1

The Early Arthur

What is the Historical Evidence of a 'Real' Arthur?

A leader, though not one called Arthur, had long been associated with the brave but unavailing defence of the Britons, that is, the Romanized and Christianized Celtic inhabitants of Britain, against the pagan Anglo-Saxon invaders in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. The most authentic historical story is that told by Bede (673–735), monk of Wearmouth and Jarrow, in his Latin *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ('Ecclesiastical History of the English People'), completed in 731, and supported by fairly reliable continental sources and by archaeological finds. It tells of a power vacuum that followed the Roman evacuation of Britain (which was the northernmost province of the empire) in 410, and of resistance to the various continental marauders who were sucked into this vacuum to plunder the rich counties of southern and eastern England and who eventually settled there.

But there was a need for something more dramatic and decisive than this, more intelligible as an explanation of the causes of historical events, whether in the form of a satisfying narrative of general moral sloth punished by military defeat, or in the form of a heroic story of battles bravely won and lost. The retrospect of history needs decisive battles, where a brave warrior can act as the leader of the defeated people so that his final and inevitable defeat in battle can mark the transfer of power to the victors, the *translatio imperii*.

Gildas, a British (that is, Celtic) monk of the mid-sixth century (d. 570), is the earliest witness for the story of a concerted British

resistance, under a named leader, against the Anglo-Saxon invaders. His account of events was known to Bede, and appears in his ranting tract *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* ('Concerning the Destruction and Conquest of Britain'), probably written after he had departed for Brittany. Gildas is not interested, at this early date, in foundation myths of legitimation. For him the Anglo-Saxon conquest is a punishment visited by God upon an erring people – an explanation that was always available to medieval monkish writers to deal with disasters of all kinds, from earthquakes and plagues to a succession of particularly disreputable popes.

The lack of evidence for Arthur's existence in Gildas is startling, given that he is a datable witness, writing near the time when Arthur is supposed to have existed, and about the battles in which he is supposed to have played a prominent part. Gildas does mention a British leader who around the year 500 fought a great battle against the Anglo-Saxons at Mount Badon (Mons Badonicus, probably on Salisbury Plain, where the Saxons were indeed for a time halted), but the name he gives him is not Arthur but Ambrosius Aurelianus, clearly representative of that old Romano-Christian-British civilization whose passing Gildas laments with such gloomy relish. 'A gentleman', he calls him, 'who, perhaps alone of the Romans, had survived the shock of this notable storm: certainly his parents, who had worn the purple, were slain in it. His descendants in our day have become greatly inferior to their grandfather's excellence' (25.3, p. 28).

The absence of early written evidence for Arthur is, as I say, startling, but it does not in itself mean that Arthur did not exist. In the absence of written records of any kind, other than the tainted witness of a writer like Gildas, much will be lost, and some will be lost absolutely, and the two centuries after the departure of the Romans are an exceptionally blank period. An instructive comparison is made by the historian Gerald Hammond in a review of a book on early Mayan history. He writes:

> Only in the 1970s did Mayan history begin to emerge, as the dynasties of Tikal, Palenque and Copan and other great cities of the first millennium A.D. were transformed from simple lists of kings to a chronicle of their martial and marital exploits on thousands of carved stelae, door-lintels and other media. Kings such as Jasaw Chan K'awiil I of Tikal and K'inich Janaab' Pakal I of Palenque left such elaborate and

> explicit records that we know more about both of them than we know about King Arthur.[1]

Scholars of King Arthur would give anything for a single one of those thousands of inscriptions, whether on a pillar, a post, a lintel, a stone, or any other kind of durable material. In the absence of such writing, we know next to nothing of King Arthur. The best we have is an ancient slab, still to be found on the banks of the River Camel, near Camelford, in Cornwall, near the supposed site of the legendary 'last battle' at Camlann, where Arthur and Mordred died. It has Ogham script as well as Latin and can be dated to the sixth century. The Latin inscription, so far as it can be made out, reads 'LATINI IACIT FILIUS MA. . . . RI'. Arthurian enthusiasts since the early seventeenth century have hoped that this could refer to Arthur, and a small Arthurian theme-park, opened in 2000 near the site, celebrates 'King Arthur's Stone', as well as much else of Arthurian legend, though it also displays clearly the almost conclusive evidence against any Arthurian association.

But there was an 'Arthur' floating about in Welsh legend. He is first recorded in the *Gododdin*, a commemoration of British heroes who fell at Caetrath (Catterick) about 600 AD, written by Aneirin, a Welsh poet who is presumed to have flourished in the seventh century but whose writings are preserved only in manuscripts from the thirteenth. Aneirin offers superlative praise of the hero Gwawrddur, 'but', he adds, 'he was not Arthur'. That is the first we hear of him: he was already a pre-eminent hero (and his name provided a convenient rhyme). In later Welsh legend, Arthur has the reputation of a warrior of superhuman powers, not particularly virtuous, in fact not virtuous at all, and certainly not a Christian – a winner of giant cauldrons, a killer of monstrous cats, and the stealer of the comb and scissors from between the ears of Twrch Trwyth, the terrible Chief Boar of the Island of Britain. It seems to have been in the *Historia Brittonum*, a collection of historical notes attributed, probably wrongly, to an early ninth-century monk called Nennius, that Arthur first appeared as a great patriotic Christian national leader (*dux bellorum*, 'leader of battles', not king) killed in the triumphant and decisive last charge at Mount Badon (516). His name in Nennius is 'Arthur', which was derived from the well-attested Roman name Artorius, and which had some unprecedented currency among the Celts of Britain in the sixth

century. A similar story is alluded to in the *Annales Cambriae*, a collection of historical notes surviving in a Latin manuscript of *c.*1100 but deriving from much earlier Celtic legends, of a battle at Badon in 516 where Arthur carried the cross of Jesus for three days on his shoulder and the British were the victors. There is also here a reference to a battle at Camlann in 539 in which Arthur and Medraut (Mordred) perished. So, from the ninth century, the battle-leader of Mount Badon, now for the first time named as Arthur, became a great hero, around whom began to accrete legends associated with the 'Arthur' of Celtic folklore, who may or may not be the same person (if there ever was one).

There is, it is clear, no simple answer, indeed no answer at all, to the question, 'Was there a real Arthur?' Faced with total frustration in trying to answer a question so simple, it is interesting to wonder if it was necessary to ask it in the first place. The desire to ask it, and the determination to arrive at a positive answer, has always been strong, as is evident in the account of the disinterment of the supposed Arthur's skeletal remains at Glastonbury in 1191 or in Caxton's determination to prove Arthur historical in his Preface to Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (1485) by offering evidence on the present whereabouts of Lancelot's sword, Gawain's skull and the Round Table. On these occasions there were, it is true, particular reasons for trying to prove that Arthur was a real person: the abbey of Glastonbury was eager to use Arthur to establish its special venerable antiquity and with that its exemption from episcopal visitation, while Caxton was making the usual publisher's claim to have the full, true and authentic story. But even when there are no such practical reasons, the desire for a real Arthur still remains strong, as can be seen from the caravans of TV cameramen and newshounds and assorted well-wishers who have accompanied every supposed archaeological sighting of Arthur, such as that at Cadbury Camp in Somerset in 1966, and who remain on the alert for every Arthurian promotional stunt. It is not very different from the publicity that is given to UFOs.

In a larger sense, the desire to find a historical Arthur can be understood as part of the yearning for 'great men' or heroes, a desire that is powerfully fed by both the idea of the individual and the idea of the subordination of the individual to the will of the leader or to the state. Belief in the power of individuals to change things is writ large in the belief that 'great men', whether dark-age kings or

modern presidents and prime ministers, are individuals who can change everything. In this way, attention can be distracted from the painful and intractable realities of social and economic circumstance. The desire to seek a historical Arthur is part of this 'cult of personality', of belief in a great king who changed the course of history. Of course, even in the mythical story, Arthur did not change anything for long, but then he has a further great claim on us as a great man, that is, the attraction of the tragic hero, the survivor of a great civilization fighting a desperate rearguard action against barbarians – even if those barbarians, in the end, are *us*, the English, and even if the process was actually one of prolonged and messy integration rather than a doomed heroic last stand. Many British people stayed and mixed peaceably with the Anglo-Saxons, and many of the battles that were fought were not between nation and nation but between one local faction and another. At the battle of Catterick, around 600, in Welsh poetry a famous heroic battle against the invaders, there were British and Anglo-Saxons fighting on both sides. It is a not uncommon kind of national myth-making: the tangle of events in eighth-century Spain, when the Frankish armies, withdrawing after unsuccessfully encountering the Moorish conquerors of the peninsula, were set upon in the Pyrenees by hostile local groups, had to be simplified for the sake of the narrative of French nationhood into the story of a hero and a villain and of the doomed last stand of the hero Roland at Roncesvalles against the overwhelming might of the infidel.

Winston Churchill, whose *History of the English-speaking Peoples* fits well the idea of history as what 'ought' to have happened, speaks thus of the desire and need for Arthur's historicity:

> It is all true, or ought to be; and more and better besides. And wherever men are fighting against barbarism, tyranny and massacre, for freedom, law and honour, let them remember that the fame of their deeds, even though they themselves be exterminated, may perhaps be celebrated as long as the world rolls round. Let us then declare that King Arthur and his noble knights, guarding the Sacred Flame of Christianity and the theme of a world order, sustained by valour, physical strength, and good horses and armour, slaughtered innumerable hosts of foul barbarians and set decent folk an example for all time.[2]

So Arthur, whether he existed or not, in any form that we might recognize, had to be invented (or found) to fill a vacuum in history

and to fulfil a need for a national hero. The nature of his existence as what is supplied is what has made him always so malleably contemporary. He is a vacuum, waiting to be filled with signification, a floating signifier, or, as it is put in the Introduction to the book of essays edited by Shichtmann and Carley – which has much more of this kind of jargon – the legend is 'a set of unstable signs appropriated by differing cultural groups to advance differing ideological agendas'.[3] For this use, Roland was less effective. Though he seems to have been expanded from very modest historical beginnings in order to provide a suitable national Christian hero at the time of the First Crusade in 1099, and though he survived to be transmogrified into romance by the Italian poet Ariosto, his role was too well defined for him to survive in the way Arthur has.

At a deeper level than the cult of the hero, there is also the desire for the narrative of historical inevitability, in which the 'causes' of history will become transparent, and the death of the hero will mark the transfer of power. So, as with Arthur, the American myth of 'manifest destiny' found inevitability and legitimation for the American spread westward in stories of brave and temporarily successful but ultimately doomed defensive actions led by famous Indian warriors. Sitting Bull and Geronimo are the modern equivalents of Arthur in this account: it is interesting that Sitting Bull is also associated with legends of a second coming, when buffaloes will once more roam the prairies.

Beyond this, there is the simple desire for historical certainty. Renaissance scholars like Milton, having first been enchanted by the Arthurian legends, found disenchantment in scornful rejection of their claims to veracity. This attitude has come to be regarded as scientific and objective, but proving that Arthur did not exist is just as impossible as proving that he did. On this matter, like others, it is good to think of the desire for certainty as the pursuit of an illusion.

Geoffrey of Monmouth

By the early twelfth century Arthur already had a long career, as we have seen, in Celtic legend, most of it oral, and surviving in written form only in later copies from no earlier than the thirteenth century. He appears frequently in the collection of Welsh prose tales known as

the *Mabinogion*, and presumed to date from the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. He is often associated with other warriors who have a permanent place in the later Arthurian tradition, and particularly with Cei (Kay) and Bedwyr (Bedivere). He first appears as the king of a well-known court in a tale from this collection called *Culhwch and Olwen*, perhaps to be dated as early as 1100. That his fame had spread beyond Celtic-speaking lands is evident from the remarkable survival in Italy of a semi-circular sculpted stone frieze over the north doorway of Modena cathedral. It shows 'Artus de Bretania' and others fighting, named in carved labels, and is usually dated not later than about 1120.[4] But even allowing for this enigmatic fragment of evidence, and for the persistence of Arthur in Celtic legend, it seems that Arthur would probably have gone the way of Cuchulainn and other Celtic heroes, into a more narrowly circumscribed cultural history, if it had not been for Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1154), whose Latin prose *Historia regum Britanniae* ('History of the Kings of Britain'), written between 1130 and 1136, is one of the most influential books ever written. The *Historia* is not itself a romance – in fact it masquerades as a meticulously exact account of British history, with details of the reigns of kings who never existed and of the numbers killed in battles that never took place – but it was the pseudo-historical basis on which the whole story of Arthur was erected.

Geoffrey studied and taught at Oxford, and spent much of his life there as a professional cleric, though he held ecclesiastical offices elsewhere, such as that of archdeacon of Llandaff. He had close associations with the aristocracy, especially Robert, earl of Gloucester (d. 1147), one of the most powerful men in the kingdom and one of the dedicatees of the *Historia*. Geoffrey was consecrated bishop of St Asaph in 1152 (a week after being ordained priest), but he never visited his see, and died in 1154.

Over two hundred manuscripts of the Latin text of the *Historia* are extant, a quite staggering number, given the probable survival rates of manuscripts of a non-religious text from such an early period, and suggestive of thousands that have perished. It was further disseminated in French and English translations. Not only is the *Historia* the primary and direct source for the whole central supposedly historical story of Arthur, it is also the only source for stories such as those of King Lear and Cymbeline (both of them the subject of plays by Shakespeare), and the lesser-known King Lud, who gave his name to

London, and King Bladud, who met his death over London in an early attempt to fly. Geoffrey begins with Brutus, an otherwise unknown great-grandson of Aeneas, who gathered the remnants of the Trojan race after the destruction of Troy and sailed to the distant isle of Albion, which he renamed Britain, after himself. There he founded the city of Troynovant, or New Troy (a rationalization of Trinovantes, which Geoffrey had come across as the name of a historical British tribe that lived east and north of London in pre-Roman times), later called London, after King Lud, of course. Geoffrey carries the history of Britain down to the death of Cadwallader (d. 689), an actual historical person and the last 'British', that is, Welsh, king with serious claims to dominion in England. In between, he alternates fairly rapid series of kings with more developed narratives of Leir, of Belinus and Brennius and their conquest of Gaul and Rome, of the Roman invasions of Britain, and of Uther Pendragon and Arthur.

Geoffrey used Gildas, Bede and Nennius, and took much from traditional Welsh legend, of which he had an extensive knowledge, and from Breton legend. Some of it would have been oral, but some too would have been written: the fact that the Welsh material he used is known to us now only in copies made after his death does not mean that he did not use earlier written sources which have since disappeared. But he also unquestionably invented a great deal too, especially in the early part of his narrative, his purpose being to supply England with the national history, the myth of national emergence, that it lacked. The Romans traced their ancestry to the Trojan hero Aeneas, in the story told by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, and other peoples claimed Trojan heroes as their eponymous ancestors, the Lombards, for instance, claiming Langobardus and the Franks Francus. Virgil was the great model for emulation, and because of him the Trojans were generally the heroes of the Trojan war in the medieval view, the Greeks being regarded as a shifty and treacherous race. Geoffrey's purpose was to claim descent for Britain from Troy, and also to create a great national hero, in whom the nation would be symbolized, in the person of Arthur. Geoffrey alleges that he derived the new parts of his work, the stories so far untold, from 'a certain very ancient book, written in the British language' (*britannici sermonis librum vetustissimum*), owned by his friend Walter, the well-attested archdeacon of Oxford, and originating in Brittany (which would conveniently explain why no one in England had seen it before). The book had

unfortunately disappeared since he had used it. He warns rival historians that they have no chance of competing with him on early British history. He has scooped the pool. Contemporary historians of a more sober cast of mind, such as William Newburgh, were scornful of his 'History', but Geoffrey was by now working, so to speak, in a different genre.

It is an amazing feat of invention. Probably half of Geoffrey's ninety-nine kings between Brutus and Cadwallader are totally made up, though one could not tell this from the plausible-sounding names he invents for them: nothing sounds more improbable than Rud Hud Hudibras, Dunvallo Molmutius or Gurguit Barbtruc, but these are all names Geoffrey could have found in old Welsh genealogies. Geoffrey's inventions are dressed up as perfectly sober matter-of-fact history, with synchronized dating references to Old Testament history, and a particular fondness for explaining the derivation of place-names. His battle-descriptions are detailed and circumstantial, full of military tactics and replete with statistics of the size of the armies and the numbers killed. Sometimes the numbers don't quite add up, which of course suggests that they are drawn from much older sources that may be confused about such things – for clearly, someone who was making them up would get them right.

These inventions force us to ask an odd question: Did Geoffrey know the difference between what was believed to be historically true and what he knew he had made up? There are two possible answers, or rather two more questions. One is, Are narrative historians always sure they know the difference between the two? The second, In what ways does it matter? There was a Carolingian hagiographer or writer of saints' lives of the eighth century who acknowledged that he had no information on certain of the saints whose lives he had written. In such cases, he says, he had made up lives for them of an appropriate kind, knowing that God would guide his pen just as he had guided their lives.[5] In other words, they are portrayed as living the edifying lives they must have lived, and those lives are in that sense more true and, even, more real than the lives they might have lived in actuality, if that actuality were known about, or if indeed they had actually existed. To deduce, from this, that the Middle Ages had no understanding of the difference between fact and fiction is to imply that the difference modern people wish to make is the best or only one there is. The 'very ancient book in the British language'

most probably never existed, but it is unlikely that Geoffrey's purpose was to practise upon the gullibility of his audience and patrons, or to share a joke with them about the gullibility of others, or to induce a whimsical and amused complicity such as later authors might indulge when they constructed elaborate framing narratives of pseudo-authentication, like Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose*. What Geoffrey was chiefly doing was to secure authority and credit for his version of the history that needed to be written by claiming for it a lost and venerable antiquity. He was supplying the written record of the British history that had been lost.

It may also seem odd, in a way, that Geoffrey should write in praise of the British and be so severe upon the Anglo-Saxons, when he came of and was writing for an Anglo-Norman aristocracy whose supreme recent achievement had been in conquering those very same Anglo-Saxons and colonizing their country. Representing them as untitled holders of the land would reflect poorly on their conquerors. What we mean by 'English' or 'British' is a hard question here, when a Celtic people, most numerous in his day only in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, are celebrated at the expense of the Anglo-Saxon people (who constitute most of the population of England) by victorious Norman people from France who are descended from the Viking invaders of Normandy. What we can point to are the close links between the Anglo-Normans and the Welsh, as indeed those links are present in Geoffrey's own name, which associates him with both; and how the whole story works as a legitimation of serial invasion and conquest from Brutus on, and also, especially in the emphasis on Arthur's continental conquests, as a legitimation of Angevin imperial ambitions. But there are many other topical allusions and reworkings of themes relevant to the contemporary preoccupations of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy: for instance, the very favourable view of Brittany throughout, as Arthur's closest ally, is relevant to Henry I's attempts to woo the Duchy of Brittany into an alliance. In this way, as often, Arthurian legend provided a narrative that would, with appropriate modifications, make the views of a particular political group look like the way things had always been and had to be.

Geoffrey gives particular prominence to Arthur, who occupies about a quarter of the whole work. His *Historia* is in prose, but announces its epic ambition by being divided into the classic twelve books, of which Books 9, 10 and part of 11 deal with Arthur. Before that, Merlin plays

a major part. Book 7 contains the 'Prophecies of Merlin', a series of riddling pseudo-prophecies that identify the actors of future history as symbolic animals and lend themselves therefore to fulfilment in a very large number of ways. The Prophecies were written prior to the *Historia* and then incorporated in it, but they were soon detached and in circulation separately. There were many wild and whirling imitations, and this genre of 'political prophecy' is mocked by the Fool in *King Lear* (III.ii). Merlin is also the principal character in Book 8, which ends with the tricking of Ygerna and the engineering of Arthur's conception. Book 9 deals with Arthur's accession, his battles against the Saxons, his marriage to Guenevere, the establishment of his court, his campaigns in Norway and Gaul (against the French king Frollo, whom Arthur kills in single combat before the opposing armies with a single blow which splits Frollo's head into two halves), the holding of his first plenary court at Caerleon (City of the Legions, a Roman city in south Wales to which Geoffrey transferred Arthur's main castle from its traditional Celtic location in Cornwall), and the arrival of the Roman embassy to demand tribute. Book 10 begins with Arthur's dream of the bear and the dragon, and goes on to narrate the arrival at Barfleur, the fight against the giant of Mont-Saint-Michel, Gawain's embassy to Rome, the ambush of pursuing Romans after his hurried departure, the ambush of the British taking prisoners to Paris, and the battle of Saussy (which occupies almost half the book). Book 11 tells of Mordred's treachery and Arthur's three battles against him, ending with the battle of Camblan, which Geoffrey dates to 542 AD, and the carrying away of Arthur, mortally wounded, to the Isle of Avalon. The crown passes to his cousin Constantine, and Book 12 tells of his successors, now in effect kings of Wales only, until Cadwallader finally abandons Britain to the Saxons.

Most of the familiar story of King Arthur, it will be seen, is already here, though there is as yet no Round Table, and his followers are either relatives, like Gawain and Mordred, or household servants, like his seneschal Kay and his cup-bearer Bedivere, or else tributary kings and dukes, like Cador, and not feudal knights. But there are the beginnings of a court such as will provide in the future a setting for romantic adventures and entanglements. Arthur's first crown-wearing at Caerleon, to which all the leaders of the British come to pay homage, is elaborately described, and includes the first-ever reference to a battle-game or tournament fought for fun, where the

ladies wore the colours of their menfolk and 'aroused them to passionate excitement by their flirtatious behaviour' (ix.14, p. 230). We seem to be suddenly in the high Middle Ages here, though we come back to earth with the rest of the day's sports, which include playing dice and heaving heavy stones and rocks around.

Elsewhere, though, Geoffrey gives little attention to women as objects of romantic attachment. Cador's contribution to the discussion of the demands of the Roman ambassadors is to welcome the opportunity of some serious fighting since the long spell of peace has left men unused to their weapons, 'playing at dice, and burning up their strength with women' (ix.15, p. 232). Earlier, the story of Uther's passion for Ygerne has none of the trappings of the ideal medieval code of love. Uther simply burns with passion and has to find a way of satisfying it: it is his destiny. Nor is there any investigation of Ygerne's feelings on the matter, no debate about whether she really thought it was her husband in bed with her such as we might think inseparable from the notion of identity; she seems to accept what has happened quite peaceably when she finds out, though the fact that her husband Gorlois turns out to have been conveniently killed, just the minute before Uther jumped into bed with her, makes things easier to bear. Geoffrey's rationalizations are interesting here: he recognizes, and has as witness the stories of the birth of both Alexander the Great and Jesus Christ, that the greatest heroes must be born of mysterious conceptions, with supernatural interventions as a form of suprahistorical legitimization, but he stops short of having Arthur born of any but a (just about) legal union or of any but the king.

Geoffrey is equally perfunctory in describing Arthur's marriage to Guenevere. She is introduced simply as 'a woman called Guenevere' (ix.9) and within two sentences he is married to her. Later, Geoffrey's professed reluctance to comment on Guenevere's adulterous liaison with Mordred may be a form of gentlemanly discretion, or a passing claim to veracity (refusal to talk about something suggests to the reader that there is something real to talk about), but it is more likely to be evidence of his lack of interest in the desires and feelings of men and women in their sexual relationships with each other. For him, battles and skirmishes, strategies and slaughters, are the stuff of history, especially when religion can be called in to sanction them: Archbishop Dubricius guarantees salvation to those who die in Arthur's cause, and Arthur himself carries an image of the Blessed Virgin on

his shield as he rushes forward with his sword into the thick of battle. 'Every man whom he struck, calling upon God as he did so, he felled at a single blow' (ix.4, p. 217).

Wace, *Roman de Brut*

Geoffrey's *Historia* was written in Latin, which was the *lingua franca* of educated or literate people (the original meaning of Latin *litteratus*, 'literate', was 'literate in Latin'), and therefore principally of clerics, who were the only people who were normally taught Latin. But its impact was such that it was soon translated into French, which was the aristocratic *lingua franca* of western Europe (and remained so in Italy until the time of Dante, in England until the time of Chaucer). A rhymed translation, the *Estorie des Bretons*, no longer extant, was made about 1150 by the Anglo-Norman Geffrei Gaimar. It was soon superseded by another French version, also in octosyllabic couplets, called by its author the *Geste des Bretons* ('The History of the Britons'), but soon renamed by scribes the *Roman de Brut* to fit it to the new fashions. This very free translation, or rather expanded adaptation, was made by Robert Wace, a cleric from Jersey in the Channel Islands who had settled in Caen in Normandy, and presented to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the imperious and flamboyant new queen of Henry II, in 1155. This puts the work immediately at the heart of European courtly culture, for the court of Henry II (reigned 1154–89) and the glamorous divorcée Eleanor was the most exciting in Europe. Henry's power extended over most of France as well as England, and the court and literary language of his kingdom was French.

Wace follows the sequence of events in Geoffrey pretty closely, but he constantly adapts the story to the fashions of a more courtly and chivalric and self-consciously elegant culture. His work takes its place among the many contemporaneizations and romanticizations of earlier stories, especially classical epics, that were being produced in the twelfth century to fit them to the new culture of chivalry and idealized love. There was a *Roman d'Eneas*, a *Roman de Troie*, a *Roman de Thebes*, even a *Roman d'Edippus*, and characteristic of all of them was to stress the elegance of court manners, costume and decoration, and the importance of affairs of the heart. Achilles' relationship with Polyxena takes on a much greater prominence at the siege of Troy,

and the whole love-affair of Troilus and Cressida is woven into the story out of nothing. Virgil's story of the love of Aeneas and Lavinia, in the *Roman d'Eneas*, is elevated so as to give it more attention, and a romantic episode is interpolated even into the story of Thebes, though fortunately there is no attempt to romanticize the relationship of Oedipus and Jocasta.

The tone of Wace's treatment is well illustrated in his account of Uther's passion for Igerne. Wace turns Geoffrey's abrupt and rather clinical account of Uther's infatuation into a fashionable public flirtation, with laughs and glances, and with Igerne joining in quite knowingly.

> He glanced aside at the lady, and smiled if she met his eye. All that he dared of love he showed. He saluted her by his privy page, and bestowed upon her a gift. He jested gaily with the lady, looking smilingly upon her, and made a great semblance of friendship. Igerne was modest and discreet. She neither granted Uther's hope, nor denied. (p. 36)

Also the signs of love are more elaborately described in Uther according to the codes of behaviour that were beginning to be celebrated as part of the cult of ideal love. No man could really count himself in love unless he thought continually about his beloved, lost his appetite, couldn't sleep, and grew thin and pale, and Uther duly suffers a beginner's version of these symptoms (where in Geoffrey it is simply said that he will have a physical breakdown if he fails to get hold of Ygerne): 'Whether he ate or drank, spoke or was silent, she was ever in his thought'. A curious book, the *De arte honeste amandi* ('The Art of Honest Loving'), written for Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter (by her first marriage), Marie de Champagne (1145–98), by her chaplain, Andreas Capellanus, gives a seemingly serious list of all the rules of the lovers' behaviour in the service of his lady, as well as model dialogues for the purposes of seduction. It has been sometimes taken seriously, as if it really did provide rules of conduct for real life, or else it has been treated as a covert moralizing attack on fashionably loose sexual morals, but the likeliest explanation seems to be that it is a rather sophisticated and *risqué* send-up of some of the excesses of an erotically charged court atmosphere. The existence of such a parody would argue for a thriving culture of amorous sentiment.

Wace is comparatively restrained in his romanticization of the story of Arthur, perhaps necessarily so because of the nature of the story. Guenevere is declared to be surpassingly beautiful, and Arthur to have set his love wonderfully upon her, which is more than there is in Geoffrey, but the account of their marriage is swiftly brought to an end with the reminder that they had no child together (which Geoffrey forebore to mention). Elsewhere, there is a generally greater emphasis on human feelings and affections than in Geoffrey, and this may be part of the courtly cultivation in the twelfth century of a more refined sensibility, of which the growing interest in romantic love was part. The return of Arthur's lords from the battles against Frollo and the French is described as bringing joy to their ladies, and the love of knights for their ladies and their desire to show well in their sight are prominent in the greatly expanded description of the courtly festivities at Arthur's crown-wearing. But there is no elaboration of love-sentiment such as we shall see in later romance.

Wace's treatment of Geoffrey's story shows also some tentative first moves towards the portrayal of Arthur, though he remains essentially a martial figure, as a chivalric hero. He speaks of him at his coronation as a prince of courtesy and 'one of Love's lovers' (p. 43), a conventional enough phrase but one that would have been unthinkable for Geoffrey. As Arthur prepares for battle near Bath, there is a more fashionably detailed account of his armour and accoutrements than in Geoffrey, and he even has a horse, a proud destrier (p. 48). He does not appear to use it in the ensuing battle, which is fought on foot, Roman style, as in Geoffrey. Wace has spontaneously equipped Arthur with what no hero of chivalric romance (no *chevalier*) can be without. He also suppresses the archbishop Dubricius's exhortation to the troops before the same battle, in which he promises salvation to those who die in this just war for their country, and instead Arthur is given a speech of proud revenge. Arthur is becoming slightly less of a national religious leader and warrior and slightly more of a Europeanized chivalric hero.

Layamon's *Brut*

A hundred years or so after Geoffrey had launched Arthur on his international career, Wace's version of the *Brut*, as it was coming to

be called, was taken up by an obscure country priest of Arley Kings, on the River Severn near Worcester, and put into English verse. The *Brut* of Layamon[6] is a complete version of Wace which expands the Arthurian section with great patriotic vigour and enthusiasm and has many claims to be the first or even the only true English national epic.

> Hit com him on mode & on his mern thonke
> Thet he wolde of Engle tha æthelen tellen.
> (lines 6–7)

[It came into his mind and into his high purpose that he would tell of the noble deeds of the English.]

The 'English', as we know them, were strictly speaking the villains of the piece and not the heroes, but in charting all the patterns of conquest and movements of allegiance it is his passionate attachment to the 'land of Britain' that gives Layamon's work its national epic temper.

Layamon does not misunderstand or always neglect Wace's courtly interventions in Geoffrey, but he works against Wace in creating a heroic and martial rather than a courtly and chivalric atmosphere, and in portraying Arthur as a fierce warrior-king. Layamon is inspired by strong national and patriotic feelings which found little opportunity for expression while he was labouring after Wace in the early part of the history, king by confected king, but Arthur provides a focus for all his patriotic and imaginative energies and all his love of heroic battle-poetry. It is on these occasions that Layamon, who writes an idiosyncratic mixture of traditional unrhymed alliterative poetry derived from Anglo-Saxon and rhyming or assonantal couplets derived from Wace, seems closest to the Germanic heroic spirit of poems like the *Fight at Finnesburh* and the *Battle of Maldon*.

The general character of Layamon's *Brut* can be illustrated from some comparisons with Wace. Wace's first introduction of Arthur in person is cool, measured, generalized and abstract, proposing to tell without exaggeration of one who surmounted all in courtesy and nobility, virtue and liberality. Layamon excises all comment on love and courtesy and concentrates on particular detail to build up a portrait of extravagant heroism and kingliness, steeped in religious awe.

In the battles with the Saxons, Layamon writes with brilliant panache, bringing his poem to a climax as he comes to the treacherous raid by the Saxons on the south-west after they have made a truce with Arthur. The account in Wace is generalized and well articulated, with the sequence and geography of events in clear perspective; Layamon is full of graphic, violent, often inessential detail, poured out pell-mell as if the verse can hardly contain the fury and indignation and bitter foreshadowing irony concerning the fate of the perfidious Saxons. The battle of Bath brings this sequence to a climax: Wace prepares for it with a careful description of Arthur's advance and an elaborate and solemn speech of exhortation, before describing the battle quite briefly (more briefly than Geoffrey, who as usual gives a precise and circumstantial account of battlefield and general strategy). These careful preparations are almost swept aside in the onrush of Layamon's martial fervour (which has the love of violence characteristic of those who have occupations that keep them well away from any actual fighting), with vigorous scenes of individual combat and mêlée punctuated with vows of vengeance, boastings, denunciation, execration, scorn and triumph, and ending with Arthur's sarcastic tauntings over the defeated Saxons as they flee and are drowned in the River Avon (10638–42):

> Yurstendæi wes Baldulf cnihten alre baldest;
> nu he stant on hulle and Avene bihaldeth;
> hu ligeth i than stræme stelene fisces,
> mid sweorde bigeorede. Heore sund is awemmed;
> heore scalen wleoteth swulc gold-faȝe sceldes.

[Yesterday Baldulf was the boldest of knights; now he stands on a hill and looks upon the Avon, how there lie in the stream steel fishes, equipped with swords. Their swimming-power is impaired! Their scales gleam like gilded shields.]

Throughout Wace is calm, practical, rational, with an eye for the realities of war and strategy; Layamon is aggressive, violent, heroic, ceremonial and ritualistic.

Arthur's battles against the Saxons illustrate how Layamon makes a drama out of what in Geoffrey and Wace was more like a chronicle: the difference is like that between the Bayeux tapestry, with each episode given the same sort of attention, and a huge epic battle-scene.

There is a much stronger sense of emotional identification with Arthur and the British, shown in Arthur's speech to his troops before the battle of Lincoln (10287–98) – a noble exhortation to them to destroy those who have brought calamity upon Britain, and to avenge our kinsmen and their realm, 'ure cun and heore riche' (10297). The attachment to the British cause is strong enough to permit even some criticism of Arthur, as an individual with a capacity for human error, in the suggestion that he was headstrong and rash in allowing a truce when he did (10428): 'Her wes Arthur the king athelan bidæled' ('. . . lacking in sound judgement'). Elsewhere, in the same spirit of emotional identification, there is exaggeration of enemy atrocities, insulting ironies at their expense, and ominous foreshadowing of the fate that awaits them. The 'epic similes' that are so prominent a feature of Layamon's style in this section are strongly emotive in spirit: Arthur is compared to a savage wolf, a raging wild boar, his foes to fleeing cranes or wretched foxes dug out of their holes by hunters.

Another distinctive feature of Layamon's treatment of Arthur is his serious-minded attention to the establishment of an ordered kingdom under the rule of law. After the campaigns against the Saxons are over, Arthur holds the kingdom for many years in peace, but eventually disagreements about precedence among his diverse followers break out in open brawling at a feast and many are killed. Arthur deals with the problem by first executing those responsible for starting the fight, and having the noses of their womenfolk cut off so that no one will want to marry them and the tribe will die out. Having thus established law and order in his own unique way, he has the Round Table installed, at which there can be no disputes about precedent. The Round Table was very briefly mentioned by Wace, but here it is made much of, with an explanatory story. It is, contrary to most modern portrayals, a hollow rather than a solid disc, with people sitting inside facing those on the outside (11436). It is said to travel everywhere with Arthur, but this, since it is big enough to seat 1600, would have presented problems. Layamon is quite careful to distance himself from the story at such points. 'This was that table', he says, 'of which Britons boast, telling fables of many kinds about Arthur' (11454–5), and warns about the dangers of speaking from personal prejudice before himself going on to state as plain fact that there was never any king like Arthur. The air of painfully honest truth-telling makes what he says appear to be no more than the

truth. He introduces the same note of caution in speaking of the belief of the Britons that Arthur dwells still in Avalon and will return one day to help the people of England. It was, he says, with all the air of someone bringing weighty evidence to bear, one of Merlin's prophecies, and 'his sayings were true' (14296). In this, and in every other way, Layamon shows his care for his reputation as a historian, and not a romancer.