The English Reception of Geoffrey of Monmouth

Elizabeth Bryan

1 De gestis Britonum

Historical narratives in Middle English that translated or incorporated matter from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *DGB* began as early as 1185, continued to be composed throughout the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries, and were consulted by Tudor readers and historians of England across the 16th century.¹ The earlier Middle English texts duplicated the historical span of the *DGB*, but by the end of the 13th century, the Geoffrey-derived history of ancient Britain began to appear in English as the first section of longer histories of Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman, and Plantagenet England. Some translations of Geoffrey's work into Middle English altered the position of the *DGB* as providing a history of origins for the British (i.e. Britons), transposing that history into a teleological history of the English, to whom dominion over the island of Britain explicitly belonged. The collective term "Brut tradition" (referring to any history based on Brutus, Geoffrey's Trojan-descended, legendary founder of ancient Britain), has been applied to any and all of these texts, but the nomenclature of "Brut" can be ambiguous and scholars must remain alert to possible confusion in the literature about which text, or genre, is actually under discussion.² Whereas Geoffrey's *DGB* was a significant catalyst for writing in Middle English from the 12th through the 15th centuries, many Middle English "Brut" histories

1 An essential resource for Middle English chronicles is E.D. Kennedy, *Chronicles and Other Historical Writing* (A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 8), New Haven, 1989, especially Chapter 2, "Brut Chronicles", pp. 261–47 (discussion) and 2781–2845 (bibliography). See also R.G. Dunphy (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, 2 vols., Leiden, 2010.

2 For example, "Brut" chronicles listed in inventories in wills surveyed by L.M. Friedman were (erroneously) assumed to be all by Lazamon, according to a personal communication from Friedman as reported by Carole Weinberg at the 1998 Lazamon's *Brut* conference in St John, New Brunswick, Canada, whereas some of these book legacies were more likely Prose *Brut* manuscripts or other chronicles. See L.M. Friedman, *Dead Hands: A Social History of Wills, Trusts, and Inheritance Law*, Stanford, 2009. For some issues raised by critics' differing uses of the term "Brut" and difficulties of "Brut" nomenclature, see *The Abridged English Metrical Brut: British Library MS Royal 12 C. XIII*, ed. U. O'Farrell-Tate (Middle English Texts, 32), Heidelberg, 2002, pp. 14–17.

were drawn most directly from intermediary Anglo-Norman French iterations of Geoffrey's *DGB*, especially Wace's *Roman de Brut*, from which the Middle English texts Lazamon's *Brut*, Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Chronicle* (1338), and London, College of Arms, Arundel 22 were directly translated.

The earliest of the *DGB*-derived Middle English histories was Lazamon's *Brut* (fl.1185–1216 or ?1236).³ Lazamon, a secular cleric at Areley Kings near Worcester, likely drew directly on the *DGB* as well as Wace's *Roman de Brut*, though systematic study of his direct use of the *DGB* is needed.⁴ Only one of the Middle English histories, the anonymous *Castleford's Chronicle* (c.1327), translated the entire *DGB*, including Merlin's prophecies, directly from Geoffrey's Latin to Middle English.⁵ The most widely read Brutus-based history in English was the 15th-century anonymous Middle English Prose *Brut*, which in various continuations took the history as far as 1461.⁶ Its prolific manuscript production (over 183 manuscripts survive) mirrored, in the 15th century, the explosion of readership that Geoffrey's *DGB*, its remote textual ancestor in Latin, had enjoyed in the 12th.

Verse, in a significant variety of Middle English prosodies, was the prevalent form in 12th- and 13th-century *DGB*-derived English-language history texts;

- 3 Lazamon, *Brut*, ed. G.L. Brook and R.F. Leslie, *Lazamon: Brut. Edited from British Museum MS Cotton Caligula A ix and British Museum MS Otho C xiii*, 2 vols., London, 1963–78; vol. 3 is in preparation by R. Allen and L. Perry. Also useful, especially for its notes, is Lazamon, *Brut*, trans. R. Allen, *Lawman: Brut*, London, 1992. A facing-page edition and translation is Lazamon, *Brut*, ed. and trans. W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg, *Lazamon: Brut, or Hystoria Brutonum*, New York, 1995. See K. Tiller, *Lazamon's Brut and the Anglo-Norman Vision of History*, Cardiff, 2007, for the most recent book-length study of Lazamon's *Brut*, including an argument for 1185 as the earliest date of composition.
- 4 See F.H.M. Le Saux, *Lazamon's Brut. The Poem and its Sources* (Arthurian Studies, 19), Cambridge, 1989, for claims that Lazamon drew from the *PM* and *VM*. Occasional details or wording in Lazamon's *Brut* correlate better with the *DGB* than with Wace's *Roman de Brut*; Lazamon's direct use of Geoffrey's work is in need of further study.
- 5 *Castleford's Chronicle, or, The Boke of Brut*, ed. C.D. Eckhardt, 2 vols., Oxford and New York, 1996. E.D. Kennedy, *Chronicles*, pp. 2624–25, 2809–11 uses the title "Thomas Bek of Castleford's Chronicle of England". *Castleford's Chronicle* adds hagiographic material to the *DGB* matter.
- 6 *The Brut; or, The Chronicles of England*, ed. F.W.D. Brie (Early English Text Society, 131, 136), London, 1906, 1908 (repr. Woodbridge, 2000). Essential studies are F.W.D. Brie, *Geschichte und Quellen der mittellenglischen Prosachronik. The Brute of England oder The Chronicles of England*, Marburg, 1905; L. Matheson, *The Prose "Brut": The Development of a Middle English Chronicle* (Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 180), Tempe, 1998; and J. Marvin, *The Construction of Vernacular History in the Anglo-Norman Prose Brut: the Manuscript Culture of Late Medieval England*, York, 2017.

prose was introduced in 14th- and 15th-century “Brut” texts, though some verse continued as well.⁷

In chronological order, the Middle English narratives derived indirectly or directly from Geoffrey’s *DGB* are:

- Laȝamon, *Brut*, surviving in two copies, London, British Library, Cotton Otho C. xiii (s. xiii^{ex}–xivⁱⁿ) and London, British Library, Cotton Caligula A. ix (s. xiii³⁻⁴)
- Robert of Gloucester, *Metrical Chronicle* (s. xiii^{ex}–s. xivⁱⁿ)⁸
- *Short English Metrical Chronicle* (c.1307; Auchinleck version, 1330–40)⁹
- *Castelford’s Chronicle* (also Thomas Bek of Castelford, *Chronicle of England*) (c.1327)
- Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Chronicle* (1338)
- “History of the Kings of Britain” attributed to Walter, archdeacon of Oxford and Wace (“Gnaor” or “Guace”) in London, College of Arms, Arundel 22, fols. 8r–80v
- Middle English Prose *Brut*
- John Trevisa’s translation of Ranulph Higden’s *Polychronicon* makes use of details from the *DGB*
- Genealogical rolls in Middle English form another significant medium for the English-language reception of the *DGB*¹⁰

7 T. Summerfield, *The Matter of Kings’ Lives: Design of Past and Present in the Early Fourteenth-Century Verse Chronicles by Pierre de Langtoft and Robert Mannyng*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1998, argues that in England, poetry was an authoritative form for history in vernacular English and French languages, whereas prose was privileged in Latin histories. When gauging the historiographical seriousness of a text on the basis of a historian’s choice of verse or prose, the critic must weigh whether to privilege clerical and scholastic Latin expectations alone. It is no longer adequate to assume that formal “verse” is equivalent to generic “romance”.

8 Robert of Gloucester, *Chronicle*, ed. W.A. Wright, *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, 2 vols., London, 1887. There are at least 14 manuscripts in at least two recensions, plus a prose paraphrase. See also Robert of Gloucester, *Chronicle*, ed. T. Hearne, *Robert of Gloucester’s Chronicle*, 2 vols., Oxford, 1724.

9 *The Abridged English Metrical Brut*, ed. O’Farrell-Tate; see also *An Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*, ed. E. Zettl (Early English Text Society, 196), London, 1935. There are seven manuscripts plus one manuscript of an Anglo-Norman version. At least nine different titles have been used by editors and critics to refer to this text, including *Chronicle of England*, *Anonymous Riming Chronicle*, *Short Metrical Chronicle*, *Short English Metrical Chronicle*, and *Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*.

10 See, for example, J. Rajsic, “Looking for Arthur in Short Histories and Genealogies of England’s Kings”, *Review of English Studies* 68:285 (2017), 448–70.

2 Prophetiae Merlini

In the *DGB*, Merlin prophesies on four occasions, and a Merlinian prophecy to Arthur is recalled at the end of the history.¹¹ Wace's *Roman de Brut* famously omitted Geoffrey's *PM*, but reinserted the individual prophecy that Arthur's end would be doubtful as commentary at Arthur's death.¹²

Lazamon's *Brut* (fl.1185–1216 or ?1236), the earliest Middle English translation (via Wace) of Geoffrey's matter, reinstated from the *DGB* quite a few more individual prophecies than Wace did.¹³ Lazamon's source had to be either the *DGB*, *PM*, and/or possibly a manuscript of Wace (such as Lincoln, Cathedral Library, 104 or Durham, Cathedral Library, C.IV.27) in which Geoffrey's Latin prophecies had been restored. Lazamon interpolated these Geoffrey-derived prophecies structurally and poetically across the career of King Arthur and at the history's conclusion, adding Merlinian prophecies at Arthur's conception,¹⁴ the creation of the round table,¹⁵ and war with Mordred.¹⁶ A manuscript variant at Arthur's passing (l. 14297), which asserts a Merlinian prediction (possibly an adaptation of the *DGB*, xi.205.563–73) of a specifically Arthurian return to help either the "Bruttes" (BL Cotton Otho C. xiii) or the "Anglen" (BL Cotton Caligula A. ix), has provoked critical debate about the political stance of Lazamon and/or his text's audience(s).¹⁷

Castleford's Chronicle (c.1327) is the only English *Brut* chronicle to have translated the entirety of Geoffrey's prophecies into Middle English, as part of its direct translation of the entire *DGB* into Middle English rhyming couplets.¹⁸ Its prophecies omit only the final lines of the *DGB*, vii.117.295–304, where Geoffrey's prophecies turn from planets to zodiac signs and constellations;

11 *DGB*, vi.108.563–64, 567–68, 573–74; vii.112–117.304. The prophecies also circulated separately as the *PM*, as Geoffrey explains in *DGB*, vii.109–110; viii.118.4–5, 7–21; viii.133.361–72; xi.205.564–73.

12 Wace, *Roman de Brut*, ed. I.D.O. Arnold, *Le Roman de Brut de Wace*, 2 vols., Paris, 1938–40, vol. 2, p. 694, l. 13286; *DGB*, vii.112.42. Wace also interpolated a claimed Merlinian prophecy that Gurmund would be a pirate (*Roman de Brut*, ed. Arnold, vol. 2, p. 699, ll. 13401–02), which is not in the *DGB* nor Lazamon's *Brut*.

13 *DGB*, vii.112.39–43, 115.129–31, 116.166–67, 118.20–21; viii.133.369–72; xi.205.563–73.

14 Lazamon, *Brut*, ed. Brook and Leslie, vol. 2, pp. 489–90, ll. 9398–9423, cf. *DGB*, vii.112.36–43, 115.129–31.

15 Lazamon, *Brut*, ed. Brook and Leslie, vol. 2, pp. 601–2, ll. 11494–11517, cf. *DGB*, vii.112.41–43, 115.129–31; viii.133.369–71; xi.205.563–73.

16 Lazamon, *Brut*, ed. Brook and Leslie, vol. 2, pp. 743–46, ll. 14161–14202, cf. *DGB*, vii.116.165–72.

17 Lazamon, *Brut*, ed. Brook and Leslie, vol. 2, p. 751, l. 14297. See, for example, D. Donoghue, "Lazamon's Ambivalence", *Speculum* 65:3 (1990), 537–63.

18 *Castleford's Chronicle*, ed. Eckhardt, vol. 1, pp. 414–51, ll. 15364–16731.

Castleford's Chronicle reads at that point, *parof na mare to lerne*, "there is no more to learn about that."¹⁹

One other significant Middle English transmission of the *PM* is a 15th-century selection of 37 prophecies with commentaries on how these predictions were fulfilled in Anglo-Norman England, rendered in Middle English prose. Eckhardt has edited the unique manuscript, University Park, Pennsylvania State University, Pattee Library, PS. v-3, and observes that "complete English prose translations [of Geoffrey's *PM*] were apparently not made until the seventeenth century."²⁰

3 Vita Merlini

Le Saux argues that *Lazamon* drew on the *VM* for his elaboration of Merlin's encounter with a hermit, but otherwise few studies exist of the possible influence of the *VM* on Middle English writing.²¹

¹⁹ *Castleford's Chronicle*, ed. Eckhardt, vol. 1, p. 451, l. 16731.

²⁰ *The Prophetia Merlini of Geoffrey of Monmouth: A Fifteenth-Century English Commentary*, ed. C.D. Eckhardt (*Speculum Anniversary Monographs*, 8), Cambridge, MA, 1982, p. 4.

²¹ Le Saux, *Layamon's Brut*, pp. 110–17.