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Title of extract: **Geoffrey of Monmouth and Welsh Historical Tradition**

Name of Author: **Roberts, B.F.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable)

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable): **Nottingham Medieval Studies Vol 20 (1976)**

Publisher: **University of Nottingham**

Pages scanned: **29 - 40**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Celtic Arthur CYCS7021**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning: *E.L. Harris*

Date authorised: 27.03.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH AND WELSH HISTORICAL TRADITION

Former generations of readers, who accepted Geoffrey's claim to have translated a "British" book, naturally regarded the *Historia Regum Britanniae* as an authentic and valuable source for early Welsh or British history. Even after the eclipse of the book as an acceptable account of genuine history, there remained a belief in its value as a source of Welsh legend and tradition. If Geoffrey had in fact concocted a largely imaginary history of Britain, it was assumed that he had drawn on early Welsh legendary lore and that the book, therefore, could be used as evidence of Welsh story. When the reaction to Geoffrey became more pronounced, when the "ancient book" was held to be merely another example of an appeal to a fictitious authority, and when the careful dissecting of the work revealed not only literary borrowings, verbal reminiscences, contemporary fashions and modes of thought, but a thoughtful design and structure also, it seemed right to regard Geoffrey as a creative Anglo-Norman author drawing on contemporary and classical literary sources and moving in Norman society, rather than as a conservator of Welsh tradition. It seemed fruitless, therefore, to expect to find any genuine, or at least uncontaminated, fragments of native tradition in his work. Geoffrey's statements tend to be dismissed, and any agreement with Welsh stories has too often been explained away as the *Historia's* influence. However, the last word on Geoffrey, his aims and methods, and particularly his sources, including the "ancient book", has not yet been said, and like those seventeenth-century defenders of the British History, we would be wise to steer a middle course, neither accepting the *Historia* as being wholly, or even mainly, true to Welsh tradition in the majority of its episodes, nor yet rejecting Geoffrey's work as the fruits of a lively imagination, able to combine diverse sources in a new pattern, playing upon the reading of an educated man. There are signs that there is now greater readiness to regard Geoffrey as a serious writer, neither the tongue-in-cheek rogue that has been sometimes portrayed rather censoriously, nor the ambitious climber imposing his fraud on a gullible public, and to believe that he can tell us something about the aims and ideals of twelfth-century historical writing. That, however, is not the aim of this paper, which will attempt to examine some points of contact between Geoffrey of Monmouth and what native Welsh historians taught as the accepted history of Britain.

"Native Welsh historians" is a term which needs some explanation, for there are no historical treatises in Middle Welsh other than those which are translations of Latin works, the versions of the *Historia* and of Dares Phrygius, and of some few chronicles, in particular the Chronicle of the Princes which in its final form is later than Geoffrey. Nor is there extant in Latin anything other than some annals, sometimes showing Geoffrey's influence, and of course Gildas and Nennius. By native historians is meant here the conservers of

traditional historical material or of the accepted myth of the Welsh past, transmitted and controlled by a learned class. This class was probably the poets, whose duties and learning exceeded what the word implies for us. The poet was a court official, highly trained in his art and standing in a close relationship with his lord whom he praised, eulogized, congratulated and mourned as the representative of his people.¹ Eulogy and elegy in a formal courtly setting cannot be separated from the subject's lineage, and throughout history the bards have been poets and genealogists; but apart from the emotive appeal of ancestors' names, genealogies have to be clothed in the memories of deeds and exploits to become meaningful. Behind the written record of a name lies an extensive oral context.

The conserving of historical tradition has always been one of the poet's functions in Wales, as in other courtly settings.² The mediaeval poetic triads refer to the three features which give amplitude to a poet, poetics, old verse and knowledge of histories, "the History of the Notable Acts of the Kings and princes of this land" that a late poetic treatise speaks of.³ The poets sometimes refer to themselves as historians, and in one or two poems we have a portrait of the poet and his patron reading history together.⁴ This traditional learning underlies much of the corpus of bardic knowledge known as the Triads of the Island of Britain, the dominant themes of which have been described by Dr Rachel Bromwich as mythological, historical and heroic. The Stanzas of the Graves are based on the same historical learning, but here more closely associated, perhaps, with topographical features and antiquarian speculations.⁵ The history was probably transmitted in narrative forms which we would regard as story. "Considerable sections of the people have never risen to the appreciation of history proper, but have remained in the stage of saga, or what in modern times is analogous to saga", and we may compare Jan Vansina's description, "History is told in proverbs and in songs, and above all in tales, which the Rundi do not distinguish from tales and fables with non-historical themes".⁶ D. A. Binchy has summarized the duties of the Irish

¹ For court poetry in Ireland and Wales see J. E. Caerwyn Williams, "The Court Poet in Medieval Ireland", Sir John Rhŷs Lecture, *Proc. British Academy*, LVII, pp.85-135; id., "Beirdd y Tywysogion: Arolwg", *Llên Cymru*, XI, pp.3-94.

² Myles Dillon, "The Archaism of Irish Tradition", Sir John Rhŷs Lecture, *Proc. British Academy*, XXXIII, pp.261-2; Seán mac Airt, 'Fíliocht and Coimgne', *Ériu*, XVIII, pp.139-52.

³ *Llên Cymru*, III, pp.234-9, "Y Tri Chof" (the three Memorials, history, language, genealogies). For the survival of oral history see Ifor Williams, *Hen Chwedlau*, Caerdydd, 1949, pp.3-4.

⁴ "Ystoria", *Bull. Board of Celtic Studies*, XXVI, pp.13-20, I. Williams & T. Roberts, *Cywyddau Dafydd ap Gwilym a'i Gyfoeswyr*, Caerdydd, 1935, p.159. The history these poets read was the Brut which had been absorbed into the poetic tradition by the XVth century. Even in the following century some of the major poets wrote or compiled histories.

⁵ Rachel Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, Cardiff, 1961, lxvii-iii; Thomas Jones, "The Black Book of Carmarthen 'Stanzas of the Graves'", Sir John Rhŷs Lecture, *Proc. British Academy*, LIII, pp.97-137.

⁶ H. Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis*, 1-2 (quoted in *Llên Cymru*, XI, p.45); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, Penguin, 1973, p.49.

learned class, the *filid*, "Besides the praise-poems and the elegies, the learned men also had the task of conserving the genealogies of the powerful families, the tribal lore, the stories of conquest or migration and so on. I should think that it was from this storehouse of tribal memory that the sagas originated".⁷ The corpus of Welsh learning was *cyfarwyddyd*, and though this frequently means no more than a tale in Middle Welsh, and *cyfarwydd* is the normal word for story-teller, its original denotation was much wider. It is related to Latin *video*; *cyfarwyddyd* is "guidance, information, knowledge".

Knowledge, learned lore, here would comprise origins, history, genealogies, the heroic age, geography, topography and onomastics, the detritus of older mythology, and tales.⁸ This culture, which was, for the most part, oral, comes to us second, even third, hand, as allusions and references in poems, stories and triads, and at a stage farther removed from its source, in Latin, as in Nennius's tale of Vortigern which, it has been claimed, derives very largely from a typical Welsh *cyfarwyddyd*.⁹ Enough remains, however, for us to attempt to sketch the outlines of the traditional British history or the myth of the British past, using myth in Vansina's meaning, "the collective representation of past events," (*Oral Tradition*, 12), that is, what men believed had happened in the past, and which illuminated and gave direction to their lives.

The physical area covered by the traditional history and geography is not merely Wales but the Island of Britain. The corpus of learning preserved by the poets as a source of reference is called the Triads of the Island of Britain, and when the king prepared for battle, the law books, none of which is earlier than the late twelfth century in its present form, state that it was the duty of the poet of the body-guard (*comitatus*) to sing "the poem called the Monarchy of Britain". The terms of geographical reference were not Anglesey to Monmouth as for modern Welshmen, but from Caithness to Cornwall, and Anglesey to Kent, or from the North Sea to the Irish Sea.¹⁰ Britain had three adjacent islands and twenty-seven minor islands, three chief estuaries and 140 minor ones, 34 chief ports, 33 chief cities. Although this information is preserved in a fairly late mediaeval copy,¹¹ Nennius's description of Britain, with its *tres magnas insulas*, . . . *Sic in proverbio antiquo dicitur, quando de iudicibus vel regibus sermo fit, 'iudicavit Britanniam cum tribus insulis'*; chap.8, its *duo flumina praeclariora ceteris fluminibus*, . . . *quasi duo brachiatoria Britanniae*, chap.9, and its twenty-eight cities, chap.7, is obviously derived from a similar

⁷ "The Background of Early Irish Literature", *Studia Hibernica*, I, pp.11-12; cf. Gerard Murphy, *Saga and Myth in Ancient Ireland*, Dublin, 1961, 12: "the *filí*, who as well as being a learned poet, master of *senchus* (history) and *dinnshenchus* (placelore), had been trained to narrate 'the chief stories of Ireland to kings, lords, and noblemen'."

⁸ See further Gerard Murphy, *op. cit.*; T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, Dublin, 1946; Brian Ó Cuív, "Literary Creation and Irish Historical Tradition", Sir John Rhŷs Lecture, *Proc. British Academy*, XLIX, pp.233-62; A. & B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, London, 1961; Rachel Bromwich, "The Character of the early Welsh Tradition", N. K. Chadwick, ed., *Studies in Early British History*, Cambridge, 1959, pp.83-136.

⁹ *Hen Chwedlau*, pp.14-15.

¹⁰ See, e.g., *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, 229, or the tale *The Dream of Maxen*.

¹¹ "The Names of the Island of Britain", *Trioedd*, 228, cxxiii-vii.

body of learning. There are frequent references in mediaeval texts to the three realms of Britain, which seem to have been Wales, Cornwall and the North, and this would imply an ethnic unity which existed before the advent of the Saxons and which may derive from the idea of Roman Britain, inherited by Brythonic peoples from the lowlands of Scotland to Cornwall. This concept of a unified Britain has some validity and the distinction between North Britons, Welsh and South Britons is acceptable in linguistic terms. Nevertheless, the simple homogeneity of Britain was not the whole of the myth, for even more important was the political unity of the island. "No one had a right to this Island except only the Cymry, the remnants of the Britons", claims the tract, *The Names of the Island of Britain*, a concept found also in Nennius, "Brittones olim implentes eam [Britanniam] a mari usque ad mare iudicaverunt", chap.9. The symbol of sovereignty was the Crown of London, a term used in the tales and in the laws; this implied concept of a single king is made explicit when Arthur is called *rex totius maioris Britanniae, rex universalis Britanniae, pen teyrnedd yr ynys hon*.¹² No doubt there is an element of rhetoric in these titles, (as is suggested in *Studia Hibernica*, XI, pp. 181-2), but it is the rhetoric of the ideal, for the same title was borne by historical Welsh kings who, although having no political right to it, claimed it as representatives of "the remnants of the Britons". Thus Taliesin calls his lord Urien of Rheged in the sixth-century Lord of Britain (Ud Prydein) and in the following century Cadwallon of Gwynedd was termed leader of Britain (Lluydawc Prydein) by his poet.¹³ The Island of Britain was one, there was one crown, and at any one time, a single king.

In such a tradition as this, one might expect to find an emphasis on a succession of kings and although one must admit that this is not a feature of the texts which have come down to us, Peter Bartrum (*Bull. Board of Celtic Studies*, XXIII, pp.1-6) has suggested, on the basis of his study of mediaeval Welsh genealogies, that there may have existed a king-list, "the genealogical skeleton of an early connected 'History'".¹⁴ It is this conception of a succession of single kings which underlines the rhetoric of the titles bestowed on British kings of the sixth and seventh centuries. It was not a meaningless rhetoric, for the battles of the seventh century were the battles for the overlordship of Britain, and these titles were full of significance for those who used them. Adomnán, *Life of St Columba*, tells of the defeat of Catlon (Cadwallon) at the hands of Oswald of Northumbria in the mid seventh century, "victor post bellum

¹² *Life of St Gildas, Culhwch and Olwen*. A. W. Wade-Evans, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 95, pp.249-50, and Saunders Lewis, *Meistri'r Canrifoedd*, Caerdydd, 1973, pp.6-9, argue that the "crown of London" concept is derived from Geoffrey of Monmouth; Wade-Evans attributes the idea of the unity of Britain to Gildas. For contrary arguments see Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Trans. Cymmrodorion Society*, 1970, p.290.

¹³ Ifor Williams and J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Poems of Taliesin*, Dublin, 1968, VII, 1. 31; *Bull. Board Celtic Studies*, VII, 23.

¹⁴ Cf. T. M. Chotzen, *Etudes Celtiques*, IV, pp. 252-3, who suggests evidence for 'la généalogie des premiers rois de la Grande-Bretagne' and 'la lignée de plus anciens rois' as elements in Geoffrey's source material.

reversus postea totius Britanniae imperator a deo ordinatus est'; Sir Frank Stenton has explained Bretwalda as an abbreviated form of Bretenanwealda, 'only ruler of Britain'.¹⁵

Myth and history coalesce here, for the traditional history sought to explain how the Britons, or the Welsh, lost their sovereignty and saw their unity shattered. The old divisions, Wales, Cornwall, the North, lacked any political reality and they were re-expressed in a later triad, England, Wales, Scotland. Thus the second strand which runs through Welsh history is the theme of loss. Dr Bromwich (*Triodd*, 84-6), has remarked on the term *gormesoedd* used to denote foreign oppressors. In the tale of Lludd and Llefelys, which occurs first in Welsh versions of the *Historia*, one of these *gormesoedd* is a race called Coraniaid, clearly supernatural beings, and we may have here the remnants of a truly mythological story, similar to the Irish tale of the Battle of Mag Tuired, which recounted the winning or the defence of Britain against Otherworld enemies,¹⁶ but in historical terms, the primary invaders who had threatened British sovereignty were the Romans.

The theme of Wales and Rome was a fruitful one, for it had two aspects. On the one hand, the Romans represented one of the waves of invaders who had assailed Britain and had settled there. Though they had abandoned the island, leaving the sovereignty in British hands, more than one general had been proclaimed Emperor by his troops in Britain, and the constant denuding of Britain of her fighting men had so weakened her that she had been left open to the attacks of new marauders, Irish, Picts and Saxons. These Romano-British emperors linked Britain with the remnants of the Empire. The Britons were the heirs of Rome and new dynasties were not slow in tracing their descent from these Roman emperors.¹⁷ The relationship could be expressed in more imaginative terms. Caswallawn (Cassivellaunus), the British leader who opposed Julius Caesar, was a natural figure around whom stories could develop.¹⁸ There appears to have been a tradition that he had repulsed Caesar and had driven him from the island, a tradition which is referred to in Triad 35, the men who went across the sea with Caswallawn in pursuit of the men of Caesar, and which is suggested in Ieuan ap Sulien's poem to his father

¹⁵ A. O. and M. O. Anderson, *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, Edinburgh, 1961, p.200; F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford, 1943, pp.34-6. Cf. Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, Penguin, 1973, pp.320-2; N. K. Chadwick, *Bull. Board Celtic Studies*, XIX, pp.225-30.

¹⁶ Brynley F. Roberts, *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*, Dublin, 1975, xix.

¹⁷ For these genealogies and dynastic origins see P. C. Bartrum, *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts*, Cardiff, 1966, 2, 10, (nos 2,4), 11 (no. 16); Rachel Bromwich, "Character of Early Welsh Tradition", *op. cit.*, pp.107-9, 135-6. Nennius has a long section on the Romano-British emperors, chaps 19-30, a sign of the interest this period in their history held for the Welsh.

¹⁸ Lludd, son of Beli Mawr, is a mythological king who may have had a traditional role as a defender of Britain, as is suggested in *Cyfranc*, *op. cit.* xii-xx. Caswallawn played a similar part in the historical tradition. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the two associated in mediaeval legend, and that the historical Caswallawn is listed as Lludd's brother, one of Beli's other sons. For Caswallawn see *Triodd*, pp.300-3, "Character. . .", *op. cit.*, pp.132-3.

(*Studia Celtica*, VIII/IX, 81, 56). Geoffrey may also reflect this tradition in IV. 3, 9. Another triad may suggest that the Roman conquest, like the Saxon, was due to trickery.¹⁹ Triads 67 and 71 refer to Caswallawn's love for Fflur and his seeking her in Rome, which may be an allusion to a lost tale of a dynastic marriage not unlike the story of the Emperor Maxen who sought a British wife. Geoffrey's account of Octavius, Maximianus and the succession of the British crown (V.9-16) is obviously closely related to this latter story, *The Dream of Maxen*. This is the historical Magnus Maximus who was proclaimed Emperor in Britain in 383 A.D., and who led his troops to the continent where he ruled until his death in 388. In both Geoffrey and *The Dream* the marriage motif is linked with another theme, the association of Maxen and Cynan (Conanus Meriadocus) and the founding of Brittany by their troops. Both authors have preserved related, though not identical, versions of a traditional account of the establishment of Brittany. This legend may be as old as Gildas's day, as N. K. Chadwick has suggested, *Early Brittany*, Cardiff, 1969, pp.163-4, and is therefore to be regarded as part of the common traditional history of both Welsh and Bretons.²⁰

Stories arising from the Roman conquest represent one aspect of the Roman-Welsh relationship; another was the common and equal descent of both nations from the heroes of Troy. This Trojan origin, however, seems to be a learned development which was not part of the origin myth of the Britons. In the older tradition Prydein son of Aedd, who is no more than a name to us, may have been the eponymous hero, though the tract *The Names of the Island of Britain*, *Tríoedd*, 228, refers to the "first name" Clas Merdin, subsequently superseded by Y Vel Ynys when the island had been taken and settled, and further states that it was called Britain only when it was conquered by Prydein vab Aed Mavr.

After the Saxon settlements the theme of loss is a dominant thread in Welsh history. Gildas is the first to give full expression to it in his moral explanation of the Saxon conquests which were due to British perfidy and laxity. The British had proved themselves unfaithful to Rome and to God, and had opened the way for Barbaria, the heathen Saxons who are the instruments of God's justice. The coming of the Saxons was the turning-point in Welsh history and psychologically it was, indeed is, one of the deepest events in the Welsh consciousness. The predominant element here is the loss of sovereignty, not simply the loss of unity. The historical myth could accommodate the partition of Britain and even the idea of subreguli: as *The Names of the Island of Britain* puts it, "There should be therein a Crown and Three Coronets".²¹

¹⁹ *Hen Chwedlau*, p.17, *Tríoedd*, pp.159-60.

²⁰ For the view that Geoffrey's source for this story, or a version of it, is extant in Breton historical material see Gw. Le Duc, "L'Historia Britannica avant Geoffroy de Monmouth", *Annales de Bretagne*, LXXIX, pp.819-35. On the Dream of Maxen see "Character. . .", *op. cit.*, pp.107-9; Susan M. Pearce, "The Traditions of the Royal King List of Dumnonia", *Trans. Cymmrodorion Society*, 1971, pp.128-9.

²¹ *Tríoedd*, 228. Cf. again R. W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*, Columbia, 1966.

What gave cohesion to the three realms of Britain was the basic concept of unity expressed in a single overlordship. Early English history is the story of attempts to create unity and establish sovereignty: Welsh history recounts the loss of sovereignty and consequent fragmentation.²²

Gildas was writing in the throes of battle. By the time Nennius was putting together the *Historia Brittonum*, the political scene was clearer and the Saxon conquest in its main outlines was over. The loss was a fact, but the encounter could now be related in imaginative terms, and the myth could be developed to meet the new situation.²³ Gildas's "proud tyrant" who had invited Saxon mercenaries, becomes Vortigern, the foolish king who is duped by Saxon exiles, and thus history becomes fable.²⁴ However one might explain the arrival of the Saxons, their dominance was undeniable. God's judgement, the Romans' fault, says Nennius, but he has also the story of the fighting dragons, revealed to Vortigern by the boy Ambrosius, and he relates how the red dragon, *gens nostra*, finally drives the white, *gentem Anglorum*, from the scene. By the ninth century, therefore, the theme of loss had produced its emotional, national, reaction, the hope of renewal and the re-establishment of British sovereignty, expressed by means of prophecies and vaticinations. The day would come when the Britons would rise up under an age-old hero and regain what was rightfully theirs. Arthur and Owain both play this role, but the earliest deliverers are Cynan and Cadwaladr who appear to be representatives of the Breton and Welsh peoples. Cynan Meiriadoc seems to have been regarded as the leader of British troops who settled in Brittany and who were the first colonizers, so that his role as the returning deliverer is explicable. Cadwaladr, however, is almost unknown except as King of Gwynedd towards the end of the seventh century. His father, Cadwallon, is far better known and is the natural figure around whom legends could have grown. It is not clear why Cadwaladr should be cast as the deliverer, unless we assume either some degree of confusion with his father or that accounts of his exploits have not come down to us. Whatever may be the explanation, Cadwaladr's role as saviour is older than Geoffrey of Monmouth. Political prophecies in verse

²² Attitudes towards the Edwardian conquest of 1282 reveal the two viewpoints in a later period. For English annalists this was a triumph of unification, *Hic monarcha effectus et totius insulae dominus, Wallenses saepius rebellantes devicit, Scotos subvenit*, and referring to the Scottish defeats of 1296, *Unde ex Anglia, Scotia, et Wallia monarchiam quondam totius Britanniae per multa tempora decisam et truncatam occupavit*, quoted by Robert Stepsis, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s., no. 3, 73; but for the anonymous Aberconwy chronicler (*Register and Chronicle of the Abbey of Aberconwy*, *The Camden Miscellany*, I, 1847, 12), recording the death of Llywelyn the Last, *Reddiderunt etiam Coronam famosissimi Arthuri quondam regis Britanniae; et sic gloria Walliae et etiam Wallencium regibus et magnatibus Angliae translata est*.

²³ Cf. Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 51, "A number of myths are exclusively aimed at providing an explanation of the creation of the world and of society as it exists, and their function is to justify the existing political structure". For the adaptation of Irish origin myths see *Etudes Celtiques*, XIII, 109-10. A late example of a Welsh political explanatory story is the account of the founding of the Lordship of Glamorgan by the twelve knights, *Glamorgan Historian*, III, pp.153-69.

²⁴ For the historicity of early references to Hors, Hengist and Vortigern see *Bull. Board Celtic Studies*, XXIII, pp.37-59.

are a feature of Welsh literature throughout the Middle Ages.²⁵ One of the earliest extant examples is *Armes Prydein Vawr*, (The Great Prophecy of Britain), written about 930, which prophesies the return of Cynan and Cadwaladr at the head of a confederation of all the peoples of Britain and Ireland, Irish, the Dublin Danes, Welsh, men of Strathclyde, Cornishmen, and even Bretons, who will drive out the Saxons and their High King, presumably Athelstan, whose arrogance and taxes had become unbearable. This stirring poem reveals that the themes we have been discussing were established in a coherent, unified pattern of thought by c.930. The poem is an appeal to "history", a call to re-establish the British entity, from the Scottish lowlands to Brittany, from Dyfed to Thanet, and to regain the crown now "worn by slaves".²⁶ The poem was composed as a response to a particular political situation in the tenth century, the preparations for the alliance of the Danes of Dublin, the Scots and men of Strathclyde, which the Welsh did not join and which was defeated by Athelstan at Brunanburh in 937;²⁷ but it derives its strength not merely from a reading of political possibilities and options, but from an emotional appeal to an accepted myth. There was small hope of either Cornish or Bretons joining such a coalition and the poet must have known this, but no appeal to the myth, which he was using in an attempt to influence Welsh policy, could omit them. *Armes Prydein* is an example of the use of the Welsh historical myth in a specific contemporary context.

How relevant is this myth of unity, loss and renewal,²⁸ to a reading of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*? Little is known about Geoffrey's life and career, although some well-founded deductions can be made. It is assumed that he was of Breton or Welsh extraction, perhaps a Normanized Breton, and that during the period of the writing of the *Historia* he was living at Oxford as a secular canon at St George's. The *Historia* was written by one who was an outsider to British tradition, one with sympathy and interest but one for whom the tradition was not an integral part of his cultural make-up, and who was living far removed from the living waters of that tradition. It is not surprising that Geoffrey sometimes misunderstood native material and that the majority of the episodes which he recounts in the *Historia* is not based on traditional tales. The pieces of genuine tradition found here are insertions rather than the basic content of the work; but that there are genuine pieces cannot be doubted and in his attitude to British history it may well be that Geoffrey is not only true to the myth but that it has meaning for him.

The theme of Wales and Rome is a recurrent one in the *Historia*, and structurally it is the one which gives cohesion to the work. Geoffrey seems to

²⁵ Enid M. Griffiths, *Early Vaticination in Welsh*, Cardiff, 1937; Glanmor Williams, "Proffwydoliaeth, Prydyddiaeth a Pholitics yn yr Oesoedd Canol", *Taliesin*, XVI, pp.31-9; Basil Clarke, *Life of Merlin*, Cardiff, 1973; *Et. Celt.*, XIII, pp.73-4.

²⁶ See line 34, *heith y mynuer*.

²⁷ The poem is edited by Ifor Williams, trans. Rachel Bromwich, *Armes Prydein*, Dublin, 1972.

²⁸ Psychological aspects of the theme are discussed by R. F. Hobson, *The King who will return*, Guild of Pastoral Psychology, Lecture 130, 1965, pp.31-41.

have built his narrative around three kings whose relations with Rome reflect the jealousy of two ancient nations sprung from the same stock, or the conflict in the Welsh mind between the bitterness of a Roman conquest and pride in a Roman descent. Rome is a constant unwelcome presence in the *Historia*, but there are three peaks in the relationship. If we disregard Geoffrey's introductory chapters and his epilogue, the *Historia* seems to be made up of three similar sections, (a) a period of civil wars culminating in the stability of the reign of Belinus and Brennius and their sacking of Rome: (b) the Roman Conquest, preceded by a statement of British moral ideals and brought about more by British dissension than by Roman superiority. The Roman period ends in civil discord and with Constantine's return to regain his rule in Rome: (c) another period of decay is ended with Arthur's coronation, and though Arthur's immediate enemies are the Saxons, the culmination of his reign is his march on Rome. He sees himself as the heir of Brennius and Constantine (IX.16-17), but the measure of the decline of the Britons is that he fails where his predecessors had succeeded. In romance terms, Arthur fails the hero's quest, and it is this failure which symbolizes and foreshadows the end of British sovereignty.

The sovereignty of Britain is the thread which runs through the whole book. Geoffrey accepted both the unity of Britain and its traditional divisions. The first king is Brutus and his sons are the eponymous founders of the three realms of Britain, England, Wales, Scotland (Locrinus of Lloegr, Camber of Cymru and Albanactus of yr Alban), but there is also a suggestion that Cornwall was a recognized province, as in the older division, and it is given its own founder, Corineus.²⁹ He also makes it clear that though there are three regions, there is only one Kingdom. The eldest son Locrinus is the chief ruler (II.1), and the supremacy of the crown of London is formally expressed later (III.1) when the elder Belinus is crowned King of the island and rules Lloegr, Wales and Cornwall, leaving the North to the younger Brennius. Cassivellaunus rules the whole island, though he has subordinate kings and powerful regional earls. Geoffrey stresses the unity and single kingship of Britain. In his first three books he presents pictures of the anarchy which stems from the denial of this concept. The jealousy of Ferrex and Porrex leads to civil war which is ended only by Dunvallo's accession, but history begins to repeat itself when his sons fall into the same snare and civil war is averted only by their mother's appeal. Geoffrey returns to this theme at the end of the *Historia*, for the final irrevocable breach between English and Welsh occurs when Edwin seeks permission to wear a crown in his own region.³⁰ Cadwallo's advisers are indignant, "it was contrary to law and to the customs of their ancestors that an island with one crown should be placed under the

²⁹ Cf. again Geoffrey's three bishoprics, London, York, Caerleon, with those of the tract "The Names of the Island of Britain", London, York, Menevia, *Trioedd*, 228.

³⁰ For Edwin see *Trioedd*, 339; Alcock, *op. cit.*, 322, 353; Stenton, *op. cit.*, 80.

sway of two crowned heads", XII.3.³¹ It is the upholding of this principle which leads to the final catastrophe, for the crown passes to Athelstan "who was the first among them to be crowned King", XII.19.

The concept of a succession of single kings which is at the root of Geoffrey's view of British history is wholly traditional. It poses, however, a question regarding the book which he claimed was his source. He describes it as an ancient book written in Breton (or Welsh) relating the acts of the kings of Britain in succession, in an ornate style: it was brought out of Brittany (or Wales), and given to Geoffrey to translate by Walter of Oxford. The only improbable features here are the references to an ornate style, to a single source, and the claim of translation. Professor Dominica Legge³² has stressed the links between the "Lincoln circle" and Caen, and has reminded us that the earliest specific reference to a copy of the *Historia* comes from Bec in 1139. A Breton manuscript, of early British history,³³ at Oxford seems quite possible. Moreover, a book, if not of the acts, certainly of the names, of successive kings is wholly in keeping with the British historical tradition and has been suggested from a study of the genealogies. That such information was available in a written form is suggested by Gerald of Wales, who tells us that the poets of the twelfth century had books of genealogies, *Descriptio Kambriae*, I.3.

The idea of unity is implicit in the theme of loss and cannot be separated from it. This theme pervades the whole of the *Historia*, which is an account of the rise to greatness of a favoured people and their decline and loss of sovereignty. However glowing specific reigns may be, in Welsh eyes it is a rather sombre book in its final effect. Although Geoffrey makes some attempt to explain the English conquest in terms of the wisdom and good sense of the Saxons, his recurrent explanation is the moral one, that wickedness and unfaithfulness incur the wrath of a patient Providence. The book opens with this statement, "The Britons once occupied the land from sea to sea, before the others came. Then the vengeance of God overtook them because of their arrogance and they submitted to the Picts and Saxons", I.2; the reader is allowed to view the working out of this vengeance but Geoffrey again states his theme clearly (XI.9, XII.6-7, 10, 12, 15, 17) as the book draws to an end.

The theme of loss is deepened by the place Geoffrey gives to prophecy, which is used carefully to introduce significant characters and to point to the idea of greatness and loss. The representatives of the nation are introduced by

³¹ Trans. taken from Lewis Thorpe, *History of the Kings of Britain*, Penguin Classics.

³² "L'influence littéraire de la cour d'Henri Beauclerc", *Mélanges offerts à Rita Lejeune*, Gembloux, 1969, pp.679-87.

³³ Down to the period of the emigration and for some centuries afterwards, Welsh, Cornish and Bretons shared common historical traditions and common genealogies: see Susan M. Pearce, *Trans. Cymmrodorion Society* 1971, pp.128-39; L. Fleuriot, "Old Breton Genealogies and Early British Traditions", *Bull. Board Celtic Studies*, XXVI, pp.1-6; Myles Dillon and N. K. Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms*, London, 1967, pp.88-9. For connections in later periods, see Jean Marx, "Monde Brittonique et Matière de Bretagne", *Et. Celt.*, X, pp.478-88; L. Fleuriot, "Breton et Cornique à la fin du Moyen-Age", *Annales de Bretagne*, LXXVI, pp.706-21. Cf. n.20.

prophecies, Brutus before his birth by Ascanius's magi, the greatness of his line by Diana. Arthur is first mentioned in Merlin's Prophecy and the final stages of the history are revealed by the Angelic Voice. Merlin's Prophecy, therefore, is not simply a virtuoso performance of abstruse nonsense. It is placed exactly in the centre of the book, immediately after that most significant event, the arrival of the Saxons who are the instruments of God's vengeance. History stands still for a moment while we seek its significance. We look ahead past Arthur, beyond the end of the *Historia*, to the very end of time. Merlin prophesies the greatness of Arthur, his victories against the Saxons and Romans. The spectre of civil war is revealed as the Red Dragon tears itself and the Saxons win sovereignty. The new conquerors are themselves bound in everlasting captivity by people in wood and iron suits, and so on to contemporary history. But the tone changes. Britons will arise, and Cadwallader shall call Conan; Welsh, Cornish, Bretons will drive out the foreigners and "The island shall be called by the name of Brutus". Geoffrey surely derived this from Welsh prophecies,³⁴ and here he has the themes of British unity and restitution at their simplest, the British alliance which even for the author of *Armes Prydein* had been "long prophesied", and which Geoffrey was to use again in *Vita Merlini*. The Prophecy changes its tone again and from here to the end it makes use of animal symbolism and celestial portents, but it seems significant that the last clear, intelligible reference in this Prophecy which sets out the meaning of history, is to the restoration of British rule, sometime in an undefined future.

Gerald of Wales, in *De Vaticiniis*, the Preface to the lost Book III of the *Expugnatio Hibernica*, Opera, Rolls Series, V, 402, provides evidence for the existence of written prophecies in Welsh attributed to Myrddin (Merlin) in the twelfth century, and a fragment of one is quoted in the twelfth-century *Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan* (ed. Arthur Jones, Manchester, 1910, pp. 110-111). Even an early critic of Geoffrey, William of Newburgh, accepted his claim to have translated the prophecies. In this context the version of Merlin's Prophecy prepared, with a Commentary, by John of Cornwall about 1154 is important. This prophecy goes over much of the ground covered in the version in the *Historia* but more concisely. It refers to the return of Conan and Kavaladro and makes it more explicit than either the *Historia* or the *Armes*, that Conan, who "navigat undas", represents the Bretons, (cf. *Vita Merlini*, l. 967, *donec ab Armorica veniet temone Conan*). This version is more direct in its appeal and ends on the note of restitution, *Posteritas magni tollet diadema Britanni*, without Geoffrey's celestial upheavals. Rupert Taylor's view³⁵ was that "John of Cornwall was not versifying Geoffrey's book. . . It is assumed on the

³⁴ E.g. *Armes Prydein*, lines 171-5: 'Wise men foretell all that will happen: they will possess all from Manaw to Brittany, from Dyfed to Thanet, it will be theirs: from the Wall to the Forth, along their estuaries, their dominion will spread over Yr Echwydd', trans. taken from Williams and Bromwich, *op. cit.*

³⁵ *The Political Prophecy in England*, New York, 1911, p.20. For the contrary view, see Paul Zumthor, *Merlin le Prophète*, 1943, p.79.

strength of his own statement that he had a Welsh original"; but the sentences in the commentary believed to be Welsh are in fact Cornish,³⁶ so that there can be little doubt that for John in *Britannico* was Cornish. If this prophecy is translated *iuxta nostrum Britannicum*, it would appear that these hopes of British restitution, and therefore the traditions of unity and loss, were common to Wales and Cornwall and not unknown in Brittany. The historical myth outlined here was a common British tradition.³⁷

What, therefore, is the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a fairly light-hearted fraud by a clever writer of few principles and some ambitions, or a genuine imaginative response to the meaning of history, in this case the legendary history of Britain? Geoffrey follows contemporary historical thought, in his views of "the destiny of a nation", and of the working out of fate or Providence; he has his contemporaries' fears and abhorrence of civil war; but he found these ideas incipient and ready for him in traditional British history and he uses them to express his own historical ideals. What raises the *Historia* from being no more than an entertaining chronicle of the rise and fall of a succession of imaginary kings is the eschatological view of history which he took from the traditional history with its interweave of loss and renewal, of history and prophecy. The period of the *Historia*, Troy to Saxon Conquest, is well-defined, but the significance of the narrative is left open-ended. Geoffrey leaves his readers with the question: has Providence completed her purpose for the Britons? Geoffrey, as always, is ambiguous: but, as he pondered "about the history of the kings of Britain" and as he considered the myth of loss and restitution, did Geoffrey, like others after him, find his mixed loyalties, emotions and hopes rather a problem? The way we resolve the ambiguities he has left us may be no more than a reflection of our own problems, hopes and fears.

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³⁶ The Prophecy has now been edited and translated by P. Flobert, *Et. Celt.*, XIV, pp.31-41. L. Fleuriot, *ibid.*, pp.43-56., discusses these "British" phrases and sentences, and holds that they are proto-Cornish. On John of Cornwall see Eleanor Rathbone, *Recherches de Théologie anc. et mod.*, XVII, pp.46-60.

³⁷ Arthur's role as the returning deliverer is a later development than the Cynan-Cadwaladr traditions, as is pointed out in *Medium Aevum*, XLIII, 183. Basil Clarke, *op. cit.*, pp.162-3, suggests that Arthur first appears clearly as a "deliverer figure c.1168 in Etienne de Rouen's *Draco Normannicus*", and that this was a Breton development. That all three British peoples subsequently regarded Arthur in this light is shown by a commentary on Merlin's Prophecy, *Speculum*, XV, pp.414-5, *omnium scilicet haec est superstitio, Britonum, Guallorum et Cornubiensium*.