

# The Supernatural...A Force to Reckon With

The combination of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People (EH) and Geoffrey of Monmouth's The History of the King of Britain (HRB) offer some unique insight into the lives of the British. The concept of faith **was** very prevalent in Britain during Bede and Geoffrey's time period. **One** could even go so far as to say that it **was** the main form of community that everybody shared. Even though the two texts display different narratives of English history, one clear similarity between the texts **is** the significant impact the supernatural had on developing a common bond of faith in the public.

HRB differs immensely from Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English people. Although Bede **was** a respected monk of Jarrow and Geoffrey **was** an important British cleric, the content matter of their works varied greatly. While Bede's account focused primarily on religion and the Ecclesiastical History, Geoffrey of Monmouth attempted to take a more neutral approach with his writing. It **is** even justified to say that the fundamental purpose of both of these books differed drastically. While Bede's main reason **was** to, "...read it and give it your [King Ceolwulf] approval" (Bede, 41). Geoffrey's main purpose **was** to "...trace the history of Britons though a long sweep of nineteen hundred years..." (GOM, 9). Where one **was** aimed to please a powerful king and hopefully earn his approval, **the other genuinely wanted to record the past and give, what Geoffrey of Monmouth thought to be, an accurate account of the history of Britain.**

In addition to this difference, both introduce the concept of the supernatural in their own ways as well. Geoffrey of Bede describes Merlin the prophet as, "...partly the nature of men and partly that of angels, and when they wish they assume mortal shapes and have intercourse with women. It **is** possible that one of these appeared to this woman and begot the lad in her" (GOM, 168). Geoffrey of Monmouth does not give too many details on who Merlin **is** exactly but does define him in terms of his speeches and prophecies. Merlin played a pivotal role in the account of Geoffrey. **Oftentimes, whenever**

**Comment [JWG1]:** I like the title

**Comment [JWG2]:** In Chicago citation style, book titles are italicized

**Comment [JWG3]:** This is unnecessary hedging...be more direct. You *are* saying this, so be up front about it

**Comment [JWG4]:** This is a good, clear thesis. The introductory paragraph itself needs a bit more though...you need to introduce your actors better, and be a bit more precise in setting the stage for your reader. What time period are we working with, for example? There are 400+ years between Bede and Geoffrey (I'm going to abbreviate him as GoM). How are you defining the time period, and why?

**Comment [JWG5]:** In a formal essay you won't want to abbreviate the text like this. Instead use the full name.

**Comment [JWG6]:** I'm not sure that this is Bede's intent in writing the book itself...this is from the letter to the king, but he's writing in response to the king's request for another copy of the book. So this is Bede's intent for a single, specific, copy of the text. You are right that the two authors had different reasons and rationales, but you need to be a bit more careful in sussing out what they were.

**Comment [JWG7]:** This is a pretty controversial take on Geoffrey's motivation. There are people who would support you in this, but the bulk of the scholarship comes down on the side of him just making up most of his history.

**Comment [JWG8]:** This is an exaggeration, I think. Merlin only gives Vortigren 2 prophecies...both at the same time. There is the crazy chapter of nonsense, and then right after that he foretells Vortigern's death. But that's it, really.

Vortigern, the King of the Britons, did not know what to do, Merlin would step in and give detailed descriptions on how to fix the situation or what lay ahead for him. This usually resulted in Merlin's side getting the upper hand during strategic planning and battles. Thus, whoever Merlin was advising tended to take a liking to him and believe in him blindly as he would provide invaluable information about the future. To Geoffrey of Monmouth, the supernatural was more a catalyst in history that prompted certain events and conflicts. On the other hand, Bede takes a more substantial approach to magic. He regards it as various miracles and events that take place, as per the what he writes in EH. For example, Bede records, "So the brother suffered great pain for a long time, and it seemed that no human skill could prevent the loss of his eye, whose condition was deteriorating daily, till he was suddenly cured by the goodness of God and by the means of the relics of the most holy father Cuthbert" (Bede, 265). These miracles were commonplace in Bede's time as seen by the frequency in which they occur in EH. In Bede's history, all it takes for a miracle to occur is for an important religious figure to die. As shown in the example above when Saint Cuthbert dies, his body parts are used to heal diseased people. For Bede, the supernatural was more of an accessory than an essential part of the story. With these differences it is clear that, at its heart, EH and HRB are fundamentally different.

It is important to discuss the supernatural further because without it, the stories would not be what they are now. The supernatural makes plenty of appearances in both stories and although they are different they are both magical at its core. This means that they are events which the outcome does not make any sense and the common man would not even believe they took place. As mentioned above, the primary example of the supernatural in HRB is the abilities of Merlin. Everything about this man points to the supernatural, from the pre-prophecy behaviors to the truth of the prophecies to the way he was conceived. After asking Merlin to provide a prophecy of what is going to happen in the future, Geoffrey writes, "Merlin immediately burst into tears. He went into a prophetic trance and then spoke as follows..." (GOM, 171). This is a clear example of magic. It vividly describes the weird and mystical

**Comment [JWG9]:** Is it blindly? He proves his chops as a mystic/seer to Vortigern by asking him to dig up the foundations of his tower and telling him what we would find there (the dragons). Then he correctly foretells Vortigern's death.

**Comment [JWG10]:** I feel like this is a really important point for your essay. It shouldn't be buried in the middle of a paragraph. I think it should probably be closer to the top of the paper, along with a paragraph explaining your terms a bit. How are you thinking about magic, the supernatural, and religion? How do you want your readers to understand these terms when you use them? You need to give your readers the definitions that you want them to use...don't let them supply their own.

**Comment [JWG11]:** Were the miracles commonplace, or was it that belief in them was commonplace? Can we even make that kind of distinction?

**Comment [JWG12]:** interesting

**Comment [JWG13]:** Fair, but there are other examples, too. The prophecy of the oracle of Diana that sends the Britons to England in the first place, or God's warning at the end that Britons would need to wait to return to England are both important examples. Moreover, they both fit your argument about GoM using the supernatural as a plot device to move his narrative along.

characteristics of Merlin so wholly. It **is** important to point out that even though **both** refer to the supernatural, each interprets it in its own way. While Bede's work **is** peppered with specific events all throughout the book, Geoffrey does not place as much emphasis on it. Where Bede's work focuses more on faith and Christianity as an avenue for creating a sense of community, Geoffrey focuses more on the supernatural and the paranormal as the means to develop a bond of faith.

Building off this, one can safely say that the majority of the supernatural events that took place in these books **was** generally positive. Merlin's prophecies in HRB only served to advance the situation that Vortigern **was** in. For example when Merlin said, "Alas for the Red Dragon, for its end **is** near. Its cavernous dens shall **be** occupied by the White Dragon, which stands for the Saxons whom you have invited over. The Red Dragon represents the people of Britain, who will **be** overrun by the White One" (GOM, 171). Based on his earlier prophecies being true nobody in their right mind doubted what Merlin said (GOM, 169). This created a sort of faith that prominent figures would place on Merlin.

Delving further, we can see that the fact that, in general, people reacted positively to these supernatural events and that helped foster a bond among the people. This bond **is** one of faith and religion that bring people together in times of peril. From the relic example above in Bede's EH, when the young man **is** suddenly cured by the magical relic and his strong belief in a higher power, one can deduce that this incident renewed the young man's faith in god. Furthermore, if these miracles happen as often as Bede describes, then there **are** quite a few people who **are** directly affected by the supernatural. This can **be** interpreted as being part of a community of faith. Essentially a community **is** a group of people who share the same values and who **are** connected by at least one aspect of their lives. It seems sensible then to identify the seemingly magical events that happen as the aspect of people's lives that connect them together. This **is** clearly reflected in HRB as well. Merlin performs Utherpendragon and Vortigern favors (GOM, 205-208, 170-171) that resulted in them having the utmost respect for Merlin. Since these people **are** important people in their respective times, **it is safe to say**

**Comment [JWG14]:** Both books? Authors? What are we talking about here?

that this respect permeated to the public as well. This sort of blind faith in the supernatural provided a way to connect a lot of the population similarly to how the relics did in Bede's narrative.

Furthermore, examples from Bede's narrative show that faith and religion **was** actually used as a tool to unify newly conquered territories. "After his [King Eadbald] conversion, however, he and his people **were** zealous to observe the teachings of our Lord" (Bede, 114) This worked especially well because a bond of faith **was** a powerful one. The common faith promoted things such as building churches and monasteries (Bede, 114) that furthered the sense of community that prevailed in this time.

In conclusion, the fact that abnormal events **were** so ubiquitous only helped foster a shared sense of belonging within the people and contributed heavily to their identity. This **was** achieved through numerous ways in both Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People and Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain. In Bede, many examples of supernatural miracles **were** sprinkled in his texts and all of them doing some sort of good to people. This led many to believe that Christianity **is** perhaps the way to go and join the larger faith centered society of the Church. Similarly, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account, he approached the supernatural in a less eventful way but completed the same purpose. The favor and reputation that Merlin earned among the kings of Britain as a trustworthy and useful right hand spoke volumes to the amount of faith that **was** placed on the supernatural. It **is** for these reasons that the supernatural fostered a strong sense of community and identity among the British.

**Comment [JWG15]:** Possibly, but that's a pretty big assumption. You're not providing and proof.

You might try to prove this point by looking at Bede and the importance of converting kings first in order to begin the conversion of the people more broadly. Bede makes clear that the people follow the king's lead on matters of faith, which is why (or at least is one of the reasons why) the king is the primary target for missionary work. Plus, he can make laws and break up shrines. But most important, for you, is the king's role as arbiter of belief in Bede. This is offers support for your claim that the public GoM imagines in his book would have followed the king's lead on accepting Merlin and his magic.

### Works Cited

- 1.) Bede, R. E. Latham, Cuthbert, and D. H. Farmer. *Ecclesiastical History of the English People ; with Bede's Letter to Egbert ; and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*. London: Penguin, 1990. Print.
- 2.) Geoffrey, and Lewis Thorpe. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966. Print.

This is, in many ways, a much better essay than your last. It is better organized, with a much clearer thesis. By-and-large you keep to the main argument throughout, and while there are places where it feels like it gets off-track, generally the essay holds together pretty well. There are some things that would have made it much more successful, however.

Firstly, it would have helped tremendously if you had defined your terms near the beginning of the essay. You use the terms magic and supernatural as if they mean the same thing, and you often seem to include religious miracles in the mix. But the authors, I think, would have understood real differences between these things. It would have been a good idea to tell your reader what you mean by magic, and what you mean by supernatural, and how these interact with each other and with the idea of miracles.

Secondly, I think this might have been better organized by book. If you had dealt with one text at a time, it would have given a bit more clarity and purpose to your paper. Sometimes when you are moving back and forth between the two books it gets hard to follow which you are talking about, and it becomes difficult to see where the argument lies.

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Lastly, I would say note that you are somewhat short on textual evidence that supports your claims. Some of the places where you have spent time and space on sources and evidence do not esp. help you; the early paragraph about authorial intent, for example, doesn't really need to be there. It doesn't move your argument along, and it takes up space that you could use later on to provide a closer examination of how magic and the supernatural are working in the books. Make sure that all of your essay is doing work for you.