, in the year of Our Lord 542, handed over Britain’s crown to his relative Constantinus, son of Cadour duke of Cornwall.” (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 252)

In between these events, Geoffrey records the main events of Arthur’s life, including his marriage to Guinevere, his magnificent coronation at Caerleon, his campaigns against the Gauls and the Romans (in which Arthur carries a shield bearing an image of the Virgin Mary), and finally his usurpation by Mordred. Though Geoffrey does not name his sources, other than saying that his history is actually a translation into Latin of “a very old book in the British tongue” (Geoffrey of Monmouth 2007, 4), it is clear that he was drawing on earlier histories, particularly Gildas’ *De excidio Britanniae* (since he refers to Gildas by name) and the *Historia Brittonum*, and on early Welsh material, particularly early poetry and prophecy (Flood 2016). Geoffrey authenticates his history by using techniques familiar from classical historiography: reliance on an earlier written source, reported speeches, dramatic narratives of events, moral evaluations of behaviour and rhetorical devices which emphasize extremes of sin, virtue and divine punishment. Taking a technique from other universalizing Christian histories, Geoffrey suggests that the foundation of Britain by Brutus can be aligned with biblical chronology. Most compellingly, Geoffrey uses the language and form that signify *historia* of the conventional classical type, namely Latin prose.

Geoffrey also authenticates his history by invoking magic and the supernatural as proof that some events are beyond human control and therefore must be ordained. The story of the two dragons fighting underground, Vortigern’s consultation with his “magicians”, Merlin’s prophecies, Uther’s supernatural seduction of Ygraine, the extremes of famine and plague, the “angelic voice” that speaks to Cadwallader, are woven into the narrative as part of its providential circularity. It is significant, however, that the supernatural element more or less disappears from Geoffrey’s story once Arthur is on the throne. From then until the end of his

book, Geoffrey, drawing on earlier histories such as Bede's eighth-century *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* [Ecclesiastical History of the English People], becomes increasingly authoritative, apart from highly-coloured accounts of devastation due to plague and war. Geoffrey seems determined that Arthur, almost the last and certainly the greatest of the long line of British kings, should be regarded as a genuinely historical figure from whom the aura of the supernatural has been largely removed. The manner of Arthur's conception, arranged by Merlin the magician, is normalized through Merlin's use of drugs rather than a magic object; Arthur and Merlin never meet or engage with each other in Geoffrey's text; even the reference to Arthur being taken to Avalon "to have his wounds tended" lacks the otherworld atmosphere it acquires in the later romance tradition. In Geoffrey's *Historia*, Arthur represents the high point of British hegemony; because of the workings of providence expressed through plague and famine, and the divine punishment visited on the warring British, the Saxons prevail.

Geoffrey's *Historia*, translated into a large number of vernacular languages and disseminated throughout Europe, was enormously influential for later historians. His account of Arthur's life formed the basis of new histories, expanded with additional information taken from the burgeoning literary traditions, mainly from France, about Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot and the knights of the Round Table. Two of the earliest and most significant vernacular texts based on Geoffrey's *Historia* are the *Roman de Brut* by the Norman cleric Robert Wace, written in 1155 (Weiss 2002), and the *Brut* written at the end of the twelfth century by an English parish priest, Layamon, "the first chronicler to write in English since the final, tenacious continuators of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*." (Matheson 2009, 60)

Wace's *Roman de Brut* follows the course of Geoffrey's history but adds new details from other sources, drawing especially on French chivalric romance, thus creating a hybrid form of history and romance. Said by Layamon to have been presented to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of Henry II (Weiss 2002, xiii), Wace's narrative poem was intended for oral performance in the setting of the medieval court. It emphasizes the kind of chivalric and affective details typical of French vernacular romance of the time, such as the *Roman de Thebes* and the *Roman d'Eneas*, which are also associated with the court of Henry II in the middle of the twelfth century.

Layamon's *Brut* is an adaptation of Wace into English but expanded to almost double the length including a much longer Arthurian section (Le Saux 1989). Deliberately embracing a native English historiography, Layamon undid the chivalric romance style of Wace and instead emphasized Arthur's status as an old-style British warrior (Tiller 2007; cf. Meyer, *supra*). Unlike Geoffrey's *Historia*, which survives in over two hundred manuscripts, and Wace's *Roman de Brut*, surviving in twenty-four manuscripts up to the fourteenth century, Layamon's

Brut survives in only two manuscripts from the thirteenth century, suggesting a much more limited readership, perhaps due in part to what was perceived as its antiquated heroic English diction and metre (Matheson 1990). Close comparisons between the three texts by Geoffrey, Wace and Layamon suggest different authorial attitudes to Arthur, ranging from admiration of Arthur's martial victories to distrust of his political ambitions and leadership (Donahue 1998; Allen et al. 2013).

The vernacular poetic form of both Wace's *Roman de Brut* and Layamon's *Brut* signalled to medieval readers that these authors were not claiming to be writing history (which was done in Latin prose) but were consciously creating dramatic semi-fictionalized versions of what were assumed to be the historical facts of early British history as set out by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Indeed, Geoffrey's account, mediated through Wace, formed the basis of an Anglo-Norman prose history, the *Brut*, dating from the late-thirteenth century and possibly composed in the north of England (Marvin 2006; Spence 2013). Continuing the history up until the reign of Edward I, the *Brut* shifted the historiographical structure from the rise-and-fall pattern adopted by Geoffrey to a more linear model of the rise of a great people, namely the Normans, the true and legitimate inheritors of the British kingdom. This was later translated into a Middle English version, the Prose *Brut* of the fifteenth century, which circulated widely in England and was regarded as the authoritative history of England. Both the Anglo-Norman and Middle English prose *Bruts* were addressed to the same kind of audiences as the genre of chivalric romance, the nobility and, in the later Middle Ages, the wealthy urban class of merchants and royal administrators.

3 History or legend?

Almost from the date of publication of Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae*, doubts began to be expressed about the factuality of Geoffrey's version of British history, particularly in relation to his story of Brutus as the founder of Britain and in relation to the great claims he made for Arthur. William of Newburgh was a particularly early critic of Geoffrey's historical accuracy. In the preface to his *Historia rerum Anglicarum* [History of English Affairs] of 1190, William denounces the *ridicula figmenta* [ridiculous inventions] that Geoffrey inserted into his account of Arthur, claiming that Geoffrey had drawn these "from the traditional fictions of the Britons, with additions of his own, and endeavoured to dignify them with the name of authentic history." (Howlett 2012, 11) Like other critics, William's scepticism was based on the fact that no mention of Arthur and his period of

post-Roman history had been made by earlier historians, particularly Gildas, who was writing at about the same time that Arthur had supposedly been active as a famous military leader. But William's suspicions failed to gain much traction from medieval readers who wanted to believe in the glorious British past of their contemporary Anglo-Norman monarchs, and William's inability to offer any alternative account of early British history allowed others to dismiss or ignore his criticisms of Geoffrey (Matheson 2009).

Gerald of Wales was another twelfth-century historian who criticized Geoffrey's version of events, though Gerald's own historical method was characterized by a reliance on unsupported anecdote, apocryphal stories and an apparent belief in supernatural events which "proved" the power of divine intervention. Gerald, in his *Descriptio Cambriae* [Description of Wales], was scathing about Geoffrey's history, calling it "fabulous" (in the sense that it was based on fables) and "false" in its explanations of place names (Gerald of Wales 1978, *Description of Wales*, Book 1, Ch. 7), though it seems that Gerald was objecting to Geoffrey's historical accuracy rather than doubting the existence of Arthur altogether. In his *Itinerarium Cambriae* [Journey through Wales], he refers to Arthur's great court at Caerleon where he received ambassadors from Rome (Gerald of Wales 1978, *Journey through Wales*, Book I, Ch. V) and, describing the hilltop in south-eastern Wales called Cadair Arthur, "Arthur's Seat", he calls him "the most distinguished king of the Britons." (Book 1, Ch. 2)

Like a number of other commentators, including William of Newburgh, Gerald was dismissive of Geoffrey as a historian but nonetheless accepted the historical existence of Arthur – and of Merlin as well, whose prophecies Gerald cites as evidence of the inevitability of Welsh decline. William of Malmesbury, whose *Gesta regum Anglorum* [Deeds of the English Kings] (1125) was written at least a decade before Geoffrey's *Historia*, was already expressing scepticism about Welsh legends of Arthur's return from the grave, though he does not seem to doubt that Arthur actually existed (Thomson and Winterbottom 1998–1999, 520; cf. Johnston, *infra*). Alfred of Beverley, whose *Annales, sive, Historia de gestis regum Britanniae* [Annals, or, History of the Deeds of the Kings of Britain] were compiled about 1150, based his history mainly on Geoffrey and, although he commented on the lack of corroborating evidence for Arthur's war against the Romans, he did not challenge the view that Arthur was a historical character.

The general acceptance of the historicity of Arthur by clerical writers had a political purpose. The history of Britain, as the prehistory of the English kingdom, was regularly invoked by such writers to support the legitimacy of English monarchs as inheritors of the old British sovereignty over the island of Britain. As R.R. Davies says, "The British past had to be captured and possessed by the English if their claim to the domination of Britain, and with it the revival of Arthur's empire,

was to be historically and mythologically legitimized.” (Davies 2000, 41) What Arthur symbolized for the English kings, based on Geoffrey’s account of his conquests and the later *Brut* retellings, was a unified territory, a single polity mapped on to the island of Britain that was called “England” but managed to include Wales and Scotland as well.

In the first half of the fourteenth century, a monk belonging to the Benedictine abbey of St Werburgh in the northern city of Chester produced a vast universal history spanning the centuries from the Creation to the author’s own time, first to the year 1327 and then with additions and revisions up to the author’s death in 1362/1363. This was Ranulf Higden, whose Latin *Polychronicon* was the first work of history to offer a serious challenge to the version of British history popularized by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Higden takes his lead from William of Newburgh, revisiting William’s scepticism about Arthur and his supposed war against the Romans and echoing William’s concern that no other chronicle from any part of Europe mentions such a war or the figure of Arthur as a historical leader of the British. Higden’s history was a best-seller: it survives in more than one hundred and twenty manuscripts dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and it circulated widely among religious and secular audiences, inspiring continuations and subsequent histories of England.

The *Polychronicon* was translated into English by John Trevisa in 1387, becoming in the process a national history for the English people (Taylor 1966; Woolf 2000). But Trevisa’s text was not simply a translation; he also added to and commented on Higden’s history and, in a significant departure from Higden, took the completely opposite view regarding the historicity of Arthur. While Higden had been sceptical, Trevisa robustly defended Arthur as a genuine figure from history.

In the late fifteenth century, the first printer in London, William Caxton, a shrewd businessman who understood the literary tastes of London readers, published two versions of English history. The first, based on the Middle English Prose *Brut*, appeared in 1480, with a reprint in 1482, under the title *The Chronicles of England*, and contained the section about Arthur that was based ultimately on Geoffrey of Monmouth’s account. In the same year, 1482, Caxton published Trevisa’s English version of the *Polychronicon* but based his printed edition on a manuscript which did not contain Trevisa’s defence of Arthur. What appeared, then, in quick succession, was one history telling Geoffrey’s stirring tale of Arthur’s Roman wars and another history containing Higden’s dismissal of this same event (Matheson 1990; 2009). Though Caxton almost certainly did not intend to present such a contradictory account of English history, this publishing event brought out into the open the struggle to establish the truth about Arthur – was he a historical character or not?

4 Tudor history and Arthurian legend

The sixteenth century saw the rise of what is called humanist historiography, an approach to reconstructing the past that broke with the medieval reliance on unsubstantiated eye-witness accounts and unprovenanced sources, and consciously sought out the evidence of authoritative documents and surviving records of the past, whether written, archaeological or material. One of the earliest examples of this type of history was Robert Fabyan's *New Chronicles of England and France*, a universal history that was published after his death in 1516. Drawing on the earlier printed versions of English history, Fabyan came down somewhere in the middle of the conflicting versions: he accepted that Arthur was a historical figure but he rejected Geoffrey's account of the Roman wars.

The most systematic and persuasive challenge to Geoffrey's history was mounted by the Italian humanist historian, Polydore Vergil (c. 1470–1555). Moving to England as a church diplomat in 1502, Polydore had already published a number of works and was invited by Henry VII to write a complete history of England, in Latin, up to the present day. Polydore's *Anglica Historia* was finally published in Basel in 1534, during the reign of Henry VIII, with two updated editions appearing in 1546 and 1555 (Hay 1952; Davies 2015, xxxvi). Inevitably, Polydore turned to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* as an important source for his history, but soon experienced similar doubts to those of earlier writers, in particular the insuperable stumbling block that no other historical sources, from classical Latin texts through to medieval Latin and vernacular chronicles from France, substantiated Geoffrey's claims about Brutus and the early British kings, or about Arthur's Roman wars. Polydore quotes in full William of Newburgh's scornful dismissal of Geoffrey's history and, summarizing Geoffrey's account of Brutus, says: "But yet nether Livie, nether Dionisius of Halicarnaseus, who writt diligentlie of the Roman antiquities, nor divers other writers, did ever once make rehersall of this Brutus." (Ellis 1846, I.30)

Writing of the Anglo-Saxon invasions of Britain in Book III, Polydore mainly follows Gildas, who did not mention Arthur at all, but, in deference to the Tudor kings he served, Polydore cautiously accepts the historicity of Arthur as one of the line of British kings, son of Uther Pendragon who followed Vortigern and Vortimer. In 1485, Henry Tudor, a Welshman, had won the throne of England and called his first son Arthur; the prediction made to Cadwallader in Geoffrey's *Historia* that the British (reappearing through the Welsh Tudor family) would one day reoccupy their lost kingdom seemed to have been fulfilled. Polydore referred to this popular prophecy at the time of Henry VII's coronation:

Thus Henry gained the throne, as had been preordained by God's will and plan, since, as I have recalled earlier, 797 years previously Cadwallader had forecast that his stock would reign once more. Men's minds had already been gripped by the belief that Henry had been brought to the throne by this prophecy, and Henry VI had also predicted it. (Hay 1950, 1)

However, Polydore draws the line at endorsing any of Geoffrey's stories about Arthur's life as a military hero. According to Polydore, it was Uther, not Arthur, who was on the throne at the time of the battle of Badon and he implies, with great scepticism, that much of what has been written about Arthur's exploits, including the Roman wars, belongs to the world of legend rather than history, comparing the Arthurian tales to the stories told about Charlemagne's nephew Roland:

As concerninge this noble prince, for the marvelous force of his boddie, and the invincible valiaunce of his minde, his posteritee hathe allmoste vaunted and divulged suche gestes, as in our memorie emonge the Italiens ar commonlie noysed of Roland, the nephew of Charles the Great bie his sister. (Ellis 1846, III.121–2)

In this comparison with the Charlemagne legend, Polydore implies that Geoffrey borrowed the theme of uncle and nephew from French romance and that there was no historical basis for Arthur's usurpation by Mordred.

Polydore's rewriting of British history was not welcomed by everyone; in fact, "Vergil's incredulity about Geoffrey of Monmouth's veracity attracted the patriotic, xenophobic, and religious ire of English writers." (Matheson 2009, 67) But he nonetheless reinforced the growing doubts about the historicity of Arthur, and his views were the ones that finally prevailed. While John Leland, a commissioner for Henry VIII, drew on his knowledge of Welsh writing to defend Geoffrey's history against Polydore's aspersions (Davies 2013, xxxviii), the most authoritative Tudor historians of the sixteenth century, Edward Hall (1497–1547), John Stow (1525–1605) and Raphael Holinshed (†1580), followed Polydore's lead in criticizing the Galfridian version of history, with its "fables" of Arthur, and vented their scorn on the figure of Merlin as a false prophet and charlatan. Nevertheless, these historians continued to repeat the basic outline of British history that had been first laid down by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

One of the last supporters of Geoffrey's British history was Sir John Prise (1501/1502–1555), another of Henry VIII's commissioners who undertook the dissolution of the monasteries. A Welsh-speaking Welshman from Brecon, Prise believed that the legitimate claims of the Welsh to the original rulership of Britain were at stake and that a defence of Arthur was a defence of the Welsh as the inheritors of British sovereignty. Prise's Latin treatise, *Historiae Britannicae defensio* [A Defence of the British History], published in 1573 after Prise's death, used

humanist techniques to rebut the accusations of Polydore Vergil and others that stories about Arthur were largely figments of Geoffrey's imagination. Defending Geoffrey as the translator of an earlier authoritative work, not the author of a fictitious history, Prise cites numerous works in Latin and Welsh, including early poems attributed to the sixth-century poet, Taliesin, whose British hero, Urien of Rheged, he connects, rather tenuously, with Arthur (Davies 2013, 67–69). Since Urien is associated with Arthur as one of his knights only in Geoffrey's *Historia* (Davies 2013, 282), this is a somewhat circular argument but it is part of a concerted effort by Prise to find evidence for Arthur's existence that pre-dated Geoffrey's work. Prise does not deny that legends about Arthur have been invented since his death: "fables of the kind which tend to be made up about such men of distinction" (Davies 2013, 61); his task is to restore the authentic historical Arthur from the kind of evidence that Geoffrey himself was using, in particular the early histories of the British people told in their own Welsh language. The fact that William of Malmesbury had heard Welsh legends about Arthur a decade before Geoffrey wrote his history was enough proof for Prise that Arthur had been a historical king.

5 The decline of the historical Arthur

Belief in Arthur as a historical king faded away in the wake of the Reformation. With the rise of Protestantism under Elizabeth I and the rejection of medieval practices of prophecy and divination, belief in Galfridian history as a true account of the early history of Britain began to wane. Significantly, the political reasons for supporting such a history were no longer as pressing as they had been; Elizabeth I had no need to shore up her legitimacy by reference to the ancient traditions which had put her Tudor ancestors on the throne. Besides, Arthur himself belonged to a model of history, circular and providential, that was now perceived to be out-dated and almost heretical in its Catholic sense of divine retribution. It is striking that William Shakespeare, brought up on the histories of Hall and Holinshed, did not write any play, historical or otherwise, about King Arthur, as he did about King Lear, another of Geoffrey's British kings, as if Arthur's status was now too uncertain to categorize him as either authentic or legendary.

With the rediscovery of the "Ancient Britons" as a noble people betrayed by the cowardly Saxons, antiquarians expressed admiration for Arthur as a great British king (Piggot 1989). As late as the mid-eighteenth century, David Hume, author of the *History of England* (1754–1762), acknowledged the intrusion of many fables into the life of Arthur but seemed nonetheless to retain a belief in Arthur

as a real person, the hero of the Britons and the scourge of the Saxons (Lupack 2009, 342). The strength of Geoffrey's Arthurian narrative, bolstered by additions from romance, therefore retained much of its power as history until the dawn of the modern era.

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