

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Brut (The Chronicle of Britain) 1190***

Layamon (Late 12<sup>th</sup> early 13<sup>th</sup> century)

Textual sources: Two main manuscripts: Cotton Caligula A--first quarter of the thirteenth century; Cotton Otho C--written fifty years later; both manuscripts presently in British Library.

### *Background*

Layamon, apparently a priest living in Worcestershire-- although of what cult one will wonder--reworks the legends of King Arthur, the birth of Merlin, the Knights of the Roundtable. (If this seems to place us in the world of fantasy, we should first consider the fact that *Brut*, the title of the work before us. Is short for the name Brutus, the supposed founder of Britain.) (We might well keep in mind the role of Snorri Sturluson in keeping alive the ancient poetic lore of Iceland) *Brut* is short for Brutus, the renowned Roman senator, who was among those Romans who founded Britain itself. The alliterative interplay of the vocables *br* in both *Brut* and *Britain* cannot fail to reinforce the notion that the ancient Romans were the ancestors of the British people.

This assumption, which is central to Layamon's poem--for *Brut* is a long poem, 1190 lines---offers putative evidence that as we have it from Vergil's *Aeneid*, world figures like Aeneas and his young son Ascanius scattered into the ancient Mediterranean, at the end of the Trojan War, and founded such great empires to be as Britain. The persuasiveness of the poetic model established here is proven not only by the nationalist vision inscribed in *Brut*, but in the testimony given to its perspective by such fastidious later western writers as Sir Thomas Mallory, Jorge Borges, or T.S. Eliot.

It stands to expectation that the work of writing on the origins of the British people. It was created here by Layamon is not only dependent on his own personal vision but shares in that kind of quasi historical world view with others with the same view of the origins of Britain. As late as the sixteenth century Holinshed's *Chronicle* adopts Layamon's perspective. We can well be astonished at the durability of late historical mythology. But there was a long tradition of the history of Arthurian Britain, stretching back to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. (Well before Layamon Geoffrey wrote about Arthur's departure by ship for Avalon, to be healed by the elf-queen. Geoffrey wrote as well about the birth of Merlin and the origins of the Knights of the Round Table.

### *Poetic style. And character*

It is difficult to characterize the kind of poetry Layamon wrote. A 'loose alliterative style' is a useful starting point. The sounds of the words seem to constitute a separate language of their own—alliteration, here is an occasional patch of rhyming, or an explicit caesural halt among the progress of the linear hemistichs. For all the prosaic appearance of this language it has its purely poetic elements. The language in which this material deploys is basically an old fashioned Anglo Saxon, with only one hundred or so words borrowed from Anglo Norman French. Layamon, we gather, wrote for a religious, impoverished peasant audience in Worcestershire--far from the centers of culture in the south east of England, where Anglo Norman sophistication was far more apparent than it was in the north. In the early 1200s, at the time of Layamon's work, Henry III had come to the throne of England, and in particular, institutionalized a strongly British tone of ruling and of cultural style.

### *How the narrative works*

The opening of the epic pours forth with characteristic *drive*.

*At Totnes Constantin the Fair and all his host came ashore; thither came the bold man--well was he brave!--and with him two thousand knights such as no king possessed. Forth they gan march into London, and sent after knights over all the kingdom...terrible battle ensued*

Thus opens, with efficiency and vigor, a tale which topples over itself with the energy to be replaced with what follows it. What kindred to London was this intruder or hero who has arrived? Why is he on mission in England? The Britons of the intruded upon land were in fact astonished by this apparition.

Summoned by the intruder, *the Britons heard: where they dwelt in the pits; in earth and stocks they hid themselves like badgers, in wood and in wilderness, in heath and in fen so that well nigh no man might find any Briton except they were in castle or in burgh.*

A terrible battle ensued, in the course of which Constantin wiped out an extraordinary harvest of locals.

*Together they rushed with stern strength, fought fiercely--the fated fell! Ere the day were gone, slain was Wanis and Melgan and Peohtes enow, Scots without number. Danes and Norwegians. Galloways and Irish. The while that the day was light lasted ever this slaughter. When it came to the eventide then called the Earl Constantin and bade that guides should ride to the waters, and active men toward the sea to guard them. A man should have seen the game...Wheresoever they found any man escaped, that was with Melga the heathen King, the women loud laughed, and tore him all in pieces, and prayed for the soul, that never should good be to it.*

This bitter final note typifies Layamon's skill in the introduction of punch lines, and in the withholding of a full discussion narrative, in which all would be told, and flatly out. Note how briskly the author has brought us to the point of feeling the impetus of Constantin's all out assault. The place of alliteration--the fated fell--and serial repetition--the names of the national groups overwhelmed by Constantin's army--alternately thicken and aerate the text, with an effect of chewy anticipation.

The culmination of this immediate process is the election of Constantin 'king of Britain.' The remainder of this section tapers off into a genealogy of the subsequent royal family of England itself upward into a new peak of narrative energy, starting out afresh with the death of Constantin at the hands of a treacherous servant, then the entry of Vortiger, 'a crafty man and most wary,' who will carry forward and open out the whole tale, giving us our first glimpse of Layamon's dramatic purview, to introduce a struggle among the sons of Constantin, and, from Layamon's standpoint, an historical analysis of the origins of the British monarchy as western writers understand it.

As an historian properly understood, Layamon is considered of no interest. He is at best anecdotal, picking details from much older sources, and going back as far as *the 'Anglo Saxon Chronicle'*, the oldest preserved attempt to record details of the history of England, or as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, mentioned above.

### *Layamon's characters*

There are few who receive development,

Constantin, the brash and all ravaging King, conqueror incarnate.

Constance, the eldest son of Constantin; he becomes a monk at Winchester, until Vortiger deceives him into leaving his post, and becoming the devious head of state, now King. Guencelin. Political elevation has made him a pathetic figure.

Vortiger, the crafty councilor who wins away Constance from the monastery, and whose long term plan is to become the second power in the state.

The creation of characters out of the thickets of a geopolitical account, is difficult, and has engaged the highest talent of many of the world's most skilled. Herodotus and Thucydides provide good examples.

Herodotus writes an anecdotal history of the fifth century Eastern Mediterranean, Greeks and Persians. He is led by tales drifting his way in the increasingly dense thoroughfare of the sixth century Mediterranean, and out of the myriad of historiettes in which he finds slider characters like structures in time: Cyrus or Solon or Xerxes who chunk out the evolving landscape imagery of a patterning structure in time. These sliders are not distinguished for tuftiness or richness--as a group, these ancient characters present nothing like a Dickensian landscape of richly humorous Individuals like Falstaff. The same manner of using characters as sliders provides bast in his mind for Thucydides' bold sketch of a theory of historiography; his characters are standpoints in his mind.

Layamon, no great visionary, but more properly a mythological chronicler, characterizes his figures, but in the course of action and narration. A full example might include the 'characterization' of Constance, the eldest son of the great Constantin the invader, with whom our text opens. It needs to be remembered that this son of the invader was sent to a monastery and lived there as a monk, but that the crafty Vortiger, anxious himself to rise to the summit of England, lured Constance to leave the monastery life--and reclaim his rightful royal position. The account of Constance's departure from monastic life--the way Vortiger whisked Constance out into the world, like a regular citizen, while taking along a swain who served as fake monk, to deceive the onlooking forsaken brothers. This account is part of the several-stage emerging depiction of the character of Constance. The summit of this verbal strategy, and the true move by which Layamon 'characterizes' the in-spirit fallen Constance, follows in the *depiction of the sadness of the brother monks as they watch Constance leaving them*:

*Monks passed upward, monks passed downward; they saw the swain with monk's clothes; the hood hanged down as if he hid his crown they all weened that it were their brother, who there sat so sorry in the speech-house, in the daylight, among all the knights.*

### Themes

Craftiness. The councilor Vortiger is determined to gain power in the kingdom. Craftiness hangs like a shadow over the entire poem. The new kingdom is up for grabs. This shrewd councilor knows how to make his way to the center of power.

Power. The forces of Constantin drive heavily into the country of the pagan Britons, extirpating people on all sides, establishing a new regime. Power is naked in this world, superseded, if at all, by craftiness.

Politics. The epic work of Layamon opens on the world of invasion, is the forced change of what had seemed to be a fixed pattern of society. The native pagans of England are driven underground, in a desperate effort to replace them by a new government. In the course of this struggle the political entanglements of rival factions are forced to the fore.

### Events

The epic of Layamon concerns the mythical founding of the Empire of Constantin, a place we learn to call Britain. In developing his account Layamon employs classic rhetorical practice. Both a triumph and an invader- force promptly pacify the people, leading that people up to its own monarchy. By what seems an inevitable continuation, the monarchy generates from within itself the grounds of its own downfall, namely the ambitious and malcontent Vortiger, who reinstalls a new king, the monk son of Constantin, the original invader. A new regime commences, using the same old blood line. The exhausting cycles of history recommence.

### Events: A retrospective

*The fact can be lost on us, that the early Middle English poem before us, known to be the fairly brief epic of a British priest, written around 1200, is not reaching us in its original form. This work exists in two manuscripts from the first half of the twelfth century. (We can look at them today in the British Library and think in awe of the scribal effort that went into that writing down of those vellum texts.) We can enrich*

*that reconstructive effort, today, by reading a lively book of academic fiction; The Swerve, by Stephen Greenblatt, takes up the life and culture story of a professional scribe who travels among monasteries plying his trade. A fine read, this book enables us to see what fine textured work the scribe faced, in dealing not only with the eye straining script before him, but with the world view disclosure emerging from a long unstudied parchment. Hence we can reflect on the kind of mediation that will have been required to bring the Cotton manuscripts via electronic laptop scripts of Layamon to our eyes, or, to be more precise, to a shady corner of a flat in Lagos, Nigeria, where the author of this note labors in the mode of an electronic laptop, to cross a word- bridge first constructed a millennium ago.*