

Reference Focus: Geoffrey of Monmouth

Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1095 – c. 1155), also known as *Galfridus Artur* (Geoffrey Arthur), was a medieval British clergyman and chronicler best known for his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (also *De gestis Britonum*), or *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Though now considered to be pseudohistory, *Historia* contributed to British historiography and introduced the legend of King Arthur to the European imagination. Geoffrey's other works comprise the poems *Prophetie Merlini* (Prophecies of Merlin) – which is included in *Historia* – and *Vita Merlini* (Life of Merlin).

In *Historia*, Geoffrey calls himself *Galfridus Monemutenis* (Geoffrey of Monmouth) from which a possible birthplace of Monmouth, Wales is inferred. Beyond this, there is little evidence of Geoffrey being Welsh or Welsh-speaking, and most of his life was spent outside Wales. It has been suggested that Geoffrey's family were Bretons that settled in Monmouth following the Norman Conquest.¹ Geoffrey's contemporaries referred to him as 'Geoffrey Arthur', which may be a patronymic name but is more likely a reference to the subject of his writing.

Geoffrey's name appears on seven charters originating from around Oxford between 1129 and 1151. Three of the charters are co-signed by Walter, archdeacon of Oxford, whom Geoffrey mentions in *Historia*. Geoffrey is sometimes styled *magister* (teacher), which suggests a high level of education, and he may have been a secular canon at the chapel of St George in Oxford

¹ J. C. Crick, *Monmouth, Geoffrey of [Galfridus Arturus] (d. 1154/5), bishop of St Asaph and historian.*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. (Oxford University Press, September 23 2004), <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-10530>> [accessed 27 October 2024].

Castle.² He was ordained as a priest and consecrated as Bishop of St Asaph in February 1152, but there is no evidence of him visiting his see, which at the time was caught up in the conflict between the Anglo-Norman Marcher lords and Madog ap Maredudd of Powys. Geoffrey died sometime between 1154 and 1155 when his successor took office, although the exact date of his death is unknown.³

Historia Regum Britanniae in its complete form is first mentioned in 1139 when Henry of Huntingdon was shown a copy at Bec monastery in Normandy by Robert of Torigny – both of whom used *Historia* as a source for their own writing. Over the following decade, Geoffrey produced several versions, one of which is dedicated to Robert of Gloucester and another to both Robert and his rival, Waleran Beaumont. Geoffrey's relationship to these Anglo-Norman lords could indicate a network of patronage extending to South Wales, or it may be a result of scholarly ties between Oxford and Caen in Normandy.⁴ By the mid 13th century, *Historia* had been translated into French, Latin, and Middle English verse as well as Welsh prose.

Since its release, the *De gestis Britonum* has been defined by its popularity. The work became successful quickly and the material record of its early reception is exceptional in its extent. The count of surviving manuscripts runs to 225 at the moment, and almost 80 of them can be dated to before c.1210.⁵

In *Historia*, Geoffrey claims that much of the text was translated from an unnamed ancient book written in Welsh and given to him by Walter of Oxford. This claim is considered to be fabricated: instead Geoffrey drew on several sources including Bede, Gildas, the *Historia Brittonum*, the poems of Taliesin, and the tale of Culhwch and Olwen. It is clear that Geoffrey had access to

² *ibid.*

³ Karen Jankulak, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), pp. 10–11.

⁴ Jaako Tahkokallio, *A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. by Joshua Byron Smith, and Georgia Henley, 1st edn. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020), pp. 158–159.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 155.

Welsh genealogies and bardic poetry, however much of the narrative seems to be Geoffrey's own invention.⁶

Historia begins with the settlement of Britain by Brutus of Troy, a descendent of Aeneas, and traces the lives of his descendants – introducing the characters of King Bladud and King Leir – through Julius Caesar's invasions, ending with Cadwallader as the last 'King of Britain'. Features of Arthurian legend that would endure for centuries are introduced in *Historia*, such as Arthur's clandestine conception, Guinevere's adultery with Mordred, and Arthur's fatal wounding at the Battle of Camlann and passage to the Isle of Avalon.⁷

The historicity of the work was widely accepted, and it was included in histories as late as the 16th century. However, modern scholars consider *Historia* to be largely a product of Geoffrey's imagination in which even the few verifiable events are described inaccurately. Geoffrey's work nonetheless 'forms the most significant milestone in the development of Arthurian literature'⁸ and occupies a central place in the Matter of Britain.

⁶ Jankulak, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, pp. 13–16.

⁷ O. J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature*, 2nd edn. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 57.

⁸ *ibid*, p. 58.

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