

Merlin: Ambrosius and Silvester

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In speaking of the ancient seer known to us as Merlin, Giraldus Cambrensis distinguishes two separate prophetic characters, each with a different name: 'iste qui et Ambrosius dictus est' ('the one who was also called Ambrosius'), begotten by an incubus and prophesying in the time of King Vortigern; the other coming from Scotland, 'qui et Celidonius dictus est' ('who was called both Celidonius') from the Caledonian Forest in which he prophesied, 'et Silvester' ('and Silvester') because in battle he perceived a fearsome monster, became demented, and, fleeing to the forest, 'silvestrem usque ad obitum vitam perduxit' ('lived out the rest of his life as a man of the woods'). This second Merlin is placed by Giraldus in the time of King Arthur.¹

For the prophecies of his character Merlin Ambrosius, Giraldus sometimes draws on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*,² although he ignores the prophecies presented in Geoffrey's later *Vita Merlini*.³ In the earlier of these two works, Merlin (Ambrosius) has the role of prophet. He enters the text in the time of Vortigern, but disappears from it after the time of the birth of Arthur. In the later work, Merlin's character is very much altered: here he is a wild man, living intermittently in the Caledonian Forest, though also a soothsayer who has knowledge of events from the time of King Vortigern, through the time of Arthur, and up to the time of Conan (pp. 88–96). The name 'merlinus silvestris. siue caledonis' ('Merlin Silvester, or Caledonis') forms part of the heading of one manuscript of the poem;⁴ but nowhere is it suggested that the character of this text is separate from the Merlin portrayed in the *Historia Regum*.

Geoffrey's sources for his *Historia Regum* include the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*⁵ and the sixth-century *De Excidio Britanniae* by Gildas.⁶ The earlier

¹See Giraldi Cambrensis, *Opera*, edited by J. F. Dimock, Rolls Series, VI (London, 1868), 133. The text is of the late twelfth century. Subsequent references to this edition appear parenthetically in text.

²The edition used here is that of E. Faral in *La Légende Arthurienne*, III (Paris, 1929). The text is of the late 1130s. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in text. For parallels between this work and that of Giraldus, compare, for example, Faral (p. 191) and Dimock (p. 56) — the prophecy concerning Menevia.

³*The Vita Merlini*, edited by J. J. Parry, *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, 10 (1925), 3–125. The work was written between 1148 and 1154. Subsequent references appear in text.

⁴See Parry, *Vita Merlini*, p. 30.

⁵The edition used here is *The 'Historia Brittonum'*, edited by David N. Dumville, III, *The 'Vatican' Recension* (Cambridge, 1985). Subsequent references appear in text. Though the authorship has

writer, Gildas, is the first to mention any form of the name 'Ambrosius': in the *De Excidio* he writes of 'Ambrosius Aurelianus', who successfully leads the British resistance against the invading Saxons (probably in the fifth century). Ambrosius is of the Roman race; his parents, who had 'worn the purple', have been slain in the unrest (p. 98). He lives in the time of the *superbus tyrannus*, 'supreme tyrant' (p. 97), who is later identified by Bede as 'Vortigern'.⁷ Ambrosius is no prophet, but merely a military leader — the ultimate saviour of Britain.

Though it does not mention the name 'Aurelianus', the *Historia Brittonum* gives the name 'Ambrosius' three times. The first is when King Vortigern fears that Ambrosius will seize the throne (p. 82); the second, when the advisers of Vortigern inform him that the stronghold he is building will never stand unless he finds a child without a father whose blood may be sprinkled on the foundations. The boy (whose mother has never known a man) is brought to Vortigern and, explaining that his sacrifice is unnecessary, discloses the reason why the timber and stones for the work keep disappearing. He then makes various other revelations and prophecies. Upon being asked his name, he replies 'Ambrosius uocor' ('I am called Ambrosius'), yet he goes on to say 'unus de consulibus Romanorum pater meus est' ('one of the consuls of the Roman people is my father'); Vortigern then gives him the western part of Britain to rule (pp. 90–95). The final occurrence of the name is when it is stated (pp. 101–02) that Pascent rules (after the death of his father, Vortigern) in two provinces, 'largiente Embresio' ('with the leave of Ambrosius'), who is 'rex magnus inter reges Britanniae insule' ('the great king amongst the kings in the island of Britain').

There is no question that the so-called 'fatherless boy' by the name of Ambrosius is identical with the Ambrosius Aurelianus of the *De Excidio*. Each is identified at one time as the son of a Roman consul; each lives in the time of Vortigern; and each ends as a powerful military ruler/king of Britain. The symbolism of the *Historia Brittonum* is clear. The boy 'without a father', that is, the (orphaned) son of a Roman consul, is in line for the kingship and, constituting a threat to Vortigern, must be killed before his fortress, that is to say, his kingdom, will stand. With the introduction of supernatural elements into the story, historical events seen in retrospect become mysterious revelations about the future.

However, in elaborating on the factual to create the popular, the author of the *Historia Brittonum* has created two problems for future readers, one textual, the

commonly been attributed to Nennius, Dumville refutes this in his 'Nennius' and the *Historia Brittonum*', *Studia Celtica*, 10/11 (1975/76), 78–95.

⁶Gildas: *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, edited and translated by M. Winterbottom (London, 1978). Subsequent references appear parenthetically in text.

⁷Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), p. 48 and note 2.

other conceptual: the first is the obvious contradiction over the parentage of the boy; the second is the question of how the boy who begins in the *De Excidio* as the son of a Roman consul and ends as a military commander is, at one point, transformed into a soothsayer of fabulous origin. Both bear the name Ambrosius. This duplication of names is later deftly removed by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum*, when he transfers *en bloc* the prophecies of Ambrosius as they appear in the *Historia Brittonum* to a new character, giving his name (p. 188) as: 'Merlinus, qui et Ambrosius dicebatur' ('Merlin, who was also called Ambrosius'). To the mortal 'Ambrosius Aureli(an)us' he assigns the role of king.

Some ten years after the publication of Geoffrey's *Historia Regum*, Merlin appears in the *Vita* in a different guise (e.g., pp. 32–36), as the wild man of the Caledonian Forest, bewailing the lot of mankind. Here he is more of a literary than a historical figure. The historical details of the *Vita* are, however, essentially a reiteration of the earlier material of the *Historia Regum*, with further echoes of Gildas' *De Excidio*,⁸ and so, the cognomen 'Caledonius' is to be seen perhaps as a nickname, used by those writing of Merlin's exploits in the Caledonian Wood. Therefore, although the soothsayer in the *Vita* lives on into the age of Arthur, the existence of both Merlin Ambrosius and Merlin Caledonius can be dated back (as far as Geoffrey's texts are concerned) to the time of Ambrosius Aurelianus, and hence to the time of Vortigern. Assuming Giraldus Cambrensis knew of the *Vita*, his depiction of a second Merlin might be a deliberate attempt to avoid having his character span the time from the reign of Vortigern to that of Arthur, or beyond.

A Library Catalogue of mid-twelfth century Bec also distinguishes between two Merlins. In describing a manuscript containing a text of the *Historia Regum*, it mentions a twelve-book history of the kings of Greater Britain, up to the arrival of the English, in the seventh of which is contained the 'prophetie Merlini, non Siluestris, sed alterius, id est Merlini Ambrosii' ('the prophecies of Merlin — not Silvester, but the other one, i.e., Merlin Ambrosius').⁹ This might be taken to imply two personages — indeed, Giraldus Cambrensis has made a similar distinction. Yet the entry in the catalogue might be explained merely as a differentiation between the two separate texts — each dealing with the same person (Merlin) and written by the same person (Geoffrey of Monmouth), but having to be classified according to the particular sets of prophecies contained therein.

Evidence in support of the claim that Merlin Ambrosius and Merlin Silvester are identical comes from the *Promptorium Parvulorum*, an English-Latin dictionary

⁸As shown by Neil Wright, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gildas', in *Arthurian Literature II*, edited by Richard Barber (Cambridge, [1982]), pp. 30–33.

⁹Quoted from David N. Dumville, 'An Early Text of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and the Circulation of some Latin Histories in Twelfth-century Normandy', in *Arthurian Literature IV*, edited by Richard Barber (Woodbridge, 1985), pp. 3–4.

compiled in Norfolk in the mid-fifteenth century. This text has two relevant entries: 'Ambrose, herbe: *Ambrosia, salgia siluestris*' and 'Ambrose, propyr name: *Ambrosius*'.¹⁰ The name 'Silvester', as used by Giraldus, is equivalent to '(man of) the forest', that is, of the Caledonian Forest, and so may also be regarded as a nickname, originally more or less synonymous with the name 'Ambrose', which, as the *Promptorium* shows, has forest associations — the term *salgia siluestris* (*recte, saluia siluestris*) means 'sage of the forest' or 'wild sage'. There are other implications here as well, for Merlin appears in Geoffrey's *Vita* as a 'wild' man living in the 'forest';¹¹ and yet he is also a 'sage' or 'wiseman'. The association of 'Ambrose (a herb)', with 'wild sage' may, therefore, be a play on words, established in the first instance, perhaps, by Geoffrey of Monmouth — a *jeu de mots* which might well have provided the impetus for the Wild Man theme in the context of Merlin.¹²

So, then, we are led to the conclusion that the names 'Ambrosius' and 'Silvester' are interchangeable: the two characters are one and the same. We might think Giraldus something of a pedant in creating a second Merlin, since he was no doubt aware of the relationship between the two names. We might also consider Geoffrèy somewhat frivolous in introducing an outside character, Merlin. On the other hand, we cannot but sympathize with Giraldus when he says (p. 163): 'Difficilis namque est tam certa rerum singularum indagatio' ('How difficult it is to find out just what really happened'). To this we might add the comment: 'How very much is the medieval author at the mercy of his sources.'

¹⁰The *Promptorium Parvulorum: The First English-Latin Dictionary*, edited by A. L. Mayhew, EETS, e.s. 102 (1908), s.vv.

¹¹For the notion of the wild man, see Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952).

¹²Certainly, stories embodying the same notions were circulating in the twelfth century, although it is uncertain whether these stories pre- or post-date Geoffrey's work. The name 'Merlin' seems to have first been used by Geoffrey himself. For discussion on the name and on parallel texts, see J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950), ch. 5; and J. J. Parry and R. A. Caldwell, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth', in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, edited by R. S. Loomis (Oxford, 1959), pp. 72–93.