ARTHUR
THE ORIGINS OF THE ANGLO-NORMAN LEGENDS

Introduction

How the Arthurian legends were exported to Brittany is lost in the mists of 'the Dark Ages', but we may presume that émigré Welsh monks of the 6th century, like Brioc (who established the monastery at St Brieuc), Samson (who established the abbey of Dôl-de–Bretagne ('Dôl')) and/or their followers, took the tales with them. What is clear is that, by the 12th century, there was a body of material in Breton tradition (including the Arthurian legends), which came to be known as 'the Matter of Britain'. This material was, for example, the basis of the *lais* written by Marie de France (in the Anglo-Norman language) at the end of the 12th century.

However, the subject of this paper is the re-importation of the Arthurian legends into Anglo-Saxon England after the Norman Conquest, a process that served the political ends of the victors, while providing entertainment for the literate classes of the day. And the starting point for this discussion must be the '*Historia Regum Britanniae'* ('HRB') published by Geoffrey of Monmouth in about AD 1136, where the legends first reappeared in literature.

Geoffrey wrote in the Dedication to the HRB that his work was based on a 'certain very ancient book written in the British language', which had been given to him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, 'a man well-informed about the history of foreign Countries'. And he repeated the claim at the end of the HRB, stating that it was based on a book in the British tongue ('*Britannici sermonis*'), which Walter Archdeacon of Oxford had brought out of Britain *('quem Gualterus Oxenfordensis archidiaconus ex Britannia advexit.'*).

While the meaning of *'Britannia'* in this context has been much debated, given that Geoffrey was writing in Oxford, with some arguing that it meant Wales, I am going to side with the majority opinion that it meant Brittany.

It would be fair to say that the claim that Geoffrey had an ancient source has met with a good deal of academic scepticism over many years, probably because much of the content of the HRB is so outlandish. Nevertheless, I am inclined to believe that Geoffrey did receive a book from Walter, because Walter himself must have read the HRB and, so far as we know, did not demur from this claim. Walter and Geoffrey, who had been co-witnesses to charters going back to 1129, continued to jointly witness charters until 1149.[1] This hardly suggests that there had been a falling out between them.

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However, I do not need to consider the contents of any such book, which may indeed

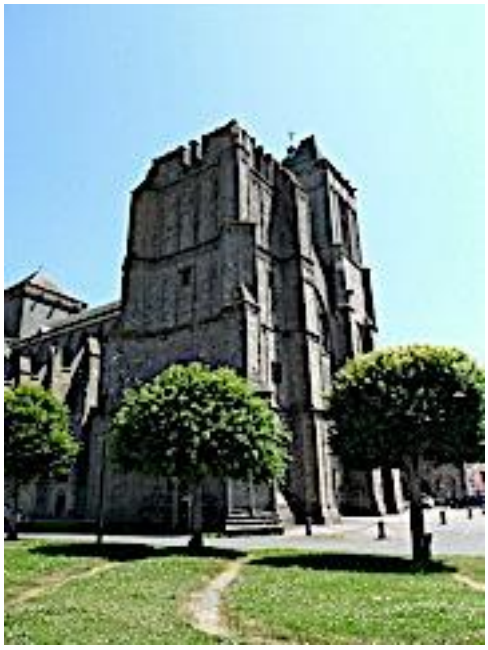
[1] 'Historia Regum Britannie (sic) by Geoffrey of Monmouth: Dissemination and Reception in the Later Middle Ages' by Julie C Crick, Boydell & Brewer (1991); p.4

have been no more than a manuscript of the '*Historia Brittonum*', the 9th century [2]compilation attributed to Nennius. The oldest surviving manuscript of Nennius was found in Brittany. My purpose is to speculate on how any such a book might have got into the hands of Walter.

Brittany in the Early 12th Century

In ecclesiastical terms, Brittany at the start of the 12th century was torn by a power struggle between the French metropolitan diocese of Tours on the one hand, which claimed authority over the whole peninsula, and the centre of the Breton religious establishment at Dôl on the other. In practice the Bishop (or possibly Archbishop) of Dôl commanded the loyalty of only four suffragan bishops, those of Saint-Pol-de-Léon, Tréguier, St Brieuc and Rennes – effectively the northern half of the peninsula, and roughly the area historically known as *Dumnonée*.

Assuming that Walter made a journey to Brittany, it is scarcely conceivable that he would not have paid his respects at the Abbey of Dôl. To have avoided the diocese of the Bishop would not merely have been a breach of etiquette, but it would have involved a sea journey around Finisterre to the southern or western coasts of the peninsula.



The present cathedral at Dôl dates to the 13th century.

As to the timing of such a visit, Bishop Kennet claimed that Walter was referred to as the Archdeacon of Oxford in documents dated 1104 and 1111[3] but Kennet did not identify these documents. This suggests a date of birth for Walter no earlier than c.AD 1080. If we further assume that Walter would not have made his visit to Brittany

[2] Manuscript on the British Museum (Lansdowne 935)

until he was at least in his 20s, it is reasonable to conclude that the visit probably did not take place before the early years of the 12th century.

The Archbishop of Dôl from AD 1107 until 1130 was Baudri de Bourgueil, although he lived in exile outside Brittany from about 1120 onwards. We may therefore conclude that, if Walter visited Brittany between 1107 and 1120, it is highly likely that he would have met Baudri de Bourgueil.

Baudri was a man of some interest, and we will consider his life and works in more detail below. But before that, there is one other possible connection between Geoffrey, Walter and Baudri that we should consider. It has often been suggested that Geoffrey was a member of the Baderon family, who were major landowners in Monmouthshire. The head of the family in Geoffrey's day was Baderon of Monmouth (c.1100 – 1176), who was Lord of Monmouth from about 1125 until 1176, and a patron of Monmouth Priory.

Geoffrey is also associated in local tradition with the Priory, a Benedictine monastery, where he allegedly received his education. The Baderon family hailed originally from Brittany, where one branch of the family remained, at La Boussac, near Dôl. It is therefore possible that Geoffrey had family connections in or near Dôl.

Baudri de Bourgueil

Baudri was born in 1046 at Meung-sur-Loire, near Orléans. Little is known of his family or early career, but in 1078 – 1082, he acceded to the post of Abbott of the Benedictine monastery at Saint-Pierre-de-Bourgueil. In 1098 he tried to buy an appointment as Bishop of Orléans from King Philippe I, but was outbid by a rival. His consolation was an appointment as Bishop (or Archbishop) of Dôl in 1107.

As we have already noted, the status of the diocese of Dôl was hotly contested by the Archbishop of Tours, and Baudri was eventually forced to concede that he held his pallium purely as a personal honour. During the course of his tenure, he was deserted by almost all of his suffragants, and in 1120 he suffered the indignity of being suspended by the papal legate Gérard d'Angoulême, following some unsuccessful litigation with certain members of his chapter.

Although he was rapidly restored to office, the experience affected him badly. He abandoned his responsibilities at Dôl, and eventually established himself at one of the abbey's daughter houses, situated at Saint-Samson-sur-Risle in eastern Normandy.

At the start of his 'exile' he made a two-year visit to various (unspecified) Benedictine abbeys in England, and later to other Benedictine houses in Normandy (at La Bec, Fécamp, Fontenelle and Jumièges). He died on 5 January 1130 at Préaux , on the eastern banks of the Seine.

Unsurprisingly, Baudri reflected unhappily on his time in Brittany. He wrote that he

had been 'defeated by the barbarous stench of the maritime territory' (*'terra maritimae barbara mephita devictus, substiti)*". He held the Breton people in general contempt and wrote that he had tried in vain to 'clear the land of stones and plant olives', but in the end was forced 'red with shame', to raise his sail for England' and thence to Normandy.

Today, Baudri is mainly remembered as a chronicler of the First Crusade, and for shedding some light on the events of the Battle of Hastings in a poem in which he describes what may well have been the Bayeux Tapestry. Indeed, Baudri considered himself a serious historian, although most of his work would today be described as hagiography. He rewrote the Life of St Samson, a work originally written at the end of the 9th or beginning of the 10th centuries, and he wrote a 'Chronicle of Dôl', a history of the diocese, which is now almost entirely lost, apart from fragments which have been reproduced in other works, such as the two editions of the '*Histoire de Bretagne*' by Pierre Le Baud (c.1480 and 1505).

A letter (or perhaps three letters merged into one) that Baudri wrote to the monks of Fécamp provides interesting observations on the abbey at Fécamp, at which he was a frequent guest, and some details of his foreign travels But he is also known as the author of 256 poems, in the style of Ovid, which have survived to us in a folio in the Vatican library.

One aspect of Baudri's work which must be broached here, is the apparently homoerotic content of some of his poems. This has made him a 'gay icon' for some commentators, though others (such as Jean-Yves Tilliette)[4] insist that the passionate language that Baudri used to address some boys and young men merely reflected the literary styles of the classical authors that he admired.

Tilliette points out that Baudri explicitly railed against the evils of homosexuality and transvesticism in two of his poems (in graphic terms), rather as Geoffrey did in the HRB. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is beyond doubt that the collection of poems shows that Baudri was very friendly with several younger males. An example of the genre is a letter that he wrote to an unidentified Walter:
'May an exchange of letters always unite us while we are apart, and may this letter now bring me into your presence. Let my letter now greet you, repeat my greetings, and repeat them a third time to please you even more. Lately I received a sweet poem from Walter, which, since you wrote it, has touched your hand. I received it with the honour that it deserves. And immediately called you to mind with my love. If you wish to take up lodging with me I will divide my heart and breast with you. I will share with you anything of mine that can be divided; if you command it, I will share my very soul."

Although Delbouille [5] speculated that this 'Walter' might have been a scribe employed by Baudri, Tilliette concludes that 'This identification does not seem to us

[4] 'Baudri de Bourgeuil; Poémes' Jean-Yves Tilliette, Paris Les Belles Lettres, 1998, pps v - x

[5] 'Un mysterieux ami de Marbode: le "redoubtable poète" Gautier', Le Moyen Age, 57, 1951, p.205 - 240

to rest on decisive proofs'[6]. I cannot help wondering whether this mysterious Walter was Walter, the Archdeacon of Oxford. Because this would prove that Baudri and Walter were in communication with each other.

Baudri in England

In Baudri's *'Itinerararium'*, he told the monks of Fécamp that he had made a two-year tour of England, where he had visited various Benedictine monasteries. But frustratingly he did not name the places concerned. The letter was probably written in about 1123, because we can discern from its contents that it was written after Baudri's contretemps at Dôl. We know that he attended the Council of Reims in 1119, and that he was suspended from his diocese in 1120, so we may presume that the tour took place during a two-year period commencing in or shortly after 1120.

The only place that we know for certain that he visited in England was Worcester, because he wrote a poem about the organ in the cathedral. This is a shame because, if we knew the other stops on his tour, we might have a fuller understanding of his purposes in England. This could help to solve a puzzle, because the circumstances were quite remarkable. In 1120, Baudri was 74 years old. It is inconceivable that he would have embarked on a perilous sea-voyage at his age, to a country that was entirely foreign to him, without a very good reason. And I suggest that it is unlikely that he would have done so if he had no relations or connections in England.

However, the fact that the '*Itinerarium*' was addressed to the monks of Fécamp provides an important clue, which suggests the identity of some of the places he may have visited. Fécamp had several daughter houses in England, notably around Rye and Winchelsea in East Sussex and at Cogges Priory (now St Mary's Parish Church, Witney) in Oxfordshire. Cogges had been founded in 1103, and the parent monastery in France would no doubt have been keen to hear news of its development. It therefore seems highly likely that Baudri visited some or all of these monasteries.

Cogges Priory was only 12 miles to the west of Oxford, and by extension it is a strong possibility that Baudri would have visited that city. It would therefore be unsurprising if he had taken the opportunity to pay a visit to the Archdeacon, especially if Walter was a man already known to him. Of course there were a number of other Benedictine houses in the area, including Wallingford Priory, where, according to Bishop Kennet, Walter was born. And if Bishop Kennet's speculation was well-founded, we may presume that Walter himself had a Benedictine upbringing.

In Oxford itself, Baudri might have visited Oxford Castle, the location of St Georges College. Both Walter and Geoffrey were canons there at the time of Baudri's tour.

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[6] Tiellette (supra) p.154

The College was secular, but if, as it seems, both Walter and Geoffrey had Benedictine schooling, Baudri would no doubt have felt comfortable in their company.

It should be mentioned in passing that Benedictine houses were associated with several places of Arthurian significance, including the nunnery at Tintagel and the abbey at Glastonbury. It was the abbey of Glastonbury where the monks fraudulently 'unearthed' what they claimed to be the remains of Arthur and Guinevere in 1191.

However, space does not permit any further discussion of the possible links between the Benedictines and the Arthurian legends, an interesting topic in itself.

Baudri, Wace and the Arthurian Legends

From the above, I conclude that Baudri may well have met Walter, and could therefore, have given or loaned him a book. If he was entertaining a guest in Dôl who was proficient in the Breton or Welsh language, and Baudri knew that the library of the monastery contained a book in that language, it would have been only natural for him to lend the book to his guest.

While the theory may be plausible, the evidence is of course circumstantial. But there is another way to test the theory: turning the question around, we may ask 'Is there anything in the Arthurian legends which looks as if it may have come from Dôl? ' And the answer to that is an emphatic 'yes'.

In the 'Sacred Acts of the Order of St Benedict' [7]. we can read about the life of St Budoc, the third bishop/abbot of Dôl (after Samson and Magloire) who took up office in c. 565. And we are told that 'Such was the saintliness of this man, Saint Budoc, that this is attested by the precious gift which he brought back from the sacred City of Jerusalem, that is to say the cup and plate that our Lord used at the last supper which he ate with his disciples.' [8]

We need not concern ourselves with the authenticity of this story, or of any objects that Budoc may have brought back from Jerusalem. It is sufficient to know that the Benedictines believed that the cup and plate used by Christ at the Last Supper had been in the possession of a 6th century Bishop of Dôl, and possibly his successors. The source of this story in the 'Acta Sanctorum' may well have been the lost 'Chronicle of Dôl', written by Baudri (in which case we might speculate on whether Baudri simply made it up - he seems to have separately invented an otherwise unknown St Armel – distinct from Saint Armel of Boscheaux, whose existence is reasonably well evidenced). But whether he invented the story or not, I think it is reasonably certain that Baudri would have known of it. He not only wrote the Chronicle of Dôl, but he also rewrote the 'Life of St Samson' one of Budoc's immediate predecessors.

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[7] 'Acta Sanctorum Ordinis Sancti Benedicti', Vol. 1, at pages 223 – 225, Mabillon, 1668

[8] 'Quantae vero sanctitatis fuerit vir iste sanctus Budocus, pretiosa munera quae secum de sancta civitate detulit Jersusalem, scutella scilicet et scutellus quibus Dominus usus est in ultima Coena quam cum discipulis suis testantur'

And that means that he could have disseminated the story, in written or oral form, during his retirement in Normandy. There is no question, of course, that he directly informed the Grail Quest romances of Chrétien de Troyes, written in the 13th century, but he, and other Benedictines, would have ensured that this interesting historical 'fact' was known in that Duchy. Baudri is known to have been interested in sacred relics, because his letters to the monks of Fécamp describe a phial of the 'blood of Christ', which was in the possession of that abbey.

There is another aspect of the legends that may derive directly or indirectly from Baudri, and it too concerns the Grail Quest. According to the 13th century romances, the Holy Grail was kept at a castle called Corbénic. I am convinced that this name is a compound of Gaulish words: cor-pen-ic. The meaning of pen-ic is settled, because the name of the town has barely changed – it means 'head of the river Ic' (just as Bénodet means 'head of the river Odet'). Today we would say 'the mouth of the river Ic',

The building known as the Nunnery, on Alderney, is the best preserved small Roam fort in Britain, and give us some idea of what Carbonic (the castle at Binic) might have looked like before it was destroyed.

The town is today called Binic, the name having changed from Bénic at the end of the Middle Ages. 'Cor' is a word that I interpret as meaning 'hill'. So, I interpret Cor-pen-ic as meaning 'hill at the mouth of the River Ic'.

Part of the north-east wall of the castle at Binic.

And sure enough, on the hill overlooking the southern flank of Binic, there are the remains of an impressive late Roman or early Medieval castle, which has been destroyed. The castle had seven towers defending its seaward wall, and sits a stone's throw from the cliffs and the sea. While the site has never been archaeologically examined, the evident destruction is consistent with the legendary fate of the castle, which was apparently razed by Charlemagne.[9]

The remains of a tower on the seaward wall of the castle at Binic (one of seven). The castle was destroyed by Charlemagne in the early 9th century, and has been extensively quarried by the people of Binic for building materials.

The significance of Binic, from the point of view of this paper, is that Binic lay within the diocese of Dôl. We must recall the precarious position in which Dôl found itself in the 6th century. A war between the Franks and the Armoricans had resulted in a defeat for the Franks in c. AD 501-3, following which the parties seem to have settled for some sort of truce. Judging from the circumstantial evidence, the Armoricans recognised the overlordship of King Clovis of the Franks, and he in turn allowed the Armoricans to continue to govern themselves as they pleased. Very unusually, the Armoricans were not required to pay any tribute to the Franks.

Thereafter there was an uneasy coexistence, with the Franks ruling the territory to the east of the Rance River, and the Armoricans ruling the rest of the peninsula (or at least the northern half of it). Dôl itself, was however located to the east of the Rance – in other words in territory controlled by the Franks.

If we put ourselves in the shoes of the Bishop of Dôl of the time, probably a monk from Wales, and we assume that he had possession of what he thought were the original cup and plate used by Christ at the last supper, he would have wanted to store these most valuable possessions somewhere safe from the Franks. And fortunately, he had in his

[9] Charlemagne overran Brittany in the early years of the 9thcentury.

diocese the most powerful castle on the northern coast of Armorica. It makes perfect sense that he would have stored these treasures in the castle at Binic.

There are many hints in the Arthurian legends which reinforce the identification of Binic as the location of the Grail Castle. In '*Perlesvaus'* (early 13th century) we learn that the Grail Castle was approached via the Castle of Enquiry, where pious knights habitually stopped to make their confession before entering the Grail Castle. The village immediately outside the gates of the castle at Binic is today called Queré ('enquiry'), and it is the place where the lords of the castle held their courts.

In the Post Vulgate *Mort Artu* (1230-1240), Corbénic was razed by Charlemagne. The castle at Binic was raised by Charlemagne, who never visited England. Corbénic has a town, a bridge (and therefore by implication, a river) and it is on the coast. Binic ticks all of those boxes. The master of Corbénic was the Fisher King, and Binic is still a fishing port today.

Conclusions

1. It seems probable that Walter, the Archdeacon of Oxford, would have met Bishop Baudri de Bourgueil if he visited Brittany in the early 12th century.
2. It is at least possible that Walter was the Walter addressed in a passionate poem written by Baudri – which would indicate a strong friendship between them
3. It seems probable that Baudri would have visited Oxford during his two-year visit to England in c.1120 - 1122.
4. It is therefore at least possible that Baudri lent Walter the 'book in the British language' which Walter in turn lent to Geoffrey of Monmouth
5. Geoffrey of Monmouth published his '*Historia Regum Britanniae'* in c.1136, which would be consistent with his having obtained the original 'book in the British language' in 1120-1122.
6. Geoffrey could have learned of the folklore of Dôl, either from the book, from Baudri or from his family connections with Dôl.
7. The book or that folklore could have included tales of an Arthurian campaign in Brittany
8. It is likely that Dôl/Binic were the inspiration behind the Grail Castle legends.