READING THE LANDSCAPES OF LAȝAMON’S ARTHUR:
PLACE, MEANING AND INTERTEXTUALITY

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To set any medieval writer, such as Laȝamon, in his context requires several things at once: ascertaining the place and time in which he wrote; understanding what that place and those times were like, physically, economically, politically, and socially; and reading the texts which served as sources for or influences on a writer’s work. Laȝamon himself tells us that he was a priest in “Ernleȝe” (l. 3), now Areley Kings, and his reference to “Ælienor / þe wes Henries quene þe heȝes kinges” (“Eleanor who was the great King Henry’s queen”, ll. 22–23) allows narrowing the poem’s date to between 1189 and c. 1235.1 Although this

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1 See Laȝamon: Brut or Historia Brutonum – Edition and Translation with Textual Notes and Commentary, eds W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg, Harlow, 1995, ix, for the reasons for this dating. All quotations and translations of the Brut, unless otherwise stated, are from this edition, based on the Caligula manuscript. The editors of the standard edition (Laȝamon: Brut, eds G.L. Brook and R.F. Leslie, EETS, o.s. 250, 277, 1963, 1978) agree that London, British Library, Cotton MS Caligula A. is provides not only a fuller version of the text, but also one closer in language and orthography to the author’s original than does London, British Library, Cotton MS Otho C. xiii. Brook and Leslie give an account
still leaves the composition of the Brut somewhere within a period of nearly fifty years, it does at least provide some temporal parameters for re-imagining Laȝamon’s world and for identifying those texts which may reveal or clarify allusions, debts, borrowings and innovations. Laȝamon acknowledges his reliance on the book “‘pa makede a Fenchis clerc, / Wace wes ihoten” (“which a French cleric called Wace ... had composed”, ll. 20-21), and the Roman de Brut was clearly his main source. Scholars have found, and will continue to find, particular passages or ideas for which Laȝamon is indebted to other texts, but the close relationship between his Brut and the Roman de Brut prompts examining just what Laȝamon kept, discarded or added to his Anglo-Norman model.

In addition, we need, so far as is possible, to understand the intellectual and conceptual environment in which Laȝamon wrote and to attempt to recapture characteristically medieval ways of reading and conceiving of texts, in order to improve our chances of seeing his poem as he designed it to be seen or as his contemporaries may have seen it. In this article, therefore, I wish to focus on landscape, perhaps viewed by present-day readers as inert or merely descriptive, but which to medieval ways of thinking was richly suggestive. Two ideas underpin my analysis. First, for medieval thinkers the world was not just a phenomenon but a creation, the product of divine action. The universe was therefore imbued inevitably not only with purpose but with beneficent purpose,