Geoffrey of Monmouth's Byzantine Reception

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That the Matter of Britain had reached, at a relatively early date, not only the Western Mediterranean but also Asia Minor and the Middle East, we have the testimony of a (possibly pseudo-) Alan of Lille, whose commentary on the *Prophetiae Merlini* is found with Geoffrey's *DGB* in Valenciennes, Bibliothèque Municipale, 792:¹

Whither has winged fame not conveyed and published the name of Arthur the Briton even as far as Christian rule extends? Who, I say, does not speak of Arthur the Briton, when he is considered almost more famous among the peoples of Asia than among the Britons, as our pilgrims returning from the East tell us? The eastern peoples speak of him, the Western peoples speak of him, with the whole world stretching between them. Egypt speaks of him; nor is the sheltered Bosphorus silent. Rome, the queen of cities, sings of his deeds; nor are Arthur's battles unknown to her former rival Carthage. Antioch, Armenia, and Palestine praise his exploits.²

While the evidence tends to bear out this wide geographical swath of early Arthurian reception, research has in fact yielded no direct proof of Geoffrey of Monmouth's reception on "the sheltered Bosphorus". Despite the wide and immediate success of the *DGB*, there is no trace of this book, or of Geoffrey's name, in the Byzantine record. This will be unsurprising if just a few things are borne in mind. First, the list of Western medieval – or classical Latin for that

1 No. 211 in Crick, *SC*.

2 Alan of Lille, *Interpretation of the Prophecy of Merlin*, ed. Ioachim Bratheringii, *Prophetia anglicana: Merlini Ambrosii britanni ... vaticinia et praedictiones a Galfredo Monemutensi latine conversae una cum septem libris explanationum in eadem prophetiam ...*, Frankfurt, 1603 and 1608, pp. 22–23: "Quo enim Arturi Britonis nomen fama volans non pertulit et vulgavit: quousque Christianum pertingit imperium? Quis inquam Arturum Britonem non loquatur, cum pene notior habeatur, Asiaticis gentibus, quam Britannis; sicut nobis referunt Palmigeri nostri de orientis partibus redeuntes? Loquuntur illum orientales, loquuntur occidui, toto terrarum orbe divisi. Loquitur illum Aegyptus, Bosforus exclusa non tacet. Cantat gesta eius domina civitatum Roma, nec emulam quondam eius Carthaginem, Arturi praelia latent. Celebrat actus eius Antiocha, Armenia, Palaestina." My translation.

matter – authors who were read or translated by Byzantines is extremely short, and of that list, Western imaginative literature makes up a very small portion; medieval Latin historiography is entirely absent from it. As Elizabeth A. Fisher observes,

The literature of other cultures did not attract the scholars or savants of Byzantium, nor did the effort of translating Latin literature into Greek appeal to them. The Greek literary inheritance from antiquity provided abundant resources in *belles lettres*, biography, historical writing, and technical treatises. This rich inheritance satisfied Byzantine aesthetic, scholarly, and practical needs and supplied literati both with abundant literary models and with virtually inexhaustible subjects for scholarly study.³

It was ordinary for Byzantine clergy and intellectuals to have little or no knowledge of Latin. Reinforcing this indifference to Western literature were the Catholic Crusades, which did nothing to enamor the Latin world to the Greeks, and which, with the Fourth Crusade, put a decisive end to whatever polite commerce might have existed between the Latin West and the Greek East. The half-century of Latin rule which followed the events of 1204 only confirmed for the Byzantines what Anna Komnena had written (based on her father Alexios I's experience of them during the First Crusade): "The officers of the Celts ["Celt" and "Norman" were for Anna pretty much synonymous] are characteristically impudent and rash, money-grubbing by nature, and excessive in their physical appetites; they also exceed all races of men in their verbosity", to say nothing of the gruesome atrocities they committed in war: while ravaging Nicaea, she writes, the Normans "tore some newborn babes limb from limb, others they impaled on spits and roasted over a fire; and every kind of torture was visited upon the elderly".⁴ It was within twelve years of Anna's writing that Geoffrey of Monmouth completed the *DGB*.

It is unsurprising, then that Geoffrey's work, so universally popular in the West, should have left no trace in Byzantine textual culture. Of the more than

3 E.A. Fisher, "Planoudes, Holobolos, and the Motivation for Translation", *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 43:1 (2002/03), 77–104, at p. 77.

4 *Annae Comnenae Porphyrogenitae Alexias* [The Alexias of Anna Komnena, Porphyrogenita] 11.241–42, 11.77, ed. A. Reifferscheid, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1884: "οἱ δὲ Κελτοὶ κόμητες φύσει μὲν τὸ ἀναίσχυντον καὶ ἰταμόν ἔχοντες, φύσει δὲ τὸ ἐρασιχρήματον καὶ πρὸς πᾶν τὸ αὐτοῖς βουλευτὸν ἀκρατέες καὶ πολυρρήμον ὑπὲρ πᾶν γένος ἀνθρώπων ...", "τῶν τε γὰρ βρεφῶν τὰ μὲν ἐμελίζον, τὰ δὲ ξύλοις περιπεύροντες ὥπτιζον ἐν πυρὶ, πρὸς δὲ τοὺς τῷ χρόνῳ προσήκοντας πᾶν εἶδος ποινῆς ἐπεδείκνυντο." My translation.

200 copies and fragments of the *DGB*, only one manuscript (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ottoboni lat. 3025) contains any writing in Greek, but it is a composite and apparently athematic manuscript.⁵ The Greek section (at fols. 38r–44r), which I have investigated, contains notes and documents related to various ecumenical councils.

Signs of *indirect* reception of Geoffrey's work, in the form of Arthurian art and literature, may be found in Greek-speaking territories from south-eastern Italy to Cyprus. These occurrences are usually attributable to Latin occupation: the geography of "Alain", quoted above, tellingly alights on the Crusader-states of Antioch, Armenian Cilicia, and Jerusalem. Since Geoffrey of Monmouth, in spirit at least, may have touched down anywhere the Crusaders set foot, there are many examples of Arthurian literature being read or enjoyed in the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean, especially in Cyprus.⁶ But in these cases – all occurring in one or another Crusader court – no true Byzantine reception of the material can be measured.

But there are instances – however isolated – of the influence of Western practice and ideology in Byzantine society, and these instances may constitute, at a third remove, a possible register of Byzantine reception of Geoffrey of Monmouth. In southeastern Italy – under Byzantine control c.871–1071 – the floor of the Norman cathedral of Otranto is paved with an enigmatic Byzantinesque mosaic (c.1165) showing, as part of a pictorial universal history, a king identified as *Rex Arturus* riding a goat into the underworld even as he confronts a monstrous cat. The narrative pictured seems distinctly more Welsh than Anglo-Norman, more supernatural than historiographical, since the cat must be an incarnation of the monstrous Cath Palug from the 10th- or 11th-century dialogue-poem found in the Black Book of Carmarthen,⁷ and glimpsed again in the "Three Powerful Swineherds" triad of *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* ("The Triads of the Island of Britain").⁸ Arthur's supposed entry into Hell may be

5 Crick, SC, pp. 326–28.

6 D. Jacoby, "Knightly Values and Class Consciousness in the Crusader States of the Eastern Mediterranean", *Mediterranean Historical Review* 1 (1986), 158–86.

7 Black Book of Carmarthen, Poem 31 (*Pa guryv y porthaur*): "Kei win a aeth von / y dilein lleuon / y iscuïd oed mynud / erbin cath paluc", "Cai the Fair went to Anglesey / to destroy lions. / His shield was polished / against the Clawing Cat [*Cath Palug*]". Text from *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain*, ed. and trans. R. Bromwich, 4th ed., Cardiff, 2014, p. 473; translation by J.K. Bollard, "Arthur in the Early Welsh Tradition", in N.J. Lacy and J.J. Wilhelm (eds.), *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*, 3rd ed., Abingdon, 2013, pp. 9–27, at p. 16.

8 *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, ed. and trans. Bromwich, Triad 26, pp. 51–58, at pp. 51–52, ll. 22–26: "Ac yn llaneuir yn Aruon adan y maen du y dotwes ar geneu kath, ac y ar y maen y b6ryoed y g6ruechat yn y mor, a meibion Paluc y Mon a'e magassant, yr dr6c vdunt. A honno vu

related to a legend current in medieval Sicily that King Arthur lived under Mount Etna. Such manifestations may provide evidence of Arthurian narratives having spread to southern Italy independently of Geoffrey's texts, and probably by oral transmission.

In the realm of military and social practice – and also but indirectly related to Geoffrey's *oeuvre* – the following two items may be observed: first, as a facet of his well-known fascination with Western chivalry, Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1118–80) outfitted his cavalry with body-length shields (as opposed to the traditional small, round buckler) and long lances, and had them trained in jousting, with the emperor himself taking part in the exercises.⁹ Secondly, the word *καβαλλάριος* (*kavallarios*) entered Greek usage after 1204, and continued in use after the Paleologan restoration (1261); significantly, the term was not typically a pejorative one, but, like its Latin counterpart *miles* – and as distinct from the Greek “cavalry soldier”, *ἵππεύς* (*hippeus*) – signified a Western knight's military function and elevated social rank. Future research into Byzantine Italy may yield further and more definite points of contact between Geoffrey's textual tradition and Byzantine culture, since even after the fall of the Byzantine “Regno” (which included most of southern Italy) in 1071, and throughout the Hohenstaufen period (1197–1266), Greeks in Sicily and southern Italy were strong allies of the “Latin” (though really German) kings and emperors, especially in their common resistance to papal power. Frederick II's laws, for example, were issued in Greek as well as Latin.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that Frederick II, according to a letter of 1240, commissioned a romance called *Palamedes* from one “Johannes Romanzor”; no other testimony of this text or of Romanzor survives. Again, the author, or redactor, of the Neapolitan version of the Byzantine *Tale of Achilles*, which is essentially a medieval romance, mentions “Palamedes” as a part of his narrative repertoire (“... or I can tell of Palamedes”, ... ἢ λέγω Παλαμῆδη); but again, no Greek “Palamedes” is extant.¹⁰

The one Greek Arthurian text to survive – a fragmentary 307-line poem in Byzantine “political” meter – is the translation into high-literary “Atticizing”

Gath Baluc. Ac a uu vn o Deir Prif Ormes Mon a uagwyt yndi”, “And at Llanfair in Arfon under the Black Rock, [Henwen] brought forth a kitten, and the Powerful Swineherd threw it from the Rock into the sea. And the sons of Palug in Anglesey fostered it in Môn, to their own harm: and that was Palug's Cat, and it was one of the Three Great Oppressions of Môn, nurtured therein.” Translation by Bromwich. For discussion see ead., pp. 473–76; see also H. Nickel, “About Palug's Cat and the Mosaic of Otranto”, *Arthurian Interpretations* 3:2 (1989), 96–105.

9 DGB, ix.217–87.

10 K. Mitsakis, “Palamedes”, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 59 (1966), 5–7.

(as opposed to “demotic”, or spoken) Greek of the opening adventure of Rustichello da Pisa’s 13th-century Arthurian *Compilazione*, an episodic prose romance fashioned as a prequel to the enormous Prose *Tristan*. Untitled in the manuscript (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1822), but generally called “The Old Knight” (Ἰππότης ὁ Πρεσβύτερος), the Greek poem relates the adventures of an elderly knight, later revealed to be Branor le Brun, who comes to Arthur’s court and effortlessly unhorses all the great knights (“Gaoulvanos”, “Tristanos”, “Lanselottos ek Limnēs”, and “Palamedes” himself) and pledges his service to “Rex Artouzos”, before riding to the aid of a maiden whose castle is under siege by a “King with a Hundred Knights”. The origin and audience of this anonymous text remain something of a mystery, but the single surviving copy (dating from the mid- to late 15th century) shows every sign of belonging to one of the *ad hoc* Greek anthologies used by expatriate Greek professors and their Italian students during the Northern Italian renaissance. Its studied use of Homeric diction and syntax could have had both satirical and pedagogical application. The poem could very likely have been used as a specimen of the 15-syllable political verse-form, or as a reading exercise using subject matter familiar to an Italian student; copies of Rustichello’s book were certainly available at that time and place.¹¹ At all events, it was written by a Greek who had a respectable gift for verse storytelling.

While “The Old Knight” – and Rustichello’s *Compilazione*, for that matter – could have been written by someone who had never read Geoffrey of Monmouth, it does represent the only extant treatment in medieval Greek of the Matter of Britain, and is notable for its trenchant, mock-heroic critique both of Arthurian romance, and of Western chivalry itself.

11 T.H. Crofts, “The Old Knight: An Edition of the Greek Arthurian Poem of Vat. gr. 1822”, *AL* 33 (2016), 158–217.