

THE BRONZE HORSEMAN

A POSTSCRIPT

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In my contribution to the Society's second Special Paper *Collectanea Londiniensia* I made the suggestion, which could be no more than speculation, that the 12th-century writer Geoffrey of Monmouth's fantasy, in his *History of the Kings of Britain*, of a life-size bronze horseman erected on the west gate of London as a tomb and memorial for Cadwallo, King of the Britons, might have been inspired by the discovery in that area of fragments of a Roman bronze equestrian statue. A further reference in Geoffrey's text, not noted by me there, would seem to add further weight to that argument.

The bronze figure erected on London's west gate is referred to by Geoffrey three times. The most important of these is his account of its erection at the time of Cadwallo's death,² but it is also 'foretold' in the *Prophecies of Merlin*, which are incorporated at an earlier point in the *History*, that a 'bronze man' would 'for many ages guard the gates of London on a bronze horse'.³ The relationship to the rest of the *History* of the composition of these 'prophecies', which have their own preface and dedication by Geoffrey and were apparently first published independently before the completion of the whole work, is unclear, as is the extent to which they are the sole invention of Geoffrey himself.⁴ Yet there are sufficient references back and forth between the *Prophecies* and the *History* to indicate that they can be used in conjunction when discussing Geoffrey's intentions and his vision of the past.

Thus the third reference I had not previously noticed is relevant. This also is one of Merlin's 'prophecies', and follows shortly after that of the bronze man guarding the gates of London. It refers to the time when 'the German serpent will be crowned'—when the Saxons win control of Britain—and states simply that 'the bronze prince will be buried'.⁵ There is no doubt about the last word '*humabitur*' which appears in the earliest manuscripts, though later copyists, puzzled by this odd reference, wrote '*humiliabitur*'—'will be humbled'.⁶

Geoffrey, then, seems to envisage a bronze statue, which had been erected on a London gate in the last days of British rule, being taken down and buried when the Saxons came to power. Its 'burial' emphasises that the obvious inspiration for such a suggestion would be the discovery, in Geoffrey's own time, of such a statue, or recognisable fragments of one, in the ground—perhaps during the building, as I previously suggested, of Baynard's Castle or the new cathedral of St. Paul. Such a discovery, combined with a knowledge of cases in Rome where similar bronze statues still survived in the 12th century, some of them on arches,⁷ and possibly even of Roman coins like that of

Claudius showing an equestrian statue on a triumphal arch inscribed 'DE BRITANN',⁸ would be quite sufficient foundation for a writer with Geoffrey's obvious talents for historical speculation to build his reconstruction of a gate surmounted by a bronze horseman, to relate, as modern archaeologists so often do, the results of excavation to better-surviving parallels elsewhere and to iconographical evidence. Thus there are good grounds for regarding the 'bronze horseman' as an early example of a historical hypothesis based on the evidence of archaeology, and Geoffrey of Monmouth as one of London's earliest archaeologists.

NOTES

1. J. Clark 'Cadwallo, King of the Britons, the bronze horseman of London' in J. Bird, H. Chapman and J. Clark eds. *Collectanea Londiniensia* London Middlesex Archaeological Society Special Paper No. 2 (1978) 194–199.
2. *Historia Regum Britanniae* XII. 13.
3. *Ibid.* VII. 3.
4. J. S. P. Tatlock *The Legendary History of Britain* (Berkeley 1950) 403–421.
5. *Loc. cit.* in note 3.
6. As in the 13th-century Harlech manuscript collated with earlier texts by A. Griscom ed. *The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth* (London 1929) 386.
7. Tatlock *op. cit.* in note 4, 375.
8. Clark *op. cit.* in note 1, 198 and Fig. 1. I deliberately did not there make this suggestion, of the coin as a source of inspiration, explicit; however, having discovered that W. R. Lethaby had speculated on these lines as long ago as 1902 (*London Before the Conquest* (London 1902) 17–19), and encouraged by a similar comment (in correspondence) from Dr. Martin Henig, I am emboldened to put it in print here.