Geoffrey of Monmouth (Latin: Galfridus Monemutensis, Galfridus Arturus, Galfridus Artur, Welsh: Gruuudd ap Arthur, Sieffre o Fynwy) (c. 1100 – c. 1155) was a Welsh cleric and one of the major figures in the development of British historiography and the popularity of tales of King Arthur. He is best known for his chronicle Historia Regum Britanniae ("History of the Kings of Britain"), which was widely popular in its day and was credited, uncritically, well into the 16th century,[1] being translated into various other languages from its original Latin, but which is now considered unreliable history.

BIOGRAPHY

Geoffrey was probably born some time between 1100 and 1110[2] in Wales or the Welsh Marches. He must have reached the age of majority by 1129, when he is recorded as witnessing a charter.

In his Historia, Geoffrey refers to himself as Galfridus Monemutensis, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", which indicates a significant connection to Monmouth, Wales, and which may refer to his birthplace.[3] Geoffrey's works attest to some acquaintance with the place-names of the region.[3] To contemporaries, Geoffrey...

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Earlier scholars assumed that Geoffrey was Welsh or at least spoke Welsh. Geoffrey's knowledge of the Welsh language appears to have been slight however, and it is now recognised that there is no real evidence that Geoffrey was of either Welsh or Cambro-Norman descent, unlike for instance, Gerald of Wales. He may have sprung from the same French-speaking elite of the Welsh border country as the writers Gerald of Wales and Walter Map, and Robert, Earl of Gloucester, to whom Geoffrey dedicated versions of his Historia Regum Britanniae. It has been argued, by Frank Stenton among others, that Geoffrey's parents may have been among the many Bretons who took part in William I's Conquest and settled in the southeast of Wales. Monmouth had been in the hands of Breton lords since 1075 or 1086 and the names Galfridus and Arthur (if interpreted as a patronymic) were more common among the Bretons than the Welsh.

He may have served for a while in a Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, also a canon at that church. Another frequent co-signatory is Ralph of Monmouth, a canon of Lincoln.

On 21 February 1152, at Lambeth Archbishop Theobald consecrated Geoffrey as Bishop of St Asaph, having ordained him a priest at Westminster 10 days before. "There is no evidence that he ever visited his see," writes Lewis Thorpe, "and indeed the wars of Owain Gwynedd make this most unlikely." He appears to have died between 25 December 1154 and 24 December 1155, in 1155 according to Welsh chronicles, when his apparent successor, Richard, took office.

HISTORIA REGUM BRITANNIÆ

Geoffrey wrote several works of interest, all in Latin, the language of learning and literature in Europe during the medieval period. His major work was the Historia Regum Britanniae (History of the Kings of Britain), the work best known to modern readers. It relates the purported history of Britain, from its first settlement by Brutus, a descendant of the Trojan hero Aeneas, to the death of Cadwallader in the 7th century, taking in Julius Caesar's invasions of Britain, two kings, Leir and Cymbeline, later immortalised by William Shakespeare, and one of the earliest developed narratives of King Arthur.

Geoffrey claims in his dedication that the book is a translation of an "ancient book in the British language that told in orderly fashion the deeds of all the kings of Britain", given to him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford. Modern historians have dismissed this claim. It is, however, likely that the Archdeacon furnished Geoffrey with some materials in the Welsh language that helped inspire his work, as Geoffrey's position and acquaintance with the Archdeacon would not have afforded him the luxury of fabricating such a claim outright. Much of it is based on the Historia Britonum, a 9th-century Welsh-Latin historical compilation, Bede's Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum and Gildas's 6th-century polemic De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniæ expanded with material from Bardic oral tradition, genealogical tracts, and embellished by Geoffrey's own imagination. In an exchange of manuscript material for their own histories, Robert of Torigny gave Henry of Huntingdon a copy of Historia regum Britanniae, which both Robert and Henry used uncritically as authentic history and subsequently used in their own works, by which means some of Geoffrey's fictions became embedded in popular history.

Historia Regum Britanniae is now acknowledged as a literary work of national myth containing little reliable history. This has since led many modern scholars to agree with William of Newburgh, who wrote around 1190 that "it is quite clear that everything this man wrote about Arthur and his successors, or indeed about his predecessors from Vortigern onwards, was made up, partly by himself and partly by others". Other contemporaries were similarly unconvinced by Geoffrey's "History". For example, Giraldus Cambrensis recounts the experience of a man possessed by demons: "If the evil spirits oppressed him too much, the Gospel of St John was placed on his bosom, when, like birds, they immediately vanished; but when the book was removed, and the History of the Britons by 'Geoffrey Arthur' (as Geoffrey named himself) was substituted in its place, they instantly reappeared in greater numbers, and remained a longer time than usual on his body and on the book."

Geoffrey's major work was nevertheless widely disseminated across the whole of Medieval Western Europe: Acton Griscom listed 186 extant manuscripts in 1929, and others have been identified since. It enjoyed a significant afterlife in a variety of forms, including translations/adaptations such as the Anglo-Norman Roman de Brut of Wace, the Middle English Brut of Layamon, and several anonymous Middle Welsh versions known as Brut y Brenhinedd ("Brut of the kings"). where it was generally accepted as a true account.

OTHER WRITINGS

The earliest of Geoffrey's writings to appear was probably the Prophetiae Merlini (Prophecies of Merlin), which he wrote at some point before 1135, and which appears both independently and incorporated into the Historia Regum Britanniae. It consists of a series of obscure prophetic utterances attributed to Merlin, which Geoffrey claimed to have translated from an unspecified language.

Geoffrey's structuring and reshaping of the Merlin and Arthur myths engendered the vast popularity of Merlin and Arthur myths in later literature, a popularity that lasts to this day; he is generally viewed by scholars as the major establisher of the Arthurian canon. The Historia's effect on the legend of King Arthur was so vast that Arthurian works have been categorised as "pre-" or "post-Galfridian" depending on whether or not they were influenced by him.

The third work attributed to Geoffrey is another hexameter poem Vita Merlini ("Life of Merlin"). The Vita is based much more closely on traditional material about Merlin than are the other works; here he is known as Merlin of the Woods (Merlinus Sylvestris) or Scottish Merlin (Merlinus Caledonius), and is portrayed as an old man living as a crazed and grief-stricken outcast in the forest. The story is set long after the timeframe of Historia's Merlin, but the author tries to synchronise the works with references to the mad prophet's previous dealings with Vortigern and Arthur. The Vita did not circulate widely, and the attribution to Geoffrey appears in only one late 13th-century manuscript, but it contains recognisably Galfridian elements in its construction and content, and most critics are content to recognise it as his.
IN POPULAR CULTURE

In the 2009 BBC series *Merlin* the character of Geoffrey of Monmouth was played by Michael Cronin.

SEE ALSO

Adam of Usk  
Henry of Huntingdon  
Ranulf Higdon  
William of Malmesbury

NOTES

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING


EXTERNAL LINKS


EDITIONS OF THE LATIN TEXT


Geoffrey of Monmouth, Second Variant version of the "Historia Regum Britannie" from Library of Matthew Parker.

Historia regum Britanniae, MS CUL Fl.1.25, Cambridge Digital Library.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS AVAILABLE ON THE INTERNET

*Historia Regum Britanniae*:
  Histories of the Kings of Britain, tr. by Sebastian Evans, at Sacred Texts
  By Aaron Thompson with revisions by J. A. Giles at http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/geoffrey_thompson.pdf (PDF)
  (Arthurian passages only) edited and translated by J. A. Giles at http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/geofhkb.htm.
  At Jones the Celtic Encyclopedia
  At Sacred-texts.com

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Geoffrey of Monmouth, brave soldier and expert commander; so that Britain with joy acknowledges, that in you she possesses another Henry. Chapter 2. The first inhabitants of Britain. Geoffrey of Monmouth. Chapter 3. Brutus being banished after the killing of his parent, goes into Greece. After the Trojan war, Aeneas, flying with Ascanius from the destruction of their city, sailed to Italy. The English pseudohistorian Geoffrey of Monmouth (ca. 1100-1155) is known for his "History of the Kings of Britain," through which he contributed greatly to the dissemination of the Arthurian legend throughout Europe. Geoffrey was born in or near Monmouth, Wales. By 1129 he was residing in Oxford, probably as a member of a nonmonastic ecclesiastical community.