

Harnessing God: Divine Will and Time in Medieval English History

Medieval historians wrote histories to do more than recount the past, they did so to search for and present the truth.¹ However, to the medieval historian, truth is not limited to the factual.² The events they chronicled signify more than themselves, and the historian often elevated the specific to the general for some greater didactic purpose.³ In this rather Korzybski-an manner, the history of the thing is not the past, strictly speaking. Further, to consistently represent the specific as the universal, the medieval historian had to employ some engine, a set of ideas through which they funneled their history to achieve their didactic purpose. Moreover, two elements persisted in many medieval English historical engines: morality, and divine intervention. As the Middle Ages progressed, the historiographical treatment of, and relationship between, these two elements changed to best support the author in achieving their goal.

At the dawn of sub-Roman Britain, historians tended to use the engine of sin and divine judgment - and subsequent intervention - to move history forward, in large part because historians, both Briton and Anglo-Saxon, found this paradigm highly useful to their political agendas. As a result, historical narrative, and the way people viewed the movement of time, became linear as divine judgment tended to be irredeemable. But, after the Norman invasion and conquest, a new Norman-allied set of historians, beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth, struggled to revise the historiographical tradition of England to justify Norman rule. To accomplish their goals, they altered their historical engines. Namely, they redefined divine judgment as redeemable, rather than final, and, as

¹ Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Comment [JWG1]: Pay attention to your tenses. Here, because you are writing about the perspective a medieval person (or, at least, a medieval type), you need the past tense. Medieval historians are not still considering the relationship between truth and history...they're all dead.

Comment [JWG2]: I like the point you are making here...but you are relying on your reader to know Korzybski's line about the map not being the territory. You can probably walk into it a bit more explicitly...something like, "Alfred Korzbski once famously noted that 'the map is not the territory', but we can extend that idea here to understand that the historical text isn't the past."

It's also a bit unclear the context in which you mean "history" here...I'm assuming you mean the written text of a created history - product of the historian's labors - but you'll want to be clear when you are assigning specific meanings to common terms that you bring your reader along with you.

Comment [JWG3]: Unnecessary "moreover"

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Comment [JWG4]: Not parallel...author is singular and their (at least in this case) is plural.

Comment [JWG5]: I think that, before you jump into the meat of your argument, you might have benefitted from a brief discussion of what you mean by a "historical engine." I know we talked about secondary sources...this is a good place to have employed them, in a short section laying the groundwork for the theoretical framework you're using. There is quite a lot of work done on history writing broadly (you might like Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*), and using that kind of established academic authority both lends credence to your own work and allows for a point of entry for readers.

Comment [JWG6]: Post?

Comment [JWG7]: Are earlier histories non-linear?

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a result, their histories took on a cyclical narrative, which changed the way that their audiences thought about the movement of historical time. While in the short term this new historical model justified Norman rule, in the long term it proved unsustainable and led to the development of the British ideology of English moral superiority – a development that both legitimized English rule and came to define its foreign policy.

While English historical tradition in no way emerged from a vacuum, it began with the writings of Gildas.⁴ Although his exact place and date of birth are unknown, Gildas clearly identifies himself as a Briton, and he most likely penned his work, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britannae* (or *The Ruin and Conquest of Britain*), prior to 547 AD.⁵ Gildas wrote *De Excidio* as a rather polemic sermon that makes use of history as a didactic and moralizing tool.⁶ As a result, *De Excidio*, includes a brief history of Christian Britain, from Roman to contemporary times.⁷ Further, because Gildas' history comes from a time and place where few other historical documents exist, medieval English historians look to Gildas' sermon as a historical touchstone, even if that was never Gildas' authorial intent.⁸ Regardless, *De Excidio*'s historical value has made it of great historiographical influence.

Gildas defined sin, and the divine intervention that follows, as the engine of British history. Although much of Gildas' sermon feels obscure, he clearly states his intent. In the preface, Gildas writes, "it is my present purpose to relate the deeds of an

⁴ Antonia Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England C. 550 to 1307* (Great Britain: Cornell University Press, 1974), 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Karen George, *Gildas' De Excidio Britonum and the Early British Church*, ed. Dauvit Broun, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, and Huw Poyce (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 55.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England C. 550 to 1307*, 5.

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Comment [JWG8]: So, this is where the 10-12 page essay goes off the rails, 'cause there is no way to successfully address these questions in that span. Also, it would be helpful to your readers if you gave a sense of time scale here. Are you planning on tracing the effects on English domestic and foreign policy through the modern era?

Comment [JWG9]: Unnecessary

Comment [JWG10]: Does it? I suppose we'll talk about that this spring.

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indolent and slothful race,” the Britons, because if God did not spare His “peculiar people... when they deviated from the right path, what will he do ... [to our people] in which, ... **is** found an innate, indelible, and irremediable load of folly and inconstancy?”⁹ In this passage Gildas brings divine judgment into the historical narrative. He claims that God actively judges and intervenes to punish those peoples who do wrong, and that the Britons currently run the risk of such punishment.

Moreover, Gildas’ brand of divine punishment does not take place after death, **but during life**. To illustrate his point, Gildas makes use of a rather elegant extended metaphor. The Britons take the form of a boat on open water. The more they sin, the rougher the water becomes, and the closer they bring themselves to wreckage.¹⁰ Once wrecked, Gildas writes, “seek ye now forthwith ... that one plank of repentance which **is** left, whereby ye may escape and swim to the land of the living.”¹¹ With moral decline comes divine punishment on a societal level, and, according to Gildas that punishment **is** not only a theological matter, but, rather, a **historical one**.

But the most poignant part of Gildas’ argument **is** in his rather biblically inspired narrative, which ties together the concepts of sin, divine punishment, and time. Gildas describes England as “decked, like a man’s chosen bride, with divers jewels... lucid fountains and abundant brooks ... transparent rivers... [and] abundant lakes,” a veritable Eden. Further, this Eden belonged wholly to the Britons until their fall, when Vortigern, tempted by the devil, turned his people into sinners, after which

⁹ Gildas, *Gildas’ “On the Ruin of Britain,”* trans. J. A. Giles and T. Habington (Camelot Online, n.d.), <http://www.heroofcamelot.com/docs/Gildas-On-the-Ruin-of-Britain.pdf>, 5-7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 73.

¹¹ Ibid.

Comment [JWG11]: Although it carries with it a pretty good chance of being fatal...and divine wrath ending in a sinner’s death is pretty well biblically attested.

Comment [JWG12]: How closely is Gildas hewing, do you think, to an Augustinian understanding of sin and historical movement re: civic collapse?

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God expelled them from their land, much as God expelled man from Eden.¹² Gildas' narrative appropriation of the fall, coupled with his view of divine judgment as irredeemable, defines historical narrative as linear because the Britons, like man, cannot regain what they had lost. There **is** no hope of redemption, because when God forsakes a people history leaves them behind.

Following in the tradition of Gildas, Bede's *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* epitomizes early medieval English history's tendency to read divine will as history's engine. Bede described his Britons much as Gildas did, as a people who committed "every kind of foul crime[.]... [but] not only laymen **were** guilty of these offences, but even the Lord's own flock and their pastors."¹³ The Britons "cast off Christ's easy yoke and **thrust their necks under the burden of drunkenness, hatred, quarrelling, strife, and envy and other similar crimes.**"¹⁴ Further, just as Gildas did before him, Bede argues that the Saxon invasion "**was** ordained by the will of God so that evil might fall upon those miscreants."¹⁵

However, Bede's work, unlike Gildas', **is** a Saxon history, and, as a result, Bede forges a much more sympathetic Saxon character than Gildas had. Whereas Gildas described the Saxons as "a race hateful to God and men," Bede, a Saxon himself, looks on his people kindly.¹⁶ But Bede's most glowing praise of the Saxons does not only serve to raise the Saxons in the eyes of the reader, but to illustrate the depravity of the Britons. While "Britons oppose the English through their inbred hatred, and the whole state of the

¹² Ibid., 8.

¹³ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the People of England*, 2008th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gildas, *Gildas' "On the Ruin of Britain,"* 17.

Comment [JWG13]: I love that line.

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catholic Church by their incorrect Easter and evil customs... the Northumbrian [Saxon] race, both noble and simple, have laid aside their weapons and taken the tonsure, preferring ... monastic vows rather than...war.”¹⁷ In short, the nature of the Saxons guaranteed them divine favor whereas the Britons’ sins had won them eternal damnation. Bede had successfully borrowed Gildas’ historical engine of sin and divine punishment, but, ironically, he had used this Briton invention to justify their own subjugation.

Comment [JWG14]: Invention is probably a bit too much...there were other historians (both contemporary to and prior to Gildas) who considered god to be an active participant in the historical process – Gregory the Great comes to mind, or the Byzantine historian Eusebius. Better here to talk about how Bede is coopting Gildas’s specific application of that engine with regard to the Britons.

But just as Bede borrowed Briton Gildas’ historical engine to justify Saxon rule, Nennius, a Welsh monk, reclaimed the Briton historical engine of sin and divine punishment to rewrite his own people’s narrative. However, although Nennius’ understanding of God’s role in history was based off of Gildas’, and subsequently is rather similar to Bede’s, it is markedly different from both. To mix extended metaphors, whereas Gildas and Bede viewed society as a ship that God could wreck at any moment, Nennius believed that God constantly guided the ship of society, and that its wreckage was not based so much on divine malice but on divine passivity.

Comment [JWG15]: So...things go wrong when god takes his eyes off the wheel? Maybe he turns around to scold the kids in the backseat, and the station wagon of state veers into oncoming traffic?

More seriously, I’m a bit confused here. Does Nennius think that god is constantly guiding the ship of state, or that he does not intervene? It’s a small point that your essay moves past, but it creates an unnecessary moment of confusion for your reader.

Nennius bears out this paradigm shift from positive to negative divine intervention in several places. Throughout his history, Nennius maintains that God does not intervene, He allows. This is very neatly illustrated in the *Historia* when a Bishop, Palladius, was sent to Scotland to convert the Picts to Christianity. En route, “Tempests and signs from god prevented his landing,” because, as Nennius argues, “no one can arrive in any country, except it be allowed from above.”¹⁸ Although the landing of

Comment [JWG16]: This would have been an interesting point of explicit comparison with Bede...there are several points in Bede where he writes about bishops and such having their sea passage to England obstructed by demons, and then combatting this via supplication to god.

¹⁷ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the People of England*, 290.

¹⁸ Nennius, *History of the Britons (Historia Brittonum)*, trans. J. A. Giles (Cambridge, Ontario: Parentheses Publications, 2000), 40.

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Palladius **is** a rather minor episode in Brittonic history, it illustrates a greater point.

Comment [JWG17]: ?

Nennius believed that God allowed the Saxons to come to Britain.

But Nennius goes farther than to say that the Saxons **were** simply foreigners let into the country through God's **passive** stance towards the sinning Britons. Rather, Nennius' writing on the Saxon invasion **is** unequivocal. God allowed the Saxons to come to England, but the Saxons represented far more than foreign enemies. Rather, to Nennius, the Saxons themselves **were** the embodiment of sin and temptation, demon spawn and agents of the devil themselves. As Nennius wrote, when Vortigern ruled in England, "three vessels, exiled from Germany, arrived in Britain."¹⁹ These Germans **were** led by Horsa and Hengist, two brothers descended from a man "who **was** the son of a god, not of the omnipotent god of our Lord Jesus Christ... but the offspring of one of their idols, and whom, blinded by some demon, they worshipped according to the custom of the heathen."²⁰ However, Vortigern "received them as friends," and allowed them to tempt him to sin.²¹ Namely, because Vortigern **was** lustfully "enamored with the beauty of [Hengist's Daughter]... [Vortigern] promis[ed] to give for her whatever [the Saxons] should ask," and in this way gave land, the duchy of Kent, up to the demon-spawned Saxons.²² Nennius' prose **is** utterly unambiguous. To his reader he writes, "let him that reads understand, that the Saxons **were** victorious, and ruled Britain, not from their superior prowess, but on account of the great sins of the Britons: God so permitting it."²³

Comment [JWG18]: is allowing passage the same thing as being passive?

Comment [JWG19]: Good. Strong conclusion to a good paragraph.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 16.

²³ Ibid., 20.

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But Nennius' work, unlike that of Gildas and Bede, did much to salvage the reputation of the Britons as a people. Nennius' argument for the worthiness of the Britons is tripartite. Nennius connected his Britons to the Trojans in a completely fabricated although narratively powerful origin story. Descended from Brutus, a noble Trojan, Nennius' Britons had a proud lineage to call on, and an almost epic story as to how they settled their land. Further, although Vortigern marred the middle part of the Briton's history, their latter history illustrates that they still have the capacity for nobility. Nennius demonstrates this through Arthur, who mirrors Brutus' might. The victories he won against the Saxons while he "[bore] the image of the holy virgin" illustrate that the Britons, although weakened, were still capable of fighting evil.²⁴ In the end, Nennius does manage to suss out a relatively positive Brittonic and Welsh narrative from the historical evidence Gildas and Bede presented him with – and that which Nennius took the liberty to invent. However, God's passive neglect of the Briton people is ultimately a permanent one, as they never regained the territory they lost to the Saxons, and this finality of divine historical judgment characterized historical analysis through the end of Saxon England.

This use of absolute moral judgment as the driving engine of history led to linear historical narratives and, as a result, a linear understanding of time. In the works of Gildas, Bede, and Nennius, the Britons cannot redeem themselves. Having sinned grievously, they lost their right to rule to the Saxons. Further, while the Saxons play different roles in different histories - literally representing sin to Gildas and Nennius while simultaneously representing a moral race to Bede – their conquest is permanent.

²⁴ Ibid., 23.

Comment [JWG20]: You mean Arthur here, but it is ambiguous. You could just as well mean Brutus.

Comment [JWG21]: And, in fact, wind up losing their identity...consigned to the hills and caves of wales and forgetting who they were...literally losing the right to be considered Britons.

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Time moved forward and left the Britons behind. However, fortune turned its wheel on the Saxons, just as it had on the Britons, and with the Norman's ascension to power came the need for a whole new English historiography.

By the early 12th century, English identity was in crisis. This was, in rather large part, due to England's almost complete lack of historiographical tradition.²⁵ As a result, the 1120s and 1130s encouraged the production of historical works that, in the words of contemporary English Historian William of Malmesbury, would "mend the broken chain of our history."²⁶ This corpus of works attempted to fill the gaps in English historiography, but the dearth of historical records and the absolute void of knowledge with regards to pre-Roman Britain meant that they mainly focused on the rather undocumented two centuries directly following Bede's lifetime.²⁷ This did not satisfy the readership of the day, as historians still failed to illuminate the earliest Briton history and readers more and more turned to the romance genre for entertainment. Geoffrey of Monmouth finally sated both the desire for romance and early Brittonic history in one fell swoop.²⁸

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* began a whole new tradition of English historiography. Geoffrey's work satisfied his readership, won lasting popularity, and gained academic respect because it completed the chain of English history.²⁹ In a brilliant tour de force, Geoffrey borrowed Nennius' fictitious connection between the Trojans and the Britons, but redefined the Normans and Britons as one

²⁵ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*, 158.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 159.

²⁸ Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England C. 550 to 1307*, 201.

²⁹ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*, 4-5; Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England C. 550 to 1307*, 201.

Comment [JWG22]: I'm not sure how closely you can actually link these two issues in this way. I'll buy that English identity post-Conquest was a mess, but given the limited readership of histories I'm not sure that you can pin that mess on an absent historiographical tradition. Certainly the history writing reflects the mess, and people like William are attempting to provide solutions, but the question of identity in the countryside is far broader.

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people. This greatly substantiated Norman claims to Saxon land, adding weight to the legality and righteousness of the Norman Conquest. Further, the Norman and Briton connection with the Trojans endowed both groups with a certain moral prestige, a prestige that the Britons lacked and whose lack thereof the Saxons utilized as justification for their conquest.

Comment [JWG23]: Rather than saying that the Saxons used it as pretext, which leaves open the question of whether or not you think the actual invaders thought in these terms, you probably want to keep the spotlight on the historians you've been writing about.

Geoffrey made no mistake in borrowing from Nennius and modeling the Normans after the Trojan people. The Trojans and the Romans share common ancestry, at least mythically, and so aligning the Normans with those who had conquered the world over, and, who, at least to Geoffrey, had made "the whole world subject to them," and whose "power was greater than that of [any] individual country or any one province" was simply good practice.³⁰ But one thing stood in Geoffrey's way: the Britons.

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The medieval English people commonly held the belief that the Britons were a militarily weak people. This belief can be traced back to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, in which Bede claimed "the [Britons] were utterly ignorant of the practice of warfare."³¹

Comment [JWG24]: Evidence/citation? You can point to passages in Bede et al, but that doesn't give you license to make assumptions about the English people more broadly, which is what "commonly" gets you.

This prejudice against the military might of the Britons presented itself as highly problematic to Geoffrey, who was trying to legitimize and propagandize for a dynastic regime that hardly wanted to be considered as descended from a weak people.

Comment [JWG25]: It might be worth noting here that Bede writes that it was the Romans who had to teach the Britons how to make walls and weapons

Geoffrey's combats this prejudice against the Britons by staging his fictitious Romano-Briton wars. When the Romans landed in England in Geoffrey's *History*, they did so to conquer it, and they felt assured of an easy victory. Julius Caesar even felt so secure as to say, "the Britons come from the same race as we do, ... [a]ll the same, unless

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³⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Radice, Betty, trans. Thorpe, Lewis (London: Penguin Group, 1977), 124.

³¹ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the People of England*, 22.

I **am** mistaken... they can know nothing at all about modern warfare, living as they do beyond the deep sea and quite cut off from the world.”³² In one fell swoop Geoffrey fashions a rather intriguing situation. The Roman’s arrival creates great narrative tension, but more importantly, Caesars words almost echo Bede’s prejudices against the Britons, a prejudice that Geoffrey seeks to destroy.

Geoffrey does not only liken the Britons to the Romans, but in many ways he casts the Britons above the Romans with regard to their military prowess. This favorable comparison **is** demonstrated succinctly through a gendered reading of the climax of *The History of the Kings of Britain*, the battles between Arthur and the Romans. While gender roles **are**, **by nature constructed**, Geoffrey depicts the Romans as effeminate and weak, and the English as masculine and strong. Whereas Geoffrey portrayed the English as a people who “wanted a fight with all their heart and soul,” the Romans simply **were** a people “given careful instructions as to when they should move forward and when [to] retreat.”³³ Carrying on with this rather gendered comparison of the Britons and Romans, Arthur, in rallying his men, cried, “What the Devil **are** you doing, men? ... Are you letting these effeminate creatures slip away unhurt?”³⁴ Similarly, when the Romans finally surrendered, they “h[e]ld out their hands to **be** bound, like so many women[,]”³⁵ illustrating that, to Geoffrey, the Britons bested the Romans because they **were** true men, and true men had military **might**.

However, Geoffrey’s **main challenge** came in explaining away the Britons’ defeat at the hands of the Saxons. Up until this point in English historiography, divine

³² Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 107.

³³ *Ibid.*, 243.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

Comment [JWG26]: I know what you are saying here, but your choice of wording creates an ambiguity that works against you. You mean that gender roles are constructed in their very nature, but you might also be saying that gender roles are natural (created by nature) – not constructed.

Comment [JWG27]: This is an interesting reading. I feel like it needs more support to be really convincing, though. It would have been interesting to see if anyone else has written on this issue...if so, it would have been a good place to use secondary work in support of your own claims.

Comment [JWG28]: If you are going to argue for this as his main challenge, then you probably need to spend a bit more time explaining why all the work he does to hide the Roman occupation of Britain is less important. Not addressing it leaves a hole that a knowledgeable reader will wonder at.

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intervention had driven forward historical time, and this intervention had always been irredeemable. But, in linking the Normans to the Britons, this could no longer be the case. The Britons moral fall and subsequent historical losses should stop their descendants from ever regaining what they had lost, but the Normans (Geoffrey's descendants of the Britons), had done just that when they conquered England. To reconcile this discrepancy between historical philosophy and historical truth, Geoffrey redefines his engine of history. Geoffrey does away with Gildas' model of unalterable divine judgment, and defines God's judgment as weighty, but redeemable. But just as Gildas' historical engine affected how his audience understood the movement of historical time, so did Geoffrey's, and his audience began to view historical time, and narrative, as cyclical, not linear.

This paradigm shift of English historical engines is borne out clearly in the text. After Arthur, the moral quality of the British nobility declined. Kings "[took] delight in civil war," "made [themselves] hateful to God [through] the vice of homosexuality," and "fomented civil discord."³⁶ Geoffrey's character, Gormund, who conquered much of England, went on to say, "weighed down by the sheer burdens of [their] own monstrous crimes, ... [they] have so far weakened [themselves] in domestic upsets that [they] ... cannot protect their own country."³⁷ The Britons made themselves hateful to God, and "God decided to take vengeance on them by suffering a foreign people to come and drive them away from the lands of their forefathers."³⁸

However, unlike in Gildas' *De Excidio*, in Geoffrey's *History* there is hope yet. Although God had judged and condemned the Britons to exile, there remained the

³⁶ Ibid., 263.

³⁷ Ibid., 264.

³⁸ Ibid., 274.

Comment [JWG29]: You haven't yet demonstrated the strands of this connection.

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possibility of redemption. Cadwallader, a British king in the wake of the Briton's expulsion from England, "began to turn his mind to his own kingdom" and sought allies to "help him return to the position of power he formerly held."³⁹ However, as he prepared to return to England, "an Angelic Voice spoke to him and told him to stop. God did not wish the Britons to rule in Britain any more."⁴⁰ Rather, "the Voice ordered Cadwallader to go to Rome and ... do penance," and, "as a reward for its faithfulness, the British people would occupy the island again at some point in the future."⁴¹

Geoffrey was not himself solely responsible for the diffusion of his ideas.

Geoffrey's choice to write his *History of the Kings of Britain* in Latin lent it much historical authority.⁴² However, his readership was limited by his choice of language, and the *History's* similarities to a romance meant it had great promise within Anglo-Norman circles, as Anglo-Norman was traditionally the language of medieval romance.⁴³ As a result, Wace translated the work into Anglo-Norman verse to broaden its readership, and found great success.⁴⁴ However, Anglo-Norman was never the vernacular of England, and at the very end of the 12th century, Layamon finally translated Geoffrey's work to English.⁴⁵ This final translation was a clear step to the democratizing of history, as its stated purpose was to allow "each good man [to] read[] this book and learn[]... for the

Comment [JWG30]: I think the question gets trickier than this. Geoffrey skates past it, but he has to deal with the fact that the Normans are not in any genetic or historic way Britons – rather, in 1066 the Normans are in control of Brittany as well as Normandy. I think that this is where the slippage that Nennius introduces becomes important – the idea that identity isn't necessarily fixed by blood. If the Briton-ness can be forgotten then it can also be learned, and if it can be lost to sin it can be gained through virtue. Interestingly, I think that part of the virtue that the Normans display is in conquering the island. It is circular, but I suspect that the conquest itself is a significant part of the evidence for their identity as the descendants of the Britons.

Comment [JWG31]: This isn't quite the right transition here...I'm not sure that one thing is really the result of the other.

³⁹ Ibid., 282.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 283.

⁴² Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*, 141.

⁴³ Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England C. 550 to 1307*, 200-201; Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*, 142.

⁴⁴ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*, 141.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 139, 142.

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benefit of his soul.”⁴⁶ Geoffrey’s narrative was so powerful that it promoted the practice of vernacular history writing itself, and in the process shifted the historical paradigm of God’s punishment and the shape of historical time for the Norman and English historian and reader alike.⁴⁷

Comment [JWG32]: That’s an interesting rationale, and makes for a curious contrast with Wace’s approach (which he makes clear in the *Rou*). Wace writes that his history (and others) should be read aloud in markets so that everyone could learn their past...not for the good of their souls but to keep knowledge of the past from disappearing under the shifting sands of changing languages and times.

This new historiographical tradition legitimized the Normans with an argument that follows the logic of might makes right. To Geoffrey, God rewarded moral men with military victory. Christian King Oswald’s victory over pagan King Penda illustrates this principle of divine reward in the form of military triumph. Because Oswald “kn[e]w full well that [he] had undertaken this righteous war for the safety of [his] own people... [he] was rewarded for his faith by winning a victory.”⁴⁸ Oswald’s victory confirmed his righteousness – his power made him good.

Comment [JWG33]: I’m not sure I agree with this last bit...it says something other than what you want/need it to say. It’s not his power, but his application of it that demonstrates his goodness to Geoffrey. You’re correct that his victory is proof of God’s favor and justifies his actions for the historian.

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This same logic sheds much light onto King Arthur’s rather absurd sounding monologue on the legality of conquest in the *History of the Kings of Britain*. When Arthur cried out, “nothing that is acquired by force and violence can ever be held legally by anyone,” he means that anything acquired by human force without the consent of God can ever be held in perpetuity.⁴⁹ When Arthur said “in so far as the Roman has done us violence, he pleads an unreasonable case when he maintains that we are his tributaries in the eye of the law,” he truly argues that the case is unreasonable because the law, unlike divine judgment, is irredeemable.⁵⁰ Finally, when Arthur said, “let him who comes out on

Comment [JWG34]: This is the weak point in your argument in this paragraph...I’m not convinced that this is actually what Arthur is saying here. You’ve just argued that Geoffrey is working with the idea that victory is a sign of god’s blessing and general moral correctness...how does that jibe with an argument against violent conquest?

Comment [JWG35]: Again...is this what he is saying? Or is he saying that the Romans are operating outside of the law, and are misunderstanding it? I feel like the distinction here is between legally sanctioned and unsanctioned violence...maybe making this more of a commentary on Harold’s (possibly) extra-legal attempt to claim the throne of England from William.

⁴⁶ Layamon, *Layamon’s Brut: A History*, trans. Donald G. Bzdy (Binghamton, New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1989), 35.

⁴⁷ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*, 139.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 277-278.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

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top carry off what he has made up his mind to take," he essentially threw down the gauntlet and turned a war of men into an act of divine judgment.⁵¹

Comment [JWG36]: Fair interpretation.

Wace uses Geoffrey's logical scheme of divine will to justify Arthur's conquest of Roman lands in Gaul. Of the formerly Roman English holdings in France Wace writes, "we've taken from their hands by force/They should not have complaint at all/When they did not attempt to save them,/From lack of will or ability,/Or possibly lack of right."⁵²⁵³

Comment [JWG37]: That connection between will and ability to rule and right to rule is worth thinking about, perhaps, in relationship to issues of identity (see note above about the Normans and their Briton-ness).

However, this **is** not the sovereign right or legal right modern readers **are** so accustomed to, but **divine right**. Wace makes this clear when he writes of the coming Roman emperor,

Comment [JWG38]: Pretty sure you don't have 5253 footnotes.

"May God not wish the man to hurt Us!/He said he'd take our lands/... But God **bc** pleased, if he comes here/...He'll have no taste for making threats./ When he and I meet to dispute,/Let him take all who can take all."⁵⁴ Arthur's argument in Wace, much like in

Comment [JWG39]: How are you making the distinction between legal right and divine right? It feels like this is an important part of your argument's understructure that you haven't laid out.

Geoffrey, **is** that God takes the side of the man who **is** righteous, and will grant him victory, essentially justifying all of Arthur's past and future wars insofar as he triumphs. However, perhaps it **is** Layamon who expresses this sentiment most clearly when his Arthur declares, "let he who can win it enjoy it now and forevermore, for now we will learn to whom God grants it."⁵⁵

This method of legitimizing Norman rule with Norman might, however, **was** highly problematic, as it only functioned while the Normans **were** powerful. If the Normans won a battle, Geoffrey's narrative prescribed it to their moral superiority,

⁵¹ Ibid., 233.

⁵² Wace, *Le Roman de Brut: The French Book of Brutus*, trans. Arthur Wayne Glowka (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 10887-10890.

⁵³ Ibid., 10887-10890.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 10896-10904

⁵⁵ Layamon, *Layamon's Brut: A History*, 229-230.

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however, if they lost a battle their enemies could easily interpret it as a loss of divine favor. While Geoffrey's historical engine had been useful to the Normans during their conquest, it became a liability after they had more firmly established their rule. If one believed time was cyclical, it could only be so long before the Normans themselves transgressed in the eyes of God and the wheel of fortune turned again.

Comment [JWG40]: From time to time it feels like there is some slippage in your argument between the historians' rhetoric and the actions of the people he was describing. I suspect here you are talking about people reading GoM moving forward, and this causing a problem for future Normans, but it's not clear.

Comment [JWG41]: Fair point.

However, beyond the problems that Geoffrey's *History* might have presented to the Normans in the years to come, Geoffrey's work also had the unintended consequence of kindling a sense of Welsh proto-nationalism. Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon all worked to legitimize Norman rule and, in the process, disparaged the Welsh as "The [Britons of a] baser sort [who] remained behind and ... gave themselves airs beyond anything their predecessors' position had ever warranted."⁵⁶ However, just as Geoffrey had borrowed Nennius' Welsh narrative and appropriated it for Norman purposes, the Welsh read into Geoffrey's legendary Briton history a possible Welsh revival. The Welsh believed that they, like the Norman descendants of the Britons, could, through repentance, achieve divine pardon. Of this predicted Welsh revival Gerald of Wales writes that the Welsh "boast, and most confidently predict, that they will soon reoccupy the whole island of Britain. It is remarkable how everyone in Wales entertains the illusion."⁵⁷

Comment [JWG42]: I'm not convinced that you can tie this thread back to Geoffrey. His work on Arthur came, in part, from pre-existing Welsh narratives and stories (and you'll remember that William of Newburgh wrote that Geoffrey was recycling oral histories of Arthur told by the people).

Geoffrey's model for divine judgment and the role it played in history was too ingrained in popular understanding to be countered easily. Moreover, attacks on Geoffrey's history tended to fall flat. One of Geoffrey's most active critics was William

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⁵⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 273.
⁵⁷ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and the Description of Wales*, ed. Betty Radice, trans. Thorpe, Lewis (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 265.

of Newburgh. In the preface to his *History of English Affairs*, he hardly introduces his own work, and instead focuses much of his attention on denouncing Geoffrey of Monmouth. His diatribe **is** animated and harsh, and he lambasts Geoffrey for his self-serving use of false prophecy (which **is** not only anti-historical but heretical) and sharply rails against Geoffrey's *History* as a verifiably false work of fiction.⁵⁸ But Newburgh's criticism fell on deaf ears, and Geoffrey's work would continue to **be** used as if it **were** certifiably historical material for several centuries.⁵⁹

The effects of Geoffrey's historical tradition **were** too widespread to **be** undone or forgotten; rather historians had to find a historical engine that could reconcile might makes right and right makes right with the perpetual legitimacy of Norman rule. Gerald of Wales implemented an elegant and simple solution to the problem. Instead of trying to redefine the nature of divine judgment as permanent or make linear historical narrative, Gerald strove to reestablish the role and nature of kingship in England. Namely, Gerald defined English **kingship** as an inherently moral institution with ethical obligations not only to its own subjects, but also to those who needed moral guidance. In doing so, Gerald of Wales manages to separate English kingship from the cyclical historical narrative Geoffrey constructed, and makes it a permanent historical fixture.

In Gerald of Wales' tightly wound *History and Topography of Ireland*, he attempts to justify English colonization of the island. His argument **is** complex, multifaceted, personally motivated, and racist, but perhaps its most notable element **is** its

⁵⁸ William Newburgh, *History of English Affairs*, ed. Scott McLetchie, trans. Joseph Stevenson, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/williamofnewburgh-one.asp>.

⁵⁹ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*, 4-5.

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Comment [JWG43]: So is there a shift here from ethic identity such as Britons to one centered on the crown (and does this align with Anderson's ideas about identity?)

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moral rationalization of colonization, which he ties directly to English kingship.⁶⁰

Further, Gerald of Wales implements a rather **unique** historical engine. He believes that historical time **is** moved forward by migrations, and claims Ireland has seen five.⁶¹

Comment [JWG44]: It's not unique, though. Henry of Huntingdon (1080-1160) employs a similar mechanism for processing historical change.

However, he argues that Ireland **is** in the process of its sixth great migration, that of the English, who have the right and moral obligation to colonize and civilize the island.

Gerald demonstrates English moral right to invade Ireland through rather scathing attacks on the Irish church and clergy. He argues “the Irish prelates should **be** reprovved for their neglect of their pastoral office” because “the prelates of [Ireland] keeping themselves according to an old custom within the enclosure of their churches, give themselves almost always to contemplation alone. ... They scrupulously fulfill the obligations of a monk. But they omit almost everything to which they **are** obliged as clerics and prelates.”⁶² Further, he writes that the “monk **is** like a grain of wheat remaining alone. But the cleric **is** like a grain that germinates and brings a big yield into the granary of the Lord.”⁶³

Comment [JWG45]: These are good points, but what has this to do with the king of England? Gerald is making an argument here about ecclesiastical authority.

Below the pastoral cadence of Gerald's writing lies a stinging criticism. Over the course of *The History and Topography of Ireland*, Gerald develops a rather powerful motif of wheat and grain. The first mention of grain comes in the second chapter of the history, when Gerald writes “the land **is** fruitful and rich in its fertile soil and plentiful harvest.”⁶⁴ But, although grain gives “great promise in the blade, even more in the straw,

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⁶⁰ Grandsen, *Historical Writing in England C. 550 to 1307*, 244.

⁶¹ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, ed. Betty Radice, trans. O'Meara John (London: Penguin Classics, 1982), 26.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

but less in the ear. For here the grains of wheat **are** shriveled and small.”⁶⁵ Irish clerics, Gerald argues, **are** like Irish grain, they yield no harvest, unlike both English grain and clerics.

Gerald still feels like he has not gone far enough. In his own take on the march of progress, Gerald writes, the Irish “**are** a wild and inhospitable people. They live on beasts only, and live like beasts... While man usually progresses from the woods to the fields, and from the fields to the settlements and communities of citizens, this people despises work on the land...and desires neither to abandon nor lose respect for, the life which it has **been** accustomed to in the woods and countryside.”⁶⁶ In this passage, Gerald disregards Irish traditional life and robs them of their humanity because they live on a pastoral model, and do not bother with intensive, English style grain based agriculture, which, in turn allegorically represents their uselessness and worthlessness in the eyes of the Lord.

Moreover, Gerald extends this argument to demonstrate that the Irish have no sovereign claim to their land. The medieval English believed that a good king **is** a king who built because shaping ones land gave the builder sovereignty over it.⁶⁷ The Irish however, “lived like beasts,” and whatever cities they Irish did possess **were** Norwegian in origin.⁶⁸ The Irish never shaped their land enough to qualify them as sovereign over it.⁶⁹ However, Gerald argues that while the Irish had no claim to their own kingdom, the

Comment [JWG46]: Which is interesting if you think about the relative sacrifices of Cain and Abel and God's reaction to them.

Comment [JWG47]: He's thinking of Dublin, which was in fact founded by the Danes.

⁶⁵ Ibid.
⁶⁶ Ibid., 101-102.
⁶⁷ Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*, 130.
⁶⁸ Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, 122.
⁶⁹ Ibid., 101-102.

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English did.⁷⁰ To support this claim, Gerald cites several episodes of English history from Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* to establish England's claim to Ireland.

But, Gerald stresses the Pope's approval of the English invasion of Ireland the most.⁷¹

This positions the English crown as the enforcers of papal will, and by extension the will of God. It recasts what a clear land grab as a moral mission to save the souls of a territory. Gerald essentially grants the English the right to carry out God's will, or at least the English interpretation of divine will, on whomever they please.

Gerald's work is important because it reconciles the historical engine of divine will and favor with the permanent legitimization of Norman rule. Gerald borrows Geoffrey's historical engine of right makes right and might makes right, but, Gerald aligns the actions of the English crown with the will of the Pope, and, by extension the God. In the process, Gerald defines the English crown as an inherently moral institution, as its legitimacy is not reliant on the morals of its current leader, but connected to divine authority.

Gerald's school of history leads very clearly to the idea of English exceptionalism. Whereas the entire world played itself out within the model of Geoffrey's historical engine, with regime change as the result of moral decline and amelioration, the English stood alone. It was their divine mission to conquer and civilize those who floundered morally – like the Irish had - as the English were invariably moral themselves. In many ways, Gerald's model allowed the English to see themselves as

Comment [JWG48]: This again raises the question of how you are dealing with the issue of legal right vs. divine right. Which is this?

Comment [JWG49]: Kinda. But he's also legitimizing the work of the Norman barons who did most of the heavy lifting of colonizing Ireland (including his own family).

Comment [JWG50]: There are some serious problems with this claim that tie back to Gerald's life-long efforts to move the Welsh sees out of the control of Canterbury. Gerald had real feelings about the importance of Welsh independence from the English (at least ecclesiastically).

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⁷⁰ Ibid., 100.

⁷¹ Ibid.

outside of, or rather above, history. Moreover, the English continued to employ this exact ideology for centuries, oftentimes as a justification for colonialism.⁷²

From Gildas to Gerald of Wales, the English again and again wrote histories that connected the past to the present. In many ways, the English historiographical tradition sought to give continuity to a rather disjointed, long, and complex past that evaded easy explanation.⁷³ However, central to the English peoples' treatment of their past was the role of God, and the way He intervened and shaped their history. Unsurprisingly, with every change of regime, the historians en vogue always managed to get God on their side. However, in harnessing divine will to achieve their political aims, historians fundamentally changed the way that their audiences viewed the world around them, even the way that their readership envisioned the movement of time. In many ways, the narrative of a history holds more weight than what actually happened. While the past counts for something, what may matter more is how it is written.

I'm not going to write a ton of endnotes here...we've talked about your essay some and I've provided a fair number of marginal comments. By and large, this is a very good essay (if a bit long). It is well written, well evidenced, and fairly well argued. There are a number of places (I've noted them in the margins) where I feel like you needed to slow down a bit and provide more evidence, grounding or analysis (depending). Broadly speaking, your argument holds together pretty well until the last bit. I don't see the connection with Gerald...that part does not really fit well into the essay, and I think probably your paper would have been better off cutting it. I understand

⁷² Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England*, 130.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

Comment [JWG51]: Maybe. But I'm inclined to disbelieve this. After all...isn't Gerald painting the English as a part of history in their role as the final migration? Keep in mind that all of these people are operating under the idea that they are working in the twilight of human history. Any minute now Christ will return and bring down the curtain.

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that taking the essay through Gerald lets you connect the topic at hand to a broader and more meaningful historical moment, and certainly there are connections between Gerald and his predecessors in their thinking about history and historical progression. But it opens up a number of doors that you've not touched on earlier (such as ecclesiastical authority), and I'm unconvinced by your claim that Gerald is the next evolution of the change you're describing. Geoffrey's work would have been a better place to end this essay, esp. if you'd taken a bit more time to talk about the issue of legal vs. moral rights in Geoffrey.

In all, however, a good essay. I've enjoyed having you in class this semester, and I'll look forward to doing further readings with you. If I can be of any other help, please don't hesitate to let me know.

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