

Some Notes on Merlin¹

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The image of Merlin that surfaces in the medieval romances is a complex syncretism reflecting Celtic, Christian, Alano-Sarmatian, and possibly historical overlays. The figures of Merlin and the Dame du Lac may ultimately derive from a common, probably female, prototype. (CSL/LAM)

Figure One: Merlin with the Pendragon.
Bibliothèque Nationale fr. 95 fol. 327^v

The legends of Merlin occupy a significant portion of the Arthurian Cycle (see Fig. 1). It is no accident that most of the thirteenth-century texts in which the wizard appears – Robert de Boron’s *Merlin, Arthour and Merlin*, and others – bear the wizard’s name (Micha 1980, Kölbing 1890). Merlin’s association with Arthur dates from the earliest written records of the tradition. The Merlin introduced into the Arthurian material by Geoffrey of Monmouth does not exhibit the same shapeshifting, magical fairy powers that the character displays in other branches of the tradition (*cf.* Goodrich 1987, 4-8). Geoffrey’s version of the story tells of a scholar, trained by monks, who outwits magicians, accomplishes skilled feats of engineering, and uses ‘drugs’ rather than spells to transform himself and Arthur’s father, Uther Pendragon, into the likenesses of

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other people (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1966, 167-207). But first and foremost Merlin is a prophet, and it is this characterization of him, rather than the portrayal of him as a spellcaster, that remained popular throughout the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance.

Geoffrey's *Prophetiae Merlini* predates the rest of his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1130s).² The French *Les Prophécies de Merlin* (1270s) were ostensibly translated from Latin by Richart d'Irlande and are unrelated to Geoffrey's account of Merlin's prophecies.³ The Icelandic *Merlínússpá* (ca. 1200), in contrast, is a verse translation of Geoffrey's *Prophetiae Merlini*, and many other medieval accounts of the prophet draw on Geoffrey's rendition of the legend.⁴ A fifteenth-century Spanish sermon, for example, retells the Merlin and Uther story. This tale relates how Merlin used 'drugs,' or in later renditions 'magic,' to disguise Uther, making the British king look like the Duke of Cornwall (who was on the battlefield fighting Uther's troops) so that Uther could slip into the Duke's castle and rape Igraine (the Duke's wife and Uther's future queen).⁵ In this legend Merlin displays the classical, trickster-figure characteristics that one would expect from the Germanic Loki in a tale about Thor or from the Ossetic Syrdon in a saga about XÆmyc rather than from the statesman/magician of the Round Table in a story about Uther.⁶

When medieval authors choose to tell of the spell-casting, supernatural Merlin, the Merlin-as-prophet figure tends to be edited out of the legend. Wace, for instance, uses a supernatural version of Merlin and omits the prophecies. Yet even this Merlin exhibits a heavy Christian overlay. In most legends this scholar of the Round Table is depicted in black, flowing robes that are more reminiscent of a Benedictine cleric⁷ than of a Celtic druid, who would have worn white, as would have the priests and monks of the Celtic church (Jung and von Franz 1986, 359-360; Piggott 1968, 98-99; Gougaud 1923, xviii-xix). Merlin's connection with the Church of Rome is even more explicit in continental works. In the French Vulgate *Merlin* the infant prophet dictates the history of Joseph of Arimathea and the Grail to Blaise, a cleric who supposedly lived in Britain under the fifth-century king 'Constant' (Robert de Boron 1979).⁸ Merlin is responsible for the creation of the Siège Perilous of the Round Table, the chair on which only a pure knight may sit.⁹ Many of Merlin's 'miracles' are arranged to take place on Christian holy days, as well as at Christian locations. The 'Sword in the Stone,' for instance, appears in a churchyard at Whitsuntide.¹⁰ In this particular episode Merlin advises the Archbishop of Canterbury to send for all British nobles and to order them at Christmas to ride to the churchyard where the sword-bearing stone appeared (Malory 1969, 1: 15-16). Although none of the medieval texts says so explicitly (cf. West 1969,

115), one cannot help but get the impression that he somehow stage-managed the whole business, that he himself put the sword into the stone, as he later in fact does with Galahad's sword (Malory 1969, 1: 90-91).

There is no general agreement among Arthurian scholars as to the source of this curious figure. Markale asserts that his prototype was probably the historical late fifth-century figure Ambrosius Aurelianus, who later came to be known as Myrddin Emrys and, finally, Merlin (1977, 94-96; cf. Littleton and Malcor 1994, 61-77).¹¹ Perhaps a partial conflation between the character of Ambrosius and the cleric Constans accounts in part for Merlin's odd penchant for Benedictine-style dress and Christian festivals.¹² Or perhaps Merlin's description derives from the appearance of clerical advisers to kings within the experience of the scribes who transmitted these legends, a style of dress that may have suggested itself to the writers by virtue of Merlin's role as adviser to Arthur. Other scholars see a lingering reflection of the ancient druids, those shadowy priest-magicians who played such a central role in pre-Christian Celtic religion everywhere (Jung and von Franz 1986, 359-360), in the mentor of Arthur who watches the king's battles from a nearby hill. But neither Geoffrey nor his immediate predecessors (such as Gildas, Bede, Nennius, William of Malmesbury, and any of the anonymous authors of the Welsh Arthurian tradition) knew the 'Sword in the Stone' (Brengele 1964; Littleton and Malcor 1994, 181-193). So why do the French romances make such a point of connecting Merlin with this episode?

Perhaps a clue lies in the fact that the 'Sword in the Stone' is not the only sword closely associated with Merlin in British tradition. Another is that which Balin draws from the girdle of a female messenger from the Lady Lile of Avelion at the court of Arthur (Malory 1969, 1: 60-64).¹³ Merlin eventually takes this sword from Balin's tomb and places it in a stone, which he floats down a river to Camelot, where the blade is ultimately drawn from its resting place by Galahad to serve as his weapon in the quest for the Holy Grail. Merlin closely parallels the Dame du Lac in this and similar tales. In Malory's version of the story, Merlin makes the connection even more explicit by taking Arthur to the lake where the Dame du Lac grants the king another sword (Malory 1969, 1: 55-57).¹⁴ The parallels between Merlin and the Dame du Lac, in their roles as the mentor to the young hero and as the provider of his sword, in their use of female messengers to Arthur's court (Jung and von Franz 1986, 373-374), and in their associations with water and tombs have led us to consider the possibility that Merlin may be a reflection of the same prototype as the Dame du Lac (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 153-178). The end result was a complex syncretism. The Merlin who finally surfaced in the medieval romances had undergone a

series of transformations as profound in their way as those undergone by Arthur himself. He underwent a sex change, attracted Trickster elements to his story, and became the subject of Celtic, Christian, and possibly even historical overlays. But the similarities of how Merlin functions in the life of Arthur and of how the Dame du Lac functions in the life of Lancelot are too exact to be ignored.

The 'Sword in the Stone' story itself, in all of its manifestations, probably derives from a ritual that was practiced by the Alans, a group of Northeast Iranian-speaking nomads from the trans-Caucasian steppes who invaded the Roman Empire in the fifth century c.e. (Littleton 1982; Littleton and Malcor 1994, 181-193).¹⁵ These horse-riding nomads settled heavily over the area that became France and founded many of the noble families who would become patrons of the medieval Arthurian tradition (Littleton 1982; Littleton and Malcor 1994, 3-57, 293-325). Many of them also became prominent figures in the medieval Church (Littleton and Malcor 1994, *passim*), which brings us back to the references to Merlin being trained by clerics, possibly in the north of Britain. Following the Norman invasion of 1066 c.e., William the Conqueror gave many of the lands in the north of Britain to descendants of the Alans.¹⁶ One of these families, the FitzAlans, became patrons of the Arthurian legends.¹⁷ It is not inconceivable that the tradition of the prophet Merlin was introduced by clerics who were themselves descendants of the ancient Alans, especially since the Holy Grail cycle in which Merlin plays a role was codified and disseminated almost entirely by such clerics.¹⁸

The potential Alano-Sarmatian influence on Merlin seems to go beyond the episode of the 'Sword in the Stone.' The fifteenth-century English poem *Arthour and Merlin* ends with Pendragon, who is described in this poem as Uther's brother and who, like Arthur, is supposedly buried at Glastonbury.¹⁹ The name 'Pendragon' in all probability derives from a widespread Eastern European word for 'ruler,' *pan/panje*, which would yield 'Dragon Ruler.' This is consonant with the images of Sarmatian warriors on grave stelae and elsewhere, many of whom bear banners shaped like dragons (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 14 [plate 1], 101).²⁰

The Merlin who appears in the thirteenth-century *Tale of Balain* is quite distinct from the prophet of the Grail romances:

Merlin ... stayed on the island for a little more than a month and cast there various spells. Next to the tomb he constructed a bed that was so strange that no one could sleep in it without losing his mind and his memory in such a manner that he couldn't remember anything which he had done before he came to the island. And this spell lasted until Lancelot, son of the King Ban de Benoic [Benoich/Benwick], came there, and then the spell of this bed was broken, not by Lancelot but by a ring which he was wearing which broke all enchantments. (Campbell 1972, 119)²¹

Here, unlike the ‘clerical’ Merlin of the Grail tradition, the sage of the Round Table is truly a spellcaster, a wizard who gains his ends through enchantments rather than through prophecy.

The Continent, rather than Britain, serves as the setting for this particular legend. This is important since this work and the other Continental tales of Merlin tend to exhibit the same apparent Alanic influence that can be seen elsewhere in the Continental Arthurian tradition. For example, the author of the Huth *Merlin* promises to tell of ‘Helain the White, who became Emperor of Constantinople’ and whose name is but one of many examples of Alans/Elaines in the Arthurian material (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 98-99);²² however, the legend is not contained in the version of this work which survives (Waite 1961, 199). ‘Similarly the *Suite du Merlin* introduces Ban as if the reader were already acquainted with him and his affairs’ – and those affairs appear to include Merlin (Bogdanow 1966, 35). As Merlin and Niviene (Niniane) pass through Benoich (*i.e.*, Benwick), war is raging there. They come to the Castle of Trebes,²³ and Helaine (Elaine), Ban’s wife, explains that Claudas²⁴ does them harm whenever he can. In the Cambridge Manuscript (fol. 301d) she adds that they are forever at war with him. Merlin comforts Helaine by predicting that her son Lancelot will one day overcome Claudas (Cambridge MS, fols. 301c-302a; Paris and Ulrich 1888, 144). In the rebellion section, Ban and Bors (‘Boors’) play a considerable role. On Merlin’s suggestion they do homage to Arthur and help him in his wars, an alliance that becomes the focus of the entire first section of Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. Their own troubles with Claudas are also mentioned. Ban had built a castle on a piece of ground that Claudas claimed as his, but Ban denied the validity of his claim (Cambridge MS, fol. 208a).²⁵ As Arthur’s messengers, Ulfin and Bretel,²⁶ pass through Ban’s lands, Claudas has just been defeated by Ban, but the author predicts that Claudas will take revenge later (Cambridge MS, fol. 208b-c),²⁷ a prophecy that results in the death of Ban and the kidnapping of Lancelot by the Dame du Lac – events set in motion by Merlin.

The tellers of the legends of Lancelot apparently recognized something in Merlin that led them to include him in stories of the Dame du Lac. We suggest that this ‘something’ was the parallels between these two figures. But where the Dame du Lac became most closely associated with the legends of the ‘sword from the lake,’ Merlin became most closely associated with the stories of the ‘Sword in the Stone.’ The stories filtered to Britain, where the Dame du Lac eventually became attached to the figure of Arthur, who was originally paired with Merlin, just as Merlin had become associated with the figure of Lancelot, who was originally paired with the Dame du Lac, on the Continent. The figure

of Merlin, in particular, has been the subject of Celtic, Christian, and possibly historical overlays resulting in the complex figure who emerges as the statesman/magician of the Round Table.

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n o t e s

- 1 We would like to thank Gary Kuris, of Garland Publishing Inc., for his valuable editorial suggestions.
- 2 See Ashe in Lacy *et al.* (1986, 209-214). Geoffrey composed the *Vita Merlini* (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1973) after the completion of the *Historia* (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1925).
- 3 *Les Prophécies* include references to political events of both the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1926; cf. Paton 1966).
- 4 This text is found in the Icelandic manuscript of the *Breta sogur* by Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218 or 1219), an Icelandic monk of the Benedictine monastery of »ingeyrar (Jónsson 1892-1896, 271-283).
- 5 See, for example, Entwistle (1925); Sharrer (1977, vol. 1).
- 6 See Dumézil for the legends of the X/Emyc and the Ossetic Narts (1930, 115-121, 1948). See also Littleton and Malcor (1994, 126, 143). In an enigmatic passage, Geoffrey describes Merlin as 'a boy without a father' (Rees and Rees 1961, 237; cf. Geoffrey of Monmouth 1966, 167), which implies that his birth occurred without benefit of a begetter. Several legends of Merlin list him as the son of an incubus, engendered on a nun (Kibler in Lacy *et al.* 1986, 382). This specific tale is also told of the Ossetic seer/trickster, Syrdon, who in some variants of the Nart sagas is said to be the son of the Devil, engendered on the virgin Satana (Dumézil 1930, 77).
- 7 Such garments would have been worn by Benedictine-trained scholars and clerks as well as by actual members of the clergy.
- 8 'Constant' is probably Constantine III of Britain, although possibly Constantine Cadorson. The former usurped the imperial throne of Rome in Britain (407 c.e.) and followed the Merovingian practice of dividing his kingdom among his three sons (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 28, 38, 51-52, 236, 271, 293, 304, 307-308, 312, 318; Micha in Loomis 1959, 319), while the latter is Arthur's designated heir in the legends.
- 9 This purity is judged by Christian standards, mainly piety and virginity. Galahad

- succeeds; everyone else who attempts the feat is destroyed by divine lightning.
- 10 *I.e.*, Pentecost Sunday, the seventh Sunday after Easter.
 - 11 Ambrosius Aurelianus is sometimes identified as the 'historical Arthur.' Ashe in Lacy *et. al.* 1986, 7.
 - 12 Constans is the son of Constantius of Britain and brother of Ambrosius and Uther in the Arthurian tradition.
 - 13 Apparently Malory is scrambling two traditions at this point: that in which the Dame du Lac, who is also known as the Lady of the Lake, sends a sword to Arthur's court from the Isle of Avalon and that in which she is the enemy of Balin. This latter tradition gives Balin his motivation for beheading her.
 - 14 Modern films, such as *Excalibur* (1981), sometimes take this connection a step further by having Arthur break the sword from the stone, having Merlin instruct him to place the pieces of the sword in the water, and having the Dame du Lac then present Arthur with Excalibur – apparently reforged from the pieces of the broken sword.
 - 15 See also Bachrach (1973), who traces the Alan invasions and assesses their impact on Western Europe.
 - 16 A contingent of 5,500 Sarmatians, close ethnic cousins of the Alans, was sent by Marcus Aurelius to northern Britain in 175 C.E. to garrison Hadrian's Wall. When these auxiliary *cataphracti* (heavy cavalrymen) retired from duty they were settled near the Lancashire village of Ribchester, known in Roman times as Bremetennacum Veteranorum (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 18-26, 300-303). See also Richmond (1945), Sulimirski (1970, 173-174), and Edwards and Webster (1985-1987).
 - 17 See Littleton and Malcor (1994, 16, 25-26, 69, 302-303, 316).
 - 18 See Littleton and Malcor (1994, 209-280); Malcor (1991, 60-67, 119-127, 137-139, 186-235, 324-337).
 - 19 This rendition is what scholars call the *jüngere* version (Lagorio in Lacy *et al.* 1986, 18). The *Arthour and Merlin* on which it was based dates to the thirteenth century.
 - 20 The more conventional etymology of the name Pendragon is that it is a bastardized construction from Welsh *pen* ('head') plus Latin *draco* ('dragon'); see Nickel (1975, 1-8).
 - 21 See also Kölbing (1890) and Ackerman in Loomis (1959, 485-86).
 - 22 In his fourth century account of the ancient Alans, Ammianus Marcellinus refers to them as the 'Halani' (Rolfe 1939, 391).
 - 23 *I.e.*, Trèves (Trier).
 - 24 *I.e.*, Clovis; cf. Littleton and Malcor (1994, 90-91).
 - 25 The Vulgate *Merlin* continuation (Sommer 1908-1916, 2: 98, lines 14-16) does not say that the wars between Ban and Claudas were continuous.
 - 26 These names derive from Geoffrey's account of Uther's rape of Igraine. Ulfin was Uther's henchman, whom Merlin disguised as Jordan, and Merlin himself was disguised as Britaelis (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1966, 207).
 - 27 See also Sommer (1908-1916, 2: 98, lines 38-41).

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