Past and Present in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*: evidence from four manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin

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Written at Oxford in the 1130s, Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain is undoubtedly one of the most influential texts to come out of the middle ages. His highly imaginative history provided the first account of Britain's pre-Roman past, the reign of King Arthur, and the prophecies of Merlin. As a result the work blurred distinctions between history and myth, and between past, present and future. It is therefore often hard to determine how the work was categorised by its Anglo-Norman audience. The extant 218 manuscripts offer some important insights, and it has already been noted by at least one scholar that the works associated with the *History* in these manuscripts 'constitute the outermost layer of evidence' for discussion of this complex issue.[1] Eight of these manuscripts are now preserved at Trinity College Dublin and the various works that are included alongside the *History* reveal much about the themes and subject-matter which most captivated the scribes involved in their production (Fig. 1). Having examined four of these manuscripts, certain patterns in the nature of their contents became clear.[2] Of these, perhaps the most revealing are those works concerned with prophecy and those concerned with genealogies. To illustrate this, it is worth taking a closer look at some specific examples from the four manuscripts under consideration here.

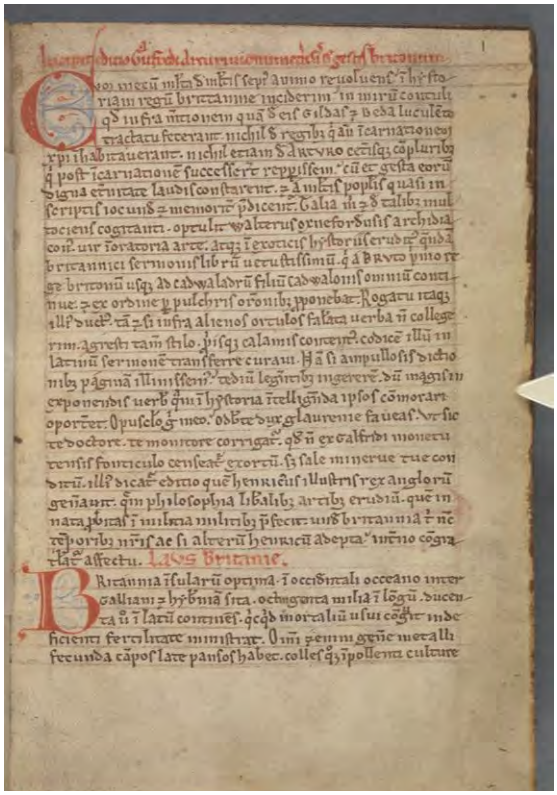

Fig. 1, Geoffrey of Monmouth *History of the Kings of Britain*, Trinity College Library MS 494 f. 1 © The Board of Trinity College Dublin

The Prophecies of Merlin are certainly one of the most prominent aspects of the *History* and are therefore a useful starting point. TCD MS. 514, which was likely produced in Canterbury during the early fourteenth century, contains a series of marginal and interlinear glosses, written in a contemporary hand, which relate several of Merlin's prophecies to kings William II, Henry I, Stephen, Henry II and so on. Here, as with TCD MS. 496, the commentaries on the prophecies appear as separate texts to the *History* itself, but in

[1] J. Crick, *Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth IV: Dissemination and Reception in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 19.

[2] Manuscripts examined are TCD MSS. 172, 496, 514, 515. Others included in the manuscript catalogues by Colker and Abbott, but not examined for this study, are TCD MSS. 493, 494, 495. For more on these see J. Crick, *Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth III: a Summary Catalogue of the Manuscripts* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 98-112.

both of these commentaries the animal imagery used in Merlin's prophecies is related to prominent figures in the Anglo-Norman regnum, including most famously those listed above. We know that Merlin's prophecies exercised considerable influence upon the way both prophecy and the *History* itself were viewed by subsequent Anglo-Norman or even Cambro-Norman writers. Gerald of Wales, for example, used the prophecies to justify the Norman invasion of Ireland under Henry II and later under King John, and within the four manuscripts discussed here the prophecies appear to have contributed to the system of categorisation which shaped the composition of these manuscripts and their contents.

Two of the other prophetic works associated with the *History* in these manuscripts are the Prophecy of John of Bridlington, which appears in TCD MS. 172, and the Prophecy of the Eagle, which appears in TCD MSS. 514 and 515. Both of these prophecies employ animal imagery which was interpreted as political allegory, and their association with the *History*, and with the separate commentaries on the Prophecies of Merlin, therefore makes thematic sense.

The Prophecy of John of Bridlington, the original composition of which is generally dated to around 1364 (and which is therefore roughly contemporary with the production of MS. 172), narrates in both retrospect and prospect (prophecy) political events from the death of Edward I in 1307.[3] The inclusion of this prophecy alongside the *History* extends the chronological scope of the manuscript's contents, while maintaining a sense of narrative unity by the extension of the *History*'s theme and its use of political prophecy made famous by Merlin. The Prophecy of the Eagle does much the same thing. Two slightly different versions of the prophecy (both of which derive in part from language and subjects used in Merlin's prophecies) appear in TCD MSS. 514 and 515, although three separate versions are known to appear through the 218 extant manuscripts. The version in MS. 514 is that usually identified as the

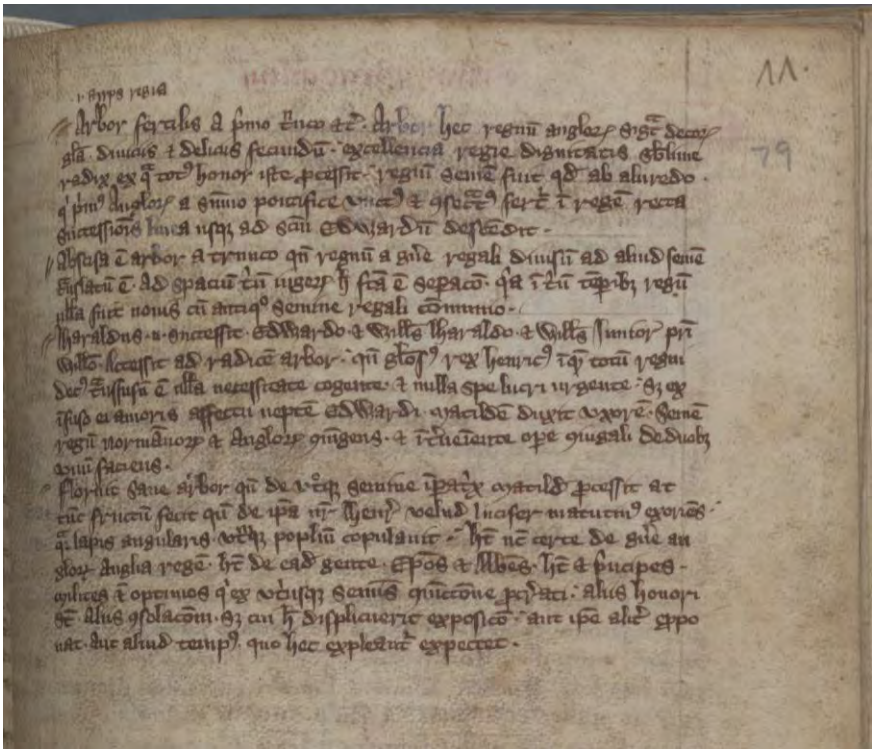

Fig. 2, *Arbor fertilis* prophecy, Trinity College Library MS 514 f. 79 © The Board of Trinity College Dublin

[3] For more on the dating of the original composition of the prophecy see R. Taylor, *The Political Prophecy in England* (New York, 1911), p. 52; and M. J. Curley, 'The Cloak of Anonymity and the Prophecy of John of Bridlington', Modern Philology 77 (1980), p. 361.

'*Arbor fertilis*', which is often associated with a prophecy supposedly uttered by King Edward the Confessor upon his deathbed, in which England is described as a fertile tree that will suffer when its trunk is severed (Fig. 2). The version in MS. 515 is generally known as '*Sicut rubeum draconem*' and, though it is slightly shorter than the version presented in MS. 514, it is much the same prophecy. Animals that appear in this prophecy include the lion, the boar, and of course the eagle itself, and the prophecy is one that was reinterpreted over time, referring alternatively to the struggle between the Empress Matilda and King Stephen (and Henry II's eventual succession), to the struggle between Henry II and his sons, and eventually to the struggle between Richard II and Henry IV.

What these and other prophetic texts included in the manuscripts demonstrate is that Geoffrey's *History* was seen as intrinsically tied to the present experiences of the Anglo-Norman and Plantagenet dynasties. The combination of materials looking both to the past and to the future seems to reflect an attempt to establish a level of continuity in English history. In another sense this continuity is represented through the inclusion of various genealogies which not only bridge the divide between the Britons of Geoffrey's narrative and the Anglo-Normans, but also between these and the ancient Trojans and the generations described in the Old Testament.

Of the four manuscripts examined here, two contain significant genealogical materials, with perhaps the most notable being MS. 496. Here Geoffrey's *History* is included alongside five genealogical entries. The first of these is a brief account of the Ages of the World, each of which is identified according to generations in the Old Testament, as was common, with the first age lasting from Adam to Noah and the second from Noah to Abraham, and so on. This is followed by a brief reference to Merlin's prophecies and to the list of kings from Stephen to Edward I. After a brief interruption by a reckoning of the age of the earth and the coming of Christianity to England, there are three further genealogical diagrams accounting for the earliest English kings and for the immediate line of Edward I (including some of his children) (Fig. 3). The combination of these materials here places English, and more particularly Anglo-Norman history, within a larger chronology of Christian universal history, of which Geoffrey's Britons were a part.

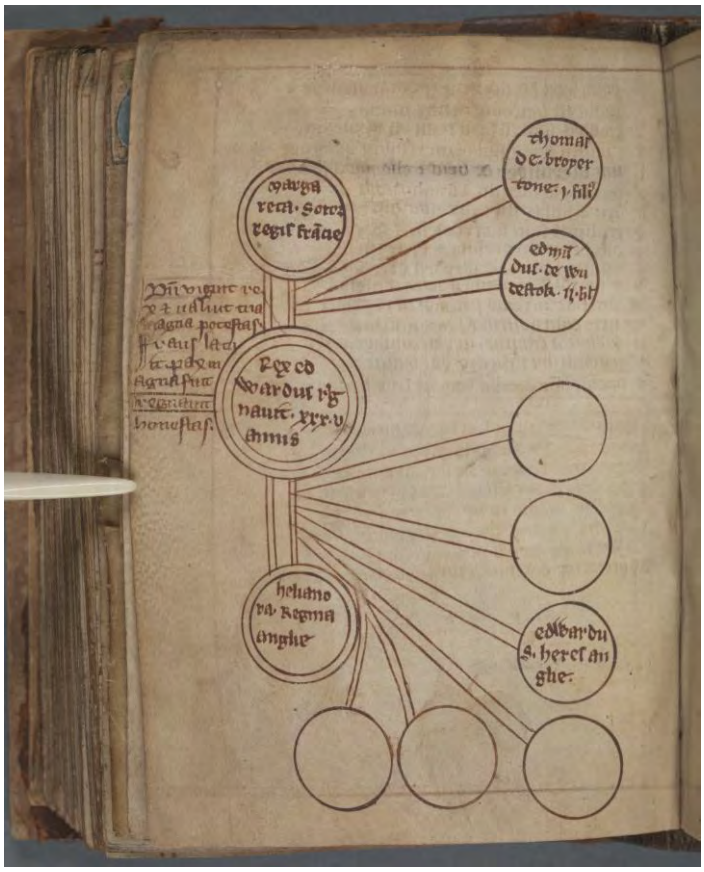

Fig. 3, Genealogy of the Kings of England, Trinity College Library MS 496 f. 137v © The Board of Trinity College Dublin

MS. 515 presents a similar though shorter combination of works, represented by a genealogical list from Adam to Brutus to Cadwallader (the latter two of whom are the first and last kings of Geoffrey's Britons), followed by a genealogy of the Trojans, from whom Brutus and the Britons are descended. Again, the combination of texts emphasises the connection between the ancient Britons and the generations of the Bible, but equally now with the Trojans (a connection also detailed in Geoffrey's *History* itself).

The decision to include these genealogical materials alongside Geoffrey's *History* not only places his work within a wider tradition of both Christian and classical history, but it was also likely based on an entirely understandable desire to group together texts which complemented and/or shed light on the meaning and contents of the others. The range of texts associated with the *History* in these manuscripts is therefore certainly important when it comes to considerations of how the work may have been classified by his Anglo-Norman audience. However they also go some way towards illustrating how the work was interpreted to reflect the interests of the present in which these manuscripts were produced. This makes sense for a work which focused on the history of Britain's pre-Saxon kings but which was directed ostensibly at a contemporary Anglo-Norman audience. Since on the surface prophecy is concerned with the future and genealogies with the past, the combination of these materials alongside the *History* places it within a much larger chronology of world history that was as much concerned with the present and the future, as it was with the past.