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Anne Mahoney
Tufts University

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Caesar's Cousin Cassivelaunus in Geoffrey of Monmouth

Anne Mahoney
Tufts University



During the Middle Ages, a handful of writers attempted to put the history of Britain into the framework of Roman history, treating the Roman empire as a continuing, living institution.¹ Although the best known and probably the greatest of these medieval English historians is Bede, in the 8th century, my topic here is Geoffrey of Monmouth, some 400 years later in “the great age of medieval historiography.”² If classicists are at all familiar with Geoffrey’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*, it is probably as an important early source for the story of King Arthur. Long before Arthur’s reign, though, Caesar came to Britain. In this paper I will compare Geoffrey’s version of Caesar’s second expedition with Caesar’s own account.³

1 Ray refers to the myth of “continuity of the Roman empire” and writers tracing contemporary princes back to Roman ancestors, though he does not mention Geoffrey (1966, p. 643); he discusses Bede along with other historians of Britain (1966, p. 644). Lucken traces this development all the way back to Augustine’s *City of God*, and observes that claiming noble ancestors “permet aux familles nobles de s’appuyer sur l’ancêtre prestigieux auquel elles doivent leur existence” (2000, pp. 56–57).

2 Ray (1966, p. 645).

3 Long made a similar comparison, though he seems mainly to have looked at a work purporting to be by “Tysilio” and supposed to be the Welsh book that Geoffrey translates. He says little about Geoffrey’s own text (1924). Dunn compares Geoffrey’s narrative to those of the other medieval British historians, rather than to Caesar’s own (1919, pp. 288–293).

Geoffrey, or Galfridus Monemutensis in Latin, lived in the first half of the 12th century, roughly 1100–1155. In 1152 he became bishop of St. Asaph, in Cambridge. His first work is the *Prophecies of Merlin*, and not long afterward, in the 1130s, he writes a history of Britain and incorporates the *Prophecies* into it. This work, the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, also called *De Gestis Britonum*, in eleven short books, covers the history of Britain from the legendary beginnings down to the take-over by the Saxons in the 7th century. King Arthur, the hundred-and-sixth king, enters the text in book 8 and is a major figure in the last three books. The *Historia* was wildly popular and over 200 manuscripts survive, many of them copied within 50 years of the composition of the text. And it's no wonder: the writing is lively and the stories are exciting. They're also frequently embellished, even entirely fictional.⁴

Our concern here is with book 4, in which Caesar arrives in Britain. As we all know, that much is true: Caesar goes to Britain for the second time in 54 bc, and gives us a brief description of the expedition in book 5 of his own *Gallic War*, chapters 11 to 22. As he tells it, Caesar meets Cassivelaunus, who rules a portion of Britain north of the Thames, and has been put temporarily in charge of the British forces to repel the Romans (5.11.9). Naturally, the Romans win the fight, but Caesar does not want to remain to consolidate the victory. He takes hostages, demands tribute, tells Cassivelaunus not to harass the Trinobantes, and returns to winter quarters in Gaul (5.22).

Geoffrey's version is considerably longer, taking up most of his fourth book.⁵ In this version, Caesar leaves Britain and returns to Gaul because he's been defeated. He then comes back to Britain two years later, and is defeated again. Finally, a nephew of Cassivelaunus, feuding with his uncle, calls in Caesar for help. Together Caesar and the nephew fight Cassivelaunus, and when they cannot beat him in pitched battle, besiege his camp. When supplies run out, Cassivelaunus tells his nephew to broker a peace; Cassivelaunus agrees to pay tribute, but he and Caesar part as friends.

Several of the main points of Caesar's text are recognizable in Geoffrey's: that

4 This was recognized from the beginning: Lucken points out "Nombreux sont les chroniqueurs médiévaux, en Angleterre, à avoir mis en doute la vérité de l'ouvrage de Geoffrey", citing in particular William of Newburgh (1136–1199) (2000, p. 59). Howlett discusses Geoffrey's "old book in the British language," which Geoffrey claims is his source for the Arthurian part of his narrative in particular, and concludes that it is a "spectacularly successful fraud" (1995, p. 25) that began a chain of "literary responses to a pretended source" (1995, p. 64), to be read as a sophisticated joke among medieval historians.

5 Nearing calls this "one of the best stories in Geoffrey's work," (1949, p. 899) and Dunn refers to it as "a most diverting romance." (1919, p. 288).

Caesar goes to Britain more than once, that he leaves after a battle with Cassivelaunus, and that Britain eventually pays tribute to Rome. But in this version the British win all the battles and make peace on their own terms.

Let us look more closely at Geoffrey's narrative. Geoffrey begins his fourth book when Caesar, looking out to sea from Flanders, first catches sight of the island of Britain. When he asks about this place, he immediately remembers its background:

Hercle, ex eadem prosapia nos Romani et Britones orti sumus, quia ex Troiana gente processimus. Nobis Aeneas post destructionem Troiae primus pater fuit, illis autem Brutus, quem Silvius Ascanii filii Aeneae filius progenuit. (4.54.6ff)⁶

By Hercules, we Romans and the Britons share a common ancestry, being both descended from the Trojans. After the sack of Troy our first ancestor was Aeneas, theirs Brutus, whose father was Silvius, son of Aeneas's son Ascanius.

In other words, these are long-lost kinsmen. Caesar goes on to say that he will simply ask them to pay tribute, rather than attacking them and shedding family blood.

Readers may at this point be wondering why they do not remember this Brutus from Livy, Ovid, or any other Roman foundation story. There is a good reason for that: as far as anyone knows, this Brutus appears first in the Middle Ages. The earliest source is Nennius (or, better, "pseudo-Nennius"), a 9th-century historian, who says "*Brittannia insula a quodam Bruto consule Romano dicta*" (II.7) and later that Brutus is the grandson of Aeneas (II.10), though in a subsequent section he puts Brutus a few generations further down the family tree (II.18).

Geoffrey takes the story of Brutus from Nennius, but expands it from one crabbed paragraph to an entire book. After Geoffrey, Brutus will have a long after-life, in English and French versions: Wace's *Roman de Brut*, in Old French, and Lazamon's *Brut*, in Middle English, both from the late 12th century, turn Geoffrey's Latin prose into vernacular verse.⁷

Geoffrey makes Brutus the beginning of his history, and gives him the entire

6 I cite Geoffrey from Reeve and Wright, by book, section, and line; the translation is also theirs.

7 See Drabble s.v. "Geoffrey of Monmouth" and "Brut" (1995).

first book. Brutus is the son of Silvius, son of Ascanius, son of Aeneas. This is different from Nennius who makes Silvius the son of Aeneas and Lavinia (II.10). Before Brutus is born, his mother receives a prophecy:

Dixerunt magi eam gravidam esse puero qui patrem et matrem interficeret,
pluribus quoque terris in exilium peragratis, ad summum tandem culmen
honoris pervenerit. (1.6.57–59)

The magicians said that the girl was carrying a boy who would kill his father and mother, wander many lands in exile, and in the end receive the highest honor. Their prophecy was not made in vain.

Naturally the prophecy comes true: the mother dies while giving birth, and Brutus kills his father Silvius by accident while hunting. He is exiled as a result, and goes to Greece, then an island called Leogetia, then Africa, then Mauritania, then through the Pillars of Hercules to the Tyrrhenian sea, then Aquitaine, and finally to an island called Albion *quae a nemine, exceptis paucis gigantibus, inhabitabatur* (I.21.453). Fortunately, he has a companion who really enjoys fighting giants! Brutus re-names the island after himself, “Britain,” and builds a city on the banks of the Thames which he calls *Troia Nova*, later corrupted to *Trinovantum*. Of course both names are folk etymologies: the Trinobantes were a tribe in the area, as we know from Caesar (*BG* 5.20), and Geoffrey seems to have turned “Trinobantes” (or “Trinovantes”) into “Troia Nova.” Geoffrey’s definition of “Britain” as the entire island of Albion is arguably the beginning of “Britain as a geopolitical concept,” as MacColl suggests,⁸ combining England, Scotland, and Wales into a single unit, though this is quickly revised in the First Variant Version of Geoffrey’s text.⁹ Moreover, the Trojan origins, the wanderings, the need to fight with the aboriginal inhabitants of the new home all assimilate Brutus to Aeneas, as Ingledeu observes¹⁰: he even calls the first book “a mini-*Aeneid*.”

Several hundred years after Brutus, Caesar turns up and, as we’ve seen, he

8 MacColl (2006, p. 249).

9 MacColl (2006, p. 254). Cf. also Ingledeu (1994, p. 703): “Galfridian history therefore effectively defined historical consciousness in England insofar as that consciousness was expressed in the literate community’s narrative of insular origins and the first twelve hundred years or so of insular history.”

10 Ingledeu (1994, p. 677).

already knows that the Britons are descended from Brutus and thus are his own distant kinsmen. He doesn't want to fight them, but of course he does want to subjugate them. He sends a note to the British king Cassivelaunus,¹¹ whose angry reply Geoffrey quotes for us:

Cassibellaunus, rex Britonum, Gaio Iulio Caesari. Miranda est, Caesar, Romani populi cupiditas, qui, quicquid est auri vel argenti sitiens, nequit nos infra pericula oceani extra orbem positos pati quin census nostros appetere praesumat, quos hactenus quiete possedimus. Nec hoc quidem sufficit nisi postposita libertate subiectionem ei faciamus, perpetuam servitutem subituri. Opprobrium itaque tibi petivisti, Caesar, cum communis nobilitatis vena Britonibus et Romanis ab Aenea defluat, et eiusdem cognationis una et eadem catena praeferat, qua in firmam amicitiam coniungi deberent. Illa a nobis petenda esset, non servitus, quia eam potius largiri didicimus quam servitutis iugum deferre. Libertatem namque in tantum consuevimus habere quod prorsus ignoramus quid sit servituti oboedire; quam si ipsi dii conarentur nobis eripere, elaboremus utique omni nisu resistere ut eam retineremus. Liqueat igitur dispositioni tuae, Caesar, nos pro illa et pro regno nostro pugnaturus si ut comminatus es infra insulam Britanniae supervenire inceperis. (4.55.18ff)

Cassivelaunus king of the Britons sends greetings to Gaius Julius Caesar. The greed of the Roman people, Caesar, is remarkable. In their thirst for gold and silver, they cannot bring themselves, though we live at the world's edge amid the perils of the ocean, to forgo seeking the wealth which we have so far enjoyed in peace. If that were not enough, they also demand we submit and become their slaves forever. Your request disgraces you, Caesar, since Briton and Roman share the same blood-line from Aeneas, a shining chain of common ancestry which ought to bind us in lasting friendship. Friendship, not slavery, is what you should have asked us for, since we are

¹¹ The name is generally spelled "Cassivelaunus" or "Cassivellaunus" in Caesar, "Cassibellaunus" in the medieval sources. I will use the Caesarean spelling for consistency.

more accustomed to give than to bear the yoke of servitude. We are so used to freedom that we have no idea what it is to serve a master; if the gods themselves tried to take it from us, we would strive with every sinew to retain our liberty. Let it therefore be clear to you, Caesar, that, whatever your intentions, we will fight for our freedom and our country if you attempt to carry out your threat of landing in the island of Britain.

Cassivelaunus turns the idea of kinship right back to Caesar: “if the very same blood flows in our veins,” he says, “then you have no right to make us slaves.” He accuses not only Caesar but the Roman people as a whole of greed, and speaks strongly and boldly of the freedom of the Britons: “we are so accustomed to freedom that we barely know the meaning of the word ‘slavery.’”

Naturally Caesar comes straight over with his army. Cassivelaunus calls a council of war, including in particular his younger brother Nennius and his nephews Androgeus and Tenuantius. They are sons of Cassivelaunus’s older brother Lud, who had been king of Britain; Cassivelaunus has inherited the kingdom because when Lud died, they were still too young to rule (3.53).

The first battle is a great triumph for the British forces. Nennius meets Caesar in single combat and though rather badly wounded, the British prince gets Caesar’s sword from him and uses it to kill Labienus — clearly a historical error, as in fact Labienus survives the Gallic campaign, and dies fighting on Pompey’s side at Munda in 45. It seems that Geoffrey’s sources may have confused Labienus with Laberius, who dies in Caesar’s first action in Britain (*BG* 5.15). Geoffrey himself adds the detail that the Caesar’s sword has a name: *Crocea Mors*, the “yellow death,” *quia nullus evadebat vivus qui cum illo vulnerabatur* (4.58.85).

The Romans are routed and sail immediately back to Gaul. According to Geoffrey, the Gauls assume Caesar is now weak, and they’ve heard rumors that Cassivelaunus is chasing him back to Gaul, so they seize the opportunity to rebel. Caesar caves at once: *Qui prius leonina feritate fulminans ipsis omnia abstulerat nunc mitis agnus humili voce balans omnia posse reddere laetatur* (4.58.94ff). He spends the next two years plotting revenge. Geoffrey’s Caesar is weak, somewhat afraid of the fierce Gauls.

When Caesar finally comes back to Britain, Cassivelaunus is ready for him. He fills the bed of the Thames with metal stakes to trap approaching ships, then sets up nearby to wait. Of course the Roman ships run right into the trap; many are sunk and thousands of soldiers are drowned: *Hoc igitur Cassibellaunus ex ripa qua aderat aspiciens gaudet propter periculum submersorum, sed tristatur ob salutem ceterorum*

(60.117), but instead of just celebrating, Cassivelaunus presses the advantage and attacks the remaining Romans. Because so many have drowned, the British have a thirty-to-one advantage, and the Romans just can't resist them — so, once again, they flee to the continent.

Cassivelaunus holds a festival to give thanks to the gods. In the course of the feasting and gaming, a quarrel breaks out between two younger men of the royal family. One of them, called Cuelinus, who happens to be the nephew of Androgeus, kills the other. Cassivelaunus orders Androgeus to bring Cuelinus to his court for judgement. Androgeus considers this an insult, and refuses; Cassivelaunus thereupon starts to lay waste to Androgeus's territories. When Androgeus cannot mollify the king, he looks for outside help: Caesar. He writes a beautifully constructed letter first apologizing for having opposed Caesar, then explaining why he now opposes Cassivelaunus. The opening and closing of the letter are as follows:

Gaio Iulio Caesari, Androgeus, dux Trinovantum, post optatam mortem optandam salutem. Paenitet me adversum te egisse dum proelia cum rege meo committeres. Si enim me a talibus ausis abstinuissem, devicisses Cassibellaunum, cui post triumphum suum tanta irrepsit superbia ut me, per quem triumphavit, a finibus meis exterminare insistat. ...

(4.61.167–171)

Unde misericordiam tuam implorans auxilium a te peto ut ego per te dignitati meae restituar et tu per me Britannia potiaris. De hoc autem nihil in me haesitaveris, quia omnis abest proditio. Ea enim conditione moventur mortales ut post inimicitias amici fiant et post fugam ad triumphum accedant.

(4.61.188–192)

Gaius Julius Caesar, Androgeus duke of Trinovantum, who used to wish you dead, now wishes you well. I regret opposing you when you fought against my king. Had I refrained from my acts of daring, you would have beaten Cassivelaunus, whose victory has made him so proud that he is trying to drive me, the author of his success, from my lands. ...

Therefore I throw myself upon your mercy and request your aid so that I, through you, may regain my proper position and you, through me, may conquer Britain. Have no qualms on my account, for I have no thought of betrayal. It is part of life for enemies to become friends and for defeat to be followed by victory.

‘Note the charm of *post optatam mortem optandam salutem*, followed by the arrogant apology: “if I’d held back, you would have won.” At last, Androgeus suggests that it’s a normal development for enemies to become friends.¹²

Caesar accepts hostages from Androgeus and returns to Britain for a third time. Cassivelaunus at once comes to meet him, and there is much slaughter: *Concidunt in utraque parte vulnerati quemadmodum folia arborum in autumno* (4.62.211). Androgeus has hidden his forces nearby, and brings them in as reinforcements when Cassivelaunus is starting to lose. The king’s troops flee to the top of a nearby hill, and as it gets dark, the Romans settle in for a siege. Here Geoffrey comments:

O admirabile tunc genus Britonum, qui ipsum bis in fugam propulerunt qui totum orbem sibi submiserat! Cui totus mundus nequivit resistere, illi etiam fugati resistunt, parati mortem pro patria et libertate subire. Hinc ad laudem eorum cecinit Lucanus de Caesare “Territa quaesitis ostendit terga Britannis.” (4.62.226-229; from Lucan, *Bellum Civile* 2.572)

How admirable were the Britons of that age, who twice put to flight the conqueror of the whole world! Even after being routed, they faced a man the whole world could not resist, and were ready to lay down their lives for the liberty of their country. It was in praise of them that the poet Lucan described how Caesar “in terror turned his back upon the Britons he had attacked.”

Note once again that for Geoffrey it all comes down to freedom: his British value this above everything.

The siege lasts only a couple of days. Cassivelaunus sends Androgeus a message asking for peace, and Androgeus responds contemptuously, but agrees to talk to Caesar on his uncle’s behalf. He takes rather an arrogant line with Caesar, who yields from fear of Androgeus, as Geoffrey tells us (*timore igitur Angrogei mitigatus*, 4.63.260). In the final settlement, Cassivelaunus agrees to pay annual tribute to Rome, and Caesar spends the winter in Britain before returning to Gaul. Androgeus goes back with him and is not heard of again.

Geoffrey has taken Caesar’s brief, matter-of-fact narrative and turned it ` a

¹² Compare Sophocles, *Ajax* 679–682, and 1359, although Geoffrey cannot have known the Greek play.

major drama, with battles, defeats, and family conflict. As Tolhurst observes, Cassivelaunus “destroys his country’s and his own autonomy by refusing to reconcile with his nephew, Duke Androgeus of Trinovantium.”¹³ She points out that this incident is part of a pattern of “internecine warfare and the refusal to pay tribute to Rome” that runs through the *Historia*. Although it appears that everyone has won — Cassivelaunus survives and continues to rule, Androgeus gets power in Rome, and Caesar gains a new vassal state — in fact Britain’s much-valued freedom has been compromised.

In Geoffrey’s narrative, Caesar is weak. He makes no decision and takes no action without consulting his officers, something we see relatively rarely in Caesar’s own *commentarii*. He loses the first two engagements, and might well have lost the third if not for Androgeus.

Cassivelaunus, on the other hand, is stronger and bolder. The arrogant letter that is his first action in the narrative calls to mind Ariovistus from *BG* 1.¹⁴ Both Ariovistus and Cassivelaunus try to explain to Caesar that they are doing very well on their own, and would prefer that the Romans not interfere. In his first speech, Ariovistus insists on his right to manage his domain in his own way: *si ipse populo Romano non praescriberet quem ad modum suo iure uteretur, non oportere sese a populo Romano in suo iure impediri*, “I don’t tell you Romans what to do, so you shouldn’t tell me what to do” (1.36.2; similarly 1.44.8, *provinciam suam hanc esse Galliam, sicut illam nostram*). On the other hand, if it’s a fight Caesar wants, Ariovistus is more than willing to oblige. In his second speech, after Caesar has brought up his army, Ariovistus refers to the friendship between Rome and his people (1.44.5), and between himself and Caesar (1.44.10), and says that it’s hard to believe in Caesar’s friendship while Caesar is attacking, *debere se suscipari simulata Caesarem amicitia, quod exercitum in Gallia habeat, sui opprimendi causa habere* (1.44.10). Although Ariovistus can’t claim to be Caesar’s kinsman, he uses the idea of friendship much as Cassivelaunus uses the distant blood relationship: if we are bound by such a tie, we should not be fighting. Both Cassivelaunus and Ariovistus insist that their nations are independent of Rome, and that they would prefer not to fight, but both make it clear to Caesar that if he starts a fight, they will fight back.

Caesar, in his own narrative, defeats Ariovistus, though the latter survives the battle and escapes down the Rhine (*BG* 1.53). In Geoffrey’s story, though, Cassive-

¹³ Tolhurst (2013, p. 126).

¹⁴ I owe this observation to Cynthia Damon.

launus defeats Caesar — twice, in fact — before Caesar finally wins, but only with the help of Androgeus (4.63). Cassivelaunus reigns for another seven years and there is peace between Britain and Rome until the time of Claudius (4.64–65).

The British characters in this episode are stronger and bolder than their counterparts in Caesar's text, though neither Cassivelaunus nor Androgeus is particularly heroic: rather, they are arrogant, and perhaps lucky. But they do beat Caesar. They are, like him, distant descendants of Aeneas, and Geoffrey attempts to show that this branch of the Trojan stock has not degenerated, but is just as strong as its better-known cousins at Rome.

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