

## DEPICTIONS OF THE SCOTS IN THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND

Diana Jefferies

This paper will explore how motifs of Scotland and Scottishness are portrayed in medieval versions of the Arthurian Legend. I will discuss how the context of what is alleged to be the first literary reference to Arthur, found in a poem, dated to the sixth century by scholars mourning the death of warriors from the kingdoms of Gododdin and Rheged in Southern Scotland, is very different to the portrayal of the Scottish faction, King Lot of the Orkneys and Lothian and his family, in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, written in 1470. Whereas in *Y gododdin*, warriors settled in the southern regions of Scotland, are praised and compared to an Arthur, who is portrayed as the ultimate exponent of fighting prowess, in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, it is the family of Lot who set in motion the events that lead to Arthur's final battle on Salisbury Plain where he is mortally wounded by his son, Mordred, and his glorious civilization is swept away. Although the first mention of Arthur could be in a Scottish poem, by the end of the medieval period, the Scottish characters in Malory have an ambiguous status. To arrive at how this literary turnaround occurred, the history and context of Arthurian literature must be explored and this is a journey that takes us throughout Britain. It only by following the development of the legend that we can come to understand how the Arthurian legend, whose literary life seems to begin in Scotland, is fully integrated into the literary lore of England and how the Scottish characters associated with the legend are problematized.

A poem, *The Gododdin*,<sup>1</sup> is believed to contain the first mention of the name Arthur. This poem, attributed to the bard Aneirin,<sup>2</sup> commemorates a battle fought at Catterath, believed to be Catterick in Northern Yorkshire,<sup>3</sup> by the forces of King Uriens who is thought to have ruled over the people of

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<sup>1</sup> The poem survives in only one manuscript, the heavily corrupted, interpolated and modernized 'Book of Aneirin' produced in the late thirteenth century. See John T. Koch (ed.), *The Gododdin of Aneirin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Tradition says that Aneirin the Bard lived in the second half of the sixth century. See Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin*, p. xiii.

Gododdin and Rheged in Southern Scotland.<sup>4</sup> The poem eulogises the three hundred warriors killed in a battle, who willingly fought against overwhelming odds after a year of feasting in the king's hall at Din Eidyn, now agreed to be Edinburgh by scholars.<sup>5</sup> Each stanza is an elegy to a particular warrior. For our purposes what makes the poem interesting is its one reference to Arthur found in one of the last stanzas:

He charged before three hundred of the finest,  
He cut down both centre and wing,  
He excelled in the forefront of the noblest host,  
He gave his gifts of horses from the herd in winter.  
He fed black ravens on the rampart of a fortress  
    Though he was no Arthur.  
Among the powerful ones in battle,  
In the front rank, Gwawrddur was a palisade (967-  
974)<sup>6</sup>

This reference to Arthur is tantalizing but it gives us no information about who this Arthur is. The future legendary king and literary character is nothing more than a name. All that can be ascertained by this reference is that Arthur is a name associated with great prowess in battle. But even this is frustrating because although many claim that *The Gododdin* was written by Aneirin in the early sixth century as an eyewitness account of this battle, there is no written record of the poem before the second half of the thirteenth century and it is written in Middle Welsh.<sup>7</sup> If the poem was written in the sixth century, it would have been written in Cumbric language which is related to Old Welsh, also known as Archaic Neo-Brittonic and, as such, it would be the oldest poem written in Scotland.<sup>8</sup> Although others

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<sup>4</sup> Koch says that the bulk of Urien's lands lie west of the Pennines in present day Cumbria, Lancashire, Dumfries and Galloway. See Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin*, p. xv.

<sup>5</sup> Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin*, p. xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Aneirin, *The Gododdin: Britain's Oldest Heroic Poem*, trans. A.O.H. Jarman (Llandysul: Gomer, 1988), pp. 64-65. As it is written in the manuscript: Ef gwant tra thrichant echasaf/Ef lladdai a pherfedd ac eithaf, /Oedd gwiw ym mlaen llu llariaf, /Goddolai o haid meirch y gaeaf. /Gochorai brain du ar fur caer/Cyn ni bai ef Arthur./Rhwng cyfnerthi yng nghlysur,/Yng nghynnor, gwernor Gwawrddur.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson argues that the inclusion of Arthur's name in *The Gododdin* found in the manuscript is no guarantee that it existed in the original poem. See Jackson, *The Gododdin* 112.

<sup>8</sup> Koch discusses the language of the poem extensively in his introduction to the poem; Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin*, pp. lxvi-cxliiii.

suggest that the name Arthur could have been added at a much later date, this demonstrates how popular the legend was during this period and how all the peoples of Britain strove to be identified with the legendary king.

To understand more of *The Gododdin*, its literary and historical context needs to be considered. This is a poem many claimed to have been written during the misty past when the Roman legions left Britain in approximately 406-407 and the Saxons, Angles and Jutes arrived in Britain.<sup>9</sup> They became known as the Anglo-Saxons and their achievements include the introduction of the earliest form of the English language to Britain from which the name England is derived. Dark Age historians record this period as being one of violent occupation, although many modern archaeologists and historians dispute this view. Our main source for these events from the period comes from the Venerable Bede, who described them in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in 731.<sup>10</sup> He says that an invited force of German warriors, who were asked to save guard the native British population from the raiding Picts, used this invitation to gain a foothold on the British Isles and eventually conquered most of the Island, forcing the native British into what is now considered to be the Celtic fringes of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany. Hence the peoples of Gododdin and Rheged in Southern Scotland were forced to immigrate to Wales, possibly taking whatever concept of the name 'Arthur' they had, with them.

Bede describes the coming of the Anglo-Saxons in the following:

It was not long before such hordes of these alien peoples vied together to crowd into the island that the natives who had invited began to live in terror. Then all of a sudden the Angles made an alliance with the Picts (the peoples of Northern Scotland), whom by this time they had driven some distance away, and began to turn their arms against their allies. They began demanding a greater supply of provisions; then, seeking to provoke a quarrel, threatened that unless larger supplies were forthcoming, they would terminate their treaty and ravage the whole island. In

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Barber, *King Arthur: Hero and Legend* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> D. H. Farmer, 'Introduction to Bede', in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, revis. R. E. Latham (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 19.

short, the fires kindled by the pagans proved to be God's just punishment on the sins of the nation, just as the fires once kindled by the Chaldeans destroyed the walls and buildings of Jerusalem. For, as the just Judge ordained, these heathen conquerors devastated the surrounding cities and countryside, extended the conflagration from the eastern to the western shores without opposition and established a stranglehold over nearly all the doomed island. Public and private buildings were razed; priests were slain at the altar; bishops and people alike, regardless of rank, were destroyed with fire and sword, and none remained to bury those who had suffered a cruel death. A few wretched survivors captured in the hills were butchered wholesale, and others, desperate with hunger, came out and surrendered to the enemy for food, although they were doomed to lifelong slavery even if they escaped massacre. Some fled overseas in their misery; others, clinging to their homeland, eked out a wretched existence among the mountains, forests, and crags, ever on the alert for danger.<sup>11</sup>

The so-called historical Arthur is claimed to have lived during this period and accounts such as Bede's have influenced his portrayal in literature. He becomes the Christian king who maintains the law and order within Britain and who protects the kingdom from outsiders who would disrupt society. In many cases this threat comes from those who are either pagan or have flouted the law of God in some particular way. This concept of being a king true to God, protecting the people from the ravages of pagans and those who have turned away from God's law becomes an important part of the Arthurian legend in the medieval period.

In this early period, what literary critics now refer to as the historical Arthur, a term which in no way proves that an Arthur ever existed, is depicted as a war leader, who for a brief period of time held back the onslaught of the Anglo-Saxons. Gildas's *Ruin of Britain*, dated to the late sixth century, treats the Anglo-Saxon invasion as God's punishment against the Britains for their sins but he doesn't mention of the name, Arthur. Bede, later, writes of a Roman survivor of the invasion, Ambrosius Aurelianus, a

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<sup>11</sup> Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, pp. 63-64. All further references will be to this version of the text and will cited in the body of the paper to page number.

man of royal birth, who he says took up arms against the invaders and defeated them at the Battle of Badon Hill (64). The site and the date of this battle remains a matter for conjecture but it is generally agreed to have occurred between 480 and 520 with the most likely date close to 500.<sup>12</sup> Although both these accounts place the history of this period firmly either in Wales or England, the *History of the Britons*, attributed to Nennius and written in the eighth or ninth century, names Arthur directly and lists the twelve battles he fought and won against the Anglo-Saxons throughout England and Wales (one battle is fought in the Caledonian Forest, identified as the Englewood Forest extending from Penrith to Carlisle), including one near Bath which Nennius calls the Hill of Badon.<sup>13</sup> The name Arthur has displaced the name Ambrosius Aurelianus found in Bede and this Arthur has become a great hero with not just one but twelve victories to his name. Thus the story of Arthur takes on its embryonic form, which will be expanded upon by the romance writers of the later medieval period. The *History of the Britons* gives us a hero, who for a brief time is able to defeat the invading Anglo-Saxons, bringing a period of peace and prosperity to the British people.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* was written in 1136<sup>14</sup> is the first text that gives us the comprehensive story of Arthur, or a chronicle that begins at his birth, tells the events of his life in chronological order and ends when Arthur is wounded by his 'nephew' Mordred before he is transported to the Island of Avalon to rest, heal and perhaps return to save Britain again in a time of peril. Geoffrey says that his purpose in writing this history is to record the great deeds of the many British kings who lived before the time of Christ and those, including Arthur, who lived after the time of Christ. Geoffrey says that their deeds have been remember in oral history but there is only one book, given to him by Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, and written in the ancient British tongue, that records all these achievements (51). Whether this particular book ever existed or whether Geoffrey's assertion is no more than a rhetorical ploy has been the subject of much scholarly debate. Geoffrey's own book was a tremendous success and through various translations such as Wace's Anglo-Norman *Roman de Brut*, Arthur's story became known throughout Europe.

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<sup>12</sup> Barber, *King Arthur: Hero and Legend*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Barber, *King Arthur: Hero and Legend*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> As found in the 'Introduction' to Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe. (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 9. All further references will be to this version of the text and cited in the body of the paper to page number.

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What is interesting about Geoffrey's portrayal of Arthur is that he has become the Christian king who unites Britain under his leadership. The description of this event perhaps speaks volumes about how Scotland was envisaged during Geoffrey's lifetime. The Scots are introduced into the account of Arthur's kingship as allies of his enemy the Saxons, who at this stage of the narrative remain pagan (213). Although the Scots are Christian, their decision to ally themselves without the pagan Saxons, rather than the Christian British, justifies Arthur's attack on them. The battles to repulse the Saxons and their allies are justified as being an attack on the enemies of God. Before the battle the archbishop of the City of Legions urges the British to remember their loyalty to the fatherland in the following speech:

You who have been marked with the cross of the Christian faith, be mindful of the loyalty you owe to your fatherland and to your fellow countrymen! If they are slaughtered as a result of this treacherous behaviour by the pagans, they will be an everlasting reproach to you, unless in the meanwhile you do your utmost to defend them! Fight for your fatherland, and if you are killed suffer death willingly for your country's sake. That in itself is victory and a cleansing of the soul. Whoever suffers death for the sake of his brothers offers himself as a living sacrifice to God and follows in the firm footsteps behind Christ himself, who did not disdain to lay down his life for his brother. It follows that if anyone of you shall suffer death in this war, that death shall be to him as a penance and an absolution for all his sins, given always that he goes to meet it unflinchingly (216).

This speech has many echoes of speeches given by clerics at the time to induce men to take the cross and fight in the crusades. This war against the pagan Saxons and their allies is framed in the same context as the crusades. The defeat of the pagans and the other enemies of Arthur, which most certainly include the Scots, becomes the work of the people of God.

Geoffrey tells us that when Arthur defeats the Scots, it is the piety and repentance of the Scottish clerics that saves the people from annihilation:

With unparalleled severity, sparing no one who fell into his hands. As a result all the bishops of this

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pitiful country, with all the clergy under their command, their feet bare and in their hands the relics of their saints and the treasures of the their churches, assembled to beg pity of the King for the relief of their people. The moment they came into the king's presence, they fell on their knees and besought him to have mercy on their sorrowing people . when they petitioned the King in this way, their patriotism moved him to tears. Arthur gave in to the prayers of the men of religion and granted a pardon to the people (219-220).

Arthur restores the kings of the various regions in Scotland to their thrones as his vassals as Scotland is incorporated into the kingdom of Britain (221). Lot is married to Arthur's sister, called Anna in Geoffrey's account, and their sons are two of the most famous names in the Arthurian legend, Gawain and Mordred. Although Gawain is later overshadowed by the literary invention of the Frenchman Chretien de Troyes, Lancelot, he is a much loved character. Mordred, however, becomes the villain of the legend. His role is set as early as Geoffrey's account when he usurps the throne from Arthur and he abducts Arthur's queen, Guinever.

Geoffrey's portrayal of this event questions Guinever's complicity in the abduction, setting the queen up for her future role as the adulterous partner of Lancelot. Geoffrey says:

What is more, this treacherous tyrant [Mordred] was living adulterously and out of wedlock with Queen Guinever, who had broken the vows of her earlier marriage.

These events, first seen in Geoffrey's account of the Arthurian legend have a lasting effect on all the characters. Mordred, who is brought in the court of Lothian, is identified as being part of the Scottish connection in the legend. Furthermore, as Lancelot replaces Gawain, Mordred's brother, as the major hero of the Arthurian court, Gawain's character becomes increasing ambiguous. I argue that by the time Malory's *Morte Darthur*<sup>15</sup> is written, the problematic nature of this Scottish connection is apparent from the beginning of the text and is integral to the downfall of Arthur's kingdom.

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Sir Thomas Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, Eugene Vinaver (ed.) and revis. Sue Bradbury (London: The Folio Society, 1982).

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Malory's text opens with the events surrounding Arthur's conception, a story that immediately shows the divisions in the kingdom. Uther Pendragon, the king of Britain, falls in love with Igraine, the wife of the Duke of Cornwall (7:9-10). As his passion burns for the beautiful Igraine, civil war breaks out between Uther and the Duke (7:26-28). The Duke takes Igraine to Tintagel for her protection, a castle off the coast of Cornwall connected to the land by a narrow isthmus, while he goes to Castle Terrible to await the arrival of Uther's forces. For those who do not recognize this story, Merlin agrees to help Uther satisfy his lust when Uther agrees to give Merlin the custody of any child born from this night of passion (9:1-2). That night Uther's appearance is changed to that of the Duke. He gains entrance into Tintagel and has his way with Igraine and Arthur is conceived in the process. All this occurs while Uther's army fight the Duke and his army at Castle Terrible, the Duke dies as Arthur is conceived. Arthur is taken by Merlin and raised by the kind Sir Ector and his family in ignorance of his true birth. Uther and Igraine marry and Arthur's older half sister, Morgause (Anna in Geoffrey of Monmouth's version) marries King Lot of the Orkneys and Lothian (10:5-6). Hence Arthur's closest relatives in the *Morte Darthur* are from Scotland. This episode provides the motivation for the Scottish faction's enmity towards the Arthurian court.

The purpose of Arthur's reign is to unite the kingdom and bring peace and prosperity to all. Arthur's installation as king when he removes the sword from the stone adds another layer of complexity to the story in Malory. This event demonstrates that Arthur gains his right to the throne by miracle, not by birth, signifying that he has been given the kingship by divine command. As Sir Ector says when he witnesses the removal of the sword from the stone:

'Sire,' saide sir Ector, 'for God wille have hit soo, for  
ther shold never man have drawn oute his swerde but  
he that shal be rightwys kyng of this land' (14:20-22).

This is reinforced when the Archbishop of Canterbury consecrates the sword Arthur has removed from the stone on the altar of St Paul's Cathedral (16:18-19). This can be interpreted as a sign that Arthur has a divine mandate as king to remove those who do not accept him as the rightful king of Britain. What makes the Scottish connection interesting at this point in Malory is that a rebel force that refused to accept Arthur as king emerges because they believe he is too young to be king and is not of noble birth (17:22-24). They refuse to accept the divine signs that Arthur is the rightful king, thereby demonstrating their godlessness. The leader of this rebel group is Lot, King of the Orkneys and Lothian. The Scottish faction is cast

as rebels and the cause of strife within Arthur's kingdom. Their crimes are magnified further by their denial of Arthur's divine right to the kingship, demonstrated by the removal of the sword from the stone.

There is no decisive victory in this initial civil war between Arthur and the rebels led by Lot, which becomes increasingly fierce as the number of dead knights rises without a definitive result. It is not until the Saracens land on the shores of Britain that the rebels retreat. But throughout this entire episode Merlin continually tells Arthur that his use of unnecessary force in battle and the large numbers of casualties have made God angry with Arthur (36:29). Thus, Arthur's hope to be a sovereign who unites Britain under his Christian leadership is lost to a state of internal dissension.

The internal dissension continues to be fuelled by the Scottish faction in Malory. Lot sends his wife Morgause, the queen of Lothian and the Orkneys, to Arthur's court to spy on him (41.12-14). Arthur still ignorant of his true parentage is unaware that Morgause is his half-sister. Their affair results in the conception of Mordred, who is no longer the nephew of Arthur, he had been in Geoffrey, but Arthur's illegitimate son by his incestuous relationship with Morgause. As such Mordred, born of sin, becomes an embodiment of evil within the *Morte Darthur*. Although he returns to Scotland with his mother to be brought up alongside his siblings, including Gawain, one of Arthur's greatest knights, Arthur will be told by Merlin that Mordred will betray him in the future, cause his death and destroy the glorious Arthurian civilization that Arthur will reside over at Camelot (55:21-22).

Mordred's presence at the beginning of the *Morte Darthur* highlights Arthur's deficiencies as king. Arthur becomes so fearful of his future fate that he orders that all boys born in the kingdom on the first of May and of noble birth are to be placed on a ship and cut adrift. The ship is caught in a storm and wrecked against the rocks. All are killed except for Mordred who is rescued by a passing peasant (55:23-33). Arthur cannot escape his ultimate fate. By this action, Arthur is no longer the great king, beloved of God who saves his kingdom from the ravages of the pagans. Although he and his knights, including Gawain and Mordred, will perform many great feats before the final battle, Arthur's own flaws have alienated him from God. This is perhaps best represented when after Arthur engages in a pointless battle, the consecrated sword he received from the Archbishop, the sword he removed from the stone, breaks (50:31-32). Arthur is given Excalibur by the Lady of the Lake, a gift by which she will ask Arthur to kill her enemy (52:31-33). Thus rather than having a sword that represents the divine ideals of a kingdom living under God in peace and harmony,

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Arthur now has a sword that represents the internal conflict within his kingdom. Therefore the Arthur of Malory is no longer the great defender of Christian values and protector of the realm as he was portrayed in the earlier texts. He is now ruling over a kingdom plagued by the internal strife that will erupt in the final two books of the *Morte Darthur*. And the catalyst for this explosion of internal strife will be found within the Scottish connection.

The beginning of the end of Arthur's glorious civilization in Malory begins when Aggravayne and Mordred, members of the Scottish faction and brothers of Gawain, because they are envious of Lancelot's place in the Arthur's court, decide to bring Lancelot and Guinever's affair to the attention of Arthur. Perhaps the best known aspect of the Arthurian legend is the adulterous affair of the queen, Guinever, and the greatest knight of the Round Table, the French invention, Lancelot. Lancelot is given an entire Book in the first half of the *Morte Darthur* to celebrate his great prowess and courtesy. He is referred to, with monotonous regularity, as the best knight in the world and the only time he is eclipsed is during the Grail quest when his son, Galahad, becomes the premier Grail knight. Yet at the beginning of his tale there is a telling description of Lancelot. Although no other knight can overcome him on the battlefield, he can be overcome by deception and enchantment (254:8-12). Although Lancelot will never be overcome, the deception arranged by the Scottish faction at the court to expose the affair divides the court and provides the catalyst for the destruction of the Arthurian civilization.

When the affair is brought to Arthur's attention, he can no longer ignore it. While Arthur agrees to go hunting the next day, Aggravayne and Mordred plan to trap Lancelot in Guinever's chamber and bring the lovers to Arthur's justice (1163:26-32). One of the most telling comments about the status of Scotland occurs when the list of knights who will assist Aggravayne and Mordred are identified as being all from Scotland (1164:14-17). Although Lancelot is caught red handed in Guinever's chamber, Malory cannot bring himself to accuse his favourite knight of adultery and, like Geoffrey, coyly remarks:

For, as the Freynshhe booke seyth, the queen and sir  
Launcelot were togydirs. And whether they were  
abed other at other maner of disportis, me lyste nat  
thereof make no mencion, for love that tyme was nat  
as love ys nowadays (1165:10-13).

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Whereas the Scottish faction is repeatedly accused of treacherous deeds, Malory cannot bring himself to condemn Lancelot entirely by stating that he was engaged in an adulterous act with the queen.

Although Lancelot escapes, killing all the conspirators except Mordred, Guinever is sentenced to burn at the stake the following day. Although Gawain did not join the initial conspiracy against Lancelot, because of his great admiration for Lancelot's prowess and his love for the queen, the events surrounding Guinever's rescue by Lancelot will result in a prolonged civil war between Lancelot and Gawain. While rescuing Guinever from the stake, Lancelot accidentally kills Gawain's two other brother, Gaherys and Gareth (1177:31-34). Gawain demands vengeance, saying he will not be satisfied until either he or Lancelot is killed (1186: 3-5). Lancelot has no choice but to withdraw to his own lands with the knights loyal to his faction. Arthur's glorious fellowship of the Round Table is broken up. Gawain's anger is so great that even the Pope's threat of placing the kingdom under an interdict cannot convince Gawain to forgive Lancelot (1194.8-19). Even Lancelot's offer of an extraordinary penance does not soften Gawain's heart (1199:29-1200: 9). Gawain's refusal to accept the command of the Pope and Lancelot's penance has dire consequences for the kingdom because it is no longer a part of the kingdom of God. Arthur's loyalty to Gawain has effectively alienated the entire kingdom from God and thus the kingdom is destroyed.

The resulting civil war, fought in France between Arthur's two best knights, Arthur leaves Mordred, his son, in charge of Britain, and as we know from previous versions of the legend, he usurps the throne and is killed with Arthur on Salisbury Field. Malory gives his readers a poignant description of the aftermath of the battle:

So sir Lucan departed, for he was greuously wounded in many placis; and so as he yode he saw and harkened by the moonelyght how that pyllours and robbers were com into the fylde to pylle and to robbe many a full noble knight of brochys and bees and of many a good ryng and many a ryche juell. And who that were nat dede all oute, there they slewe them for their harneys and their ryches (1237.32-1238.4).

It is almost as if we have returned to Bede's description of the land ravaged by the invading Anglo-Saxons, but in Malory's version, it is the Scottish faction led by Arthur's own son by his incestuous relation with his

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sister who has returned the land to barbarity. Perhaps, Malory was of the same opinion as the earliest commentators of the period, Gildas and Bede, that God was punishing the British for their sins but in his version, the catalyst for this destruction can be traced to the Scottish characters.