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Prophecy and Place in the Arthurian Tradition

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CHAPTER FOUR

PROPHECY AND PLACE IN THE ARTHURIAN TRADITION

Victoria Flood

Concepts of place are fundamental to the study of Arthurian literature, whether we understand these in relation to the contested Britishness of Arthur, as a hero claimed by both the English and the Welsh, or the dimensions of the Arthurian empire which the various incarnations of the legend trace. This chapter explores these broader contexts in relation to Arthurian prophecy, approached, in the vein of recent studies on prophecy, as a discourse engaged with geopolitical imaginings.¹ I suggest that for authors of history, prophecy, and political poetry in medieval Britain, the figure of Arthur provided a significant model for imagining the dimensions of insular rule and trans-continental conquest, which endured in a remarkably consistent form from the twelfth century to the age of the Tudors. Although Arthurian prophecy had a wider European reception history, with an influence extending into Scotland and Scandinavia, as well as Italy and France, its greatest flourishing occurred in England and Wales, in the context of cross-border translation and adaptation.² This chapter is chiefly concerned with this literary history, beginning with the invention of Arthurian prophecy, in the form that we now know it, by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Arthurian prophecy has its origins in the Prophetiae Merlini (The Prophecies of Merlin) of Geoffrey of Monmouth, incorporated as book 7 of the Historia regum Britanniae (History of the Kings of Britain, circa 1138).³ Presented by Geoffrey as a translation of British material in circulation in Oxford, the Prophetiae distill and reinvent Welsh prophetic motifs for the consumption of a Norman elite in England.⁴ They function as both a crib sheet of Welsh oppositional discourse and a deft act of flattery, which introduces heroes aligned with a Norman vision of imperium into those same ostensibly oppositional prophetic frameworks (Flood, Prophecy, Politics and Place 21–41). Loosely inspired by Welsh political prophecies, the Prophetiae share with the Welsh prophetic tradition an interest in the unified rule of Britain, and the close correlation between figures of the legendary past and the British future. As Welsh prophecies look forward to future princes who will rule in the manner of the legendary Cynan of Brittany and Cadwaladr of Gwynedd, the Prophetiae anticipate their coming. Alongside these traditional prophetic heroes, Geoffrey includes Arthur.
Although associated with insular high kingship in earlier Welsh contexts, Arthur nonetheless appears to have had a marginal, if indeed he had any, role in early Welsh prophecy, and Arthur’s prophetic associations may very well have been Geoffrey’s own addition to a pre-existing Welsh construct. Yet unlike his earlier Welsh prophetic counterparts, Geoffrey’s Arthur does not just conquer Britain but much of Europe also, a trajectory pressed even further in later Arthurian prophecies, toward Jerusalem.

THE Omen OF THE DRAGONS

The history of Galfridian, and by extension Arthurian, prophecy begins with the “Omen of the Dragons”: the framing narrative and first component prophecy of the Prophetiae Merlini, which spans books 6 and 7 of the Historia. The “Omen” recounts supernatural impediments to the building project of the British king Vortigern on Mount Snowdon, the cause of which is revealed to him by the boy-prophet Merlin. Merlin explains that the foundations of Vortigern’s tower have been destabilized by two sleeping dragons, enclosed in two hollow rocks in a pool beneath the earth, whose meanings he glosses in the Prophetiae proper: “Vae rubeo draconi; nam exterminatio eius festinat. Cauernas ipsius occupabit albus draco, qui Saxones quos inuitasti significat. Rubeus uero gentem designat Britanniae, quae ab albo opprimetur” (“Alas for the red dragon, its end is near. Its caves will be taken by the white dragon, which symbolizes the Saxons whom you have summoned. The red represents the people of Britain, whom the white will oppress”; Historia 7.34–36). Geoffrey adapted this episode from the ninth-century Historia Brittonum, where the prophet Ambrosius similarly interprets the “Omen” before Vortigern, remembered in vernacular Welsh prophecy and history as Gwrtheyrn, the foolhardy king who invited the Saxons to Britain (Nennius par. 42). In the Historia Brittonum, the king’s building plans are disrupted by two “vermes” (“worms” or “serpents”) representative of the white dragon of the Saxons and the red dragon of the Britons, enclosed within two vases and a tent (representing Vortigern’s kingdom), in a subterranean pool (the world). Geoffrey’s version is a literalization and simplification of the original metaphor. The origin of the two dragons themselves remains uncertain, although the use of the dragon battle standard finds a precedent or analogue in Roman dragon ensigns, as well as further afield (Tatlock 223–24). The “Omen” in its entirety was clearly intended to correspond to a familiar prophetic register, and may well, as Patrick Sims-Williams has suggested, be related to Welsh vernacular background traditions, and certainly, the red dragon of the Britons had a long subsequent life in Wales (Sims-Williams 106).

Like the “Omen” of the Historia Brittonum, Geoffrey’s spatial metaphor is by no means a subtle one: the instability of Vortigern’s tower points to the instability of his rule, and the coming period of British oppression by the Saxons for which the king is held culpable. For Geoffrey, the pool beneath the foundations appears to signify Britain, in its broader regional context: the hollow rock of the red dragon would appear to be the caves of the Britons of the prophecy. The pool is invoked as an image of limit: the dragons chase one another across it, gaining and ceding territory. The use of the pool in the Historia Brittonum—“stagnum figura huius mundi est” (“the pool is a figure of this world”; Nennius par. 42)—feasibly reads in relation to
the watery limits of Isidorean geography, where the continents, and the entire orbis, are surrounded by the ocean. Indeed, in both its iterations, the “Omen” is concerned with wider European histories of migration and colonization—first and foremost, the arrival of the Saxons, whose departure is prophesied in the Historia Brittonum as a retreat across the sea: “at ille albus draco illius gentis, quae occupavit gentes et regiones plurimas in Britannia, et paene a mari usque ad mare tenebunt, et postea gens nostra surget, et gentem Anglorum trans mare viriliter deiciet” (‘But the white one is the dragon of the people who have seized many peoples and countries in Britain, and will reach almost from sea to sea; but later our people will arise, and will valiantly throw the English people across the sea’; Nennius par. 42). Even in this early prophetic model, what happens in Britain must be understood in relation to events beyond its island borders. This is an interest shared by Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose Historia begins with the legend of Trojan origins lifted from elsewhere in the Historia Brittonum: the migratory movements of the Britons from the ruins of Troy, via exile in Greece, to the island of Britain with their eponymous founder, Brutus. While in the “Omen” of the Historia Brittonum, the Britons are victorious, in the Prophetiae it is a new people from across the sea, the Normans, who finally drive away the white dragon of the Saxons, in the post-Arthurian, and near-contemporary, section of the prophecy: “Populus namque in ligno et ferreis tunicis superueniet, qui uindictam de nequitia ipsius sumet. Restaurabit pristinis incolis mansiones, et ruina alienigenarum patebit” (“A people will come clad in wood and iron to take vengeance on its wickedness. They will restore the former inhabitants to their dwellings, and the ruin of the foreigners will be plain to see”; Historia 7.72–74). Although the Norman delivery of the Britons is certainly a supreme example of historical revisionism, Geoffrey’s addition was influential, and later Latin prophecies include a black dragon of Normandy, which flies across the sea from Normandy to Britain, and banishes the white (Flood, “Prophecy as History”).

THE BOAR OF CORNWALL

Although the world figura is a notable absence in the “Omen” as it is reworked as the first component prophecy of the Prophetiae, its spatial dynamics are similarly geographically expansive. The Prophetiae progress from the initial “Omen” to a broader sphere of geographical movement in the age of Arthur, whose appearance immediately follows. The prophecy of Arthur’s historical career is given in the ciphered animal form characteristic of the Galfridian tradition. Arthur appears as the boar of Cornwall (the place of his birth), who emerges in the context of the Saxon invasion and persecution of the Britons, and whose conquests reach from Britain to the gates of Rome:

Aper etenim Cornubiae succursum praestabit et colla eorum sub pedibus suis conculcabit. Insulae oceani potestati ipsius subdentur, et Gallicanos saltus possidebit. Tremebit Romulea domus saeuiciam ipsius, et exitus eius dubius erit.

The boar of Cornwall will lend his aid and trample foreigners’ necks beneath his feet. The islands of the ocean will fall under his sway and he will occupy the glades of France. The house of Rome will tremble before his rage, and his end shall be unknown. (Historia 7.39–42)
In some respects, Geoffrey’s prophecy of Arthur is of a type with his treatment of Cynan and Cadwaladr in the genuinely futurist section of the *Prophetiae*:


Cadualadrus will summon Conanus and make Scotland his ally. Then the foreigners will be slaughtered and the rivers flow with blood, and the hills of Brittany burst forth and be crowned with Brutus’s diadem. Wales will be filled with rejoicing and the Cornish oaks will flourish. The island will be called by Brutus’s name and the foreign term will disappear. (*Historia* 7.110–14)

This is a reworking of Welsh prophetic material of the kind found in the tenth-century *Armes Prydein* (The Prophecy of Britain) which forecasts the exile of the Saxons in the manner of the “Omen” of the *Historia Brittonum*, here through a confederation of the Britons of Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, and the Old North, alongside other allies including the Scots and the Norse of Ireland, led by Cynan and Cadwaladr. These names appear to have been understood by Geoffrey, as in Welsh prophecy, as referring not to personal post-mortem returns (Conanus and Cadualadrus both appear as historical figures in the *Historia*), but as British leaders equivalent in force and prowess to the heroes of legend, who appear in the age to follow the Normans. Geoffrey’s Conanus-Cadualadrus prophecy must be understood as at once admonitory and pessimistic, a warning to readers within England of Welsh resurgence, a prospect that threatens to reveal Norman hegemony as little more than a phase in the island’s long history. Yet for Geoffrey, British signifiers had a double utility. In its affinity to his Conanus-Cadualadrus prophecy, Geoffrey’s prophecy of the boar of Cornwall is a significant rewriting of a Welsh prophetic narrative in line with a new referent, in which a new audience might see themselves reflected. Certainly, with a Latinate rather than Welsh name, Arthur presented a more appropriate hero than Cynan or Cadwaladr for the consumption of Geoffrey’s Norman patrons in England, to whose ambitions, it is well noted, the extent of Arthur’s rule provided something of a mirror, in terms of both his insular and his broader European conquests.

Although the precise details of this literary and cultural history may well remain forever obscure, the addition of a developed political prophetic aspect to the Arthurian legend was very feasibly Geoffrey’s innovation. Nonetheless, early legends of Arthur’s return in a Breton context may have inspired Geoffrey’s allusion to Arthur’s uncertain end. We might think, most famously, of Hériman de Tournai’s account of zealous beliefs in Arthur’s personal return in circulation in Cornwall and Brittany, as encountered by a group of traveling canons from Laon on tour in the 1110s (Flood, “Arthur’s Return” 90). Accounts of this type may well have provided the inspiration for Geoffrey’s passing allusion to Arthur’s (seemingly paradoxical) treatment for his mortal wounds received at the Battle of Camlann on the island of Avalon in book 11 of the *Historia*. This narrative, and the matter of Arthur’s return from Avalon, is developed more fully in Geoffrey’s later work, the *Vita Merlini* (circa
1155), where we first encounter what would become the conventional details of Arthur’s sojourn in Avalon: not least, Morgan le Faye, and Arthur’s immortal life. The legend of Arthur’s return from Avalon has no obvious place in earlier Welsh contexts, and there is an indication of Geoffrey’s own understanding of a distinction between Welsh prophetic models and his Arthurian construction, in a dialogue between Merlin and Thelgesin (a reimagining of the Welsh prophet Taliesin) in the *Vita*. Thelgesin raises the possibility of Arthur’s return to Britain from Avalon, “Si jam convaluit, solitis ut viribus hostes / Arceat et cives antiqua pace reformet” (“... if he has recovered his strength, that he may drive off the enemy with his accustomed vigor and re-establish the citizens in their former peace”; 956–57). Merlin replies that Arthur’s return is impossible: in generations to come, insular unity will be achieved not by Arthur but by Cadualadrus and Conanus, in keeping with the expectations of Welsh prophecy, and its approximation in the *Prophetiae* (110–14).

Leaving the question of earlier source content aside, the prophecy of the boar is clearly a prefigurative overview of the career of Arthur in books 9–11 of the *Historia*. Early commentaries on the *Prophetiae* in circulation across medieval Britain and France were less interested in Arthur’s end than they were in his conquests. All are unambiguous in their identification of references in the prophecy to Arthur’s conquest of Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, and much of Continental Europe, and the abortive march on Rome which signals the end of his imperial career. The appeal of this material might be understood in relation to its proto-crusading resonances. As Geraldine Heng suggests in her reading of the Spanish giant of Mont-Saint Michel, whom Arthur slays on his way to Rome, we might situate Geoffrey’s Arthuriad in the context of near-contemporary places, persons, and political interests associated with the history of the First Crusade (17–61). Similarly, the eastern kings who serve under the Roman Emperor Lucius, faced by Arthur in book 10 of the *Historia*, have been convincingly located within a proto-crusading schema (Fulton 53–54; Weiss 239–48). The same framework of allusion is in place in the *Prophetiae*. In the lines immediately preceding the arrival of the boar of Cornwall, we read of the religious character of Saxon oppression: “Cultus religionis delebitur, et ruina ecclesiarum patebit. Praeualebit tandem oppressa et saeuiciae exterorum resistet” (“Religious observance will be destroyed and churches will stand in ruins. At last the oppressed will rise up and resist the foreigners’ fury”; *Historia* 7.38–39). This representation owes a particular debt to the (non-prophetic) account of Arthur’s insular battles in the *Historia Brittonum*, characterized as both religious and territorial defense. In the paratactic logic of Geoffrey’s prophetic sequence, the march on Rome is presented as a continuation of Arthur’s defense of insular Christianity.

I suggest that we may find a clue elsewhere in the *Historia* that in his prophetic representation of Arthur Geoffrey had a proto-crusading framework in mind. In book 9, on the eve of the Roman campaign, Hoelus, King of the Bretons, repeats “uaticinia Sibillae . . . quae ueris uersibus testantur ex Britannico genere tercio nasciturum qui Romanum optinebit imperium” (“Prophecies of the Sibyl . . . whose truthful verses proclaim that for a third time one born of British blood will rule the Roman state”; 9.492–94). Hoelus recalls that the first two Britons to wear the crown of Rome were Beli and Constantine, and understands Arthur to be the third. Geoffrey here draws on a significant prophetic precedent: the military triumphs of the Last World Emperor, or Last King of the Romans. This is found in its earliest forms in the fourth-century *Tiburtine Sibyl*, and, most influentially, in Western Europe, the
seventh-century Prophecy of Pseudo-Methodius (Sackur 72–75). With its origins in Syriac Christian apocalypticism, Pseudo-Methodius spread with notable rapidity from the Eastern Empire to Western Europe, and was translated into Greek circa 700, and Latin soon afterward. It assumed particular urgency in the context of the First Crusade, and we might understand Geoffrey’s engagement with it as a crusading paradigm. We read of the Last King of the Romans, named Constantine or “C” (and Hoelus’s reference to the British Roman Emperor of this name is telling). In the period immediately before the coming of Antichrist, C will vanquish or convert the enemies of Christianity, and defeat the apocalyptic tribes of Gog and Magog (figures lifted from biblical prophecy, Ezekiel and Apocalypse). Finally, at Golgotha he will lay down his crown as the reign of Antichrist begins.

Allusions to Pseudo-Methodius occur from the very first book of the Historia. Gog and Magog, whose prophesied defeat marks the beginning of a new age and the conquest of new territories, find an onomastic reworking in the foundation legend of Cornwall in book 1 of the Historia: the account of the giant Goemagog, who falls from “Saltus Goemagog” (Goemagog’s leap) at the hands of Corineus (1.462–89). As in his representation of the career of Arthur, Geoffrey engages with apocalyptic signifiers, employed locally and divorced from their full eschatological development. Pseudo-Methodius is an interesting model for Geoffrey, not least in its combination of jingoism and pessimism. For all his successes, at the end of the prophecy, C renounces his crown and exits the political scene, as does Arthur (although admittedly not of his own volition). Yet Arthur is certainly not represented by Geoffrey as the Last World Emperor. The end of his reign is not the end of all human history, although it does mark the end of a remarkable chapter in British legendary history. Indeed, within the logic of the text, Hoelus’s sibylline prophecy is false—Arthur never wears the crown of Rome. This is broadly in keeping with Geoffrey’s prophetic engagements: all prophecy except the Merlinian is ultimately proved false in the Historia. But there is another way in which we might read Hoelus’s Arthurian prophecy. It speaks to the future successes of an insular ruler yet to come: a second Arthur.

A second Arthurian figure appears in the Prophetiae: a boar descended from the Breton hero Conanus, who appears a generation after the British re-conquests of Conanus and Cadualadrus:

Ex Conano procedet aper bellicosus, qui infra Gallicana nemora acumen dentium suorum excercebit. Truncabit namque quaque maiora robora, minoribus uero tutelam praestabit. Tremebunt illum Arabes et Africani; nam impetum cursus sui in ulteriore Hispaniam protendet.

From Conanus will come forth a warlike boar, who will sharpen his tusks on the forests of France. He will break all the tallest trees, but give protection to the smaller. The Arabs and Africans will tremble before him; for his charge will carry him all the way to further Spain. (Historia 7.114–18)

This sequence parallels the account of British re-conquest and European empire-building from the conclusion of the “Omen” to the death of Arthur. There are other Arthurian affinities. Spain is given as the limit of Arthur’s empire in the Historia proper. Of the sub-kings gathered to pay homage to Arthur at Caerleon in book 9 of the
Historia, “Praeter hos non remansit princeps alicuius precii citra Hispaniam quin ad istud edictum ueniret” (“In addition to them, there was no prince of worth this side of Spain who did not answer such a call”; 9.353–54). A king of Hispania appears among the kings of the orient, fighting for the Emperor Lucius against Arthur in book 10 of the Historia; and Spain functions both in the Historia and Prophetiae as something of a geographical and a cultural limit—to say “this side of Spain” is to say “within Christian Europe.” These are not the original ambitions of Welsh political prophecy (concerned with insular re-conquest), but of the princes of Western Europe, Geoffrey’s first intended readership among them. However, the utility of Geoffrey’s model extends far beyond this limited historical application; and indeed, part of the continued appeal of Arthurian prophecy was its immense capacity for re-use. It speaks to expansive imperial ambitions which continued to resonate long after universal Christendom could have been understood as in any sense a realistic political expectation.

THE BOAR OF WINDSOR AND THE TUDOR BULL

The geographical dimensions of the prophecy of the “aper ex Conano” are retained in its reworking in the fourteenth-century insular French prophecy, the Six Kings to follow John, also known as the Last Six Kings of the English. Originally composed between 1312 and 1327, the prophecy is a product of the pessimism of the reign of Edward II, and the investment of new, Arthurian, expectations in his heir, the future Edward III. The Six Kings was incorporated in the Anglo-Norman Brut, and was translated into Middle English with the Brut as a whole circa 1370, and in this context reads (much as does the Prophetiae) as a commentary on the events detailed by the chronicle. We read of the boar’s conquest of Europe and Jerusalem, prior to his death and the interment of his bones at Cologne Cathedral, at the shrine of the three magi:

And his Boor, þrouȝ ferseness of hert þat he shal haue, shal make wolifes bicome lambes; & he shal do mesurabli al þat he shal haue to done vnto þe Burgh of Jerusalem; and he shal whet his teiþ vppon þe ȝates of Parys, and vppon iiiij lands. Spayne shal tremble for drede of him; Gasconye shal swete; in Fraunce he shal put his wynge; his grete taile shal reste in England softely; Almayn shal quake for drede of him. . . . & er þat he is dede he shal bene entered at Coloine, and his lande shal bene ȝan fulfilled wiȝ al goode. (The Brut 74–76)"
The career of the messianic boar (the passage draws on John 4.13–15) is a reformulation of the summoning of the British diaspora and insular unification in Welsh Cynan-Cadwaladr prophecy, as reimagined by Geoffrey in the Prophetiae (Historia 7.110–14). The boar of Windsor marks a continuation of the cultural appropriation facilitated by Geoffrey’s work: the mobilization of Welsh imaginings of insular unity as figures of English royal power. This interest might be understood as a transference of the pervasive Arthurian associations of Edward III’s grandfather, Edward I. Most famously, in 1278 Edward I cast himself as Arthur redivivus through a ceremonial dressing of the reputed bones of Arthur at Glastonbury—a simultaneous denial of the perceived messianism of Welsh prophecy and a celebration of English imperium (Parsons). This same contestation and celebration appears to be at work in the Six Kings, although by the mid-fifteenth century, the Six Kings also enjoyed a relatively enthusiastic reception in Wales, circulating in both new Middle English versions and at least two Welsh translations. The prophecy’s vision of a crusading king of England came to be understood, in a Welsh context, to refer to a Welsh king of Britain, and English chauvinism was reimagined as British.

The international campaigns of the boar remained a dominant model in English political prophecy throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, not least in the context of the Hundred Years’ War, when the boar’s conquest of Paris proved a particularly appealing imagining (Flood, Prophecy, Politics and Place 98–99). However, early in the Tudor period, the use of the boar as a positive heroic cipher largely vanishes from English political prophecy, presumably due to the heraldic association of the boar with the house of York, which sat uncomfortably with the Arthurian associations, and even pretensions, of Henry VII (Rees). We might note, for example, the pejorative uses of the boar in the Prophecies of Rymour, Beid, and Marlyng (circa 1530), which recounts the victory of a “banyshed baron of Brutes blood” (lines 145–46; Henry VII; a reference to his Welsh genealogy), against a white boar (155; the heraldic symbol of Richard III), here stripped of any Arthurian associations (Murray; Cooper 180–81). The passage recalls Henry’s defeat of Richard’s forces at the Battle of Bosworth in August 1485, a moment which may find a similar recollection in William Caxton’s re-framing of Arthur’s dream of his battle against the Spanish giant in Le Morte Darthur. While in the Winchester manuscript Arthur dreams of a fight between a dragon (the familiar prophetic cipher of the “Omen”) and a bear, in Caxton’s edition the dragon is victorious over a boar. P. J. C. Field, who appears to have been the first to note the political implications of the change, has suggested that this substitution was intended to make a “bold political allusion” to the fall of Richard (37). We might understand this allusion in the vein of political prophecy.

Yet the imperial trajectory of the boar found continued utility in insular prophecy, even when the hero was not explicitly identified by this name. Rymour, Beid, and Marlyng contains a genuinely futurist prediction of the activities of a “child with a chaplet” (crown or laurel), after the time of the banished Briton. This figure appears...
in both anti- and pro-Henrician propaganda employed in England following the break with Rome, but the composition of the prophecy appears to pre-date this. Following his coronation by the Pope in Rome (presumably with the imperial crown of the Holy Roman Emperor), the child progresses to Jerusalem—the Holy Sepulcher and Golgotha:

> then to Iherusalem this prince shall fare  
> as conqueror of myght  
> vij mortalle batelles shall he wynne there  
> And the turkes to dede shall dight  
> Then to the sepulchre shalle he ffare  
> To see that gratious sight,  
> Where cryst ffor vs suffred sare  
> When he to dethe was dight. (Murray 517–24)

Among the opponents of the Arthurian “child” are the “turkes,” an allusion to the Ottoman Empire, which after 1516 extended to Jerusalem. This contemporary political reference is a salient reminder that while late Arthurian prophecy drew on a centuries-long tradition, it was nonetheless politically reactive and adaptive, concerned with the contemporary politics of place. We might wonder whether the very futility of crusading endeavors in the Levant contemporary with the rise of the Ottomans facilitated the particular pessimism of this text. For although the career of the child is in line with the trajectory of the boar of Windsor, this Arthurian hero dies in the Valley of Josaphat, the final site in the career of the Last World Emperor in *Pseudo-Methodius*, an event which precedes the arrival of Antichrist (although, as is typical of Arthurian prophecy, the apocalyptic narrative remains unrealized, and Antichrist does not appear). Yet in many respects, we might understand this as a response to latent apocalyptic and sibylline cues in Geoffrey’s Arthurian prophecies: the Galfridian model has crossed into the Tudor period modified but largely intact.

This movement was felt not only in English prophecy but in Welsh also. The boar appears across Welsh prophecy of this period as both a positive and derogatory cipher, largely dependent on the presence or absence of Yorkist sympathies. However, even where the boar is not named, his conquests appear in Tudor prophecy as a recognizably Arthurian allusion. References to the career of the boar are found across *cywyddau brud* (prophetic poems) of the early Tudor period, but we find a particularly interesting example of this, fully alert to its Arthurian associations, in a panegyric by Dafydd Llwyd, directed to Henry VII following the birth of Prince Arthur in September 1486. The name of Henry’s first-born son captured the imaginations of Welsh panegyристs, and during this period Arthur features particularly visibly in Welsh political poetry. We read of the young armies of the new Arthur, whose influence—as in Geoffrey’s *Historia*—will spread across Europe; after which Arthur will turn his attentions eastward, and conquer the lands of the Sultan, the Great Khan, and the Ottoman Empire, inspiring mass conversion to Christianity. Like the boar of Windsor, he ends his journey at Cologne Cathedral and the tomb of three magi. It is ambiguous whether this refers to pilgrimage or burial, but, as in the *Six Kings*, the three kings appear to be understood as an appropriate symbol for the spread of Christianity in the east (this new Arthur will restore the faith of their
time): “Troî i Gwlen rhwng tri gwely, / Cyn henaint Tri-sain t’i try” (“Passing to Cologne between three beds, / Before the old age of the three saints, which he will restore”; “Cywydd” 33–34; my trans.). The remainder of the poem is concerned with Arthur’s (presumably earlier) campaigns against the Saxons, his restoration of the Britons to their former glory, and his defense of insular Christianity.

Dafydd Llwyd’s poem suggests the long-enduring Welsh reception, and reappropriation, of Geoffrey’s Historia, which circulated in Welsh translations from the thirteenth century onward, but Galfridian historical material is here supplemented by the Six Kings. Although there are contemporing additions to the original paradigm (including, as in Rymour, Beid, and Marlyng, an allusion to the Ottoman Empire), the career of the boar of Windsor is clearly recognizable. Notably, however, the Arthur of Dafydd’s panegyric is described not as a boar but as a bull: “tarw o’n iaith” (“bull of our language/people”; “Cywydd” 40; my trans.); heraldry applied to Arthur’s forces throughout the poem. As a positive prophetic cipher, the bull first appears in the fourteenth-century Latin Prophecies of John of Bridlington, but it found particular purchase as a symbol for the house of Tudor in a Welsh prophetic tradition which, by this period, was heavily inflected by naturalized aspects of the English prophetic tradition (Curley; Rigg). In Dafydd’s panegyric, as across Welsh Tudor partisan prophecy of this period, we see not only the co-option of individual allusions and figures from English prophecy, but engagements with the structures of English prophecy, even as, in the second half of the poem, the Saxons (the English) are admonished. In his engagement with an Arthurian trajectory of conquest, reaching from Britain to Jerusalem, Dafydd makes use of a long-lived imperial fantasy associated with the kings of England, while claiming the prophesied Arthur and his new crusade as Welsh.

CONCLUSION

The history of Arthurian prophecy operates in relation to English, or British, political conceptualizations of place in a double geographical sense. In its origins, it looks westward to Wales and the Welsh and British Latin materials which inspired Geoffrey of Monmouth’s construction, or even, as I have suggested, invention, of Arthurian prophecy. In this respect, it is a literary history indelibly connected to the Norman, later English, colonization of Wales, and appropriation of oppositional discourses engaged with prophecies of British unity and insular re-conquest. But it also looks east, across Europe to Jerusalem, and takes its cue from the crusading fantasies of sibylline prophecy and the figure of the Last World Emperor. Arthurian prophecy is a fusion of these influences, drawn from two very particular imaginings of English expansionism and imperialism. Yet this material saw applications beyond its English context, and Geoffrey’s appropriative engagement with Welsh prophetic frameworks facilitated the use of English Arthurian prophecy in Welsh-language political poetry into the Tudor period. The imperial imaginings of Arthurian prophecy rest on a complex, and contested, construction of Britishness.

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NOTES

1 This builds on a critical position set out in Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place*. For an influential earlier discussion of medieval prophecy as a political discourse, see Coote.

2 For a discussion of Arthurian prophecy in Scotland, see Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place*, ch. 2; in Old Norse contexts, see Gropper; and for Arthurian prophecy in France and Italy, see Chuhan Campbell. For discussion of Welsh prophecy, see Jones; Fulton, *Welsh Prophecy and English Politics*.

3 The edition of the *Historia* cited throughout this chapter is by Michael D. Reeve, translated by Neil Wright. Hereafter, *Historia*.

4 There are copies of the *Historia* with accompanying dedications to political figures on both sides of the English Anarchy: on one side, the supporter of Stephen, Waleran of Meulan, and on the other, the Empress Matilda’s half-brother, Robert of Gloucester. The *Prophetiae* were dedicated to Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, a political actor in his own right. *Historia*, Prologue; 7.1–24.

5 Geoffrey’s Merlin is a composite of this Ambrosius and the Welsh prophet Myrddin. For discussion of the development of the legend of Merlin, see Jarman, *The Legend of Merlin* and “The Merlin Legend.” Jarman’s developmental model has seen an influential reassessment by Padel.

6 This concept was familiar through the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville; as well as a similar formulation in Macrobius’s commentary on the *Somnium Scipionis*, which describes the entire northern hemisphere as an island in the Atlantic, and is, like the “Omen,” interested in prophecy and the limits of rule (Isidore 285; Macrobius 75, 215). For Geoffrey’s broader engagement with Macrobius as a prophetic model, see a forthcoming PhD thesis by Humma Mouzam, *Astrology, Prophecy, and the Galfridian Dragon* (University of Birmingham).


8 Although a wealth of scholarship is available on this subject, for particular discussion of Arthur’s representative function in relation to Norman, later Plantagenet, interests in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, see R. R. Davies 1–2. For a succinct account of the relationship of Arthur’s continental Empire to Norman interests, see Heng 39.

9 In addition to Flood, “Arthur’s Return,” see Byrne 119–23.

10 Here the age of Arthur would appear to be positioned as the insular equivalent to the “pax romana” (“Roman peace”).

11 For an overview of the commentary tradition, see Crick.

12 For an English translation, see McGinn 75–76. For a recent account of the Western European circulation, and translation, of *Pseudo-Methodius*, see Grifoni and Gantner.

13 Among Lucius’s royal generals we find Aliphatima of “Hispania” (probably a conflation of the names of “Ali” and “Fatima,” the latter recalling also the Fatimid Caliphate, centered on Cairo). For Geoffrey, as for other authors of this period, there appears to have been a double geographical resonance to “Hispania,” in reference to both Muslim Spain and Syria. See Heng 36–37.

14 For historical contextualization of the prophecy, and its various recensions, see Smallwood.

15 For an account of the Middle English *Brut* tradition, see Matheson. For the most recent study of the *Brut* tradition, see Rajsic et al.

16 For transcriptions of extracted material from the Anglo-Norman *Original Prose Version*, and analysis, see Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place* 87–102. I quote from the late fourteenth-century Middle English version as the most immediately accessible version of the text.
17 See also Loomis. For the Arthurian associations of Edward III, in particular in relation to those of Edward I, see Vale.
18 Further to Smallwood, see Fulton, *Welsh Prophecy and English Politics*; Flood, “Prophecy of the Six Kings.”
19 For discussion of Tudor Arthurianism, alongside Yorkist Arthurian interests, see Anglo.
20 It is possible that the change may also have been prompted by a familiarity with the Alliterative *Morte*, where the bear is described as biting the dragon “boldly with baleful tuskes” (Benson 790). Presumably, this was intended to mean teeth, but it does certainly offer itself to such a substitution.
21 For an account of the uses of political prophecy during the English Reformation, see Jansen.
22 For an overview of heroic and antipathetic ciphers in Welsh political prophecy from this period, see Evans 266–69.
23 “Cywydd i Harri Seithfed wedi ennill y deyrnas, as i Arthur ei fab ef pan aned” (Richards 27–29, my trans.).
24 For the relationship of the *Historia* to Welsh source material, and its later translation into Welsh, see Roberts.
25 For a brief discussion of the broad semantic field of “iaith,” see Smith 38.