

MANY MOTIVES: GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH AND THE REASONS FOR HIS
FALSIFICATION OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines *The History of the Kings of Britain* by Geoffrey of Monmouth, with the aim of understanding his motivations for writing a false history and presenting it as genuine. It includes a brief overview of the political context of the book at the time during which it was first introduced to the public, in order to help readers unfamiliar with the era to understand how the book fit into the world of twelfth century England, and why it had the impact that it did. Following that is a brief summary of the book itself, and finally a summary of the secondary literature as it pertains to Geoffrey's motivations. It concludes with the claim that all proposed motives are plausible, and may all have been true at various points in Geoffrey's career, as the changing times may have forced him to promote the book for different reasons, and under different circumstances than he may have originally intended.

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Introduction

Sometime between late 1135 and early 1139 Geoffrey of Monmouth released his greatest work, *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain* in modern English). The book was an immediate sensation (well over two hundred hand-copied manuscripts have survived to the present day). It transformed the way that the people of the British Isles saw themselves and their place in the world. Purporting to be a history of the pre-Saxon monarchs of Britain, it traced their origins back to the Trojan War, through the Roman invasion, and on to the end of the conquests of the Anglo-Saxons. The book claimed that the nations of the Island of Britain had once been united, and had furthermore been one of the great powers in Europe.

It is clear to most modern historians who have studied Geoffrey's *Historia* that its contents bear little to no resemblance to real events. Even in Geoffrey's own lifetime many historians condemned the work. Gerald of Wales, a contemporary of Geoffrey, joked that while the Bible could be used to drive away evil spirits, *The History of the Kings of Britain* would actually attract them. Despite this, the work captured the imagination of many readers. Almost immediately after its release, the book began to spread throughout Europe. Henry of Huntingdon, another contemporary of Geoffrey's, was amazed to find a copy of the book in the Monastery of Bec in Normandy in late 1139. In a time before the invention of the printing press, when books had to be laboriously copied by hand (a significant investment in time and resources), it was astonishing to find a copy on the other side of the English Channel so soon after its release.¹

¹ Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994) ix, 7-8. ; Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966) 121.

Was this Geoffrey's intention? What caused him to try to pass a work of fiction for a true history? Scholars have proposed a number of possible reasons. Many, such as J.P.S. Tatlock and Fiona Tolhurst have argued that it was a work of propaganda.² It is strongly pro-Welsh and anti-Saxon with a pro-Norman subtext (implying that the Normans with their Breton allies had liberated Britain from its Saxon invaders) as well as supporting the claim to the throne of Empress Matilda, in hopes of gaining patronage from her half-brother Robert Earl of Gloucester. Some, such as Karen Janulak support the idea that the book is propaganda, but do not support the idea that Geoffrey was promoting Matilda's claim.³ Others still, such as Robert W. Hanning and Christopher Brooke, argue that his motivation was to make a deliberate break with literary tradition.⁴ An examination of these various theories shows that they are not mutually exclusive, and may all have been factors in one of the most influential frauds in British history. Before launching into this examination, however, it is necessary to introduce many modern readers to Geoffrey of Monmouth and the era in which he lived, as well as to four of the most important historical figures of early twelfth century Britain.

Who was Geoffrey of Monmouth?

There is little that can be said with certainty about Geoffrey's life. He was born in Wales, possibly to an ethnically Breton family, sometime between the years 1090 and 1100. It is usually assumed that his birthplace was Monmouth, but there is no way to confirm this. We do, however,

² Fiona Tolhurst, "The Britons as Hebrews, Romans, and Normans: Geoffrey of Monmouth's British Epic and Reflections of Empress Matilda," *Arthuriana* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1998); J. S. P. Tatlock, "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Motives for Writing His 'Historia,'" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 79, no. 4 (Nov. 15, 1938).

³ Karen Janulak, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), 29-30.

⁴ Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*; Christopher Brooke, "Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian," in *Church and Government in the Middle Ages*, edited by C.N.L. Brooke, D.E. Luscombe, G.H. Martin and Dorothy Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

have at least six charters (legal documents founding an organization such as a school or monastic order) which include Geoffrey's signature. These are dated between 1129 and 1151. All are religious in nature and were drawn up in or near Oxford, suggesting that Geoffrey was living in Oxford at least by 1129. The earlier charters are signed "Geoffrey Arthur" and give him the title of *magister* (teacher). While Oxford had no university at this time, it did have several clerical schools, and the college of St. George, of which Geoffrey may have been a secular canon.⁵ It was during his time at Oxford that he wrote *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Geoffrey denied authorship of the work, claiming to have translated it into Latin from an "ancient book in the British language." This book has never been found, and it is generally agreed that it is unlikely ever to have existed. It was under the name "Geoffrey of Monmouth" that he released his *Historia*, and that is how he signed his name thereafter.⁶

In 1152 Geoffrey was made bishop of St. Asaph in Wales, shortly after being ordained a priest. He was probably ordained specifically in order to allow him to assume the bishopric. It was as bishop of St. Asaph that he signed the treaty of Westminster as a witness. The treaty ended the long civil war between two contenders for the English throne, Stephen of Blois and Empress Matilda. Geoffrey died in 1155, apparently having never visited his diocese.⁷

⁵ John Edward Lloyd, "Geoffrey of Monmouth," *The English Historical Review* 57, no. 228 (Oct. 1942): 461.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 460-468.

⁷ Maureen Fries, "The Arthurian Moment: History and Geoffrey of Monmouth's 'Historia regum Britannie,'" *Arthuriana* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 93.

Historical Context

In order for the reader to understand better the various theories of Geoffrey's motivation for writing the *History of the Kings of Britain*, it is necessary to give a short explanation of Britain's civil war known as "The Great Anarchy." The war began in 1139 and ended with the ratification of the Treaty of Westminster in 1153. While the *Historia* was written prior to the war, by the time it was finished and ready to be presented to the public for the first time, sometime between late 1135 and spring of 1139, it would have been clear that war was coming. The subsequent, alternate dedications of the book would have been written during the war, in an unstable political environment. At the time that the book was first presented, a usurper, King Stephen, sat on the throne of England, and the rightful heir, Matilda, was gathering her forces for an invasion. Matilda pressed her claim to the Pope early in 1136, but the pontiff declined to issue a definitive verdict. The matter would have to be decided on the battlefield. Shortly thereafter, Matilda's uncle, King David of Scotland, invaded northern England in order to buy her time to prepare her own invasion, while her husband simultaneously invaded Normandy⁸ (William the Conqueror had been Duke of Normandy prior to his invasion of England, and English monarchs since then had retained the title). The major relevant figures of this war are as follows.

King Henry I

Henry I (1068-1135, r. 1100-1135), was the third Norman king of England. In 1120 Prince William, his only legitimate son, died in a shipwreck. Henry proclaimed his daughter (and William's twin sister) Matilda as his heir. While nothing in English law forbid a female ruler, the

⁸ Nesta Pain, *Empress Matilda: Uncrowned Queen of England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978), 37-39.

move was extraordinary enough that Henry forced all of his barons, on three separate occasions to swear oaths confirming her as his rightful heir. Her unpopularity with the Norman barons was compounded by the fact that she had recently married her second husband Geoffrey, Count of Anjou. The counts of Anjou had long been enemies of the Norman nobility.⁹

Empress Matilda

Henry I's eldest daughter Matilda (1102-1167) was the widow of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V, and retained the title of empress after his death, even though she no longer held any position of authority in Germany. A few years before Geoffrey wrote *The History of the Kings of Britain*, she had remarried, this time to Geoffrey Count of Anjou. Technically her title was now "countess," but the fact that she had once been an empress gave her the right to retain the higher title for the rest of her life. After her father's death in 1135, her cousin Stephen of Blois seized the throne before she could return to England to claim it herself. By 1139 she had marshaled the forces she needed, and invaded England to claim the throne, starting a fourteen year civil war.¹⁰

Steven of Blois

Steven of Blois (?-1154) was a grandson of William the Conqueror, nephew of Henry I, and cousin to Empress Matilda and Robert of Gloucester. Following Henry's death in 1135 he took advantage of the English barons' discomfort with the idea of a female ruler and usurped the throne before Matilda was able to return to England, breaking the oath he had taken to support her claim to the throne. His war with Matilda lasted almost his entire reign. Following the death of his son Eustace in 1153, Stephen signed the Treaty of Westminster, ending the war. The treaty

⁹ Ibid., 5; Ibid., 23; Ibid, 25-6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 16; Ibid., 25; Ibid., 31.

allowed Stephen to remain on the throne, but named Matilda's son Henry of Anjou as his heir, thus allowing both sides to claim victory.¹¹

Robert of Gloucester

Robert the first Earl of Gloucester (?-1147) was an illegitimate son of Henry I. Robert was one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Britain, and the commander-in-chief of his half-sister Matilda's military forces. According to the *Gesta Stephani* (*The Deeds of Stephen* in English, what one today might call Stephen's "authorized biography"), Robert was a favorite for the throne but refused it because of his illegitimacy. Monmouth was part of Robert's fief (feudal holdings). Geoffrey of Monmouth and Robert might have known one another, as Robert would have been Geoffrey's feudal overlord, prior to Geoffrey's move to Oxford. Robert was one of the people to whom Geoffrey dedicated his book, and included a plea to Robert for patronage.¹²

The Book

The History of the Kings of Britain was written during the period when Henry I was trying to cement Matilda's claim to his throne, and released sometime between Stephen's usurpation in 1135 and Matilda's invasion in 1139.¹³ It began with a dedication, of which three versions exist. One is dedicated to Robert Earl of Gloucester along with a request for patronage. Another is dedicated to Robert and also to Waleran, Count of Mellent. In this version Geoffrey asks both men for patronage, and asks Waleran for protection from "envious and malicious enemies," though who these might be is never stated, nor have modern historians been able to

¹¹ Ibid., 20-1; Ibid., 31-2; Ibid., 163.

¹² Ibid., 24; *Gesta Stephani*, trans. K.R. Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 12-15.

¹³ D. R. Howlett, "The Literary Context of Geoffrey of Monmouth: An Essay on the Fabrication of Sources," *Arthuriana*, 5, no. 3 (Fall 1995):53-54. Howlett makes a strong case for an earlier date, 1135 or 1136.

offer an explanation. A third version is dedicated to Robert and King Stephen with a veiled plea for reconciliation and an end to the war. While there has been much debate about in which order the dedications were released, recent scholars largely agree that they were written in the order in which I have listed them.¹⁴

The issue of patronage may seem strange to modern readers, but was crucial to many medieval writers. Without copyright laws or royalties authors could not make money from their work. Unless an author was a wealthy noble or monk (and therefore without need of an income), the only way to make a living as an author was to gain patronage. This simply meant that the author found and impressed a wealthy noble who wished to improve his or her reputation by filling their court with clever people, and was willing to feed, clothe, and house the author in exchange for the honor of having such a writer in his or her court. There is no evidence that Geoffrey of Monmouth ever received the patronage for which he asked.

In his dedication, Geoffrey denied authorship, claiming instead that *The History of the Kings of Britain* was his translation and adaptation of “a certain very ancient book written in the British language.”¹⁵ No trace of this book has ever been found, and almost all modern scholars are certain that it never existed.

Following the dedication, the first section of the book begins with a general description of the island of Britain, which Geoffrey called “the best of islands.” This description is largely

¹⁴ D. R. Howlett, “The Literary Context of Geoffrey of Monmouth,” 53-54. Again Howlett provides good reasoning to accept this order. While this is now generally accepted, earlier scholars tended to favor the joint Stephen and Robert dedication as the original.

¹⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 51.

drawn from the works of earlier historians St. Bede and Nennius.¹⁶ He went on to explain that Britain is inhabited by five races: the Normans, the Britons (whom we call Welsh today), the Saxons, the Picts, and the Scots. The Britons, according to Geoffrey, once occupied the entire island, but God, because of their arrogance allowed the Picts and the Saxons to conquer them. The Normans were not conquerors, but liberators freeing the Britons from their Saxon oppressors.

According to Geoffrey, the Britons themselves were descended from a Trojan named Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas, the father of the Roman people in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Thus the Britons and the Romans (according to Geoffrey) were one and the same people. The Normans had a Trojan descent story of their own, dating from the early eleventh century. The Britons and Normans then were also the same people, separated by the barbarian Saxons, from whom the Normans had liberated the Britons. Geoffrey, however, cannot be given credit (or blame) for the Brutus story. Nennius first mentioned Brutus and the Trojan origins of the Britons.¹⁷

According to Geoffrey, after wandering around the Mediterranean having adventures, Brutus and his followers settled the island of Britain, but only after killing off the giants that they found there. Brutus founded London (then called Troia Nova). Rather than give specific dates, Geoffrey preferred to put his events into a Biblical and classical context. For example, at the time of the founding of London, "...the priest Eli was ruling in Judea and the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines. The sons of Hector reigned in Troy, for the descendants of

¹⁶ Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*, trans. by A. M. Sellar (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907), 6-9.; Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, trans. by J.A. Giles, Project Gutenberg. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1972/1972-h/1972-h.htm> (accessed April 20, 2012), 7-9.

¹⁷ Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, 7, 17-18.

Antenor had been driven out. In Italy reigned Aeneas Silvius, son of Aeneas and uncle of Brutus, third of the Latin Kings.”¹⁸

Between the death of Brutus and the coming of Julius Caesar, more than a thousand years passed. Much of this section is merely a king list, punctuated by anecdotes of interesting monarchs and fanciful explanations of the origins of British place names. About half of this section is devoted to the stories of King Leir and the brothers Belinus and Brennius (conquerors of Rome) while at another point a single page covers the careers of thirty-four kings.¹⁹

The Roman invasion by Julius Caesar was, in *The History of the Kings of Britain*, a disaster for the Romans. Caesar was unable to conquer the mighty Britons, who were as civilized, powerful, and technologically advanced as the Romans. He eventually made friends with the British king and they drafted a treaty which made Britain part of the Roman Empire in name only.²⁰

After the fall of Rome was the coming of the Saxons. These invaders were helped in their conquest by the evil British king Vortigern. It is here that Merlin first appeared in the account. Whether or not Merlin was Geoffrey’s own invention is a matter of debate. Merlin was just a boy during Vortigern’s reign, and was about to be sacrificed by Vortigern’s magicians, when Merlin went into a trance and began to utter prophecy.

At this point Geoffrey interrupted the narrative. He wrote that he had not originally intended to publish the following section, called *The Prophecies of Merlin*, but at the urging of

¹⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, he included them in *The History of the Kings of Britain*. He also included his letter of reply to Bishop Alexander in which he asked the bishop for patronage.²¹

The Prophecies of Merlin appears to have been released as a separate work prior to the release of *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Michael J. Curley in his book *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, made a strong case that *The Prophecies of Merlin* was already in circulation by 1135.²² The prophecies were written in a style mimicking the Book of Revelations, and are full of allegory, animal symbolism and vague predictions. The first part of the *Prophecies* covered events still in the future to Merlin and Vortigern, but were historical events already known to educated people of the early twelfth century, making the prophecies self-confirming. Once the prophecies reached Geoffrey's own time, they became rather vague, but it is clear that Merlin predicted that the Britons would eventually win back their island and rule it until the end of the world (though not without tribulations).²³

After *The Prophecies of Merlin*, *The History of the Kings of Britain* resumed. Following the death of Vortigern the Saxons were driven back by the kings Aurelius, Utherpendragon, and finally, Arthur. The section on the life and deeds of Arthur is by far the longest section, occupying about a fifth of the entire book. Geoffrey was not the first to write about Arthur, but it was Geoffrey who first made him a king and associated him with Merlin and with chivalry.²⁴ Geoffrey also introduced Arthur's magical sword (called Caliburn rather than Excalibur). Arthur's magical spear Ron, did not become as popular.

²¹ Ibid., 170-171.

²² Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 48-49.

²³ Goffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 184.

²⁴ Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, 50. Nennius mentioned Arthur, but as a war leader (*Dux Bellorum*) in the company of kings, not a king himself.

Arthur's reign represented the "golden age" of Britain. Geoffrey's Arthur not only freed and reunited all of Britain, but also conquered Ireland, Brittany, Norway, Denmark, and Gaul (France), while still finding time to go to Spain to slay a giant. While Arthur was in Italy trying to conquer Rome, his nephew Mordred seduced Arthur's wife, took the throne, and invited the Saxons back to England. Arthur returned and killed Mordred, but was mortally wounded himself and taken, still alive, to the island of Avalon. While Arthur did not return, Geoffrey never explicitly told of his death.

Following Arthur's fall from the throne is a short section describing the lives of the kings who followed Arthur and how God chose to punish them for unspecified arrogance. The last British king, Cadwallader, abandoned the Island rather than risk God's wrath. Geoffrey ended the book with a warning to contemporary historians William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon to be silent on the subject of the ancient British kings, since they did not possess the mysterious book that he claimed was his source.²⁵ This hints at some argument or rivalry now lost to history.

Motivations

The sixteenth century was an era in which British historians began to adopt more modern standards of scholarship. This combined with more ready access to source material (thanks to the invention, and widespread use of the printing press) led to the realization that the *Historia* bore little to no resemblance to classical accounts of history, and nothing could be found at all to corroborate the Arthurian material. Once it was determined that Geoffrey's book was a

²⁵Ibid., 284.

fabrication, interest in it waned quickly. Twentieth century scholars took interest in the *Historia*, not as source material, but rather for what it could tell us about the medieval worldview. While much of the recent (twentieth century) secondary literature focuses on determining what sources Geoffrey may or may not have used, a great deal has been written about his motives for writing the *Historia*.

One of the most obvious motives proposed is that Geoffrey wrote the book to flatter the Normans in order to gain personal advancement. This widely agreed upon for the simple reason that we have it directly from Geoffrey himself. All three versions of his dedication are flattering to the point of obsequiousness, as is the letter to Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, which he included in the *Prophecies of Merlin*. John S. Tatlock, Michael J. Curley, and Hugh A. MacDougall all point out that the Normans also had a Trojan origin story. This allowed the glory that Geoffrey assigned to the ancient British to be reflected on the Normans, and helped to legitimize their rule.²⁶ Geoffrey also directly asked each of the people to whom he dedicates his book for patronage, making no secret of his desire for advancement. The following example, from the joint dedication to Robert and Waleran, shows the flattery that Geoffrey heaped onto his potential patrons. Geoffrey promised them that if they should give him patronage (and the protection that went with it), the credit for the quality of the work would belong to them.

I ask you, Robert, Earl of Gloucester, to do my little book this favour. Let it be so emended by your knowledge and your advice that it must no longer be considered as the product of Geoffrey of Monmouth's small talent. Rather, with the support of your wit and wisdom, let it be accepted as the work of one descended from Henry, the famous King of the English; of one whom learning has nurtured in the liberal arts and whom his innate talent in military affairs has put in charge of our

²⁶ Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, x; Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1982), 8; J. S. P. Tatlock, "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Motives for Writing His 'Historia,'" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 79, no. 4 (Nov. 15, 1938): 703.

soldiers, with the result that now, in our own lifetime, our island of Britain hails you with heartfelt affection, as if it had been granted a second Henry.

You too, Waleran, Count of Mellent, second pillar of our kingdom, give me your support, so that, with the guidance provided by the two of you, my work may appear all the more attractive when it is offered to its public. For indeed, sprung as you are from the race of the most renowned King Charles, Mother Philosophy has taken you to her bosom, and to you she has taught the subtlety of her sciences. What is more, so that you might become famous in the military affairs of our army, she has led you to the camp of kings, and there, having surpassed your fellow-warriors in bravery, you have learnt, under your father's guidance, to be a defender as you are of those dependent on you, accept under your patronage this book which is published for your pleasure. Accept me, too, as your writer, so that, reclining in the shade of a tree which spreads so wide, and sheltered from envious and malicious enemies, I may be able in peaceful harmony to make music on the reed-pipe of a muse who really belongs to you.²⁷

Although he never did receive patronage, the fact that he became Bishop of St. Asaph shortly after the end of the war, shows that he did eventually attract the support of someone in a position of power. Bishops in this era were either appointed by the king or elected by church councils. Both church and state claimed the right to make bishops, and this was a serious point of contention, not yet resolved in Geoffrey's lifetime. In either case he needed the favor of powerful men in order to be made a bishop.

In 1938 J.S.P. Tatlock proposed that Geoffrey had the dual motivations of glorifying the Norman rule of England (by glorifying the Britons as described above) and supporting Empress Matilda's claim to the throne. Geoffrey was writing less than seventy years after the Norman conquest of England, and the dynasty of William the Conqueror was not yet completely secure. Tatlock explained Geoffrey's Norman sympathies by arguing that, while he may have been born in Wales, he was probably ethnically Breton.²⁸ The Breton are a Celtic people who inhabit the region of France known as Brittany. They are descended from the Welsh, and their two

²⁷ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe, 51-52.

²⁸ Tatlock, "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Motives for writing his *Historia*," 696.

languages are so closely related as to be mutually intelligible. The Breton rulers were closely allied with the Normans and William the Conqueror's army contained a large number of Breton troops.

Regardless of whether Geoffrey was of Welsh or Breton descent, he must have been troubled, according to Tatlock, by the indifference shown the British Celts by historians up to that point. He not only wished to strengthen the Norman cause, by showing the Normans and the Britons (and Breton) to be of the same race, but to elevate his own people to the level of the civilized Normans.²⁹

Support of the Norman cause included supporting Henry I's heir, Matilda (It should be remembered that when Geoffrey began writing the book, Henry was still alive, and Stephen had not yet usurped the throne). A female heir was troubling to many of the Norman nobility, and Tatlock argued that part of the reason for the *Historia* was to provide historical precedent for a female monarch.

In the first half and less of the *Historia* there are no less than four reigning queens-Guendolena, Cordiella, Marcia and Helena; and the father of Helena, like Henry, lacking other heir, has trained her to succeed to his throne. What is more, each of the four is distinguished in the diversified line of monarchs by goodness or capacity or both. A trusting reader of the *Historia* would find ample precedent for Matilda's reign and might well expect good from it.³⁰

Robert Hanning, however, felt that Geoffrey's motives were more literary or historiographical than political. In his 1966 book *The Vision of History in Early Britain: from Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth*, he enshrined Geoffrey as a writer who exemplified, advanced,

²⁹ Ibid., 701.

³⁰ Tatlock, "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Motives for Writing His 'Historia,'" 702.

and parodied the so called “twelfth century renaissance.” Prior to the twelfth century, according to Hanning, history was primarily the history of salvation, and existed to teach moral lessons. In the first few decades of the twelfth century, however writers such as Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury, began to look at history as useful in its own right. This was coupled with a renewed interest in the classical past, including its institutions, politics, and rhetoric.³¹

Geoffrey, Hanning argued, both elevated and parodied this new approach with his own historiographical style, which is broken down into three phases:

- (1) Geoffrey’s treatment of national achievement and disaster. Using exemplary figures and incidents, Geoffrey explores human capacities for greatness and turpitude, specifically as they involve the rule of a nation...
- (2) The tension between national and personal interests, and the consequent impairment of national stability or prosperity.
- (3) The presentation of history as a cycle of nations, and of the particular “meaning” of British history. Exemplary incidents and narrative patterns in this category illustrate Geoffrey’s creation of a philosophy of history from the hints provided in the new historiography by the role of fortune and by the dim outlines of a cyclical history in the succession of nations ruling in Britain.³²

In short Hanning saw Geoffrey as the culmination of the twelfth century renaissance, his *Historia* “...a curious and inspiring monument to a time in medieval literary history when men were grappling simultaneously with the meaning of history and the nature of human achievement, and were attempting to establish...a valid and viable connection between the two.”³³

In his 1976 essay “Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian,” Christopher Brooke took a similar view, but downplayed Geoffrey’s historiographical achievement. Geoffrey’s achievement

³¹ Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain*, 124-127.

³² *Ibid.*, 144.

³³ *Ibid.*, 176.

according to Brooke was “essentially literary.” While Geoffrey’s lack of veracity limited his interest as a historian, Brooke did argue that this did not mean that Geoffrey was unable to “...distinguish truth from fiction; or a deliberate ‘liar...’” but that the distinction between history and courtly romance was not important to him. “Indeed it is not clear to some modern scholars that Geoffrey would have entirely understood the distinction.”³⁴ Furthermore, Brooke pointed out some of Geoffrey’s more outrageous claims as evidence that the *Historia* was not meant to be taken seriously, and even suggested that his admonition to Henry of Huntingdon to remain silent on the subject of the ancient British kings was just a joke to a close personal friend and confidant. Brooke also denied any political motive for Geoffrey, arguing that “If Celtic hope was uppermost in his mind, or the Norman empire, he could easily have made his interest much clearer.”³⁵ Apparently Brooke felt that the political situation in England at that time was stable enough that openly taking a stand without an army to back one up was safe. Nevertheless, it is an intriguing notion that Geoffrey may not have intended for the *Historia* to be taken too seriously.

Sixty years after Tatlock’s essay, Fiona Tolhurst greatly expanded on his idea that Geoffrey sought to glorify the Normans and Bretons, as well as to promote Matilda’s claim to the throne. She drew parallels between Geoffrey’s portrayal of the Trojans’ adventures leading up to their settlement of Britain with the trials and tribulations of the ancient Hebrews in the book of Exodus implying that the Britons were God’s new chosen people. Likewise the Britons, in the *Historia*, surpassed their Roman cousins in courage, and military might “making the Britons (and, by extension, the Normans) the greatest race in history.”³⁶ Tolhurst also followed Tatlock in demonstrating that Geoffrey’s use of reigning female monarchs helped to establish

³⁴ Christopher Brooke, “Geoffrey of Monmouth as a Historian,” 78.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82, 90.

³⁶ Fiona Tolhurst, “The Britons as Hebrews, Romans, and Normans,” 73.

precedent for Matilda's ascension to the throne, as well as to get the Norman nobility used to the idea of being ruled by a woman. She explained by saying:

...Geoffrey's series of powerful queens all rule well. Geoffrey's lack of condemnation of women's asserting their right to rule is not surprising, given that contemporary chroniclers condemned Matilda for arrogance, not for fighting for the throne. This pattern of women ruling wisely might have been a message to the Normans that good or bad government, not gender, is the true measure of a ruler. Tatlock calls this pattern 'startling' to Geoffrey's readers. But since his readers knew that Matilda was Henry I's only legitimate heir, this pattern was perhaps not so startling, particularly when Geoffrey makes it clear that women rule only in unusual circumstances. What might be startling to contemporary readers, however, is that Geoffrey presents the possibility of women rulers of Britain as a natural part of history, and in some cases, as a moral corrective to the excesses of male rulers.³⁷

Most recently, in her 2010 book *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, Karen Jankulak reiterated the idea of a political motive. She argued that Geoffrey sought to show that "Britain is properly one island, a sovereign whole under, ideally, one rule ... this sovereignty was lost due to invasions ... " and that it is prophesied that it will be restored.³⁸ Like Tatlock she saw the Geoffrey's motives as purely political. Janulak, however made no mention of the possibility that the *Historia* was meant to bolster Matilda's claim to the throne.

Thus the main motives put forward by scholars concerning Geoffrey's motive have been the glorification of the Normans, the Welsh/Breton, or both; a clean break with established literary tradition, and an embracing of the values of the "twelfth century renaissance;" and the support of Matilda's claim to the throne. Each historian makes a strong case for his or her theory, but is it possible that they are all correct?

³⁷ Ibid., 78.

³⁸ Jankulak, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 29-30.

Conclusion

Throughout the last hundred years or so, many scholars have attributed to Geoffrey of Monmouth many motives for writing a book of fiction and presenting it as history. It seems, though that none of these motives are mutually exclusive. *The History of the Kings of Britain* is a complex work, written and revised over a long period of time. When he began it, there was a strong king on the throne, with a clear and legal heir. The book was made public with a usurper on the throne and an invasion in the works. By the time of the third dedication, the country was in a state of civil war, and much of the land devastated. There is no reason to think that Geoffrey's motives were not as varied and changeable as the era in which he lived.

Without claiming any veracity to the following narrative, a synthesized version of Geoffrey's motives might look something like this: Geoffrey, a secular canon at an Oxford school, wanted to make a name for himself as a scholar and gain the patronage of a wealthy and powerful nobleman. Robert of Gloucester was an obvious choice, as he was one of the wealthiest men in Britain, and was the overlord under whom Geoffrey had spent his formative years. He wrote a book that was intended to flatter Robert as a Norman, and also to support the claim to the throne of Robert's sister, the Empress Matilda, who, it seemed at the time, would be the next ruler of England. In addition he elevated his own Breton ancestors (descendants of the ancient British, and longtime allies of the Normans) to the status of a glorious and highly civilized people. He wrote the book in a more secular and entertaining style than was common at the time, in order to enhance its appeal.

Unfortunately for Geoffrey, shortly after the book had been released, Henry I died, and Stephen usurped the throne. Now Geoffrey had, to his name, a book that could be construed as supporting Matilda against Stephen. This would not have been a safe position. No matter. He released a second edition dedicated to both Robert and Waleran, Count of Mellent (a supporter of Stephen). This had the dual advantage of making him look neutral while at the same time giving him another possible patron.

As the years went by and the war bogged down, it began to look like Stephen might win the war, or at least remain king for some time, he made a third dedication, this time to Robert and Stephen. This cast Geoffrey in the role of peacemaker, supporting reconciliation between the two opposing factions. The ploy worked, and after the war Geoffrey was rewarded by being made a bishop. While not the patronage he sought, it was a lucrative position that removed his need for patronage, and elevated him to the status of titled nobility.

The problem, of course, with inductive reasoning is that just because a story happens to fit the available evidence this does not make it true. The purpose here is not to go off on a flight of fancy, but to demonstrate that Geoffrey lived in complex and dynamic times and that his motivations in writing *The History of the Kings of Britain* were likely equally complex and dynamic. His motives when he started the project may not have been the same as his motives later on. Given the lack of information about his life and relationships with the major figures of his time, we will likely never know the whole truth, but it seems unwise to try to apply any one motive to such an ambiguous figure, living in such turbulent times.

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