LOSING THE PAST:
CEZAR’S MOMENT OF TIME IN LAWMAN’S BRUT

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Poets of history, like rulers in history, succeed in large measure through how effectively they create a sense of moment for themselves and their reading of history within the larger movements of time that constitute the story their culture tells of itself. But medievalists know all too well that “The Middle Ages” – to the extent that there is at least a degree of unity in this one thousand-year span of European cultures – has a complex, uneven, and even inconsistent relationship to the notion that time can be conceptualized as a sum of discrete, meaningful entities. Even less consistent within this time-span is a sense of confidence in the idea that human beings can understand the deep structure of the world as God ordained it. On the one hand, many seem to believe that we can experience the world as ordered in ways that evince the very nature of the Being who created it. And on the other hand, this is a world that is always already experienced as a fall from some superior mode of being, and so is never a reliable manifestation of that which truly orders existence in its eternal truth. For history the principle that eventually emerges in, but also flickers throughout, these thousand years is that if we can discern significance in and between the pieces of time, then as is the case for all pieces of the truth that we may find in the world, no one person, place, or time owns or is allowed to copyright it. Rather, time and truth are by design fundamentally phenomena in which princes and clerics, writers and artists, participate in ways that they will never fully understand, even if they do understand that they are participating in something much bigger than themselves, in the first place.
This does not mean it does not infrequently occur that it matters to writers of history who said what when. It seems to matter to Lawman, for instance, that it is he who tells us the truth about British history in his *Brut*: he names and locates himself as the work’s writer at the very beginning of the 16,095-line poem (which essentially becomes the only historical information we know about his identity). Yet as one reads this poetic chronicle it becomes ever clearer that Lawman is the identifiable truth-teller of history as a reader of and respondent to that history that he has received. He spends his time in his narrative as a tremendously engaged narrator of his long work, a conspicuous presence in his own narrative, but does so without drawing attention to himself by positioning himself as Lawman arguing with Wace, or with any other named source, on particular points of historical accuracy or interpretation. In fact, though this may be the impression given, Lawman does not precisely use the figures, the plot, and the ideas of authoritative sources as tools with which he constructs his own authority to rewrite the truth of British history. Rather, his narration engages with British-History-As-Written (even if he does not know or consult every available source) to participate in the monumental act of writing the truth about the passage of time. In his own words, his history is a “gathering” of sources and a sifting out of what was true in them to become one book: “þa soþere word: sette to-gadere. / þa Þre boc: þrumde to are” (“And the more reliable versions he recorded / Compressing those three texts into one complete book”, ll. 27-28).1 Indeed, for Lawman, achieving authority is a participatory act of writing, and one that registers itself stylistically in the way that he involves himself as narrator with the beings that populate his text and the land on which they lived (and he now lives). And though God is very much present in the world – His world – that Lawman writes about, and in the unfolding of what and

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