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Geoffrey of Monmouth  
*Complete Works*



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*The Complete Works of*  
**GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH**

(c. 1095-c. 1155)



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Geoffrey of Monmouth (1902) by A. G. Little

Geoffrey of Monmouth (1911) by Henry William Carless Davis

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**GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH**



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## *Complete Works of Geoffrey of Monmouth*



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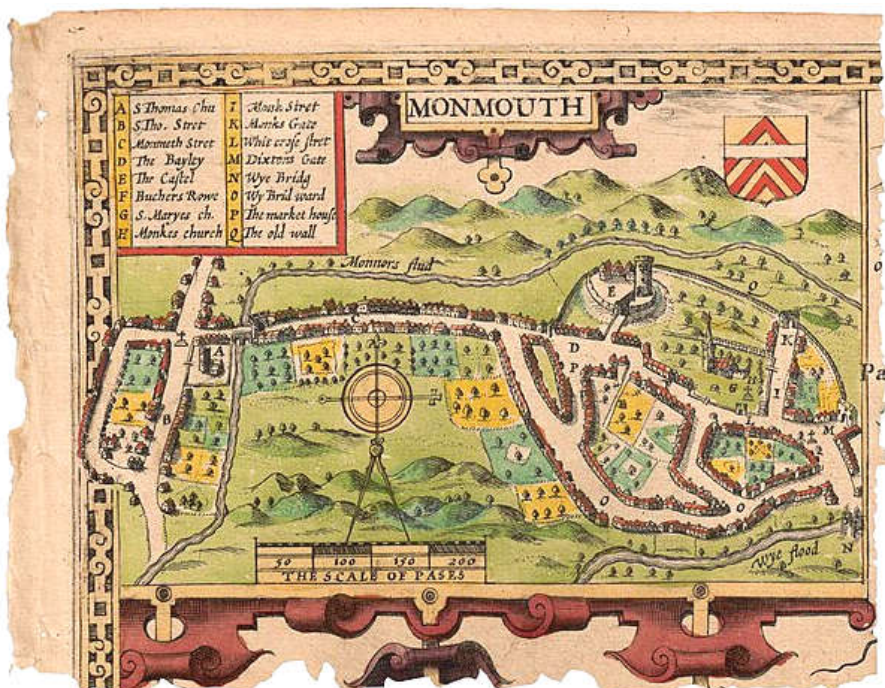
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## The Translations



Map of Monmouth, Wales by John Speed, 1610



*Monmouth today*



*Monmouth Castle, first established between 1066 and 1069*

## The History of the Kings of Britain (c. 1136)



*Translated by Aaron Thompson with revisions by J. A. Giles*

1906 TEXT

Geoffrey of Monmouth is one of the major figures in the development of British historiography and the popularity of tales of King Arthur. He was born between 1090 and 1100 in Wales or the Welsh Marches. We know little of his life, save for that he reached the age of majority by 1129, when he is recorded as witnessing a charter. In his writings, Geoffrey refers to himself as Galfridus Monemutensis (Geoffrey of Monmouth), indicating a significant connection to the town in southeast Wales, situated where the River Monnow joins the River Wye, a few miles from the Wales-England border. His works reveal an awareness of the place-names of the region.

Earlier scholars assumed that Geoffrey was Welsh or at least spoke Welsh. However, his knowledge of this language appears to have been slight and there is no evidence that he was of either Welsh or Cambro-Norman descent. Geoffrey may have come from the same French-speaking elite of the Welsh border country as Gerald of Wales, Walter Map and Robert, Earl of Gloucester, to whom he dedicated versions of *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Some historians have suggested that his parents may have been among the many Bretons that took part in William the Conqueror's conquest and settled in the southeast of Wales. Monmouth had been in the hands of Breton lords since 1075 or 1086, and the names Galfridus and Arthur were more common among the Bretons than the Welsh.

Though he may have served for a time in the Benedictine Monmouth Priory, the majority of his adult life was spent outside Wales. Between 1129 and 1151, his name appears on six charters in the Oxford area, occasionally styled as *magister* (teacher). Geoffrey likely served as a secular canon of St. George's College. All the charters signed by Geoffrey are also signed by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, a canon of that church. Archbishop Theobald of Bec consecrated Geoffrey as Bishop of St Asaph at Lambeth on 24 February 1152, having ordained him a priest at Westminster 10 days before. There is no evidence that he ever visited his see and the wars of Owain Gwynedd make this unlikely. He appears to have died between 25 December 1154 and 24 December 1155 according to Welsh chronicles, when his successor took office.

His enduring legacy is his role in the structuring and shaping of the Arthur and Merlin myths, ensuring a popularity that continues to this day. The effect of his work on the legend of King Arthur was so vast that Arthurian works have been categorised as "pre-Galfridian" and "post-Galfridian", depending on whether or not they were influenced by Geoffrey. He wrote in Latin, the language of learning and literature in Europe during the medieval period. His principal work, *Historia regum Britanniae* (The History of the Kings of Britain), relates the purported history of Britain, from its first settlement by Brutus of Troy, a descendant of Trojan hero Aeneas, to the death of Cadwaladr in the seventh century. It covers Julius Caesar's invasions of Britain, Kings Leir and Cymbeline and one of the earliest developed narratives of the fabled King Arthur. Geoffrey claims in his dedication that the book is a translation of an "ancient book in the British language that told in orderly fashion the deeds of all the kings of Britain", given to him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, though modern



historians have dismissed this claim. It is likely, however, that the Archdeacon did furnish Geoffrey with materials in the Welsh language that helped inspire his work, as Geoffrey's position and acquaintance with him would not have permitted him to fabricate such a claim outright.

The book opens with Geoffrey's statement of purpose in writing the history:

"I have not been able to discover anything at all on the kings who lived here before the Incarnation of Christ, or indeed about Arthur and all the others who followed on after the Incarnation. Yet the deeds of these men were such that they deserve to be praised for all time."

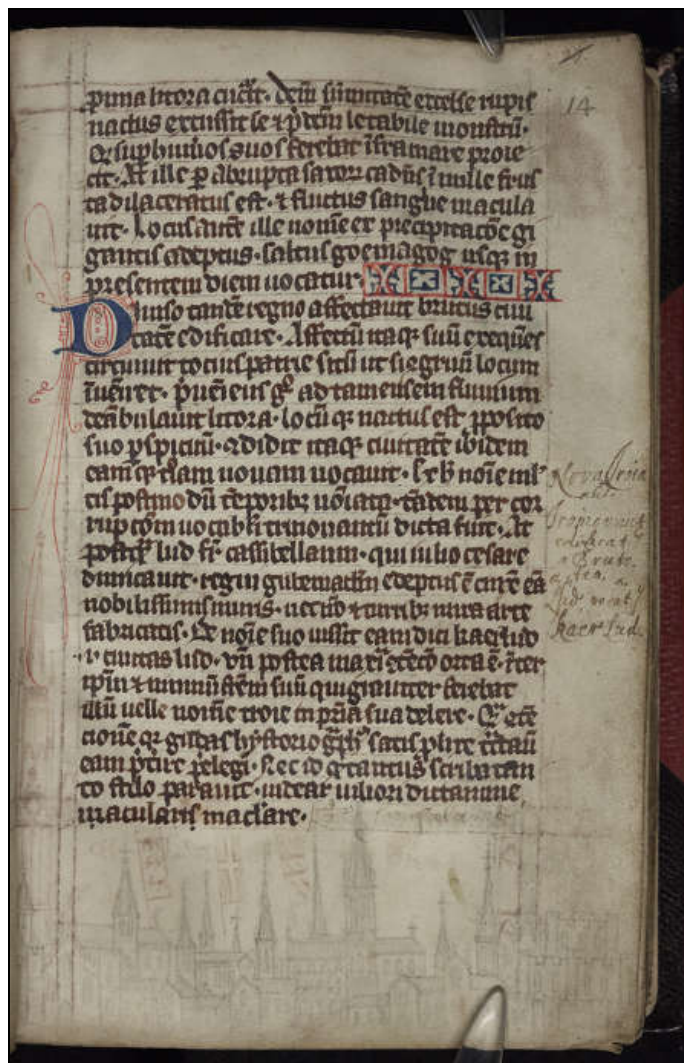
The first Book begins with the Trojan Aeneas, who, according to the *Aeneid* of Virgil, settled in Italy after the Trojan War. His great-grandson Brutus is banished, and, after a period of wandering, he is directed by the goddess Diana to settle on an island in the western ocean. Brutus lands at Totnes and names the island, then known as Albion, "Britain" after himself. Next, Brutus defeats the giants, who are the only inhabitants of the island, and establishes his capital, Troia Nova (New Troy), on the banks of the Thames; later it is known as Trinovantum and eventually London.

Then follow the reigns of the early kings down to the Roman conquest. It includes episodes such as the founding of Bath by Bladud and of Leicester by Leir. Other highlights include the story of the Saxon infiltration during the reign of the wicked usurper Vortigern, of the successful resistance of the Saxons by Vortimer and of the restoration of the rightful line, followed by the great reigns of Aurelius and his brother Uther Pendragon, leading up to the account of Arthur's conquests, the culminating section of the book. The later chapters introduce the enchanter Merlin, who predicts, in an obscure and apocalyptic manner, the future political history of Britain. These chapters were first published separately, prior to 1136, giving rise to the genre of political prophecies attributed to Merlin.

Much of Geoffrey's text is based on the *Historia Britonum*, a ninth century Welsh-Latin historical compilation, as well as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and Gildas' sixth century polemic *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, expanded with material from bardic oral tradition and genealogical tracts, and embellished by Geoffrey's own imagination. In an exchange of manuscript material for their own histories, the Norman monk Robert of Torigny gave Henry of Huntingdon a copy of Geoffrey's work, which both Robert and Henry used uncritically as authentic history and subsequently utilised in their own works, by which means Geoffrey's fictions became embedded in popular history.

Of course, *The History of the Kings of Britain* is now widely regarded as a literary forgery containing little reliable history. This has since led many modern scholars to agree with William of Newburgh, who wrote in c. 1190 that, "it is quite clear that everything this man wrote about Arthur and his successors, or indeed about his predecessors from Vortigern onwards, was made up, partly by himself and partly by others."

Still, Geoffrey's work was widely disseminated throughout medieval Western Europe — so much so that Acton Griscom listed 186 extant manuscripts in 1929 and many more have been identified since. *The History of the Kings of Britain* enjoyed a significant afterlife in a variety of forms, including translations and adaptations such as Wace's Old Norman-French *Roman de Brut*, Layamon's Middle English *Brut* and several anonymous Middle Welsh versions known as *Brut y Brenhinedd* (Brut of the Kings), where it was generally accepted as a true account.



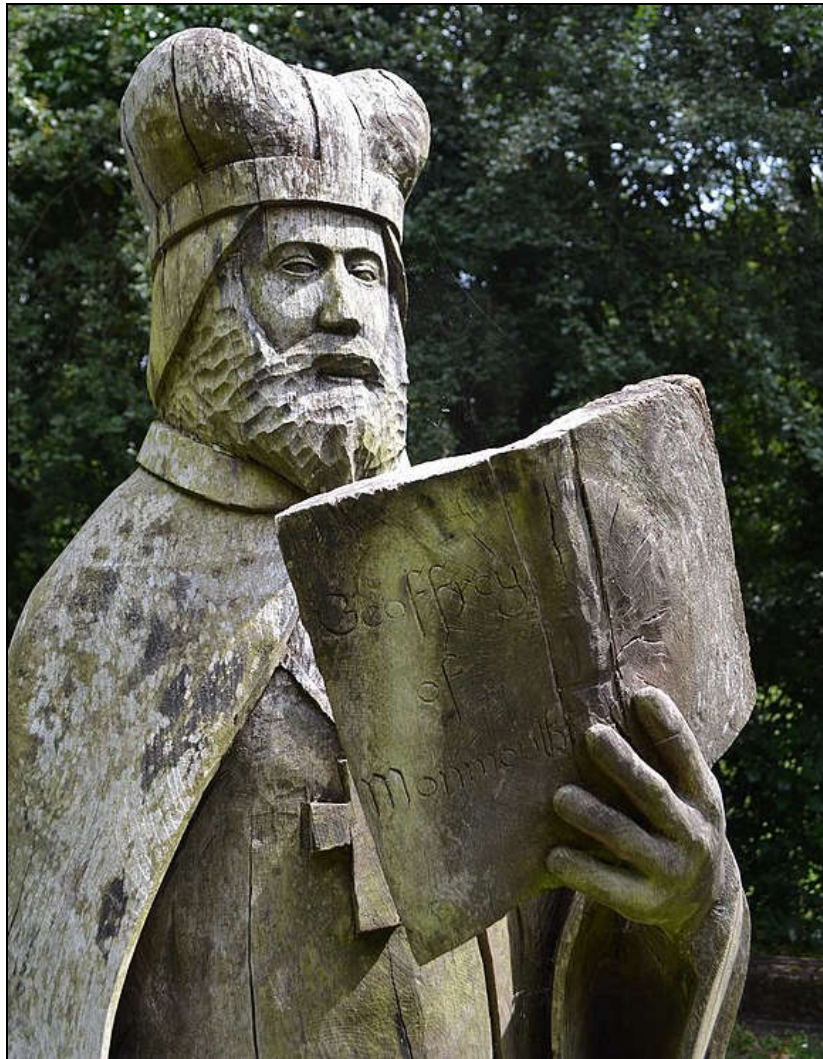
A fourteenth century manuscript of 'The History of the Kings of Britain', with a marginal illustration of London: Royal MS 13 A III, f. 14r



*An illumination from a fifteenth century manuscript of 'Historia regum Britanniae', showing Vortigern and Ambros watching the fight between two dragons*

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*Statue of Geoffrey at the Old Station Tintern, Monmouthshire*

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH'S

BRITISH HISTORY.

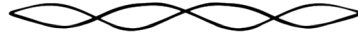
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EDITED, WITH ILLUSTRATIVE NOTES,

BY J. A. GILES

# **BOOK I.**

## Chap. I. — The epistle dedicatory to Robert earl of Gloucester.<sup>1</sup>



WHILST OCCUPIED ON many and various studies, I happened to light upon the History of the Kings of Britain, and wondered that in the account which Gildas and Bede, in their elegant treatises, had given of them, I found nothing said of those kings who lived here before the Incarnation of Christ, nor of Arthur, and many others who succeeded after the Incarnation; though their actions both deserved immortal fame, and were also celebrated by many people in a pleasant manner and by heart, as if they had been written. Whilst I was intent upon these and such like thoughts, Walter, archdeacon of Oxford,<sup>2</sup> a man of great eloquence, and learned in foreign histories, offered me a very ancient book in the British tongue, which, in a continued regular story and elegant style, related the actions of them all, from Brutus the first king of the Britons, down to Cadwallader the son of Cadwallo. At his request, therefore, though I had not made fine language my study, by collecting florid expressions from other authors, yet contented with my own homely style, I undertook the translation of that book into Latin. For if I had swelled the pages with rhetorical flourishes, I must have tired my readers, by employing their attention more upon my words than upon the history. To you, therefore, Robert earl of Gloucester, this work humbly sues for the favour of being so corrected by your advice, that it may not be thought to be the poor offspring of Geoffrey of Monmouth, but when polished by your refined wit and judgment, the production of him who had Henry the glorious king of England for his father, and whom we see an accomplished scholar and philosopher, as well as a brave soldier and expert commander; so that Britain with joy acknowledges, that in you she possesses another Henry.

### ENDNOTES.

<sup>1</sup> Robert, earl of Gloucester was the natural son of king Henry I, by whose command he swore fealty to the empress Matilda, daughter of that monarch. To prove his fidelity, he rebelled against king Stephen, and mainly contributed to the success of Henry son of the empress, afterwards Henry II.

<sup>2</sup> Thought to be Walter Mapes the poet, author of several ludicrous and satirical compositions.



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