CHAPTER 26

The Scottish Reception of Geoffrey of Monmouth

Victoria Shirley

Medieval Scottish historians had a complex relationship with Geoffrey of Monmouth and his *De gestis Britonum*. Geoffrey was a source of authority on British history who was worthy of respect; however, his idea of Insular union could not always be reconciled with Scottish national history, which advocated Scotland's independence from England. Geoffrey's narrative of British history was contested in official letters, legal documents, and Latin historiography produced in Scotland between the 14th and 15th centuries. Such national rewritings of the *DGB* are exemplified by the *Instructiones* (1301) and the *Processus* (1301) by Baldred Bisset – a lawyer who was also a canon of Caithness and rector of Kinghorn in the St Andrews diocese – and the *Chronicle of the Scottish People* by John of Fordun (1384 × 1387), which was continued by the Augustinian canon and abbot of Inchcolm, Walter Bower, in his *Scotichronicon* (1440 × 1447). These texts reimagine the political geography of Britain in the *DGB* to articulate Scottish resistance to English imperial conquest.

In the *DGB*, Geoffrey of Monmouth uses the story of Locrinus, Albanactus, and Kamber to explain the tripartite division of Britain into England, Scotland, and Wales. After the death of their father, Brutus of Troy, Geoffrey writes that

> Locrinus, the first-born, received the central part of the island, afterwards called Loegria after him; Kamber received the region across the river Severn, now known as Wales, which for a long time was named Kambria after him, and for this reason the inhabitants still call themselves Cymry in British; Albanactus the youngest received the region known today as Scotland, which he named Albania after himself.[1]

1 *DGB*, ii.23.5–10: "Locrinus, qui primogenitus fuerat, possedit mediam partem insulae, quae postea de nomine suo appellata est Loegria; Kamber autem partem illam quae est ultra Sabrinum flumen, quae nunc Gualia uocatur, quae de nomine ipsius postmodum Kambria multo tempore dicta fuit, unde adhuc gens patriae lingua Britannica sese Kambro appellat; at Albanactus iunior possedit patriam quae lingua nostra his temporibus appellatur Scotia et nomen ei ex nomine suo Albania dedit."

According to Geoffrey, Britain is a single kingdom, and the different regions – or parts of Britain – are not individual sovereign states; rather, they are merely separate parts of the whole island.

The division of Britain in the *DGB* was used to support different political and national agendas during the First War of Scottish Independence (1296–1328).[2] In a letter to Pope Boniface VIII, Edward I used the story of Brutus's sons to assert that England held sovereignty over Scotland; however, the Scottish lawyer Baldred Bisset demonstrated how Edward had revised the story for his own purposes. Meanwhile, in the late 14th century, the Scottish historian, John of Fordun, challenged and contested the geopolitical construction of Britain in Geoffrey's *DGB*. In the *Chronicle of the Scottish People* (1384 × 1387), which was the first narrative of the history of Scotland from its foundation by Scota and Gaythelos to the death of King David I in 1153, John revised and rewrote the division of Britain in the *DGB* to determine Scotland's independence from England. John was also one of the first Scottish chroniclers to challenge the legitimacy of King Arthur, and he promoted the sons of Anna – Gawain and Mordred – as the rightful heirs to the British throne.[3] Later writers, such as Walter Bower, the author of the *Scottis Originale*, John Major, and Hector Boece, continued to question Arthur's right of succession, and presented him as a bastard, a traitor and a tyrant. From the 14th to the 16th centuries, Scottish historians used legal discourse and rhetorical argumentation to interrogate the authority of Geoffrey's narrative of British history, and to address their own ideas about nation, territory, and political sovereignty.

In his letter of 1301 to Pope Boniface VIII, Edward I uses the division of Britain in the *DGB* to explain England's right to hold Scotland. The letter subtly rewrites the story of Brutus's sons in the *DGB* to emphasize the power of Locrinus, the eldest son, over his brothers Albanactus and Kamber. The text states that

> Afterwards he [Brutus] divided his realm among his three sons, that is he gave to his first born, Locrine, that part of Britain now called England, to the second, Albanact, that part then known as Albany, after the name of Albanact, but now as Scotland, and to Camber, his youngest son, the part then known by his son's name as Cambria and now called Wales,

2 See R.J. Goldstein, *The Matter of Scotland: Historical Narrative in Medieval Scotland*, Lincoln, 1993.

3 See J. Wood, "Where Does Britain End? The Reception of Geoffrey of Monmouth in Scotland and Wales", in R. Purdie and N. Royan (eds.), *The Scots and Medieval Arthurian Legend*, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 9–24.

> the royal dignity being reserved for Locrine, the eldest. Two years after the death of Brutus there landed in Albany a certain king of the Huns, called Humber, and he slew Albanact, the brother of Locrine. Hearing this, Locrine, the king of the Britons, pursued him, and he fled and was drowned in the river from which his name is called Humber, and thus Albany reverted to Locrine.[4]

Locrinus is clearly the most powerful of Brutus's sons, and he is fashioned as *rex Britonum*, "king of the Britons"[5] – such an epithet was never ascribed to him in Geoffrey's *DGB*. Edward uses a passive grammatical construction to describe Scotland's submission to England: Albania (or Scotland) is the patient subject; *reveritur* (from *reverto*) is the passive verb; and Locrinus is the active subject (or agent). As the successor of Locrinus, Edward insists that Scotland should be subjugated to England, and that he should have control of the whole island.

In response to Edward's letter to Boniface, the Scottish lawyer Baldred Bisset prepared two letters, known as the *Instructiones* and the *Processus*, which established Scotland's independence from England. These letters, which are extant in Book XI of Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon*, contest the veracity of Edward's version of the foundation and division of Britain by Brutus of Troy. The *Instructiones* addresses the silences and omissions in Edward's version of the Brutus story. The text states that "the king omitted to write down the truth about what happened, touching only on what seemed to suit his purpose and suppressing the rest of the truth."[6] The *Instructiones* acknowledges that Britain was divided between Brutus's sons, and that the regions were named Cambria, Albany, and Loegria; however, the text also asserts that, when the Scots arrived in Britain, they drove the Britons out of Albany and renamed it Scotland:

---

4 *Anglo-Scottish Relations, 1174–1328: Some Selected Documents*, ed. and trans. E.L.G. Stones, Oxford, 1970, pp. 194–97: "Et postea regnum suum tribus filiis suis divisit, scilicet Locrino primogenito illam partem Britannie que nunc Anglia dicitur et Albanacto secundo natu illam partem que tunc Albania a nomine Albanacti nunc vero Scocia nuncupatur, et Cambro filio minori partem illam nomine suo tunc Cambria vocatam que nunc Wallia vocatur, reservata Locrino seniori regia dignitate. Itaque biennio post mortem Bruti applicuit in Albania quidam rex Hunorum nomine Humber et Albanactum fratrem Locrini occidit, quo audito Locrinus rex Britonum prosecutus est eum qui fugiens submersus est in flumine quod de nomine suo Humber vocatur et sic Albania revertitur ad dictum Locrinum."

5 *Anglo-Scottish Relations*, ed. and trans. Stones, pp. 194–95: "rex Britonum".

6 Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* xi.49.28–29, ed. D.E.R. Watt and trans. N.F. Shead, W.B. Stevenson, and D.E.R. Watt, *Scotichronicon: in Latin and English*, 9 vols., Aberdeen, 1987–98, vol. 6, pp. 140–43: "rei geste veritatem scribere rex omisit, ea tangens solummodo que suo viderentur proposito convenire, reliqua veritate suppressa."

> When these Britons had been driven from Albany in this way by the Scots, along with their king and the laws, language and customs of the Britons, it is well known that the name of Albany was banished along with the former lordship held by the Britons. The place of the name Albany was taken by the new name Scotland along with the new people, the Scots, with their rites, language and customs – regarding which the Scots have nothing in common with the Britons – and with their king and the new lordship of the Scots. And for this reason, this part of the island of Britain previously called Albany, as the king has written, was from then on inviolably and unshakeably always called Scotland thereafter, since conditions changed along with the name.[7]

Bisset constructs the Britons and the Scots as two separate peoples, with their own laws, rites, language, and customs, and he argues the first Scots claimed Scotland "by the same right and title as that by which Brutus had earlier occupied the whole of Britain".[8] The change of name from Albany to Scotland symbolizes the transfer of power from the Britons to the Scots. Furthermore, the creation of a Scottish monarchy separates the new kingdom of Scotland from the rest of Britain, and establishes the limits of British power across the island.

In the more rhetorically advanced *Processus*, Bisset challenges Edward's version of the Brutus story on legal grounds. As in the *Instructiones*, Bisset aims to discredit Edward as he gives evidence "in his own case",[9] and he directly contests Edward's account of the division of Britain between Locrinus, Albanactus, and Kamber. He writes that

> The king [Edward] says that Brutus held that monarchy as a whole, and that he had divided it among his sons: we do not disagree about that. But we utterly deny that he made his division in such a way that the brothers were made subordinate to him for three reasons. First because, whatever the king states, division means equal shares in consequence, when there

7 Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* xi.49.59–69, ed. Watt and trans. Shead et al., vol. 6, pp. 142–43: "Quibus exactis tali modo Britonibus de Albania per Scotos cum suo rege, legibus, lingua et moribus Britonum, exulavit et inde notorie nomen Albanie cum dominio pristino Britonum; in locumque eiusdem nominis Albanie nomen successit novum Scocie, una cum Scotorum nova gente suisque ritibus, lingua et moribus (quibus nichil commune est cum Britonibus) unaque cum suo rege et dominio novo Scotorum. Et hec pars insule Britannie dicta prius Albania, ut rex scripsit, extunc mutatis condicionibus cum nomine vocata est Scocia ista de causa semper postea inviolabiliter et inconcusse."

8 Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* xi.49.54–55, ed. Watt and trans. Shead et al., vol. 6, pp. 142–43: "jure eodem et titulo quo Brutus totam prius occupaverat Britanniam".

9 Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* xi.60.33, ed. Watt and trans. Shead et al., vol. 6, pp. 178–79: "in sua propria causa".

> is no evidence to the contrary; hence it is that where there are not several shares, one share is defined as a half. Second, because matters which are uncertain should if possible be brought into line with common law, by which one king is not subject to another, nor one kingdom to another, as mentioned above. Third, because a father's division of his property of the kind is usually arranged so as to avoid the possibility of jealousy between the children after the father's death.[10]

In contrast to Edward, who simply relied on the narrative of the *DGB* to support his argument, Bisset's uses the laws of inheritance to legitimize his claim. He points out that Scotland "would not fall to Locrinus himself by right of succession unless there was a failure in all the other levels of the family tree".[11] As a result of Albanactus's death, Bisset implies that Scotland should have been divided between two remaining brothers – namely, Locrinus and Kamber. Bisset is clearly the more skilled rhetorician who is able to point out the flaws of his opponent's argument. Moreover, by demonstrating that Edward's argument has several false premises, Bisset strengthens his claim that Scotland should be an independent nation, and so he presents a more persuasive case to his recipient, Pope Boniface.

In the 14th century, Scottish lawyers and historians rewrote the myth of the Egyptian princess Scota and her Greek husband Gaylethos to explain how Scotland had been founded before Brutus arrived and established Britain.[12] Like Bisset, John of Fordun also critically evaluates the reliability of the Brutus story. Although John subverts Geoffrey's account of Brutus of Troy using the legend of Scota and Gaythelos, his approach to the division of Britain between Brutus's sons is more nuanced. In Book Two of his *Chronicle*, John mentions Albanactus, who "gained possession of the land which in our day is called

10 Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* xi.61.13–25, ed. Watt and trans. Shead et al., vol. 6, pp. 180–81: "Nam dicit Brutum illam monarchiam integram habuisse et quod diviserit inter filios suos: non diffitemur ad presens. Sed, quod sic diviserit quod alii subicerentur sibi, plane negamus. Triplici racione: tum quia divisio dicit partes ergo equales, cum non appareat de contrario, quicquid ipse scribat. Hinc est quod appellacione partis, ubi non sunt plures partes, dimidia continetur. Tum quia omnia non liquida, si possint, ad jus commune debent redigi, per quod rex regi, seu regnum regno, non subest, ut superius est notatum. Tum quia divisiones huiusmodi paterne solent fieri ut occasio invidie inter liberos post mortem patris evitetur."

11 Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* xi.61.33–35, ed. Watt and trans. Shead et al., vol. 6, pp. 180–81: "jure successionis, nisi omnes alii gradus et stirpes deficerent … ad ipsum Locrinum non posset obvenire".

12 See K.H. Terrell, "Subversive Histories: Strategies of Identity in Scottish Historiography", in J.J. Cohen (ed.), *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages: Archipelago, Island, England*, New York, 2008, pp. 153–72.

Scotland. He gave it the name Albany after his own name."[13] This chapter also includes several quotations from Bede and Geoffrey that affirm that Scotland was part of Britain (albeit when it was called Albion), and it is designed to be read in dialogue with the two preceding chapters, which quote the same historians, in order to show how these authorities also seem to support the independence of Scotland from Britain. The purpose of this contrast is to cast considerable doubt over the authority of these historians, and, by extension, John also questions Albanactus's right to Scotland. By demonstrating that the works of earlier historians contain irreconcilable differences, John can use these discrepancies to suit his own argument concerning the relationship between Albion and Britain. He asserts that

> whatever varying description of this sort is found in the histories for the boundaries of Britain because of writers' inadequacy, the commonly held opinion at the present time indicates that the whole of Albion is to be called Britain from [the name of] Brutus, who had settled none of it except for its southern regions.[14]

Written history has little credence here, and it is public opinion that has the most authority. The people confirm that Albion is Brutus's territory; but John is careful to indicate that he only conquered the south of the island, and renamed it Britain. The careful negotiation between the terms Albion and Britain allows John to demonstrate that Britain was not a unified island, and that Scotland was beyond British control.

The doubts that John raised about Geoffrey's narrative also allowed him to reimagine the geopolitical landscape of Britain. He contests the division of Britain into three separate nations – England, Scotland, and Wales:

> Loegria was the kingdom of Locrinus beginning in the southern region of the island, that is on the shore of Totnes, and finishing at the river

13 Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* ii.4.16–18, ed. Watt and trans. J. and W. MacQueen, vol. 1, pp. 174–75: "possedit patriam, que nostris temporibus Scocia vocatur, cui nomine ex nomine suo dedit Albaniam." The passages from Book II of the *Scotichronicon* that are quoted throughout this essay were directly copied by Walter Bower from John of Fordun's *Chronicle of the Scottish People*. D.E.R. Watt's edition of the *Scotichronicon* includes extensive notes that indicate the material that Walter Bower added to the material from John of Fordun's *Chronicle*.

14 Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* ii.4.32–37, ed. Watt and trans. J. and W. MacQueen, vol. 1, pp. 176–77: "Verum quicquid huiusmodi varie diffinicionis finium Britannie scriptorum vicio reperiatur historiis, vulgaris opinio moderni temporis omnem Albionem a Bruto qui [nichil] preter australes eius regiones cultura redigerat dici velit Britanniam." I have altered the translation thanks to the advice of an anonymous reader.

> Humber and the river Trent in the north. Then Cambria the region of the younger brother Camber lies adjacent to the kingdom of Loegria, not at its southern boundary as certain authorities declare, nor at its northern boundary, but on its western side, divided from it by mountains and the Severn Estuary, side by side with it as it were, and facing towards Ireland. Albany, the kingdom of Albanactus and the third region of the kingdom of the Britons, had its beginning at the same river Humber and the tidal reaches of the river Trent and the ends of the northern extremity of Britain, as was explained above. The Britons at one time held only lordship over all the provinces of this region of Albany that were between the Humber and the Firth of Forth, and they never had any possession further north in Albion.[15]

This division of Britain in the *Chronicle* is based on the natural landscape, and it is more detailed than Geoffrey's account in the *DGB*. Indeed, John provides a brief survey of Britain and shows how the kingdoms of Locrinus, Kamber, and Albanactus are positioned against one another. The rivers of Britain become part of its political geography, and they are used to demarcate the boundaries between the three separate territories. However, in this account of the division of Britain, Albanactus is not given Scotland: instead he inherits the north of Britain, which is distinct from Locrinus's kingdom in the south. By rewriting Geoffrey's original narrative, the Scots reimagine the landscape of Britain, and they also reject Albanactus as the founder of their nation. Scotland is conceived as a separate territory with its own inhabitants.

The works of Baldred Bisset and John of Fordun demonstrate how Geoffrey of Monmouth's *DGB* was received, and subsequently rewritten, in 14th-century Scotland. While Bisset refuted Edward's claims of political sovereignty, John subverted Geoffrey's vision of Insular unity. Both writers used the division of Britain between Locrinus, Albanactus, and Kamber to emphasize the political, geographical, and national differences between England and Scotland.

---

15 Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon* ii.6.16–30, ed. Watt and trans. J. and W. MacQueen, vol. 1, pp. 178–79: "Loegria vero Locrini regnum ad meridianam insule plagam, Totonensis scilicet litus, incipiens ad Humbri flumen versus boream, et ad ampnem de Tharent finem habet. Cambria deinde fratris quoque junioris Cambri regio connexa Loegrie regno jacet non ad australem eius finem, ut quidam autumant, neque borealem sed ad ipsius latus occiduum, ab eo montibus marique Sabrino divisa, quasi collateralis ei versus Hiberniam ex opposito. Albania siquidem regnum Albanacti tercia regio regni Britonum ad idem Humbri flumen et gurgitem ampnis de Tharent habens inicium, in fine boreali Britannie, sicut superius expressum est, terminatur. Huius autem Albanie regionis provincias, quecumque fuerint, que sunt inter Humbrum et mare Scoticum, olim Britones dominio tantum et nichil umquam possessionis amplius in Albione versus boream habuerunt."