Roma as Character: The Role of Rome in *Historia Regum Britanniae*

By Stephen Brown

A reader with even a casual familiarity with ancient history realizes quickly that Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* [*HRB*] is a not altogether factual source of knowledge for the period he chronicles. Although his narrative makes for compelling reading, it is a curious amalgam of three types of information. First, it is an account of historical events; but it also relates legends and traditional stories of bygone days as if they were equally true; and lastly there are certainly passages which are a product of Geoffrey's own creative process. Devotion to accuracy of sources does not seem to be an important feature of his writing, but one is swept along by the sheer exuberance of the chronicle. His history of the original Britons, the Celtic peoples who inhabited Britain before the arrival of the Saxons, also encompasses the wider story of the western world of the time, that being Rome and its empire, and of the Roman people who were, according to Geoffrey, closely related to the Britons.

The *Historia* does not read like a dry chronicle of historical facts, rather it is related more in the style of a series of tales, written to amuse and enlighten, not unlike that modern concoction, the epic historical novel. Since the book spans considerably more than a millenium, there is no central character in the story. King Arthur dominates the second half of the volume, but I suggest that the pivotal figure of the story is Britain herself, and the nation which inhabits her. Rome, the centre of the West at that time, is the catalyst for much of what happens, and she changes according to circumstance, now acting as an older sibling of Britain, now as a petulant neighbour, sometimes as the best friend, and often as the sworn enemy. Rome, as the secondary character in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, is worth a closer look.

Rome is a composite of her own populace. Throughout the narrative, Rome is represented by a succession of individuals. These range from emperors to scoundrels. Indeed the two roles often mesh, just as they did historically. This cast of characters gives us a rounded view of the city. We see Rome from many aspects, including the laws of Rome; the military; Rome's history; and religion. We observe the status of the city and the people therein, from both her own perspective and from the point of view of external observers.

We are not told a great deal about Rome as a locality. Her buildings are never described to us, nor is the landscape in which she is situated. The city of Rome is an idea, a symbol of civilization. We do learn that certain Britons have been to Rome. Coillus, the king of the Britons was in fact brought up in Rome and revered the place as all-powerful. "Quippe uidebat totum mundum subditum illis. eorumque potestatem quosque pagos quamque prouintiam superare [*HRB* IV.xviii]." King Arviragus' nobles agree with this. "Dicebant autem non esse ei dedecori subditum fuisse romanis cum totius orbis inperio potirentur [*HRB* IV.xiv]." Their earlier monarch, Kymbelinus, had the added advantage of being brought up by Augustus Caesar. He felt a similar affinity, to the extent that "cum

posset tributum eorum retinere gratis inpendebat [*HRB* IV.xi].” Such is the opinion of those who grew up and are familiar with the place, but the king Marius, born and bred in Britain, fought against and conquered the warlike Scythians. Geoffrey says of him: “At marius cum totam insulam summa pace composuisset. cepit amorem cum populo romano haber. tributa soluens que exigebantur ab eo [*HRB* IV.xvii].” Rome had an impressive character, capable of seducing her island neighbour, Britain. But what of her appearance? The only suggestion we receive of the material beauty and grandeur of Rome is as an aside from Geoffrey’s description of the City of Legions in Book XII, Chapter xii: “Ex alia uero parte pratis atque nemoribus uallata. regalibus prepollebant palatiis. ita ut aureis tectorum fastigiis romam imitaretur.”

Rome as an idea or an inspiration is, for Geoffrey of Monmouth, much more powerful than her physical presence. She has a character which is unpredictable, but she is, for the most part, someone to be revered. She has always been concerned with such lofty ideas as Justice and Morality, and these are upheld by her firm belief in the gods and Fate, and in their role in the events of the world. As a norm, the gods do not take an active role in the lives of individual humans, but for important and devout persons like Brutus, on whom the founding of a nation depends, the gods will step in and lead or push things in a certain direction. Thus, soon after the proper rites of sacrifice have been made, in thanks for his military victory, Brutus is visited by the goddess Diana, in whose temple he is sleeping. She gives him a vision of the land that awaits him:

> “Brute sub occasu solis trans gallica regna;
> Insula in occeano est habitata gigantibus olim
> Nunc deserta quidem gentibus apta tuis.
> Illa tibi fietque tuis locus aptus in æuum.
> Hec erit & natis altera troia tuis.
> Hic de prole tua reges nascentur. & ipsis.
> Totius terræ subditus orbis erit.”
> [*HRB* I.xi]

With such a calling, Brutus is made aware of the importance of his journey. It is reminiscent of his own grandfather’s destiny to found Rome. This is not the only prediction involving Rome in the *Historia*. The Sibyl has made her predictions about the three Britons who will come to rule Rome. And at the end of Merlin’s prophecy to Vortigern in Book VII, his revelation alters into an astrological vision, the planets, then as now, bearing the names of Roman deities.

There are several mentions of the Roman gods, chiefly Mercury, Jupiter, Janus and, as we have recently seen, of Diana. In Geoffrey’s narrative, the pagan gods of Rome definitely have their place and are not spoken of in a disparaging way, even after the Christian God has come to prominence. However, when the Saxon brothers Hengist and Horsa describe their own pagan beliefs, and relate their gods to the Roman equivalents (Woden is, supposedly, the equivalent of Mercury, a rather doubtful comparison on Geoffrey’s part), Vortigern pities them for their credulity [HRB VI.x]. This is no doubt a symptom of the character of Vortigern himself. Vortigern is certainly anxious to learn the auguries of

Merlin. Well into the Christian era, there is a certain tolerance for the ways of Merlin, and a belief in the Sibylline prophecies [*HRB* IX.xvii]. The author shows a remarkable tolerance, himself, for the pagan ways, while writing in the twelfth century.

In Book IV, Chapter xii, with the announcement of the birth of Jesus Christ, Rome enters a new era in her existence. We are soon thereafter informed that the apostle Peter is founding the Church of Antioch and would become the bishop of Rome [*HRB* IV.xv]. The new faith quickly spreads from Rome to Britain. During the reign of good King Lucius, who was anxious to learn about Christianity, "Epistolas suas eleutherio pape direxit, petens ut ab eo christianitatem reciperet," and Roman missionaries, Faganus and Duvanus, were sent to Britain [*HRB* IV.xix]. This was before the year 156 A.D., the year of Lucius' death [*HRB* V.i]. Pope Gregory would have to send Augustine centuries later to correct the damage done by the Anglo-Saxons, "qui pagana supersticione cecati. in illa insule parte quam habebant. totam deleuerant christianitatem [*HRB* XI.xii]."

Rome now begins to add a transcendant aspect to her character. To be sure, the Romans themselves are still capable of heinous deeds, but the city seems to be above all of that. This is illustrated several times. While Julius Caesar struggles with Cassibellaun, during his invasion of Britain, aided and abetted by Cassibellaun's brother Androgeus, Androgeus repents, and steps in to keep Caesar from punishing his brother too severely. Years later, despite Androgeus' primary standing in succession to the throne, when Cassibellaun dies, the crown goes to their other brother, Tenuantius, "nam androgeus romam cum cesare profectus fuerat [*HRB* IV.xi]." Androgeus' journey to Rome, after having renounced his crown, has the appearance of a journey to the next world, the trip being so final that Androgeus will never return to rule. It also, by implication, gives Julius Caesar an air of the divine, acting as Androgeus' guide. Cadwallader, too, after Arthur's transmutation to Avallon, has a similar experience:
"Tunc cadualadrus abiectis mundialibus propter dominum regnumque perpetuum uenit romam. et a sergio papa confirmatus. inopinato etiam morbo correptus. duodecima autem die kalendarum maiarum. anno ab incarnatione domini .d.cl.xxxix. a contagione carnis solutus. celestis regni aulam ingressus est." [*HRB* XII. xviii]

Geoffrey does indeed seem to hold Julius Caesar in superhuman esteem. The most overt example of this is in the tale of Nennius' encounter with Caesar, when Caesar's sword deals him a mortal blow, but gets lodged in Nennius' shield, so that he is unable to retrieve it and must leave it behind. Nennius succeeds in freeing the sword and goes on to use it to dire effect. "Quemcumque cum ipso percucibat. uel ei caput amputabat. uel ipsum sauciatum preteribat... Erat nomen gladii crocea mors quia nullus euadebat uiuus qui cum illo uulnerabatur [*HRB* IV.iii]." The sword has an almost magical quality, foreshadowing Arthur's own sword, Caliburn. As Arthur would come to be the personification of Britain, so Caesar is, at this point in the narrative, the embodiment of Rome, with all her negative and positive attributes.

Rome certainly had, like Julius Caesar, an insatiable appetite for conquest, and a belief in her own entitlement to that supremacy. It is the sort of thing which drew Geoffrey's criticism as expressed through the words of Cassibellaun. The British king in his letter to

Caesar mentions, “romani populi cupiditas,” and states, “Obprobrium itaque tibi petiuisti cesar. cum communis nobilitatis uena britonibus & romanis ab enea defluat. & eiusdem cognationis una & eadem catena prefulgeat. qua in firma amicitia coniungi deberent [*HRB* IV.ii].” Caesar was very much aware of this kinship between the two nations, but was not impressed by the Britons. “Set nisi fallor ualde degenerati sunt. a nobis. nec quid sit militia nouerunt. cum infra oceanum extra orbem commaneant [*HRB* IV.i].” He obviously thinks they are easy prey, and is not prepared for the coming fight.

But the Romans are definitely a fine race of soldiers. In two discriptions of their character, Geoffrey mentions their pride and virility: “superbiuit maximianus propter infinitam copiam auri & argenti que illi cotidie affluebat... [*HRB* V.xii]” and “At romani quamquam periculum in fluuio perpessi fuissent. ut terra potiti sunt uiriliter brittonum irruptioni restiterunt [*HRB* IV.vii],” and also mentions the greatness of their commanders, and their insatiable appetite for victory.

Another aspect of Rome about which Geoffrey of Monmouth makes periodic mention is her wonderful legal system, which has lasted to the present day. In the *Historia* people visit Rome as a centre of justice, to acquire permission from the senate for their business. For example, there is the case of Carausius, “qui cum probitatem suam in multis debellationibus examinasset. profectus est romam. petiuitque licentiam a senatu ut maritima britannie ab incursione barbarica nauigiis tueretur [*HRB* V.iii].” Of course, Carausius turns out to be the worst type of selfish opportunist, but he was “ex infima gente creatus,” which explains everything. Rome has her baser aspects and her noble side. Arthur’s wife, Guanhumara was, herself, descended from a noble family of Romans [*HRB* IX.ix]. Geoffrey also alludes to a legal system which goes even further back than the Roman system, the Molmutine Law [*HRB* II.xvii], having to do with laws of sanctuary.1

It is in the context of the law, however, that Rome brings about her own doom, by invoking the legal system to demand tribute from Britain, when Rome had not been occupying that country for many years. This stirs up the ire of the Britons. Between Geoffrey’s Britain and Rome there has always been an uneasy relationship. As partial fulfillment of the Sibylline prophesy, one Briton, Brennius, had already taken Rome in battle centuries before, and been its tyrannical ruler. Geoffrey does not go into detail about Brennius’ reign, saying that one can find that account in Roman histories. Constantine will be the second fulfillment of the prophesy, being a Briton, the grandson of Coel, duke of Colchester. And Arthur will be the final key to the puzzle.

By the time of Arthur’s reign, Rome has begun to lose her greatness. She has left Britain to its own devices. Yet Arthur’s uprising against Rome is brought about by Rome’s aforementioned insistance upon being paid tribute by Britain, which she still considers to be one of her vassal nations. Lucius Tiberius writes to Arthur, saying: “nec animaduertere festines quid sit iniustis actibus senatum offendisse. cui totum orbem famulatum debere non ignoras [*HRB* IX.xv].” These haughty words take the idea of Pride to a lower level. At this point the insulting words begin to be flung between the two sides. Arthur uses the words, “semiviros”, “pecudes” [*HRB* X.vii], and “inpudentibus [X.v]” against the

Romans.

In Geoffrey's view, then, the once proud figure of Rome has been reduced to sending petty accusations, and the once invincible Romans are now capable of being vanquished by its former vassal state. The final confrontation between the two powers brings the chronicle near to its conclusion. The two principle characters have been circling each other all through the length of the work, sometimes the greatest of friends, sometimes fractious family members. Rome has usually been the dominant elder sibling, pushing her own views and wants upon the younger, but Britain has occasionally been able to assert herself and enjoy a short respite, and a period of dominance. Geoffrey of Monmouth has, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, given us a story filled with times of war, periods of peace, characters of the highest morality and basest desires, and managed to turn his purported history of the early days of British history into a lively story of two multi-faceted rivals, Britain and Rome.

Bibliography

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