

Geoffrey of Monmouth 1095-1155

History of the Kings of England (1135-1139)

Setting

Much of our prior discussion has concerned the transition from one culture to a succeeding culture. With Cassiodorus and Boethius we met the mediaeval mind at an early stage of reformulating the world of Ancient Rome. Of course this revolutionary cultural project had been heralded well before, by the intervention of Christianity into the more or less continuous flow of historical succession which had received it.

Christianity as Intervention

The patient believers in the catacombs began the subversion of Empire, the profundity of Saint Augustine heralded in the early Christian Church Fathers, the syncretic theologizing of Philo Judaeus and the Alexandrian world, and at the Fall of the Great Pagan Empire such still deeply Latinate Christian scholars as Boethius and Cassiodorus settled in to assess the distance they had taken from the central tenets of antiquity.

Historical transition

The period of Classical-Christian transition, which was rich in contradictory hues, would be centuries in formulating itself, and indeed the millennium of what we call the Middle Ages would hardly suffice, for the formulation in question, so that to our very day, when we have a somewhat coherent sense of 'modernity,' and even of 'Greco Roman' society, we fumble over the meaning of the Middle Ages, daunted by the complexity of organizing an inner map of so many evolving national cultures over so vast a time span.

The Middle Ages formulate their own history

By the 'middle of the Middle Ages,' so to speak, we encounter, in the Venerable Bede, a balanced effort to take stock of where British history stood at his time—672-735—and to locate his own moment—two centuries into the Middle Ages—in relation to antiquity. Four hundred years later, Geoffrey of Monmouth, in one of the most read books of the Middle Ages, made the same effort as Bede, to take a purview of the historical world he was in, but taking a launching stance from the imagination, instead of from what in Bede's case we called a 'proprioceptive' conspectus of the world lying 'behind him.' Geoffrey shared, with Bede, a desire to construct a coherent backdrop for the culture he inherited.

Historia Regum Britanniae (History of the Kings of Britain) (1135-1139)

Monmouth's major text, the *Historia*, provides great ballast for the irrepressible legend of King Arthur, and belongs to the present discussion, of the British Middle Ages, for his popular history of the kings of England. In writing his history this Catholic priest of Breton descent, who spent his career life in the diocese of Oxford, joined a host of earlier British annalists or chroniclers in looking for a bridge between their own culture and that of the Romans whose cultural descendants they were.—or believed they were.

Geoffrey, Fabulist or Historian?

Geoffrey is largely viewed as a fabulist, living in his imagination, and was in his time—and throughout the Middle Ages—popular, imbibing and transforming the widespread European fascination with King Arthur, whom we now know to be pure fabrication. The mission of Geoffrey's history was well based, to ground the continuity of British history with the greatness of its Roman origins. All that was required was to solder bridge passages between early British and late Roman histories.

The Roman origins of the British people

The starting point, for Geoffrey's nationalist history, is the settling of Britain by Brutus the Trojan, the great-grandson of Aeneas (from Virgil's *Aeneid*), and by Corineus, the eponymous founder of Cornwall in Britain. (For Geoffrey, both of these ancestral predecessors of the British had won renown for their killing off of the giants of Britain.) The link having been established, between Romans and residents of the British Isles, it became intricately possible to join the histories of the two peoples, Romans and British, and to make way for the introduction of fictional culture heroes, like Arthur, who would prove to be a savior for the British people, and would serve as the culminating figure of this entire tale.

(The culminating but not the sole history making figure of the tale. The ancient Briton tale of Lochrine and Sabrina (the river Severn); the tale of King Leir (Lear) and the dismemberment of his kingdom, and its division among three daughters; a sequence of fictions about the British struggles against the Saxons: these chapters were published separately, before 1136, and established a grounding sketch of a mythography of the British Isles: Geoffrey having at this point clearly erased the borders between empirical history—what we have from Bede, on the whole,—and fabulous history generated within the imagination. Between 1149 and 1151 Geoffrey published a characteristic addendum to his *History of the Kings of England*, his *Vita Merlini (Life of Merlin, 1148-1151)* in Latin hexameters. With that poem Geoffrey launched himself into a sub theme, which was to have an indescribably rich history of its own, within the national traditions of Britain and Western Europe.

A sample from Paragraph 2 of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of England*: the narration tracks the life-movement of Brutus—the legendary descendant of Trojan Aeneas, and, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth, and other mediaeval fabulist historians, the first king of the Britons.

At length, after fifteen years were expired, the youth accompanied his father in hunting, and killed him undesignedly by the shot of an arrow. For, as the servants were driving up the deer towards them, Brutus, in shooting at them, smote his father under the breast. Upon his death, he was expelled from Italy, his kinsmen being enraged at him for so heinous a deed. Thus banished he went into Greece, where he found the posterity of Helenus, son of Priamus, kept in slavery by Pandrasus, king of the Greeks. For, after the destruction of Troy, Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles, had brought hither in chains Helenus and many others; and to revenge on them the death of his father, had given command that they should be held in captivity.

Brutus, finding they were by descent his old countrymen, took up his abode among them, and began to distinguish himself by his conduct and bravery in war, so as to gain the affection of kings and commanders, and above all the young men of the country. For he was esteemed a person of great capacity both in council and war, and signaled his generosity to his soldiers, by bestowing among them all the money and spoil he got. His fame, therefore, spreading over all countries, the Trojans from all parts began to flock to him, desiring under his command to be freed from subjection to the Greeks; which they assured him might easily be done, considering how much their number was now increased in the country, being seven thousand strong, besides women and children.

There was likewise then in Greece a noble youth named Assaracus, a favourer of their cause. For he was descended on his mother's side from the Trojans, and placed great confidence in them, that he might be

able by their assistance to oppose the designs of the Greeks. For his brother had a quarrel with him for attempting to deprive him of three castles which his father had given him at his death, on account of his being only the son of a concubine; but as the brother was a Greek, both by his father's and mother's side, he had prevailed with the king and the rest of the Greeks to espouse his cause. Brutus, having taken a view of the number of his men, and seen how Assaracus's castles lay open to him, complied with their request.

Geoffrey of Monmouth is one of the initiators of a fabulous history for the British, and his work to illustrate and glorify the British people is itself legendary. How did he view the quasi-mythological bent of his history, or, an easier example, how did he view his later tale, the *Vita Merlini*, *Life of Merlin*, in which he contrived to bring together King Arthur, the archetypal Briton King, and a legendary magician whose afterlife shadows the entire Middle Ages—and in fact popular lore to our day?

With his embrace of the vast legend of Merlin—born of a woman, but fathered by an incubus, a prophet, shapeshifter, rogue and Romeo; mythical but one of the great characters of the actual mediaeval mind; fatherer of Arthur by means of magic and intrigue—with his embrace of this unquenchable spirit, Geoffrey opens the Pandora's box of the mediaeval historical imagination. The vast progeny of the Arthurian cycle, throughout the High Middle Ages, are evidence of a Romantic movement, within the Middle Ages, which scoops up history with a voracity not to be outdone until the later Romantic Movement, almost a millennium later, when James Macpherson, creating Ossianic poetry from the third century, once more demonstrated the hunger of the human mind for unverifiable tales.

Study guide

We comfortably categorize history as either empirical or imaginative, and have done so, in the present entry, by taking Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth as our guides. Will that bald distinction, between two types of history, confirm its value? Are these two types of history as absolutely separate from each other as we imply? Do Bede and Geoffrey adopt absolutely opposite paths into accounting for the past? (Please devote part of your paper to precisely this issue, of the 'two paths to historical truth.')

One path on which our two historians seem to agree might be this: histories are artificial abstractions from what happened in the past, and are composed of words in action, words that project, out beyond them, diverse emblems of the past. Geoffrey's simulation of the Brutus-Britons connection, or of Merlin as the progenitor of Arthur, are his choice of paths toward characterizing the past, and in arguable ways provide us with optional insights unto the way our present has made the past into itself. Does this seem to you a legitimate perspective, onto the means at the historian's disposal, for recreating the truth?