

BRETON HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE SURVIVAL

OF GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH

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The invention of the past, especially for purposes of national or regional pride, was not an unusual practice in medieval or early modern historiography. Neither was the rehabilitation for political reasons of a hitherto neglected historical text. It was not, however, common to appropriate directly the more fictive portions of another nation's historical literature for one's own political purposes.¹ Yet this is what Breton erudites of the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries did when they adopted Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain as the principal source of their duchy's early history.

Before the late fifteenth century, the Bretons had produced virtually no historical literature beyond a few monastic chronicles of strictly local focus. As political absorption of the Duchy by the French monarchy became increasingly likely, however, the dukes of Brittany appealed to history, tradition and legend to defend their prerogatives and independence.² In Geoffrey's history, Breton erudites found materials to fulfill their fundamental propagandistic requirements, proofs of Breton independence from its very origins. According to Geoffrey, the Armorican peninsula had been colonized in the late fourth century by natives of the British Isles who had followed the Roman senator Maximus to the Continent during his bid to seize the imperial throne. These Bretons, he stated, almost entirely

supplanted the original inhabitants of the peninsula. Maximus rewarded their leader, a prince named Conan Meriadec, by establishing him as king in Armorica.³

In the course of the sixteenth century, Breton erudites would manipulate this account to meet the changing political exigencies of Brittany's integration into the French monarchy, and to meet changing criteria of historical composition and judgement. Ultimately, they would detach belief in the historicity of Conan Meriadec and the foundation of a Breton kingdom from belief in Geoffrey of Monmouth's authority as a writer of history.

The first history to treat the province of Brittany as a whole was begun by Pierre Le Baud (d. 1505) in about 1480, at the request of Jean de Derval, a chamberlain of Duke Francis II. Le Baud intended his work to demonstrate that the Bretons were neither Gallic nor Frankish in origin, but British, with a history, custom, and law distinct from those of France. Overtaken by both political events and changes in historiographical tastes, Le Baud's Compilation des croniques & ystoires des Bretons, despite one major revision by the author, remained unprinted for the next century and a half.⁴

The Bretons, as Le Baud noted, had never been much given to writing history. However, Geoffrey's history had long been familiar to them as a source of chivalric literature. Early in the fifteenth century, the anonymous author of the Chronique de Saint-Brieuc had borrowed Geoffrey's British conqueror of Armorica and attached him to a fictional list of princes of Dumnonum, whom he declared to have been kings of Brittany. Le Baud made this dynasty the framework for a general history of the duchy. He announced that he would turn directly to Geoffrey as his principal authority for the

early history of the Bretons. The first book of his work and part of the second thus formed a synopsis with emendations of Geoffrey's first five books.

The Croniques & ystoires faithfully summarized the History of the Kings of Britain from the exile of Brutus, through his battles with the Picts of Aquitaine and the establishment of the British monarchy, to the arrival of Maximus in Britain during the reign of King Octavius. It consequently included a great deal of material extraneous to the history of the duchy. Le Baud combined Geoffrey's story of the establishment of a British kingdom in Armorica with materials he compiled from the lives of Breton saints and from monastic chronicles. With the addition of the genealogy of fictional successors to Conan from the Chronique de Brieuç, Le Baud produced an uninterrupted history of Breton Armorica to the death of Duke Arthur III in 1458.

Le Baud added one anecdote about the foundation of Brittany which would affect discourse on the subject for years to come. When Maximus delivered Armorica to Conan, he stated, Conan "thanked him promising him his services always, as long as he would live."⁵

When Anne of Brittany, the only child of Duke Francis II, married Charles VIII, she appointed Le Baud her grand almoner. In Paris, he began a new redaction of the Croniques & ystoires, stylistically more suited to modern tastes in historiography and more Breton in content. He eliminated the first book entirely, replacing it with a single chapter describing the geography and people of Brittany. He compressed the second book into a single chapter, reducing the non-Breton component of the work to a minimum. It was this variant on which Le Baud was still working at his death.

Alain Bouchart (d. ca. 1514) produced the first history of Brittany to see print. Its title, Les Grandes Croniques de Bretagne, makes clear its intended apposition to the central source of French history, the Grandes Chroniques de France.⁶

Bouchart was a lawyer whose family had served the dukes of Brittany since the early fourteenth century. The circumstances of his life reflect the initial absorption of the duchy into the kingdom of France at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Together with his brother Jacques, Bouchart had participated in the redaction of the Coutume de Bretagne, the body of customary law first collected in the previous century, into its first printed edition in 1485. He took part that year in the establishment of a Breton Parlement on the French model, and served Francis II as maître des requêtes until the latter's death in 1488.

Bouchart, as well as Le Baud, accompanied Anne to Paris, where he entered royal service as conseiller du roi au Grand Conseil. Anne encouraged Bouchart to take up historical research and, during her brief return to Brittany between the death of Charles and her marriage to Louis XII, granted him access to the ducal archives in Nantes. He returned with her to Paris in 1499 as an avocat au Parlement. He read the first two books of his work to her before her death in 1513, and published it the following year.

The history of the Bretons in Brittany began, according to Bouchart, with the coronation of Conan Meriadec as the first British king of Armorica in A.D. 386. Conan, whose reputed tomb at the cathedral of St. Pol de Leon became something of a tourist attraction in the sixteenth century, was by then an

established figure in Breton history. At the time Maximus invaded Gaul, it was composed of ten kingdoms of which Armorica was, according to Bouchart, "the most powerful and opulent." Bouchart distinguished the new kingdom from its predecessors by stating that, following the Herod-like policy suggested by Maximus, Conan had exterminated a large part of the original population of Armorica, thereby insuring the racial and linguistic purity of his realm.⁷

Bouchart not only distinguished his Bretons from the original inhabitants of Armorica, but took care to establish their cultural and political anteriority to the Franks. The Grandes Chroniques de France had placed the departure of the Franks from Pannonia at about A.D. 375, the coronation of the first king of the Franks in about A.D. 420, and the baptism of the first Christian king of France in A.D. 496. Brittany, in contrast, had its first Christian king in A.D. 386. Gregory of Tours in his History of the Franks, had placed the first Frankish incursions into Gaul at the time "that Maximus dwelt at Aquileia," when Conan Meriadec already occupied his throne. Bouchart's account of the origins of Brittany countered the political and cultural claims of the Grandes Chroniques de France by infiltrating behind them, giving Brittany a Trojan foundation older than that of the French monarchy.⁸

That Bouchart's early history of the Bretons derived, like Le Baud's, from Geoffrey of Monmouth is clear. It is not at all clear, however, that he worked directly from the History of the Kings of Britain. Although it had been printed in 1508, he did not mention the work or its author by name. Bouchart's British genealogies are sufficiently deformed from Geoffrey's, both in name-form and order, to suggest either an intervening source or

considerable revision on his part. Both Vincent of Beauvais and Robert de Torigni had made use of the History in their own works, which would have been available to a Breton scholar of Bouchart's period.⁹

The new Breton history did not find a sympathetic audience in Paris. Gilles Corrozet's Antiques erections des villes et citez des troys Gaules, a popular guide to the foundation of the cities and provinces of Gaul which first appeared in 1538, simply ignored Breton historical productions and the entire issue of the origin of the Bretons. In a 1561 treatise on the origins of France, Charles Du Moulin, perhaps the greatest leqist of his generation, denied that any authentic reference to the Bretons could be found before the reign of the Emperor Avitus in the fifth century. Du Moulin cautioned his readers against the testimony of "fabulous histories," and singled out Geoffrey of Monmouth as his example. François de Belleforest, royal historiographer to Charles IX and Henry III and self-proclaimed as the original exposé of the historical forgeries of the Abbot Trithemius, went further. The independent kings of Brittany, he stated, were an invention of the Breton chroniclers. The various hereditary lords of Brittany had been vassals of the kings of France since the reign of Clovis. To assert otherwise was "pure janglerie."¹⁰

Bertrand d'Argentré (1519-1590) inverted the historical relationship between Britain and Brittany in the interest of preserving what, to a Breton scholar, was the core of Geoffrey's history. D'Argentré, a grand-nephew of Jean Le Baud, may have been the last champion, both as a lawyer and as a historian, of Breton independence during the sixteenth century. He devoted himself to the defense of feudal

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institutions against the intrusions of the central monarchy. During the Wars of Religion, he gave his support to the Holy League, which he saw as a counterforce to the centralizing tendencies of the royalist cause. He died while fleeing the armies of Henri IV as they invaded Brittany.

As a young man, d'Argentré came into possession of his great-uncle's research papers. In about 1540, he assembled portions of them into a treatise which argued that Brittany was not a fief of the French crown, but an independent kingdom. In 1580, the Estates of Brittany requested him to compose a new history of the duchy. The resulting Histoire de Bretagne was printed at Rennes in 1582.¹¹

The Histoire de Bretagne was largely based on the works of Le Baud and Bouchart, although d'Argentré added material on the reigns of Duke Francis II and Duchess Anne from his own research. His work varied most widely from that of his predecessors on the issue of the origins of the Bretons. He began by stating that both his predecessors and their critics had been mistaken in their opinions of how the Breton people arose. On the one hand, the Bretons were certainly not the issue of Britain and Troy. "I leave the defense of Turnus, Brutus, Helenus to the English, who would die for them," he stated. Fables, however ancient, remained "nothing but fables and old falsehoods."¹² On the other hand, he believed that the great antiquity of the Bretons could be demonstrated, and that it was they who had colonized Great Britain. The Bretons who followed Maximus into Gaul were, in his view, a band of returning Armoricans.¹³

Rather than rely on fable, d'Argentré proposed to "make use of principles and verisimilitudes taken from nature" to shed light on these obscure episodes of history. He did

not elaborate on how he would proceed with this program, but in practice he employed literary evidence where he believed it to be trustworthy. Where it was not, he attempted to extract from it what useful testimony he could. Where literary evidence was entirely absent, he resorted to the evidence of language, tradition, and artifacts.¹⁴

D'Argentré asserted that the British isles had been colonized by the Gauls of Armorica at some indeterminate time before the Roman conquest. Both Caesar and Tacitus, he stated, had arrived at this conclusion by way of "conjectures and arguments taken from the similarities, customs and practices of all nations near and far." Strabo had also come to this conclusion and, according to d'Argentré, had pointed to the existence well before the time of Conan of an Armorican city named "Britannique." Bede had concurred, stating that the island had originally been settled from Armorica. Thus d'Argentré argued the arrival of Conan Meriadec in Armorica constituted not a conquest but the renewal of the Breton nation after years of Roman occupation.¹⁵

D'Argentré was unwilling to dispose of Conan Meriadec along with Brutus and Turnus. The foundation of an independent Breton kingdom in the fourth century was central to his account of how the Brittany of his own day had come into being. He therefore undertook to salvage what he took to be the authentic portions of Geoffrey of Monmouth's History, which he believed Geoffrey had discovered in Brittany.

Polydore Virgil, the first modern historian of Britain, had pointed out that one could not accept everything Geoffrey wrote, especially patently fabulous stories such as the ones he recorded about Merlin. D'Argentré cited his judgement with approval. But, he added, would

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one thus condemn all of Herodotus or Diodorus Siculus, who had included accounts of the fanciful in their works? D'Argentré listed the English, French, German, Italian, and Scots scholars who relied upon Geoffrey as testimony to the seriousness of his work as a whole.¹⁶

The event which brought Conan to the throne of Brittany, the rebellion of Maximus, was well documented. Those who denied the existence of the Breton kingdom not only were unable to disprove that Maximus had established one of his captains in Armorica, they could not prove that the Romans had reestablished control over the area following the defeat of Maximus. D'Argentré, returning to an incident mentioned by Le Baud, pointed out that Conan had received his lordship over Brittany personally from Maximus. To a lawyer trained in the usages governing feudal relationships, the event had profound historical significance. After both were dead, and in the absence of directly imposed imperial authority, Conan's successors were absolved of obligation to any sovereign outside the boundaries of the Breton state.

Though Belleforest had argued that the kings of Brittany listed by Le Baud and Bouchart had never existed and that the authorities Le Baud had cited on the subject, Baldric, Samson of Dol, Ingomarus, and the Roys anciens d'Armoriques, were nowhere to be found, d'Argentré asserted that their history could still be demonstrated in the absence of traditional documentation. "If the books are not now to be found," he stated, "the stones themselves will speak of it, the monasteries, the tombs and sepulchres." Gralon, the second king of Brittany, had built a church at the abbey of Landeuenc, alongside which his tomb might still be seen. Similarly, the tomb of

King Judicial could be seen at the abbey of Saint Jouyn de Marne. Thucydides, d'Argentré noted, had been satisfied as to whether Pisiistratus had children by the evidence of an inscription.¹⁷

D'Argentré's Histoire de Bretagne was an energetic defense of Breton autonomy, conducted as a rearguard action following the union of the duchy with France. By jettisoning Brutus and the issue of Trojan origins, he made a gesture toward the critical view of national origins which had emerged during the sixteenth century. He simultaneously rid Breton history of the early, largely irrelevant chapters of Geoffrey of Monmouth, a task at which Le Baud and Bouchart had not entirely succeeded. By inverting the relationship between Brittany and Britain, making Armorica the cradle of both nations, he emphasized the antiquity of the Bretons as an indigenous Gaulish people. By salvaging the story of Conan Meriadec and the kingdom of Brittany, even though he depended largely on his opponents' presumed inability to prove a negative, he defended Breton claims to a law and a political existence independent of France. When the second edition of the Histoire appeared in 1588, the Parlement of Paris recognized d'Argentré's efforts by condemning his book as "contrary to the dignity of our kings."¹⁸

Nicholas Vignier (1530-1596), who succeeded Belleforest as royal historiographer, rejected d'Argentré's historical scholarship and the political implications he drew from it. If d'Argentré's claims of Breton autonomy were true, he stated in Traicte de l'ancien estat de la petite Bretagne, the Burgundians and the inhabitants of Aquitaine would have as much cause or more to claim themselves independent of the French monarchy.¹⁹

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Vignier used the very unlikeliness of the Conan story to discredit it. By demonstrating that, to any scholar with a knowledge of the period, the career of Brittany's legendary founder was highly improbable, he proposed to undercut its verisimilitude. How can one accept, Vignier demanded, the preposterous notion that one of Maximus's captains, abandoned in "un petit anlet de la Gaulle," managed to sustain his position under such circumstances. Conan and his successors, one must conclude, are mere "fantosmes & noms forgez."²⁰

Vignier conceded that there had been a kingdom in Armorica before the advent of the Franks, just as there had been a number of other kingdoms in Gaul. However, he stated, the Gauls had invited the Franks into their country and had submitted to their rule. When the old kings of the Bretons had done so, they had been made counts by Clovis. They paid tribute and rendered liege homage to the kings of the Franks, as they had ever since. Breton claims to a crown independent of that of the Franks were thus specious. Further, when Brittany passed to the kings of France at the end of the fifteenth century, it had become subject to the Salic Law, which irrevocably bound it to the monarchy.

Vignier's essay at demolishing the foundations of Breton historiography was not printed until 1619, when it appeared with a vindictory preface by his eldest son. We should not, however, assume that its publication was merely an act of filial piety, performed after the controversy had ended. It is true that the political circumstances which originally prompted the adoption of Conan Meriadec and his line by Breton scholars had largely disappeared with the consolidation of the Bourbon monarchy. It is also true that a

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reasonable age endowed with a critical spirit, for so the erudite of the seventeenth century saw their era, could not accept Geoffrey of Monmouth as an unimpeachable historical authority. However, the figures which Geoffrey had contributed to the Breton historical tradition maintained a grip on scholarly imaginations well after the circumstances of their introduction had dissipated.

D'Argentré's history had been republished, with minor revisions by his son, in 1612 and 1618. Le Baud's Croniques were finally published, in their second redaction, in 1638. Although the principal value of these works, and of Bouchart's, is now seen to lie in their treatment of comparatively recent periods, their accounts of the origins of Brittany remained a matter of considerable interest to the erudite for many years.

A commission of four learned monks appointed in 1687 by the prior of the abbey of Redon visited the archives of the province and its neighbors and, seven years later, announced itself satisfied that the, by then, traditional account of Breton origins was sustained by the available evidence. Alexis Lobineau, a member of the commission, conducted a scholarly polemic on the issue of the first rulers of Brittany which culminated when one of his opponents, the Abbé Vertot, attempted to hale him into court on sedition charges. Dom Pierre Morice, apparently forgetting d'Argentré's experience with the Parlement of Paris, remarked that, "up to now nobody had thought it was treasonous to uphold a historical point which, moreover, was regarded as largely problematical."²¹

The Abbé Jacques Gallet, in an essay on the origins of the Bretons composed in the 1730's, asserted that Le Baud's history was true in its outlines, conformed to the events of Roman

history as it was known, and needed only to be winnowed of a few fabulous elements. Gallet's defense of the historicity of Conan Meriadec and the existence of an independent Breton kingdom inspired later generations of provincial erudites. Dom Morice and Pierre Daru elaborated on the history of Conan, integrating it with the history of later antiquity.²²

When, then, did Geoffrey of Monmouth's Breton history finally disappear from scholarly discussion? A precise date is, of course, impossible to determine, but it is probably more recent than we might assume. In the Revue de l'Ecole des Chartes for 1900, Ferdinand Lot reviewed a monograph on the settlement of Armorica composed by the Benedictine Dom Bède Plaine, published the year before. Plaine's thesis, simply put, was that Brittany had been colonized in about A.D. 383 by British followers of the imperial pretender Maximus. The review was polite (for Dom Plaine was a learned man), but ultimately dismissive. Lot recognized history still based on that of Geoffrey of Monmouth.²³

NOTES

1. The notion of the Trojan origins of the French cannot have been far from the minds of Breton erudites of the period. The story, which attached the French monarchy to the earliest commonly accepted episodes in history, had circulated since the eighth century and had been incorporated into the canon of national history through the chronicles of Saint Denis and their French language derivative, the Grandes Chroniques de France. See George Huppert, "The Trojan Franks and their Critics," Studies in the Renaissance 12 (1965): 227-41. Jacques de Guyse's Annales Hannoniae, completed in 1390, serve as an example of a historical work rehabilitated after a period of neglect. They were translated into French for Philip the Good of Burgundy and formally presented to him by his councillors in about 1446, presumably as a Burgundian historiographical counterweight to the chronicles of Saint Denis. See Richard Vaughan, Philip the Good: The Apogee of Burgundy (New York: Barnes, 1970) 156-57. De Guyse's imaginative account of the origins of the Low Countries was later employed by Jean Lemaire de Belges in his Illustrations de Gaule. The entire work was printed by Galliot Du Pre in a new translation in 1531.
2. The dispute between the dukes of Brittany and the kings of France as to the nature of fealty owed by the one to the other, and its political implications within the centralizing policies of Louis XI and his successors, is discussed in B.-A. Pocquet

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- du Haut-Jussé, "A Political Concept of Louis XI: Subjection Instead of Vassalage," The Recovery of France in the Fifteenth Century, ed. P.S. Lewis, trans. G.F. Martin (London: Macmillan, 1971) 196-215.
3. Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of England, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966). The story of the British conquest of Armorica is contained in 5, 9 through 5, 15: 132-142.
 4. Pierre Le Baud, Histoire de Bretagne avec les chroniques de Vitry et de Laval, ed. Pierre d'Hozier (Paris: 1638), is derived from the author's second redaction. Chroniques & Ystoires des Bretons, ed. Charles de la Lande de Calan, 4 vols. (Rennes: n.p., 1907-1922), reproduces the first redaction. Citations are from the latter edition.
 5. Le Baud, 1: 9, 11.
 6. Alain Bouchart, Les Grandes Croniques de Bretagne (Nantes: 1886), fol. 8r-11r.
 7. Bouchart, fol. 35v; on the extermination of the original Armoricans and the preservation of the Breton's original "Trojan" language, fol. 36r-v.
 8. Les Grandes Chroniques de France, ed. Jules Viard (Paris: Société de l'histoire de France, 1920-1927), 1, 12-20 (I, 1); Gregory of Tours, History of the Franks, trans. O.M. Dalton, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), 1, 49 (II, 9).

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9. Antonia Gransden, Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307 (London: Routledge, 1974) 199-202, 261-263, on Torigni's role in transmitting Geoffrey's history to French historical learning.
10. Gilles Corrozet, Les antiques erections des villes & citez des troys Gaules, cestassavoir Celtique, Belgique & Aquitaine (Paris: 1539) fol. 10v on Nantes, fol. 39v on "Cornouaille" (=Concarneau). Charles Du Moulin, Traicte de l'origine, progres et excellence du royaume et monarchie des Francois, & Coronne de France (Paris: 1561) fol. 21r-v. François de Belleforest, Les Grandes Annales et Histoire de France, vol. 1 (Paris: 1579) fol. 70v, "Or mestonne je comme les Annalistes Bretons osent nous forger des Roys en leur pays. . . ."
11. Bertrand d'Argentré, L'Histoire de Bretagne des Roys, Ducs, Comtes et Princes d'icelle (Rennes: 1668) 3. See J. Balteau, "Argentré," Dictionnaire de Biographie Française, (Paris: Letouzey, 1939), 3: cols. 572-74.
12. This and all translations are my own.
13. D'Argentré's thesis parallels the idea of the Franks as a band of Gauls returning after a long exile across the Rhine advanced by Jean Bodin in his Methodus of 1566, and a similar notion about the Burgundians as returning Gauls advanced by Guillaume Paradin in his Annales de Bourgoigne of the same year.

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14. D'Argentré, preface, 3. (The work begins with an independently paginated section of prefatory material.)
15. D'Argentré, preface, 4-6: ". . . & rendent raison de leurs conjectures & arguments pris des similitudes, moeurs, & habitudes de toutes les nations prochaines & esloignées."
16. D'Argentré, preface, 22: "Mais a-on condamné tout Herodote? pource qu'il y a bien de telles choses, ou Diodorus Siculus, qui est presque tout farcy de telles figures."
17. D'Argentré, preface, 22-23: "Et quoy qu'il soit vray que bonne part des Autheurs soient depuis ce temps là, si est-ce qu'ils n'ont pas eu faute d'enseignemens, titres, & livres suffisans pour bien justifier ce qu'ils ont escrit, si les livres ne se trouvent de present, les pierres mesmes en parlent, les Monasteres, les Tombeaux, les Sepulchres." The stones to which d'Argentré referred were of comparatively recent origin. The paleolithic monuments which cover parts of Brittany, through their popular association with the lives of saints, remained beyond scholarly scrutiny until well into the eighteenth century.
18. Balteau, col. 574.
19. Nicholas Vignier, Traicté de l'ancien estat de la petite Bretagne, et du droict de la Couronne de France sur icelle: contre les faussetez et calomnies de deux Histoires de Bretagne, composees par feu le Sr. Bertrand

d'Argentré, President au Siege de Rennes
(Paris: 1619) 4.

20. Vignier 3-8.
21. Pierre-Hyacinthe Morice, Histoire Ecclesiastique et Civile de Bretagne (Paris: 1750; reprinted Farnborough: Gregg International, 1968), 1, xi. The Abbé Vertot (René Aubert) had claimed in his Traicté de la Mouvance de Bretagne (Paris: 1710) that Brittany had been a fief of the French monarchy since the reign of Clovis.
22. Jacques Gallet, Mémoire sur l'Etablissement des Bretons dans l'Armorique et leurs Premiers Rois, first published by the Abbé Desfontaines in his Histoire des Ducs de Bretagne vols. 5, 6, (Paris: 1739) and by Dom Morice in his Histoire Ecclesiastique, 1: 547-49.
23. Ferdinand Lot, rev. of La Colonization de l'Armorique, by Bede Plaine, OSB, (Paris: 1899) in Revue de l'Ecole des Chartes, 61 (1900): 547-49.