

THE ALLITERATIVE *MORTE ARTHURE* AND
"MONSTROUS" BRETON GEOGRAPHY¹

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I

The introduction of giants and their works in Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the conflicts between Arthur and such a giant in Lazamon's *Brut* and the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, form a well-known part of British originary history and have been studied by several scholars, most recently Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Geraldine Heng,² whose focus was primarily historical and mythic. But the concept of geographic "extremes" in Brittany and the way they affect their inhabitants to "cause" monstrosity may also shed new light on some works of Arthurian literature involving "monstrous" adversaries, most particularly the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

Obscured by time and difficult to tease out from history is the issue of geographical boundaries *within* nations—"nation" being a term, of course, that would not mean the same thing to a medieval resident of "France" or "Britain" as it does to us, for medieval views of nationhood were not especially coherent or inclusive.³ Indeed, attitudes held by those at the center of a geographical region towards the inhabitants of the edges form part of the medieval concept of alterity, and one striking instance of this is the centrist attitude toward Brittany, located at the extreme west edge of France and viewed by many as an extra-national region, where certain events associated with Arthur's exploits occurred.

The present article concerns some mental boundaries projected on such national ones. I suggest that the belief that Breton landscape was unusually rich in monstrous pagan features, such as giants and their architectural remains, led to the appearance of geographical monstrosities in a variety of literary and historical texts. These monstrosities then became highly influential in the Arthurian tradition, in particular, as mentioned earlier, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

Let us consider the development of this attitude towards national "edges" and their inhabitants by taking a peculiarly ethnocentric

moment in Frankish history as a point of entry. France was much praised for the quality of its wines, the beauty of its capitol, and the virtue of its women from earliest times, but one of its originary myths, proposed, for example, by Guy de Bazoches (1146-1203) in his *Apology*—that “France alone of nations, has no monsters” (Wattenbach 34)—seems at first a curious way of distinguishing one land from others. Yet Guy was simply following a belief, adumbrated as early as the fourth century by Saint Jerome in his *Contra Vigilantium*, that “France alone has no monsters and abounds in eloquent and strong men” (*Patrologia Latina* 171: 1235). It was certain that there *were* monsters, however, and thus, if they were not in France they must inhabit other places in great profusion.

If there were no monsters in France in the twelfth century it was, according to Peter Abelard, because they were all in Brittany. In his *Historia Calamitatum*, the speaker seeks to escape his miserable existence in the Abbey of St. Denis by accepting the abbacy of Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys on the coast of the Gulf of Morbihan in Brittany. For him

[t]he country was wild and the language unknown to me, the natives were brutal and barbarous. . . . And there by the fearful roar of the waves of the Ocean, *at the far ends of the Earth* where I could flee no further, I used to repeat in my prayers the words of the Psalmist: ‘From the end of the earth I have called to thee, when my heart was in anguish.’ [my emphasis]⁴

The extent to which later French writers shared Abelard’s attitude towards Brittany as a place separated by cultural boundaries from France is shown in Rabelais’s *Gargantua*, where the author speaks of the Bretons as a separate and “barbarous nation,” and in *Pantagruel*, (remarking on different national measures), where he notes that the Breton mile, like that of other “remote” countries, is unusually long.⁵ What was it then about this region that produced such sentiments, and how did they affect Arthur’s adventures with monsters?

I suggest that Brittany, the considerable landmass of western France, called upper and lower Brittany and Armorica,⁶ was considered by medieval Parisians—and even many Englishmen—not only as a savage and barbaric place, but one associated with giants, sorcery, and

other forms of the specifically anti-Christian supernatural that could easily and frequently erupt into Arthurian legend.⁷ And this view was largely based on certain features of its landscape: namely the numerous prehistoric stone monuments found on the Breton coast.

From a variety of decrees forbidding their worship, it is clear that Brittany's megaliths formed part of its reputation for unextirpated paganism. For example, a capitulary of Childebert I, made somewhere between 511 and 558, is known to apply to Brittany. Those who after due warning do not cause to be demolished in their domains "simulacra constructa" can be punished. It is probable that these simulacra—since wherever elsewhere in the capitulary idols are referred to—must be megaliths. The Council of Tours, in 567, recommends immediate excommunication for "whoever is seen making gestures before certain stones, gestures which have nothing in common with the principles of Catholicism." By 698 we find a council at Rouen similarly threatening anyone who "makes prayers to stones and even lights candles to them," and in his sermons the seventh-century bishop of Noyon, Saint Eloi, admonishes those who light candles or pray to stones, or even pray in areas on their outskirts.

That religious interest in megalithic remains continued to a much later period is indicated by Canon 20 of the Council of Nantes, believed to have been held around 895, that gives concrete suggestions for dealing with contemporary veneration of dolmens and menhirs: "Bishops should cause to be dug up, removed, and hidden in places where they cannot be found such stones that in ruins or wooded spots are still venerated and to which vows are still made."⁸

Another sort of evidence is more visual and literary. The latest of the three Old English manuscripts known collectively as the *Marvels of the East*, dating from the twelfth century, Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Bodley 614, contains a variety of animal or human marvels found in remote and desolate places of the world. The marvels are almost all animal or human—strange serpents, men with their faces on their chests and their eyes on their shoulders, and the like—who inhabit most particularly Africa and India. The last marvel found in the codex, differs from the others, however, in that the text indicates it occurred in Brittany.

The accompanying miniature shows a group of distraught-looking women and a ring of stones. The women seem to be standing in a

trench. Though the illustration for the marvel is a bit confusing and diffuse, the story it accompanies is not. We learn from the Latin text that “there are also to be seen in the extremist part of France [*in finibus Galliarum*] seven women leading a dance and the soil sinking beneath their feet in the form of a circle.” The text continues, providing an explanation for the dancers’ appearance: as they run round they speak in their dialect [*patria lingua*] “Woe, unhappy us! What a wrong we did to anger Saint Urri! Oh when will the end of the world come?” After this attention-getting description of the marvel, the Latin text continues:

[N]ow these were sisters who with their mother led a dance on a feast day. The priest Urri was about to celebrate mass and twice rebuked them. The third time he cursed them that they might dance forever, and so they have done. One empty place is seen in the ring, where the mother tore herself free at the moment of the curse and now the adjacent sisters have their arms stretched out but not touching.

This marvel, however, is not confined only to Brittany (for this must be the westernmost region to which the phrase “ends of France” refers). It is duplicated, the text on folio 81v notes, “in Britain, also called England, where a similar dance of young women is to be found and involves not the priest and later saint Urri but a cleric called ‘Odo.’” Otherwise, much the same tale is told.⁹

That this story is in the *Mirabilia* collection at all seems peculiar, because as I noted, the other marvels—as the scholarship on MS Bodley 614 cited here would suggest—typically concern monstrosities formed against nature and the regions they inhabit. Yet, we can see that to the compiler there is a kind of associative logic connecting an apparent folk tale with the extreme geography implicit “*in finibus Galliarum*.”

Now what the marvels of the dancing women are, as M. R. James himself noted in his edition of the texts, is nothing else than a medieval description of certain megalithic stone circles in Brittany and in England. It is even possible to identify the English original of the second part of the passage as the “Merry Maidens,” a ring of stones in Cornwall believed to be young women petrified for dancing on a Sunday.¹⁰ Dancing, as we will see soon, was early considered an

activity invoking the supernatural and even the monstrous. That the collector of marvels in Bodley 614 associated certain geographical regions in France and England with medieval perceptions of the megalithic remains so present in those areas, and that he explains the petrification as a punishment for pagan activities—a clash between cultures, so to speak—where the dancers and the priest come into conflict, testifies to the presence of a very fascinating connection between geographical and cultural marginality in the medieval mind.

Guy de Bazoches' view that France has no monsters—and its implication that other regions have all too many of them—is partly based on a rhetorical topos where one's land is a *locus amoenus* and its people are preeminent, and partly on certain climatic ideas favoring a region's center over its edges. With respect to the rhetorical topoi of geographic encomia, it had been a common device to praise one's native soil, and to condemn tacitly or openly the soils of others. A well-known example is Pliny's claim in the *Natural History* that "the one race of outstanding eminence in virtue among all the races in the whole world is undoubtedly the Roman"; Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae* praised his own land, Spain, "for the salubrity and mildness of its climate, fecund in all sorts of fruits and crops, and outstandingly rich and copious in gems and metals."¹¹ Such descriptions became standard opportunities for rhetorical elaboration, as in Peter of Riga's *De Ornatu Mundi* or the well-known model exercise in topographical description by Matthew of Vendôme in his *Ars Versificatoria*.¹² Undoubtedly, Gerald of Wales drew on such early flattering national descriptions when he noted in his account of Wales that differences in regional geography can lead to differences in the "moral" character of regions and of their inhabitants: "the Welsh of the northern part are more robust and the soil is richer and more fertile" than in the south (Thorpe Ch. 6:230).

One of the most notable examples of alterity in these medieval comparisons between the region of the speaker and the extreme geography of the "other" appears in the *Pilgrim's Guide to Compostela*, believed to have been written, from internal evidence, by a Poitevin. In describing the conditions on the pilgrimage route to Compostela, he sings the praises of one place,

Poitou, a land well managed, excellent and full of all blessing. The inhabitants are . . . vigorous and warlike; extraordinarily able users of bows, arrows and lances[.] . . . [T]hey are daring on the battle-front, fast in running, comely in dressing, of noble features, of clever language, generous in the rewards they bestow and prodigal in the hospitality they offer.

The speaker then continues on into Basque country and describes the Navarrese, who do not fare as well:

This is a barbarous nation, distinct from all other nations in habits and ways of being, full of all kind of malice, and of black color. Their face is ugly, and they are debauched, perfidious, disloyal, and corrupt, libidinous, drunkard, given to all kinds of violence, ferocious and savage, impudent and false, impious and uncouth, cruel and quarrelsome, incapable of anything virtuous, well-informed of all vices and iniquities. . . . The Navarrese also make use of animals for incestuous fornication. It is told that the Navarrese affixes a lock to the behind of his mule or horse, so that no one else but he may have access to them. . . . (Melczer 90, 94-95)

In addition to the rhetorical topos of one's homeland as a *locus amoenus*. antique climatic theory, as Paul Meyvaert has shown, also played a significant role in descriptions and evaluations of one land by the inhabitants of another, and probably such thinking influenced national *encomiae*, and their opposites, the unflattering description of a nation or a region (743-63). Perhaps the earliest known literary awareness of difference in region is to be found in the Prologue to the *Characters* of Theophrastus (third century BCE), who recognizes that peoples nominally the same in nation, can differ markedly in sensibility and behavior: "I have often marveled why it has come about that, albeit the whole of Greece lies in the same clime and all Greeks have a like upbringing, we have not the same constitution of character" (Edmonds 37) The Greek historian Polybius, for example, noted that all men must assimilate themselves to climatic features and only this explains "why separate nations and peoples dwelling widely apart differ so much from each other in character, feature, and colour, as well as in the most of

their pursuits" (Paton 2:4.21, p. 351). And Ptolemy in his *Tetrabiblos*, a work popular in the Middle Ages in Latin translation, observed, combining astral with climatic determinism, that "the inhabitants of Britain, Transalpine Gaul, and Germany because of their closer familiarity with Aries and Mars, are fiercer, more headstrong, and bestial. But those men of Italy and Gaul, because of their familiarity with Leo and the sun, are more masterful, benevolent, and cooperative." He goes on to note that India and adjacent regions "are connected with Capricorn and Saturn, and so their inhabitants are dirty, and ugly in build, having the character of wild beasts" (Robbins 2.3, pp 132-45)

A late medieval version of climatic determinism, though ascribed to Herodotus, appears in a geographic work called *Secrets de l'Histoire Naturelle*. This work, a French translation made before 1427 of the fourteenth book of the late-fourteenth-century *Reductorium Morale* by the Benedictine Pierre Bersuire, has 56 chapters devoted to different countries and regions, with each chapter giving certain defining characteristics of the inhabitants, animal and human. The speaker, citing classical authority, lavishes attention on the region he calls "Europe," which is

the third part of the habitable world and is situated towards the north, quite opposite to Africa, which is located towards the middle and is subject to the miserably burning heat of the sun. Herodotus says that the inhabitants of this region . . . are handsomer, stronger, and bolder than those in the hot country of Africa. And the reason for this is the sun's great heat, that continuously shining on the Africans, dries the humours and natural virtues of their bodies and prevents them from growing. In consequence, they are short, thin, dry, and black as coal and have kinky hair. And because of the continual heat in which they live, their pores are always open, letting the vital spirits escape from their bodies. And quite otherwise are the Europeans and the northerners who live far from the sun. For by the continual cold in which they live, their pores remain closed, restraining their vital spirits, by which they engender good men, virtuous with regard to their humoral complexions. And thus the Europeans are more temperate and

moderate in their deeds . . . for through the retention of vital spirits they are all the stronger, bolder and more courageous.¹³

Naturally, then, a large country would have wide climatic and astrological variations and so extreme regions could differ from the center. Thus, men of the center could and often did argue that those at the extremes were inferior or had an unusually high proportion of monsters of one sort or another caused by astral or climatic influence.

Serving as evidence for Frenchmen of the supernatural and diabolical in Brittany was the large number of megalithic stone monuments called *menhirs* or long stones and piled stone burial chambers called *dolmens*, or table stones that dotted its landscape (see Figure 1).¹⁴ A menhir was a large rectangular block of stone, quarried by the action of water-swollen wooden wedges or sometimes by the heat of fires suddenly doused with water, producing splits in the mass of rock. The blocks were tooled, sometimes by the pounding action of rock mauls, into fairly smooth shapes and sunk vertically in the ground, often to a considerable depth. Their function seems primarily to have been as grave markers, though it is thought that they also had astronomical purposes when they were originally constructed about two to five thousand years before Christ.¹⁵

Such stone monuments were early associated with idolatry, paganism, and the activities of giants, sorcerers, and the like, but were also assimilated to the community as boundary markers, as names in early Breton, like Kerampeulven, which contains the suffix "peulven" (menhir), indicate. Monastic documents, for example, often mention menhirs as marking boundaries. In a cartulary from the Abbey of Redon made in 848, the writer speaks of land extending "ex una parte a descensu montis Clegeruc ad lapidos magnos," and elsewhere to "lapides fixi in terra." (De Courson 168: 130 and 197: 198). Moreover, the phrase "great stone" or stones and a name attached to a stone usually denoted menhirs. Especially interesting are the several references to menhirs still erect or else knocked down, in two cartularies of the Abbey of Sainte-Croix at Quimperlé, written in 1009. These pertain to the lands of a subsidiary island house of Saint-Cado in the parish of Belz in Morbihan. The cartulary also gives a very clear sense of how boundaries were established using menhirs and dolmens:



Figure 1: A dolmen near Carnac

“And at the top of the marsh is a dike running towards Mount Haelgoeret, and before it comes to the dolmen or 'acervus petrarum,' it curves . . . towards a prone menhir, 'petra jacens.’” Another cartulary for the same place and written in the same period describes a piece of land where one boundary is formed by an erect menhir, “petra stantiva.”¹⁶

A well-known example of an extant megalith is the menhir at Kermario in the woods near the town of Carnac. Such schist and granite stones were often taken from outcroppings at the site, but just as often were carried long distances and erected using methods that still remain mysterious, in enormous fairly parallel rows stretching several kilometers, called *alignements*. There are seventeen of these in Finistère and twelve in Carnac in the Gulf of Morbihan. A group at Menec, just northeast of the town, a bit over half a mile in length, and linked to the *alignements* at Kermario and Kerlescan, is among the most dramatic, containing 1169 of these stones from one and one half to twelve feet in height.

Many of the islands in the gulf of Morbihan also had such monuments visible from the water, and it is very likely that French and English sailors visiting this region would have been familiar with them as distinctive features of the coast, for menhirs in particular served as navigational landmarks for mariners from very early times, and may have had this ancillary function for their original builders. For this reason, they could be widely known as features of the margins of France.

Some of these stones, as their present-day names imply, are connected with giants in that giants were believed to have erected them. The Breton folklore associated with such menhirs shows that from a very early period they were considered to have supernatural origins and powers. The Grave of the Giants, for instance, is a dolmen in the Forest of Brocéliande, in Morbihan, well known in Arthurian literature as a source of the supernatural. Similarly, giants reputedly living in the covered alley tomb at Mougau-Bihan, at Commana, near Morlaix in the *département* of Finistère, were in Breton folklore constantly at war with dwarves inhabiting the passage grave of Ty-ar-Boudiquet, at Brennilis, very near by.¹⁷

Presumably bowing to an ineradicable popular attraction to them, ecclesiastical authorities Christianized many menhirs in various ways.

For example, as its name would suggest, a post-medieval cross was erected on the capstone of a dolmen of Cruz-Moquen, located on a hillside outside the town of Carnac. A similar but far more elaborate process has occurred in the carving of four panels at some time between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries containing representations of the twelve apostles on the north face of the menhir at Hameau de Rungleo, Daoulas, just east of Brest in Finistère, and the adding of a cross to its top. Many other stones have scenes of holy images incised or in full relief carved on them. Perhaps the most important of these for a sense of the medieval reception of megalithic structures is the group of monuments near Auray in Morbihan at Locoal-Mendon, where most of the menhirs have been Christianized with Maltese crosses by the Knights Templar, who were extensive landowners in the region.¹⁸

The church, when it could not completely eliminate an interest in the megalithic past, tended to Christianize in other ways monuments too big to break up or ignore, by incorporating them into holy precincts. Perhaps the most famous place in the geographical area of interest to us is the barrow of St. Michel at Carnac, where a chapel was erected on top of a great chambered burial tumulus measuring over thirty feet high and extending 180 feet by 375 feet.¹⁹ It was the custom to light bonfires during the summer solstice on this barrow and the practice may have resulted from a tradition of the supposed fires lit by an evil giant on Mont St. Michel who is mentioned by Geoffrey of Monmouth in connection with one of King Arthur's more memorable encounters.

II

Let us come now to the way such material affected the Arthurian imaginary where a tie between Arthur's exploits and Breton pre-history is made. Geoffrey of Monmouth gives a learned and literary focus to the folklore of megalithic structures, and with these earlier archaeological traditions, rhetorical topoi, climatic effects, and ecclesiastical responses to megaliths in mind it is to him that I now wish to turn. The originary story of a Breton giant and barrow in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, (X. 4) influenced, as we shall see, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* as well as Wace's and Lazamon's versions of the *Brut* and an account in Gervase

of Tilbury. As it is a key element in the association of ancient stone tombs and a giant of a particularly diabolical, perversely sexual and unsympathetic cast of character in Brittany, Geoffrey's story is worth discussing in some detail here. Taken together with the older climatic and rhetorical approaches just outlined, Geoffrey's legend about giants and stones in Brittany—and its adaptation by Gervase—may help to explain some of the ideas in circulation about Breton "extreme" geography and its relation to Arthurian "monstrous" texts in the high Middle Ages.

The story in Geoffrey is as follows: while preparing for a conflict with the Roman emperor Lucius and the Saxon emperor Childric, Arthur goes to Brittany to join forces with his cousin King Hoel of that land. There Arthur learns that an immense cannibal giant, new-come from Spain, or in the *Morte Arthure*, Genoa, has carried off Hoel's niece or in some versions daughter Helena to the top of Mont-Saint-Michel which borders the modern Breton *département* of Ille-et-Villaine, and was apparently understood by Geoffrey as being in Brittany. Helena, who has been killed or died of fear in copulating with the giant, has been newly buried in a barrow on the mountain by her old foster-mother, who has also been raped by the giant. After Arthur kills the giant, Hoel builds a chapel to Helena on Mont-Saint-Michel and to this day it is known as Tombelena.²⁰

Lazamon elaborates the story such that the giant of Mont-St.-Michel dominates all of Brittany around the mountain and eats all pursuers as well as their animals. He also ties this monster more to the actual Breton landscape. For example, when Arthur approaches the giant's stronghold it is realistically described as tidal, a "hulle mid sae-ulode biuallen."²¹ Moreover, the creature is called not only giant, "eotend" but also "feond" and "scaþe," words which emphasize his demonic nature rather than his size.²² Finally, his violation of the foster mother in Lazamon is a daily event. After Arthur has mortally wounded the giant, he asks him about his race, origins, and parents but commands his head be cut off before obtaining a reply. Though Wace, his source, has named the giant Dinabuc, he is nameless here.²³

By the 1360's, when the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is likely to have been written, this story is magnified to some four hundred lines of verse. The Genoese giant comes from a race of fiends and has eaten five hundred people, including freeborn children, over the last seven

years. When first seen by Arthur, he feasts on seven children chopped up on a silver platter in a pickle sauce of rare spices and Portuguese wines. Even his appearance has certain extravagant elements:

He grenned as a grewhounde, with grysly tuskes;
He gaped, he groned faste, with grucchand latez,
His fax and his foretoppe was filterede togeders,
And owte of his face come ane halfe fote large;
His frount and his forheued all was it ouer.²⁴

The rest of his description follows the rhetorical models of the *ordo effictiones* in Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Matthew of Vendôme right down to his “schouell-[feet].”

This story of Helena’s tomb may be in fact a Christianization of a megalithic barrow, as very early in the tradition Arthur is associated in the *Mirabilia* of Nennius with two other such places. Writing in the early ninth century, Nennius tells of a “tumulus lapidum” in Builth, south Wales, bearing a representation of Arthur’s favorite hunting dog Cabal with which he pursued the boar Troynt, and of another tomb of Arthur’s son, Anyr, which was believed to measure sixteen feet in length.²⁵

A second “monstrous” legend in Geoffrey of Monmouth involves megalithic barrows or cromlechs in Ireland and Brittany. In the ur-legend, in Geoffrey (VIII.10-13), King Aurelius plans to build an eternal monument—eventually known as Stonehenge—on the plains of Salisbury. Merlin amazes the king’s councilors and wizards by his magic resources. (Interestingly, modern Amesbury, which can also be spelled Avisbury outside the Salisbury city gates, has stone circles of the sort discussed earlier.) Aurelius’s masons confess themselves defeated by such a project and he learns that only Merlin has both the skill to construct the monument and the vision of the future necessary to foretell its permanence.²⁶

Merlin counsels the king to send for the Giants’ Dance, a cromlech in Ireland on Mount Kildare: “in that place there is a stone construction which no man of this period could ever erect, unless he combined great skill and artistry. The stones are enormous and there is no one alive strong enough to move them. If they are placed in position round this site, in the way in which they are erected over there, they

will stand for ever." Merlin further observes that the stones "are connected with certain secret religious rites. Many years ago the Giants transported them from the remotest confines of Africa and set them up in Ireland at a time when they inhabited that country" (Thorpe 196).

These giants, especially populous in Britain, were eventually exterminated but left their stone remains as a record of their existence. As medieval readers learned from the apocryphal Book of Enoch, the sons of God or fallen angels, copulated with the daughters of men and produced a race of giants.²⁷ As the poet of the Old English "The Ruin" notes in visualizing the Roman city of Bath, their stone remains as a record of their existence show poignantly: "towers fallen, the work of the Giants" (Alexander 30).

Exactly where Geoffrey got his legend of the *Chorea Gigantum* and what land it was originally associated with is still not known. Nonetheless, his legend is the oldest and most elaborate story of megalithic construction.²⁸ In its reference to a ring of stones as a dance, it reminds us of the marvel in Bodley 614 and in its African and giant and religious connection, it is tied to remote spaces and the distant pagan past. That there was at least one association between the Giants' Dance and Brittany in the Middle Ages is made clear from Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia*, a collection of marvels compiled to amuse the emperor Otto (1165-1234), where the author attests to the magical character of stones:

There are men who consider powers of stones to be fabulous. We refute them through daily experience as well as by the writings of the Fathers. We know that Merlin in England transferred the "giants' ring" from Mount Childard in Ireland to the neighborhood of Mount Ambri and that he erected the stones in open air by means of conjurations, a thing worthy of eternal admiration, as we have mentioned in the first part of our work in the chapter on giants.²⁹

Gervase, however, makes a curious shift in the geography of the familiar story, as by Mount Ambri, he seems to refer the modern Ambrières-Le-Grand in mountainous Armorica or eastern Brittany, rather more than modern Amesbury on the Salisbury plain. Thus, for Gervase, the Irish Giants' Dance stone construction was moved to

western France and the area of many of Arthur's exploits. It is not immediately clear, of course, how Merlin "in England" moves the Giants' Ring to this new Breton location.

The Secrets of Nature referred to earlier has some interesting things to say about this Giants' Dance, elaborating somewhat on the passage in Gervaae of Tilbury as he in turn elaborates on Goeffrey of Monmouth:

. . .recite . . .Gervaise que en Angleterre a une montaigne nommee le mont dAmbre et dit que bien pres de la Merlin fit par ses enchantemens affin que on heust perpetuel memoire de luy et de ses euvres il fit une ronde et grand et ronde dance de geans de pierre en facon de ymages qui sentretient et tousjours tournoient par maniere de gens qui dancent. Et sont tous droiz en lair. Et sans ce que riens les soubstiengne ne par dessus ne par dessoubz. Et fit Merlin ceste chose en desprisement de ceulx qui dancent. Et aussi pour avoir perpetuelle admiracion aus simples gens. [Car les dances sont de Dieu haiez et reprouvees pour ce que Dieu fut aux dances blaspheme et renye es toute mauvaie ydolatrie mise sus. . . .fait moult a desprisiez les hatement des dances pour ce que cest la voye et le chemin denfer, la raison si est pource que on y va a main senestre.] (bracketed material added by the *Secrets* translator.)

In these comments we can see in little the great problem posed to Christian historians and moralists by the megalithic past. How the Middle Ages reacted to what is now called pre-history is not easy to determine. It is clear that parts of the world which gave evidence of primitive races of men, pre-agricultural, pre-technological and the like, were viewed with deep suspicion and lack of understanding as not participating in the dominant paradigm of classical and salvational history. The Bible and ancient authors provided a version of historical truth so compelling as to vitiate alternative views of early man. The idea that a society could build monuments of stone by mechanical means which still defy understanding, and that such a society lay beyond the recorded or collective memories of chroniclers, in some mythic past, could best be dealt with in terms of the supernatural and

tied to the monstrous giants who form part of the Arthurian past. The idea of dancing embodied in these megalithic monuments, as we saw from the marvel recorded in MS Bodley 614 only added to the pagan character of the monuments.

Where evidence of such a history intruded, it could be Christianized and so made intelligible much as in the sphere of classical myth, where Euhemeristic allegory had made the tales of the gods safe repositories of moral and Christian wisdom. But insofar as there was little or no literary conception of the peoples behind the *alignements*, the barrows and the circles found in deserted or mysterious places, it was easier to associate the mythic past with the sorcery of Merlin and the combats of Arthur and cannibal giants than to attempt answers to queries like those asked about supposedly ancient burial urns by a later antiquary of England's past. Sir Thomas Browne's questions "what song the sirens sang or what name Achilles assumed among women" as he noted, were easier to answer than those of the age and circumstances of these monuments.

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Notes

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² See Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Age*, and Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Rise of Cultural Fantasy*.

³ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (online edition, accessed October 2010) the word *nation* first appears in English in the fourteenth century meaning "a large aggregate of communities and individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture, history, or occupation of the same territory, so as to form a distinct people." The entry goes on to say that "in early examples notions of race and common descent predominate. In later use notions of territory, political unity, and independence are more prominent..."

⁴ See Betty Radice, trans., Letter I, p. 33-34. For the complete Latin text, see J. Montfrin, ed., 98-99.

⁵ See Jacques Boulenger, ed., *Rabelais, Oeuvres Complètes*. The first of these references is in *Gargantua*, Book One, chapter 31, p. 114, and the second in *Pantagruel*, Book Two, chapter 23, p. 290.

⁶ The distinction between the two "Brittanies" was made from early times. For example "Brittania citra marina" is contrasted with "Anglo-Saxonum Britanniam" in a letter of a Breton pilgrim in the reign of Aethelstan. See Caroline Brett 57-58.

⁷ See Arthur B. Ferguson's *Utter Antiquity, Perceptions of Prehistory in Renaissance England*; this work is not, as the title would suggest, about prehistory in the sense discussed here, but rather about attitudes towards the mythological past, Euhemerism and the like. See also John Mitchell's *Megalithomania: Artists, Antiquarianism and Archeologists at the Old Stone Monuments* and Stan Mendyk's

Speculum Britanniae: Regional Study, Antiquarianism and Science in Britain to 1700.

⁸ For more on this subject, see generally Glyn Daniel and Paul Bahn, *Ancient Places: The prehistoric and Celtic Sites of Britain*. For full documentation of the passages cited, see G. Guenin, "Le Culte des pierres en Gaule et en France d'après les texts...du Ve au Xe siècles," and A. de Mortillet, "Les Monuments Mégalithiques Christianisés." Texts of the decrees mentioned here are printed in D'Anjou de la Garenne II: 71-83. See also D'Arbois de Jubainville 18-146.

⁹ The Latin text and image appear in M. R. James, ed., *The Marvels of the East*, 24. A better color version appears as Plate 17 of Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages*. Recent studies mentioning this codex are by Tom Tyler, Asa Mittman, and the same author with Susan Kim. This story makes part of the "Cursed Dancers" folklore, discussed at length by Ernst Erich Metzner. On the dispersion of the "Merry Maidens" theme, see P. Menefee. For the popularity of the story in Brittany, see Pierre Saintyves, Vol. III, especially 340. That "the folk-names of stone circles often incorporate the word dance" is a point made by John Darrah, 162.

¹⁰ See Daniel and Bahn, plate 95, for a panoramic view of the Merry Maidens. See generally John Manley, *Atlas of Prehistoric Britain*; Aubrey Burl, *The Stone Circles of the British Isles*; and Leslie V. Grinsell, *Folklore of Prehistoric Sites in Britain*.

¹¹ See H. W. Rackam, ed. and trans., *Pliny, Natural History* II, Book VII, c. 40.130, p. 593, and W. M. Lindsay, ed., *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarvm sive Originvm Libri XX*, Vol. II, Lib. XIV.4.28.

¹² See Peter of Riga *PL* 23: 339 and Matthew of Vendôme, *PL* 171: 1235; see also Aubrey E. Galyon, ed. and trans., *Matthew of Vendôme, The Art of Versification* 110: 59-60.

¹³ I am preparing a facsimile edition of the latest manuscript of this work, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS fr. 22971, and quote here from my transcription at folios 23v/24: "Europe est la tierce partie de la terre habitable et est situee par devers Septentrion, toute a l'opposite de Affricque, qui est situee devers le midy. Et est subgecte a la miserable ardeur et chaleur du souleil. Erodoctus dit que les hommes et les femmes de la region d'Europe sont plus beaulx et plus fors et plus grans et plus hardiz que ilz ne sont en chault pais d'Affricque. Et la

cause si est du souleil qui continuellement est sur les Africquans et vertuz du corps et pour ce ilz ne pevent croistre ni ameliorer et sont petiz, maigres, et secs et noirs comme charbon, et ont les che 24/ vreux crespéz. Et pour la continuelle challeur en quoy ilz sont, ilz ont les pores touzjours ouvres, et ainsi se tinportent les esperilz naturelz et yssent hors de leurs corps. Et pour ce sont ilz failliz en couraige, paoureux, et sans hardiesse. Et autrement est des Euopepeans et Aquillonnaires qui sont loing du souleil, car pour la froidure foraine ilz ont les pores reffrains au dedans du corps, par quoy se engendent humeurs bonnes et naturelles a humaine complexion. Et aussi sont les gens de celle region plus attemprez et moderez en leur fait. Et auxi sont a la foiz plus hardiz et courageux, car pour labsconsion de la bonne challeur et humeur qui est dedans leurs esperilz ilz sont plus fors et plus hardiz et ont plus grant courage.” See on *Secrets* Anne-Caroline Beaugendre, *Les Merveilles du Monde ou Les Secrets de l'histoire naturelle*; John Block Friedman, “Secretz de la nature [Merveilles du monde]”; Denis Hüe, “Espace et Paysage chez Pierre Bersuire et quelques Avignonnais”; and Richard B. Reed, “A Bibliography of Discovery.” Because the French translator cites Gervase of Tilbury at such length, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* 22, claim that the work actually is a French translation of Gervase of Tilbury, which it is not, but rather Bersuire relies heavily on Gervase.

¹⁴ The literature on menhirs is vast and often very speculative. For balanced treatments, see Fernand Neil, *Dolmens et Menhirs*; James Hibbs, “The Neolithic of Brittany and Normandy” 271-97; Pierre-Roland Giot et al., *Préhistoire de la Bretagne*; the same author’s “The Megaliths of France”; Glyn Daniel, *The Prehistoric Chamber Tombs of France*; J. L’Helgouach, *Les Sépultures Mégalithiques en Armorique* and “Les mégalithiques de l’Ouest de la France” 203-19; and Roger Joussaume, *Dolmens for the Dead: Megalith Building Throughout the World*. Many of the books and articles cited here contain an excellent collection of photographs of menhirs and dolmens, individually and in *alignements*. Photo in Figure 1 courtesy of Kristen Figg.

¹⁵ On dating see Giot et al., 208-17. For an evaluation of the various theories of astronomical purpose for the *alignements* and menhirs see Giot et al., 419-29. See also A. Thom and A. S. Thom, *Megalithic Remains in Britain and Brittany*.

¹⁶ For the Latin text, see Maître and de Berthou, eds., CII, p. 257, and CIII, p. 259. See generally Hervé Martin and Louis Martin, 28-29, and a reference to a stone as a boundary maker in a cartulary of Landevennec. See R. -F. -L. Le Men and E. Ernault eds., "Le Cartulaire de Landevennec."

¹⁷ See J. Clottes, *Inventaire des Mégalithes de la France* 5; P. Bezier, *Inventaire des monuments mégalithiques du département d' Ille-et-Vilaine*; and Louis Marsille 58.

¹⁸ See generally J. S. Gauthier 145.

¹⁹ See generally J. L'Helgouach, *Tumulus du Mont-Saint-Michel: 1900-1906*.

²⁰ See J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions*. See also John Finlayson, "Arthur and the Giant of St. Michael's Mount" 117-20, and, most recently, Heng 35-57 and Thomas H. Crofts "Perverse and Contrary Doors: The Giant of Mont Saint Michel and the Alliterative *Mort Arthur*."

²¹ For the original text see Brook and Leslie eds., *Lazamon 'Brut'* EETS OS 277, Vol. II, 1.1 2844.

²² The association of this word with the demonic in Old English is exceedingly frequent. See Joseph Bosworth and Thomas Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. "feond" for examples.

²³ See Cohen, *Of Giants*, 70.

²⁴ See Mary Hamel, ed., II. 840-1151, pp. 63-72.

²⁵ See Dumville XII, paragraphs 79-80, pp. 110-11. See also Loomis 408-26.

²⁶ On Merlin, see Christopher Dean, *A Study of Merlin in English Literature from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Merlin is traditionally associated with a number of menhirs; for a list, see Darrah 204.

²⁷ For a collection of texts and a bibliography on this subject, see Robert Kaske, "Beowulf and the Book of Enoch."

²⁸ See Antonia Grandsen 193 for a discussion of the Gildare stones and the artifice of constructors. Stonehenge was considered one of the "wonders" of Britain. See Ralph Niger "inter caeteras mirabilia quatuor mira sunt in Anglia...Secundum est apud Stanhanges ubi lapides mirae magnitudinis et longitudinis in modum portarum elevate sunt, nec aliquis potest cogitare qua arte tanti lapides adeo in altum elevate sunt." Robert Anstruther, ed., *The Shorter Chronicle of Ralph*

Niger, p. 137. I am indebted to Professor Timothy Jones for this reference. See also Grinsell, *The Legendary History and Folklore of Stonehenge*.

²⁹ S. E. Banks and J. W. Binns, eds. and trans., *Decisio III*, 26, p. 611. Heng, 37-38, discusses how "Mount Aravius" could be read as "Mount Arabian" and how these mountains could have shifting names and geographical location.

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