Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Case of the Walbrook Skulls

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Introduction

In 1867 Augustus Lane Fox (General Pitt-Rivers) reported discoveries of human skulls from the buried silts of the Walbrook, the stream that once ran south from Moorfields through the City of London to flow into the Thames at Dowgate, and concluded that 'the heads were severed from the bodies before they were thrown into the positions in which they were found.'[1] Subsequent similar finds from the upper Walbrook (Fig 1) have continued to inspire discussions of their date and significance, and such discussions have usually included references to the work of the medieval arch-confabulator and deviser of pseudo-history Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain*, purporting to be a translation of a certain 'ancient book in the British language', was completed in about 1136. It comprised what seemed to be an authoritative history of Britain from the arrival of Trojan settlers, led by Brutus of Troy (Fig 2), at a date that can be calculated to be around 1100 BC, right up to the death of Welsh King Cadwallader that Geoffrey dated (wrongly) to AD 689. It was accepted as genuine history for around 400 years.[2]

Among many other delights, Geoffrey's *History* provides a context that identifies the skulls in the Walbrook as the result of a massacre of Roman troops that he claims occurred, within his 'alternative' history, during warfare between British kings and Roman usurpers in what we may identify in the real world as the 3rd century AD. Mortimer Wheeler, writing in 1928, was attracted by the idea that the Walbrook skulls might rather be those of victims of the infamous massacre carried out by followers of Boudica during the revolt of AD 60.[3] He suggested that Geoffrey might have here embodied a real tradition of that event, but that Geoffrey might have misdated it.

However, since at least 1950, when J S P Tatlock first proposed that skulls were already being found in the Walbrook in Geoffrey's own time, and that he had simply provided a vivid story to explain their presence, this latter has seemed the most likely explanation, and is perhaps the consensus view.[4]

Thus, in 1965, Ralph Merrifield noted Wheeler's suggestion that the Walbrook skulls might be those of victims of the Boudican massacre, but about Geoffrey's possible use of 'tradition' he concluded: 'It is more likely, however, that similar discoveries of skulls in the Walbrook had been made in the Middle Ages, and that the story was invented to account for them.'[5] Later Geoff Marsh and Barbara West came to a similar conclusion.[6]

More recently Chiz Harward, Natasha Powers and Sadie Watson quoted Marsh and West's views on the possible significance of the skulls as evidence of a Celtic 'cult of the head' and their reference to Geoffrey of

Fig 1: skulls from the Walbrook (Museum of London)

Fig 2: Brutus of Troy, legendary founder of London as 'New Troy' (Guillaume Rouille *Promptuarii Iconum Insignorum*, 1553)

Monmouth, but go on to conclude that their own studies of the skulls and other disarticulated human bones from the Walbrook 'provide support for the view that almost all the human remains from Moor House are simply material washed out and redeposited from a cemetery either on the site or from further upstream.'[7]

Most recently, the Crossrail excavations at Liverpool Street revealed a number of skulls buried in the southern ditch of a road just north of the cemetery area (Fig 3) as well as others in the cemetery itself. The authors surmised that the skulls had been collected, redeposited, and positioned with more care than other parts of the body – perhaps as part of the cult of the head.[8]

It has also recently been suggested that there are too many skulls for them to have been washed out from the cemeteries; instead it was possible to identify a deliberate pattern of the disposal of human remains at a specific time.[9]

Naturally the archaeologist's first approach to Geoffrey's text is to consider whether it helps us interpret the archaeological discoveries. However, once we accept that Geoffrey's story was probably inspired by similar finds in his own time, and thus itself was no more than an early archaeological hypothesis, the actual date and the origin of the bones cease to be relevant to any consideration of Geoffrey's account of event. And what few of those discussing Geoffrey's text have commented on is the historical circumstances within which he chose to set it.

Geoffrey's alternative version

In considering Geoffrey's alternative take on British history, we need first to accept that Britain, from this point of view, was never properly a subject province of the Roman Empire.

Indeed, as Harvey Sheldon has pointed out 'Rather than an imperial province, the Britain embodied in Geoffrey's "tradition" appears more like an errant client state, in an uneasy long-term alliance with Rome'.[10] In this very different world, although the Britons squabbled, sometimes violently, they retained a sort of independence and usually owed allegiance to a single king of Britain. Sometimes these kings were in alliance with or paid tribute to Rome. Roman expeditionary forces came and went, sometimes in an attempt at conquest, sometimes to support Britain against outside enemies, sometimes to impose peace on warring kingdoms. But eventually the British King Arthur was to conquer much of Europe and threaten Rome itself.

Amid this largely fictional matter, Geoffrey tells us that (at some time in the 3rd century AD, it seems) Carausius, a low-born adventurer from Britain, persuaded the Roman Senate to provide him with a fleet to guard the northern seas against barbarian pirates, but then used it to attack Britain and to force the Britons to accept him as king. The Romans sent a legate, Allectus, with three legions, to regain the allegiance of Britain. He defeated and killed Carausius, but then seized the British throne himself. The Britons rebelled against his cruel and unjust rule, led by the Duke of Cornwall, Asclepiodotus. In the ensuing battle Allectus was killed, and one of his officers, Livius Gallus, retreated with the remnant of Allectus's Roman legions to London, where they were besieged by the Britons. The Britons broke into the city and slaughtered most of the Romans.

The survivors surrendered, but one contingent of Britons, the Venedoti (from Gwynedd in north Wales) 'advanced in formation and within one day beheaded all of them, beside a stream in the city which from the name of their leader [Livius Gallus] was afterwards called in British Nantgallum or in Saxon Galobroc' (the latter reflecting the Anglo-Norman French spelling of 'Walbrook').[11] Several years later, a Roman senator, Constantius, arrived in Britain on a peace mission, fell in love with Helena, daughter of the British King Coel, married her and inherited the kingdom.[12]

Geoffrey does not say that the slaughtered Romans' heads were thrown into the Walbrook stream – he does not need to. Anyone familiar with the fact that skulls had been found in the stream would immediately make the connection. (This allusive approach is very typical of Geoffrey, who thus allows his London readers – and modern archaeologists – a frisson of delight at their own cleverness in recognising the reference.)

The name Gallus is surely a back-formation from the river name to facilitate a spurious etymology for the Walbrook itself (just as Geoffrey created his early British kings Belinus and Lud chiefly to 'explain' the origins of Billingsgate and Ludgate). The other names, however – Carausius, Allectus, Asclepiodotus and Constantius – establish the real-world context and chronology that inspired Geoffrey's extraordinary and unhistoric narrative. They clearly set it in the period of the short-lived independent 'British' empire of the late 3rd century AD, when, in 286, Carausius, commander of the Roman fleet guarding the northern waters, seized power and declared himself emperor of Britain and northern Gaul. In 293, Carausius was deposed and killed by his deputy, Allectus, who assumed the title of emperor of Britain. In 296, Constantius Chlorus, the Caesar (junior emperor of the western Roman Empire under the tetrarchy), led an expedition to depose Allectus and recapture Britain.

The details are unclear – his fleet became lost and dispersed in fog in the Channel, and Constantius himself possibly did not reach Britain until the fighting was over. However, the praetorian prefect Julius Asclepiodotus landed with a large force on the south coast and fought a battle with Allectus. Allectus was defeated and killed. The survivors of his army – said to be largely Frankish mercenaries – fled back to London and started looting the city. At this point, a separate Roman force

reached London fortuitously, possibly by sailing up the Thames, and slaughtered the last of Allectus's troops in the streets of the city. Later Constantius entered London and was greeted as a liberator – the incident perhaps commemorated by the issue of a gold medallion, the famous 'Arras medallion' (Fig 4).

Thus Geoffrey's narrative is a distorted reflection of historical reality, with the same *dramatis personae*, a similar decisive battle followed by the flight of the defeated to London, and a similar culmination in the ruthless massacre of the surviving enemy troops within the walls of the city. He gives a peculiarly 'British' slant to events, consonant with his claim to have translated 'an ancient book in the British language' – which might be expected to differ substantially from any account written from a hostile Roman point of view!

Geoffrey thus cleverly supplies a plausible explanation of an archaeological discovery (the skulls) and a satisfying etymology of an obscure place-name (the Walbrook) in the context of an apparently well-attested historical event (following a battle, the defeated enemy troops flee to London where they are massacred). Perhaps on the basis of 'what I tell you three times is true', Geoffrey seems to like to provide three pieces of 'evidence' in support of his most outrageous inventions.

Fig 3: skulls recorded *in situ* in a roadside ditch during the Crossrail excavations at Liverpool Street (Crossrail/MOLA)

The London massacre of AD 296

But this begs the question: how did Geoffrey, writing in the 1130s, know about the London massacre of AD 296? Our own sources of information on the Carausian period are limited, but several commentators have usefully brought the texts and other evidence together and discussed their significance.[13] Two 4th-century historians, Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, provide brief accounts of the events from Carausius's rise to power to the defeat of Allectus, probably deriving their information from an earlier, now lost, history of the Caesars.

The Spanish Christian historian Orosius, writing in about AD 420, summarised Eutropius's account in his *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* – important because this was the basic text drawn on by most early medieval historians for their knowledge of Roman history. Thus English historian Bede, in about AD 730, transcribed verbatim the relevant passages from Orosius to create his own chapter on the Carausian episode.[14] Geoffrey of Monmouth drew extensively, if extravagantly (not to say with fraudulent intent!), on both Orosius and Bede, and in either he would have found the names of the protagonists and the bare bones of a narrative to rework and distort to his own purposes.

However, none of these authorities, from Aurelius Victor to Bede, describes the massacre that took place in London after the defeat and death of Allectus. All end abruptly with Asclepiodotus's victory and the recovery of Britain. As Eutropius says '[Allectus] was crushed by the agency of Asclepiodotus, the praetorian prefect. Thus the British provinces were recovered after ten years'.[15] If Geoffrey knew of the London massacre, his information came from somewhere else.

Constantius Chlorus and the Carausian interlude

Today, our knowledge of the details of the campaign in 296 that recovered Britain for the Roman Empire apparently comes from a single document, 'our only detailed source for the reconquest of the island by Constantius'.[16] It is an anonymous panegyric delivered probably in March 297 in honour of Constantius Chlorus.[17] It is of its nature wordy, flowery and allusive. It attributes the recovery of Britain to Constantius alone (without placing him in the front line of the fighting) and mentions no other names – not that of the enemy and certainly not that of the victorious praetorian prefect, Asclepiodotus.

It does, however, describe events in London after the death of Allectus:

> …those soldiers of yours [Constantius] who became separated through losing their bearing on a sea which, as I said a little while ago, was shrouded in mist, and had reached the town of London, slaughtered indiscriminately all over the city whatever part of that multitude of barbarian hirelings had survived the battle, when they were contemplating taking flight after plundering the city. Your men not only gave safety to your provincials by the slaughter of the enemy, but also the pleasure of the spectacle.[18]

This panegyric survived into modern times in a single copy in a manuscript that only came to light in a monastery in Mainz, Germany, in 1433.[19] The manuscript, containing the texts known as the *XII Panegyrici Latini (Twelve Latin Panegyrics)*, was later lost, but fortunately not before several further copies were made.

Astute modern historians have used the Constantius panegyric, in spite of its vague and allusive style, to reconstruct the events of 296.[20] Perhaps Geoffrey of Monmouth could have done the same (indeed, more easily, since he wasn't

constrained by any perceived loyalty to the 'facts' of history) – if the manuscript (its existence not recorded before the 15th century) had been available to him. Was there another copy, either of all twelve of the panegyrics that were contained in the Mainz manuscript, or simply of this Constantius panegyric, in some monastic library in England in Geoffrey's time?

Or was there some other historical text with an account of the Carausian empire and its downfall that Geoffrey used? Webb admitted the possibility that Geoffrey had access to some now-lost written source, but pointed out that, if so, it seems not to have been available to Bede, who used solely Orosius's account.[21] There seems nothing in Geoffrey's text sufficient to confirm that it was specifically the panegyric he drew on. Like Eutropius, Orosius and Bede, he attributes the victory to Asclepiodotus (whether praetorian prefect or Duke of Cornwall!) rather than to Constantius – whose role in the campaign he completely ignores and who plays no part in his *History* until later.

Geoffrey says nothing of the fog in the Channel that much occupied the anonymous panegyrist's attention – although, since his scenario entailed no sea crossing, this is not surprising. He makes no use of the panegyrist's vivid description of Allectus's body found on the battlefield – Allectus had,

Fig 4: the Arras Medallion commemorates Constantius Chlorus's defeat of Allectus and the liberation of London in AD 296 (The Roman Society)

the panegyrist alleged, stripped off his finery in an attempt to escape recognition when he fled.[22]

Nor does Geoffrey mention the joy of the Britons at their liberation or the praise heaped on their liberator. The panegyrist says:

> Britons exultant [literally 'leaping up and down'] with joy came forward with their wives and children, venerating not you alone … but the sails and oars of that ship which had conveyed your divinity….[23]

If Geoffrey had read this passage, he might have been inspired to describe Londoners welcoming Asclepiodotus in like fashion!

Conclusion

In spite of all the attempts to identify his sources, amidst the distortions and misdirections he deliberately created, Geoffrey of Monmouth can still produce surprises, occasions when, improbably, he does indeed seem to have had access to a source of information unavailable to us. There was surely no ancient book in the British language, but Geoffrey's usage of unrecognised Latin sources may have been more extensive than is usually credited.

Thus Geoffrey's 'explanation' of the Walbrook skulls may pay witness to the survival in the early 12th century – perhaps in Oxford, where Geoffrey spent much of his life – of a copy of a Roman historical text which contained an independent account of the downfall of Carausius's British Empire, that was more detailed than those of Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, and less biased than the panegyric. Such a document, if it came to light today, would no doubt prove an invaluable supplement to our understanding of this fascinating episode in the history of Roman Britain!

After being curator of the medieval collections of the Museum of London for many years, John Clark retired in 2009, with the title Curator Emeritus. He has long been interested in how the remains of Roman London were interpreted by medieval writers.

1. A L Fox 'A description of certain piles found near London Wall and Southwark, possibly the remains of pile buildings' *J Anthropol Soc London* **5** (1867) lxxi–lxxxiii; see lxxvii and lxxix–lxxx.
2. Lewis Thorpe's translation of *The History of the Kings of Britain* for the Penguin Classics series, first published in 1966, is still in print. The Introduction provides an invaluable account of Geoffrey's life, writings, and influence. The more recent edition by Michael Reeve and Neil Wright (2007) has Latin and English texts on facing pages. J S P Tatlock's *The Legendary History of Britain* (1950) remains the definitive study of Geoffrey's sources and methods, and T D Kendrick *British Antiquity* (1950) describes the later reputation of Geoffrey's 'British History' and its final decline and fall.
3. Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in London, Vol. 3: Roman London* (1928) 15–16.
4. J S P Tatlock *The Legendary History of Britain* (1950) 33.
5. R Merrifield *The Roman City of London* (1965) 37 and 76 n16.
6. G Marsh and B West 'Skullduggery in Roman London?' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* **32** (1981) 86.
7. C Harward, N Powers and S Watson *The Upper Walbrook Valley Cemetery of Roman London: Excavations at Finsbury Circus, City of London, 1987–2007* MOLA Monogr **69** (2015) 7–9, 133.
8. S Ranieri and A Telfer *Outside Roman London: Roadside burials by the Walbrook stream* Crossrail/MOLA (2017) 108–114 and 120–8. For the skulls associated with the cult of the head, the discussions began with Marsh & West *op cit* fn 6.
9. D Perring 'London's Hadrianic War?' in *Britannia* **48** (2017) 37–76.
10. H Sheldon 'Roman London: early myths and modern realities' in J Cotton, J Hall, J Keily, R Sherris and R Stephenson (eds) *'Hidden Histories and Records of Antiquity': Essays on Saxon and Medieval London for John Clark* London Middlesex Archaeol Soc Spec Pap **17** (2014) 13.
11. *Nant* in Welsh (or 'British' as Geoffrey prefers to call it) does indeed mean 'brook' or 'stream'. He often maintains the fiction that he is translating from 'an ancient book in the British language' by providing a 'British' name for a place alongside a Latin or 'Saxon' (English) version.
12. Geoffrey of Monmouth *The History of the Kings of Britain* (L Thorpe trans) (1966) 127–32; Geoffrey of Monmouth *The History of the Kings of Britain* (M D Reeve ed; N Wright trans) (2007) 90–97.
13. P H Webb 'The reign and coinage of Carausius, A.D. 287–293' *Num Chron* (4th Series) **7** (1907) 1–88, 156–218; N Shiel *The Episode of Carausius and Allectus: The Literary and Numismatic Evidence* BAR British Series 40 (1977); P J Casey *Carausius and Allectus: the British Usurpers* (1994) (with translations of the texts by Roger Tomlin). See also A R Birley *The Roman Government of Britain* (2005) 369–93.
14. Bede *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (ed) B Colgrave and R A B Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts (1969) 26–9.
15. Casey, *op cit* fn 13, 198.
16. *Ibid*, 134.
17. C E V Nixon and B S Rodgers (eds & trans) *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (1994) 104–44.
18. *Ibid*, 138.
19. *Ibid*, 3–4.
20. *Op cit* fn 13.
21. Webb, *op cit* fn 13, 21.
22. Nixon and Rodgers, *op cit* fn 17, 137–8.
23. *Ibid*, 140.