From Alexander of Macedonia to Arthur of Britain

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As Geoffrey of Monmouth prepared to write the chapter on king Arthur which would culminate his Historia Regum Britanniae, he faced a disheartening difficulty: there was almost nothing in the authentically Celtic sources about Arthur. His basic structural and episodic models may have been supplied by historical and legendary biographies of Alexander of Macedonia, written in the first three centuries of the Christian era. This essay is a brief account of how Geoffrey, emulating Plutarch, extended the famous pair of world conquerors - Alexander and Caesar - to compose a triad with the imperishable king of the Britons. (ALF)

‘My lady, you made no mistake. This man is Alexander too.’
Quintus Curtius, Historiae Alexandri Magni Macedonis.

The primordial Celtic core

In the De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae of Gildas, Geoffrey would find an Aurelius Ambrosius, a man of moderation (‘vir modestus’) (Wheeler 2-3), whose noble parents of Roman descent had already died when he led the Britons to a major victory against the Saxons in the battle of Mount Badon. Although The Anglo Saxon Chronicle (Garmonsway) does not register this battle, a Saxon priest, the Venerable Bede, accepted Gildas’s testimony about Aurelius Ambrosius in his Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum (Bede 57-58). The compilation called Historia Britonum, said to be the work of a certain Nennius, may have been the first document to rename this last victorious leader of the Britons as ‘Arthur,’ insisting that he was not a king, but a warlord. He was made the winner of twelve battles (Nennius 38-39) in places today of uncertain location, such as Dubglas, Celidon, Guinnion and Badon. Recalling the first Christian ruler of Rome, Constantine, he carried a religious symbol (an image of the Virgin) close to his shoulder in the battle of Guinnion. In the Annales Cambriae, the image would be the cross of Christ and the battle would be that of Mount Badon. He and a certain Medraut perished in the battle of Camlann. In the course of the description of several ‘wonders’ of Britain (De Mirabilibus Britanniae), we learn that he had killed his own son, Anir.

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Other minor works supplied a few additional details. Stories of the Welsh saints Cadoc, Patern and Carantoc acknowledge Arthur’s kingship, but picture him as an insolent tyrant to be exemplarily corrected by the peaceful men of religion. The stories already enumerate two of his knights, Cei and Bedguir (Kay and Bedevere), shown playing dice with the king. Another illustrious knight, his nephew Walwen (Gawain), appears in William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Regorum Anglorum*. The nephew’s tomb had been found, but not Arthur’s, starting a rumour that the latter had not died and would come again (Faral vol. 1: 247). References to Arthur, his queen Gwenhwfyar (Guinevere) and his men are also present, among other documents, in the Welsh anonymous tales collected in the *Mabinogion* (Jones), surviving in manuscripts dated from the 13th century onwards but possibly composed earlier. This is by no means a complete survey; Geoffrey seems to have used a plurality of sources – an instance of a very minor borrowing is the name ‘Barinthus,’ the guide in the navigation to Avalon in Geoffrey’s *Vita Merlini*, most likely taken from the *Voyage of St. Brendan* (Webb 211-213).

What we discern in Geoffrey as a nucleus formed from these elements is a king of royal British (not Roman) descent, personally leading his army against the Saxons. The religious image is carried in the battle of Badon but, as in Guinnion, it represents the Virgin and is now placed over Arthur’s shield. He is capable of cruel acts, yielding, however, before the exhortations of saintly men. Although not inclined to intellectual vagaries, he takes his time admiring and proclaiming the natural marvels of his country. Unable despite his victories to achieve the final defeat of the Saxons, he perishes in Kamblan. There he kills a relative, Mordred, his nephew; sacrificing a son would perhaps seem too harsh. By presenting Gawain and Mordred as brothers, one good and the other evil, Geoffrey repeats a common literary cliché. Kay and Bedevere, shown in the life of St. Cadoc in a not very warlike scene of dice-playing, are assigned to serving tasks more appropriate to pages. The reality of Arthur’s death is left ambiguous.

*Casting in the heroic mold*

This winner of a purely defensive and undecisive war would hardly suffice to a writer intent on recording the grandeur of his people. Geoffrey needed a full-fledged hero to rival those portrayed by Hesiod. According to the Hesiodic canon in *Works and Days* (Hesiod 91), heroes were demi-gods destined to gain fame in combat. Though still mortal men, a selected fortunate few might be received at their demise in the Blessed Isles. Hesiod’s description of this mighty race, inserted between the Age of Bronze and our prosaic Age of Iron, contains allusions to Thebes and Troy as especially memorable scenes of their deeds.
Geoffrey’s problem was then to expand the scarce ‘authentic’ nucleus sketched above until it reached the desired heroic dimensions, with the expansion done carefully so as to preserve the primordial nucleus. Moreover, since he wanted to be credited as a historian, the end product should not offend too drastically the broad lines of the recognized historical truth.

To achieve his objective, Geoffrey may have deliberately followed an example taken from the ancient classics, much in vogue among the learned clerks of the 12th century. As a Greek writer living during the period of the Roman domination, Plutarch conceived an ingenious way to proclaim the achievements of his people: for each noteworthy Roman, he exhibited a no less illustrious Greek and compared their personalities and deeds, stressing the similarities. In his major work, the *Parallel Lives*, he revealed as analogous the careers of Alexander and Caesar. This may, in turn, have suggested to Geoffrey the idea of exalting the Britons by extending the pair of world-conquerors – Alexander-Caesar – to form a triad by including a British hero. But Geoffrey would undertake the inverse process: instead of comparing, he proposed to create, adapting the rich and fascinating elements from the story and legend of Alexander to the medieval context, adding them to the minimal traits about Arthur inherited from his predecessors and taking pains to seem a faithful chronicler.

*A world-conqueror’s progress*

Let us now summarize Geoffrey’s biography of Arthur, trying to factor out its structure. The numbers in brackets, placed after certain parts of our summary, relate each part to the item of the same number in the structural *general schema* (see below). Arthur’s conception is presided over by Merlin (1). Arthur is crowned after the death of his father, Uther Pendragon (2); misled by his young age (15 years), the Saxons and other Barbarians prepare to make war against him (3), but are defeated, as are also the ‘kings of the islands’, such as the king of Ireland and others (4). He emulates Julius Caesar by his conquest of Gaul, achieving it, however, with his own hands, since he defeats king Flollo in single combat (5). He is challenged by the Roman Empire, in the person of Lucius Hiberius (6); Guinevere, whom he had taken as spouse and queen, was of noble Roman descent (7). He leaves his nephew Mordred as regent and departs to confront the Romans (8). He defeats the Romans near Siesia (9). When already preparing to march against Rome, he is forced to return (10): Mordred had betrayed him. As he engages the traitor’s forces in battle, he is mortally wounded (11). He is taken to Avalon, where Morgan dwells, and should come back one day (12).
from alexander to arthur

General Schema:

1. A magician intervenes in the hero’s conception.
2. The hero succeeds to the throne at his father’s death.
3. Finding him young and inexperienced, peoples fearful of his father now revolt.
4. He defeats these peoples and conquers still others.
5. One of the peoples is conquered by him through single combat.
6. He is challenged by the most powerful Empire of the time.
7. The woman he had married descends from a noble family from the Empire.
8. He leaves a regent governing his country and departs to fight the Empire.
9. He wins a great battle against the Empire.
10. Desiring to proceed in his victorious campaign, he is forced to return.
11. His death is a consequence of the regent’s betrayal.
12. But one does not know whether he actually died – he is transported to a paradisiacal island.

The historical facts transmitted about Alexander are not always easy to extricate from the contributions of legend and fiction. The so-called extant historical sources about Alexander date from the first centuries of our era. They comprise the narratives, originally in Greek, of Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus and Arrian, and, in Latin, of Quintus Curtius Rufus and Justin (the work of the latter being an epitome of Trogus’s lost book). A critical survey can be found in Bosworth.

The main source for the legends is the Alexander Romance, attributed to an unknown author referred to as the Pseudo-Callisthenes. It was written, in Greek, in the third century c.e. Its influential Latin translation (circa 950 c.e.), which went through several recensions, is known as the Historia de Preliis and is attributed to archbishop Leo of Naples. Two documents are usually appended to the Alexander Romance: the Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem de Situ et Mirabilibus Indiae and the Alexandri Magni Iter ad Paradisum. Some version of these influential legendary narratives engendered, among other works, the French Roman d’Alexandre (12th century), where the word ‘graal’ probably made its literary debut (Alberic vol. 38: 91). Even Celtic folktales may have been contaminated, as suggested by the surprising similarity of the physical descriptions of the young Alexander (Pseudo-Callisthenes 45; Kratz 6-7) and the young Cuchulain (Gantz 136-137); the ‘warrior’s moon’ rising from the head of the Irish hero may correspond to the ram’s horns sprouting from Alexander’s head to mark him as son of the god Ammon (cf. old coin in the cover of Plutarch-ii).
As we shall now see, the composite image of Alexander’s career projected by the texts above also matches my general schema, to whose item numbers I refer. Alexander’s conception is the work of the Egyptian former king and magician Nectanebus (1). At the death of his nominal father, Philip, Alexander is enthroned (2). Underestimating his twenty years of age, the Greeks, who resented Philip’s rigid hegemony, hasten to revolt, as do peoples from Thracia and others (3), but they are all subdued by strength or by a skillful combination of diplomacy and intimidation; among Alexander’s conquests are the island-city of Tyre and many other seashore towns (4). He proposes to face the Persian empire (or, in fiction, is challenged by the empire), having Darius as adversary (6). He leaves Antipater as regent and begins his long military expedition (8). He defeats the Persians in several battles, one decisive – Gaugamela – proceeding afterwards to Susa (9). He marries Darius’s daughter, Barsine or Stateira (confused by the legend with Roxane) after the emperor’s death (7). He penetrates the territory of India where, in the fictional narrative, he defeats king Porus in single combat, thereby conquering his kingdom (5). When he continues through India, intending to cross the Ganges, his soldiers rebel and Alexander decides to return (10). But still far from the homeland he is, according to the legend, poisoned through the machinations of the regent Antipater (11); feeling the nearness of death, Alexander tries to plunge into the Euphrates to be carried away and, by hiding the fact of his death, preserve the belief in his divine descent, but he is detained by Roxane (12).

Vestiges of the Hesiodic archetype are present in both heroic kings. They are conceived magically, as were the classic demi-gods, become illustrious in combat, and there is a suggestion that they visit Paradise. Readers recall the circumstances of these deaths, and – about Arthur – the description of the ‘Insula Pomorum quae Fortunata vocatur’ (Avalon, again?) in the Vita Merlini (Geoffrey i 334-335). The nine sisters who rule Avalon seem to come from the Greek myth; they evoke the nine Muses in the Theogony (Hesiod 34) and also the Amazons, who were ready to receive the visit of men to ensure their progeny (Justin vol. 1: 68-76). The last Amazon queen, Minithya or Thalestris, is reputed to have sought Alexander for this very purpose (Curtius ii 128; Arrian 369). And if the word ‘Amazon’ bears some resemblance to ‘Avalon’, so does ‘Chalybes’, neighbours of the Amazons (Curtius ii 125), with Arthur’s sword ‘Caliburnus’, said to have been forged in Avalon; in addition, in the Roman d’Alexandre the hero receives his sword from an Amazon queen (Alberic vol. 38: 80). Paradisiacal places visited, albeit in life, by Alexander include the Fortunate Villages
(Diodorus 335), the Land of the Blessed (Pseudo-Callisthenes 119) as well as Paradise itself in the *Alexander Magni Iter ad Paradisum* (Kratz 127-134).

In the *Historia* (Geoffrey-ii 282) and, mainly, in the *Vita Merlini* (Geoffrey-i 335) there is a suggestion, to be developed more clearly by Wace, that Arthur might return one day. Even this had been ‘prophesied’ of Alexander: his occupation of Egypt would be the return of his father Nectanebus, reincarnated in his youthful figure, to liberate the land from its invaders (Kratz 2).

Connections with Thebes and Troy, the two heroic scenarios of the archetype, can also be identified. Baldulf, wandering under the disguise of a citharist around the walls of the city where his brother was besieged by Arthur, evokes Ismenias playing his flute while Thebes was crumbling under the Macedonian assault (Pseudo-Callisthenes 80-85) as well as Clodius’s ruse to gain access to the wife of Caesar (Plutarch-i 465). Alexander enters Troy soon after crossing the Hellespont, and there he seizes the sacred shield of Pallas (Diodorus 167, 177; Arrian 66, 313), which he or one of his men would carry before him in the direst moments of personal danger, foreshadowing Arthur’s shield in Mount Badon. Arthur never passes by Troy, but even he is strongly associated with Troy, through the incredible tradition of the Trojan origin of the Britons, also found in Nennius.

To those who accept Celtic influences in Geoffrey but may wonder why to expect influences from the classical literature, this matter of the Trojan origin should be a point to consider. Virgil had narrated the foundation of Rome by descendants of the Trojan Aeneas. Nennius and Geoffrey derive ‘Britain’ and ‘Britons’ from another legendary Trojan, Brutus, said to be the forefather of the British people. By a convenient coincidence, a region in Southern Italy was called Bruttium, and one of its cities, Locri, immediately brings to mind Geoffrey’s personage ‘Locrinus’ as well as the land of ‘Logres’. Incidents in Plutarch’s *Timoleon* (Plutarch-ii 157-158), whose protagonist navigates to Sicily, of yore the dwelling of Cyclops (Justin, vol 1: 170), are reminiscent of the episode in the *Historia* where Brutus plans and executes his expedition to Britain, likewise a land haunted by giants (Geoffrey-ii 64-72). As a matter of fact, the classic influence was to be expected from the very choice of the Latin language. And, having chosen a language of which he was not a native speaker, is it surprising that Geoffrey would seek guidance and inspiration from ancient writers? When Arthur has spoken in reaction to Lucius’s arrogant letter, King Hoel salutes his Ciceronian eloquence. The several speeches of Arthur, of his men and of the Roman procurator, after the challenge and before or during battle, ring with the same forceful rhetoric as those of Alexander, his captains and his enemy, Darius (see, for example, Curtius-i vol. 1: 54-57, 180-187; Curtius-ii 41-42, 84-85).
When we stress the similarities, we must also point out significant differences. Geoffrey was a creative writer and had a clear notion of the limits imposed by his fidelity to the Celtic core and to historical plausibility. Alexander had utterly subjugated the Persian empire. But readers with any knowledge of history would take issue with a recognizable false British domination of Rome, and even at a final victory against the Saxon invaders who, not much later, would rule unchallenged over Britain. But one might recollect that even the conquests of the great Alexander had little permanence, for his vast dominions were divided among his generals shortly after his death. Furthermore, Alexander did not complete the occupation of India, just as Arthur had to renounce his plans to invade Rome.

Although lengthy in comparison with other parts of the *Historia*, the chapter on Arthur omitted an elaboration of inessential traits found in the historical Alexander. The quality of Alexander’s inquisitive mind, tutored by no less than the philosopher Aristotle, is only hinted at as Arthur digresses to Hoel about Loch Lomond and other natural wonders. Alexander would be wont to write letters reporting to Aristotle all sorts of strange phenomena, especially what he observed in India. The extant sources pause at several points in the military campaign to describe, for instance, solar light anomalies over Mount Ida (Diodorus 135-137), the ‘ferocity’ of the tides of the Hyrcanian (Caspian) sea (Curtius-ii 125), combustion experiments at a well of naphtha (Plutarch-i 329-331), etc.

Alexander’s commiseration, sometimes following occasional outbreaks of cruelty, emerges a few times in Arthur; the latter’s extermination of Scots and Picts, halted at the plea of their men of religion, echoes the legendary Alexander finally yielding to the Jewish priest Jaddus (Kratz 13-15), as does the historical Alexander taking pity on his mutilated countrymen (Curtius-ii 103-105). Humour and subtlety are missing in Geoffrey’s concise Arthur. In Alexander they are manifested in a number of incidents, as when the captured mother of Darius, Sisigambis, did obeisance to his friend Hephaestion, taking him to be the king; alerted to her error, the terrified Sisigambis flung herself at the feet of Alexander, but he raised her with his hand and said calmly:

‘My lady, you made no mistake. This man is Alexander too.’ (Curtius-ii 46)

In addition to their reckless courage, the two kings were especially noted for their generosity: this remained a salient trait of Arthur even in later romances, which, on the other hand, seem so mute about his military exploits. Says Geoffrey:

Once he had been invested with the royal insignia, he observed the normal custom of giving gifts freely to everyone. Such a great crowd of soldiers flocked
to him that he came to an end of what he had to distribute. However, the man
to whom open-handedness and bravery both come naturally may indeed find
himself momentarily in need, but poverty will never harass him for long. In
Arthur courage was closely linked with generosity, and he made up his mind to
harry the Saxons, so that with their wealth he might reward the retainers who
served his own household. (Geoffrey-ii 212)

and, in a later passage, again:

On the fourth day all those who in the office which they held had done Arthur
any service were called together and each rewarded with a personal grant of
cities, castles, archbishoprics, bishoprics and other landed possessions. (Geoffrey-
ii 230)

Alexander also gave away landed possessions until almost nothing remained,
letting the thought of war spoils arouse an adventurous spirit in his men:

But although he set out with such meagre and narrow resources, he would not
set foot upon his ship until he had enquired into the circumstances of his
companions and allotted to one a farm, to another a village, and to another the
revenue from some hamlet or harbour. And when at last nearly all of the crown
property had been expended or allotted, Perdiccas said to him: ‘But for thyself,
O King, what art thou leaving?’ And then the king answered, ‘My hopes.’ ‘In
these then,’ said Perdiccas, ‘we also shall share who make the expedition with
thee.’ (Plutarch-i 261-263)

The two careers were similar. The personalities had much in common. If we
grant that the narratives agree with respect to their broad lines, what about a
finer grain comparison at the level of the episode?

The revealing gestures

The biography of Arthur by Geoffrey is rich in lively episodes and picturesque
details, many of which can also be traced to the same Alexandrian texts. A few
comparisons will be examined here; I present a more comprehensive treatment
in my forthcoming book (Furtado).

Arthur’s father, Uther, had his name changed to

Utherpendragon, which in the British language means ‘a dragon’s head’.
(Geoffrey-ii 202)

He had been given this name because of a vision interpreted by Merlin:

... there appeared a star of great magnitude and brilliance, with a single beam
shining from it. At the end of this beam was a ball of fire, spread out in the shape
of a dragon ... [Merlin said:] ‘The star signifies you in person, and so does the
fiery dragon beneath the star. The beam of light ... signifies your son ... His
dominion shall extend over all the kingdoms which the beam covers.’ (Geoffrey-
ii 200-201)
Alexander’s nominal father, Philip, has the vision of a dragon. And, before that, he was also told about the symbolic meaning of a beam of light; in a dream he saw a ring on which

... was a jewel carved to portray a lion’s head, a sunbeam and a sword ... The soothsayer responded by saying to him, ‘King Philip, know for a fact that Olympias has conceived, not by a man but by a god. For the lion’s head and the sunbeam and the sword have the following meaning. He to whom [your wife] will give birth will reach the orient, where the sun rises, by fighting and he will subjugate cities and nations with his sword.’ Meanwhile Philip fought and won. In this very battle there appeared to him a dragon that went ahead of him and destroyed all his foes before him. (Kratz 5)

The conceptions of the two heroes involve similar ruses of objectionable morality. As the reader will notice comparing the two fragments below, each would-be carnal father assumes, by magic, a form acceptable to the unsuspecting woman, comes to her in the first hours of the night, effectively deceives her and shares her bed; from their union an exceptional hero will be born. Merlin not only supplies the potion but, under suitable disguise, accompanies king Utherpendragon to the castle:

The King ... took Merlin’s drugs, and was changed into the likeness of Gorlois. Ulfin was changed into Jordan and Merlin into a man called Britaelis ... They ... came to the Castle in the twilight ... The King spent that night with Ygerna and satisfied his desire by making love with her. He had deceived her by the disguise which he had taken ... That night she conceived Arthur, the most famous of men, who subsequently won great renown by his outstanding bravery. (Geoffrey-ii 207)

The magician Nectanebus tells Queen Olympias that she will be visited by a god who will assume two forms: that of a dragon (‘serpent’ in the translation) and then of the clever magician himself:

‘... That god [i.e. Ammon] will come to you in the form of a dragon [original: ‘in figura draconis’], and afterward he will adopt a human form that looks exactly like me.’ ... That night around the time of the first watch Nectanebus used magic incantations to transform himself into the form of a dragon ... climbed onto her bed, kissed her and lay with her. When he arose from her embrace, he tapped her on her womb and said to her, ‘May this child who has been conceived be victorious and forever remain unconquered by any man.’ In this way Olympias was deceived, lying with a man whom she mistook for a god.(Kratz 4; Hilka 14)

Is the name of Arthur’s mother (Igerna, in the Latin text) of Celtic origin? When Nectanebus first saw Olympias, he was immediately captivated by her beauty. Noticing his rapturous stare, she asked what was in his mind; he replied:

‘Recordatus sum pulcherrima responsa deorum; etenim responsa accepi a
Accordingly, he often addressed her simply by this title, ‘regina’, of which the word ‘Igerna’ is an obvious anagram.

In Nennius, the number of battles fought by Arthur against the Saxons is twelve, a suggestive number in that it coincides with the number of labours of Hercules. The most important one is the battle of Mount Badon. Geoffrey’s account of the battle includes Arthur’s personal sortie during which he wore an image of the Virgin on his shield; it also stresses the effort to climb the mount, a formidable feat in view of the enemy’s advantageous position:

However, when the next day dawned, Arthur climbed to the top of the peak with his army, losing many of his men on the way. Naturally enough, the Saxons, rushing down from their high position, could inflict wounds more easily, for the impetus of their descent gave them more speed than the others, who were toiling up ... He drew his sword Caliburn, called upon the name of the Blessed Virgin, and rushed forward at full speed into the thickest ranks of the enemy ... Cheldric ... when he saw the danger threatening his men, immediately turned away in flight with what troops were left to him. (Geoffrey-ii 217-218)

Alexander once fought a hardy enemy, occupying a rocky outcrop called Aornis. According to popular tradition, the mountain had been unsuccessfully besieged by Hercules, who had been obliged to abandon the siege by an earthquake. Where Hercules failed, Alexander triumphed:

... [As] soon as the trumpet-signal was given, this resolute man of action [i.e. Alexander] turned to his bodyguards, told them to follow him, and was the first to clamber up the rock ... Alexander [a young namesake of the king] and Charus, however, had scaled the cliff, and had already begun to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand fighting, though, since the barbarians were pouring weapons on them from higher ground, they received more wounds than they inflicted ... Then, giving the signal for his men to raise a concerted shout, he struck terror into the Indians in their disordered flight ... Although his victory was over the terrain rather than the enemy, the king nonetheless fostered the belief that he had won a decisive victory by offering sacrifices and worship to the gods. Altars were set up on the rock in honour of Minerva Victoria. (Curtius-ii 201-203)

Arthur conquers Gaul by his single-handed victory against tribune Flollo, just as Alexander conquers a portion of India by (according to legend) personally killing King Porus. Both adversaries were remarkable for their size, an advantage especially justified in Alexander’s case, for he was reputed to be of a low stature. The two fragments below reproduce the episodic schema; in my forthcoming book, I provide similar schemas for each episode examined.
Schema of Episode:

1. The enemy leader sees that his men are weakening.
2. He addresses the King proposing a single combat.
3. The winner will have the other’s country.
4. His confidence comes from his superior stature.
5. The armies take opposite sides to watch the combat.
6. There is a commotion among the men on one side.
7. At this moment, the King rises by impulse.
8. The King kills the enemy by striking his head with his sword.
9. As the victory is announced, the enemy people hastens to surrender.

Says Geoffrey:

Frollo (Flollo, in the Latin text) grieved to see his people dying of hunger (1), and sent a message to Arthur to say that they should meet in single combat (2) and that whichever was victorious should take the kingdom of the other (3). Being a man of immense stature (4), courage and strength, Frollo relied upon these advantages when he sent his message, hoping in this way to find a solution to his problem … An agreement was come to on both sides and the two met on an island outside the city, the populace gathering to see what would happen to them (5) … When the Britons saw their King thrown to the ground, they were afraid that he was dead and it was only with great self-control that they restrained themselves from breaking the truce and hurling themselves as one man upon the Gauls. Just as they were planning to invade the lists (6), Arthur sprang quickly to his feet, covered himself with his shield, and rushed forward to meet Frollo (7) … He raised Caliburn in the air with all his strength and brought it down through Frollo’s helmet and so on to his head, which he cut into two halves (8) … The moment this was made known throughout the army, the townsfolk ran forward, threw open their gates and surrendered their city to Arthur (9). (Geoffrey-ii 224-225)

Whereas in the Historia de Preliis we read:

When Porus saw that his men were weakening in battle (1), he stood by himself in front of everyone and shouted to Alexander, ‘It does not befit an emperor that his people perish for no reason, but the king himself should demonstrate his personal valour. Have your people stand on one side, mine on the other and let you and me fight by ourselves hand to hand (2). If you win my people are to be yours; but if you fall by my hand your people are to be counted mine (3).’ Porus had said this because he thought Alexander’s body was no match for his. He underestimated Alexander because of his small size since he was short, only three cubits tall. Porus trusted in his superior height since he was five cubits tall (4) … The two sides stood opposite each other (5). As the two men began to fight, the soldiers of Porus started shouting (6). When Porus heard them shout he turned his head. Alexander attacked. Knees bent, he leaped at him (7) and struck him in the head with his sword, killing him (8) … Alexander said to them,
‘Now let the fighting stop …’. When Alexander said this all the Indians threw down their weapons, praising Alexander and blessing him as a god (9). (Kratz 51-52)

Alexander’s confrontation with the Persian empire is echoed by Arthur’s war against the Roman empire. Curiously, a late and spurious (as well as non-historical) move against a Rome whose glorious days were yet to come was credited to Alexander (Kratz 12). Lucius Hiberius sends messengers to challenge Arthur (Geoffrey-ii 230-231) in terms as arrogant as Darius’s emissaries convey to Alexander (Kratz 16). There is no record of a Lucius Hiberius leading a Roman army. But Diodorus mentions a Roman, Lucius, as he is telling about the launching of Alexander’s expedition against the Persians:

When ... the Romans elected as consuls Gaius Sulpicius and Lucius Papirius ... Alexander advanced with his army to the Hellespont [the strait of Dardanelles] and transported it from Europe to Asia. (Diodorus 163)

The election of this Lucius as consul appears here as a synchronism, a common device to denote dates. The passage is also of interest to us because it speaks of a crossing between two continents, a fateful stage in Alexander’s expedition. He proceeded at once to Troy, where the sacrificant at the sanctuary of Athena (from which he took the sacred shield, as seen above) announced omens favourable to him, one being a statue of a former satrap of Phrygia fallen on the ground. The sacrificant said that Alexander

... would be victor in a great cavalry battle ... he added that [he] with his own hands would slay in battle a distinguished general of the enemy. (Diodorus 167)

Another favourable omen, before his conquest of Tyre, had to do with a satyr that he saw in a dream, eluding his grasp but finally surrendering. The seers:

... dividing the word ‘satyros’ into two parts, said to him, plausibly enough, ‘Tyre is to be thine’. (Plutarch-i 293)

With the siege of Tyre still in progress, Alexander made an expedition

... against the Arabians who dwelt in the neighbourhood of mount Antilibanus. On this expedition he risked his life to save his tutor, Lysimachus ... Before he was aware of it ... he was separated from his army with a few followers, and had to spend a night of darkness and intense cold in a region that was rough and difficult. In this plight, he saw far off a number of scattered fires which the enemy were burning. So, since he was confident in his own agility, and was ever wont to cheer the Macedonians in their perplexities by sharing their toils, he ran to the nearest camp-fire. Two Barbarians who were sitting at the fire he dispatched with his dagger, and snatching up a fire-brand, brought it to his own party. (Plutarch-i 293-295)
Arthur also made a fateful crossing – through the British Channel, to pass from insular Britain to the European Continent – and was equally encouraged by the interpretation of omens:

... he saw a bear flying through the air ... [and] a terrifying dragon ... [which] attacked the bear ... finally hurling its scorched body down to the ground. Arthur woke up at this point and described what he had dreamed to those who were standing round. (Geoffrey-ii 237)

These unspecified persons ‘interpreted’ it for him, proclaiming that

... the dragon was himself and the bear some giant or other with which he was to fight ... Arthur, however, was sure that ... this dream had come about because of himself and the Emperor. (Geoffrey-ii 237)

Next, he showed that, like Alexander, he was ready to delay a military campaign to rescue one helpless person. And, like the Macedonian king, he undertook it personally, to give an example to his troops. Again we find the mountain scenery and the bonfires:

This giant had snatched Helena, the niece of Duke Hoel ... Being a man of such outstanding courage, [Arthur] had no need to lead a whole army against monsters of this sort. Not only was he himself strong enough to destroy them, but by doing so he wanted to inspire his men. When they came near to the Mount, they saw a fire gleaming on the top and a second fire ablaze on a smaller peak ... At that moment the inhuman monster was standing by his fire ... He struck the giant on the forehead with his sword ... He ordered Bedevere to saw off the giant’s head and hand it to the squires so that it might be carried to the camp for all to go and stare at. (Geoffrey-ii 237-240)

The place of the combat is what is today mount Saint Michel, on the coast of the British Channel. To celebrate the memory of the wretched Helena, the peak where she was buried was named ‘Tombelaine,’ which may be an echo of classic mythology; indeed we know that the ancient name of the strait crossed by Alexander, ‘Hellespont’, celebrates the death of Helle, fallen into the waters when she flew with her brother on the back of the sheep with the golden fleece.

Having killed the giant, Arthur remembers another giant, Ritho, killed by him on Mount Aravius (Geoffrey-i 257; Geoffrey-ii 240). The giant wore a cloak made of the beards of kings he had slain. Alexander’s seers had played with the words ‘satyr’ (‘satyros’) and ‘Tyre’ (‘Tyros’); would the name of the giant, ‘Ritho,’ be an anagram, a further result of this word-play? If Geoffrey was truly indulging in word-play at this point, one wonders if the cloak made of the ‘beard’ (in Latin ‘barba’) of fallen adversaries recalled Alexander killing the two ‘barbarians’ and if the Arabs whom Alexander was chasing were responsible for Geoffrey’s mount ‘Aravius’.
Favourable signs and the inspiring personal example bring the certainty of success. Both Alexander and Arthur send a bold ultimatum to the enemy: why do you flee like a coward? Throw down your arms or name the day of the battle. Both embassies terminate in a skirmish which again portends victory (Geoffrey-ii 241-242; Kratz 34-36).

With respect to the description of pitched battles, the military details furnished by Geoffrey are certainly anachronistic, since, at the time of the events, Europe had forgotten what the ancients knew about organized warfare; even in Charlemagne’s 9th century the Western armies fought like undisciplined hordes (Warfare 576). We are amazed to hear that, as the Britons prepare to engage the Romans in combat,

Arthur decided to draw up his troops in battle formation ... He drew up the remainder of his troops in seven divisions ... They were given the following standing-orders: whenever the infantry showed signs of advancing to the attack, the cavalry of that division, moving forward obliquely with closed ranks, should do its utmost to break the force of the enemy. According to the British custom, the infantry battalions were drawn up in a square, with a right and left wing. Augustus, the King of Albany, was put in charge of the right wing, and Cador, Duke of Cornwall, of the left wing of the first division ... Behind all these the King chose a position for himself and for a single legion which he had appointed to remain under his orders. (Geoffrey-ii 247-248)

In accord with the known military practices of his time, Alexander organizes his forces to face the Persian emperor; the Macedonian king is at the same time general, commander of a unit and common soldier:

... Alexander summoned his officers and encouraged them for battle ... and then led out his army deployed for battle ... ordering the cavalry squadrons to ride ahead of the infantry phalanx. On the right wing Alexander stationed the royal squadron under the command of Cleitus the Black (as he was called), and next to this the other Friends under the command of Parmenion’s son Philotas, then in succession the other seven squadrons ... He himself took personal command of the right wing and advancing obliquely planned to settle the issue of the battle by his own actions. (Diodorus 281-283)

The allusion to seven remaining units and to the oblique movement seem minor coincidences – but, on the contrary, they are vital indications that Geoffrey read Diodorus’s narrative. The number seven is consistent in Diodorus, but it forces Geoffrey’s translator to remark in a footnote: ‘The arithmetic is faulty ... In effect there are four front-line divisions, four support divisions and the two reserve divisions ... making ten in all’ (Geoffrey-ii 247 note 2). The oblique movement was a successful tactical innovation introduced by Epaminondas and copied by Philip; Alexander put it to good use in the decisive battle of Gaugamela (Warfare 574).
The Roman army is led by Lucius Hiberius and includes a few senators (one of whom is called by the strangely sounding name of Quintus Carucius), besides a colourful menagerie of foreign troops under the ‘Kings of the Orient.’ We hear of Parthians, Medes, Babylonians, Phrygians and Syrians, among others, but the conspicuous absence of Persians surprises us, especially since historians speak of Medes and Persians so often in the same breath. Biographers of Alexander (Curtius-ii 77-78; Arrian 164-165) include those ‘Oriental’ peoples in the Persian army of Darius, side by side with the Persians themselves. One can suspect that Geoffrey did not remember to conscript the Persians simply because he had already introduced them, metamorphosed into Romans.

But at least one of the Romans was authentic: senator ‘Quintus Carucius’, a transparent alias for a man who was both a writer and a senator (under Tiberius). For his good services as provider of military advice, Quintus Curtius Rufus was thus rewarded by the grateful Geoffrey with three mentions in the Historia.

As we turn the final pages of the two epics, we see that they end in tragedy, as if their purpose were to illustrate how ambition out of measure is punished according to the traditional pattern of ‘hybris’ and ‘nemesis.’ Alexander and Arthur are each forced to return at the peak of their undefeated campaign, their plans of conquest unfulfilled, and each falls through the treachery of a trusted regent. Yet the historical Alexander succeeded in carrying Hellenic civilization to a vast portion of the world. And the tales about Arthur have remained ever since a spirited example of the chivalric virtues.

Rex Futurus

I argue, then, that Geoffrey used Alexander as his model to amplify the sketchy image of Arthur inherited from his predecessors into the grand proportions of a national hero. The resulting portrait of Arthur, of course, is far more than a mere reflection of Alexander. Geoffrey’s Arthur is unmistakably individualized, and at least three major elements later contributed to his legend: the Sword in the Stone, the Round Table, and the Grail.

Pulling out the sword is the initiation proof that reveals Arthur as superior to the other men and marks him with a charisma; only he might bring back to the Britons their past glory. Hence the myth of the ‘rex quondam rexque futurus’ [the once and future king], which transforms the death and consequent failure of the hero into a promise that the times of national trouble will one day cease. In one version, in the Völsungasaga (Anderson 58-59, 75-76), Sigmund’s sword, thrust for him by a god into the trunk of a tree and later broken in combat, would be whole again to be wielded by another man of his blood. In another,
the disappearance in Africa of the Portuguese king D. Sebastião (1554-1578), occasioned the expectation of his miraculous return.

The Round Table (Wace vol. 2: 513) served as a collective noun for a company of remarkable knights. It is to Arthur as the twelve peers are to Charlemagne. In the chronicles of Geoffrey and his successors (Wace, Layamon), the king’s campaigns had signified mainly the struggle for his homeland, a goal of limited attractiveness to readers from other countries. With a membership of distinctive knights, one moved from national wars to different styles of personal ‘adventures’ in the spirit of the emerging institution of errant chivalry. Thus the cycle became truly international. From the time that Chrétien de Troyes joined the French to Arthurian story-telling, Arthur himself was often superseded by his knights, and he remained a generous king limited to being only the first among equals.

When the Round Table adventures began to look pointless and frivolous, especially to narrators associated with the priestly orders, the Grail inspired a new narrative line, where chivalry is turned away from mundane values to spiritual concerns.

Was the original Arthur historical? We cannot be sure. But the endless retelling throughout the centuries of successive versions of tales about him, as well as the creation of new stories adapted to evolving contexts, lent an irresistible momentum to the figure of the king. If Arthur was not real at the beginning, he now is.

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works cited


