

ELIS GRUFFYDD AND MULTIPLE VERSIONS OF GEOFFREY'S *HISTORIA*

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Introduction

The Welsh chronicle compiled by Elis Gruffydd is not strictly speaking a vernacular translation or adaptation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* as are most of those under consideration within this project, such as the Welsh *Brut y Brenhinedd* or the Anglo-Norman Prose *Brut*; instead it offers a rather different model.

Chronology of the life of Elis Gruffydd

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| c. 1490 | Born at Gronant Uchaf, Flintshire. |
| c. 1510 | Joins English army; on active service in the Low Countries and Spain |
| 1514 | On active service in France. |
| 1518 | Arrives in Calais; enters service of Sir Robert Wingfield. |
| 1518-24 | On diplomatic missions with Sir Robert Wingfield, mainly in France. |
| 1524-29 | In London, at Sir Robert's house. |
| 1526 | Sir Robert Wingfield becomes deputy governor of Calais. |
| 1530 | Elis Gruffydd returns to Calais and serves in the garrison, becoming known as the 'soldier of Calais'; marries Elizabeth Manfelde of Calais. |
| 1540s | Ill health. |
| 1552 | End of his Chronicle. |
| 1558 | Siege and Fall of Calais. |

It is not known whether Elis Gruffydd died before or during the siege or whether he survived it.

The works of Elis Gruffydd

All are preserved in unique, holograph manuscripts.

1. Welsh miscellany (Cardiff, Central Library, MS 3.4). Miscellany of Welsh poetry and prose, including Galfridian and Arthurian material and prophecies. Written in London, completed 1527 (f. 225).
2. Medical texts (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Cwrtmawr 1). Five medical texts, translated into Welsh from Latin, French and English; completed in Calais, Jan. 1548/9.
3. Chronicle of the Six Ages (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, NLW MS 5276Di-ii, from Creation until 1066, and NLW MS 3054Di-ii (*olim* Mostyn 158), 1066-1552). Written in Calais, starting in 1549.

The Chronicle

The Chronicle remains unpublished, apart from a few short extracts published in scattered articles by various scholars. I am preparing an edition of the main Arthurian section (to appear in a series published by the PIMS, Toronto), which covers the narrative from the conception of Arthur to his last battle and subsequent disappearance, followed by a non-narrative excursus outlining the arguments for and against the historicity of Arthur. Although I am reasonably familiar with most of the Chronicle, and have looked closely at all those sections which cover the same chronological period as Geoffrey's *Historia*, it is the Arthurian biography which I have studied in the greatest detail.

In terms of structure the chronicle follows the medieval model of the *Sex Aetates Mundi*, tracing the history of the known world from Creation to the author's own day. The

chronicle ends with events of 1552 and we may suppose that Elis wrote this last section soon afterwards. The Galfridian narrative is found in the Sixth Age, that which begins with the birth of Christ. The main, but my no means the only source for this section of his Chronicle was undoubtedly Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. And although Elis sometimes drew the content directly from Geoffrey, he also made considerable use of translations and adaptations into other languages, English and French perhaps even more than Welsh.

Sources

Establishing which texts he used and exactly which text was used at each point in the narrative is often extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible. There are two reasons for this difficulty. First of all, the chronicler rarely follows a text closely. He rephrases, paraphrases, condenses, combines information from a plethora of texts within a single episode. In those cases where the details are sufficiently precise for us to identify his sources, it quickly becomes evident that he did not simply lift entire sections of text and translate them faithfully. It seems more likely that he was working from notes he made as he worked through the texts, a process that must have continued over a long period; he probably began to assemble material in this way some years before he began to compose the chronicle. In fact, he has had recourse to such a large number of texts that it is hard to imagine that he could have had them all at his elbow as he wrote the Chronicle.

The second difficulty in identifying sources is that since he is often translating into Welsh from English, French or Latin, many significant textual variants disappear in the process, and it is usually only when there are major differences in the account of a particular event, telling details or unusual forms of proper names, that it is possible to pinpoint his source. Often we cannot tell which of two or three possible sources he was using at a given point.

It must be stressed that the Galfridian version of history is not the only type of source used by Elis Gruffydd. The sheer number of sources used by Elis Gruffydd is breathtaking. For the Arthurian section he used not only Geoffrey of Monmouth and texts derived from it, but also a wide range of other sources. These include texts in Welsh which in turn drew on sources in Welsh, Latin and French, French romances such as the *Lancelot en Prose*, and English romances, such as versions of the *Morte Darthur* narrative (including Thomas Malory), which in turn derive ultimately from the French Vulgate Cycle (*Lancelot-Graal*) of romances. The author also drew extensively on tales from the popular traditions of Wales, and also sometimes stories he has heard in France:

... oppiniwn arall yssydd yn sathredic ymhlith y ffrankod. (NLW MS 5276Dii, f. 324^v)

... *another account is well known amongst the French.*

[All translations are mine]

Sathredic (lit. 'trampled') is the term Elis uses regularly for popular or orally transmitted tales.

He peppers his narrative with references to his sources, Geoffrey among them, e.g.

Y neb megis ac J mae galfreidws yn dangos yn gydryn [*sic*] ac Jddo ef gaffael y gwirionedd ...(NLW MS 5276Dii, f. 280^v)

As Galfridus states, as soon as he learned the truth ...

Such simple appeals to a named author or text, in a classic authority *topos*, are often outnumbered, however, by more complex references. Elis shows a particular interest in the variation between available accounts of the same events. Despite his use of the increasingly old-fashioned Six Ages model, he takes a more modern, critical approach to his sources, discussing inconsistencies between them. Sometimes he simply notes the different versions, e.g.:

... kanis J mae hrai o'r awdurion wedi ysgruenu nad oedd haiach o'r pendeuigion ynn kymerud Arthur yn vab J Vthyr, ac eraill a ddywaid nad ydoedd neb ohonaunt tw[y] hagen ynn gwybod a oedd vab Jddo ef onid ydoedd. Ac o'r achos hwn, megis ac J mae Galffreidws ac awdurion eraill yn dangos drwy hir broses J dangoses Duw J w[y]rthiau J wirio J'r bobyl vod Arthur ynn deilwng ... (NLW MS 5276Dii, f. 324^f)

... for some of the authors have written that scarcely any of the nobles accepted that Arthur was Uthyr's son, and others state that none of them knew whether or not he was his son. And for this reason, as Geoffrey and other authors show at great length, God revealed his miracles to confirm to the people that Arthur was worthy ...

Often, too, he looks for consensus between the various versions he knows:

Ynn y lle a'r amser ... megis ac J mae vy awdur J ynn dangos J digwyddodd ymryson ac anghariad gyuodi ... Neithyr J mae awdurion eraill gwedi dangos mae ornesd ac ymwan mewn chware Jr ydoedd vrowdmaeth Arthur ...; onid ynn wir ni welaff vatter ynn y bydd pa un bynnac ai ymladd ai chware Jr oeddent twy ... , kanis J mae prosesse pawb o'r awdurion ynn kordio erchi o'i vrowdmaeth J Arthur vynnied i gyrchu J gleddav ef. (NLW MS 5276Dii, f. 325^v)

And there and then ... as my author shows, disputes and strife arose ... But other authors have shown that Arthur's foster brother was in playful contest and joust ... but in truth I do not see that it matters in the least whether they were fighting or playing ..., for the accounts of all the authors agree that his foster-brother asked Arthur to fetch his own sword.

The content in this passage suggests that 'Vy awdur/my author' is probably either Geoffrey or one of the Welsh versions of the *HRB*).

As these examples show, Elis does not always specify his authors by name, but of those he does name, 'Galffreidws' (Geoffrey) is undoubtedly the most frequently mentioned. However, such authority formulae often hold a trap for the unwary. Further examination of a particular passage often reveals that the actual source was not Geoffrey but a text derived directly or indirectly from the *Historia*. For some details of Arthur's biography, for example, Elis turned to the *New Chronicles of England and France* composed by Robert Fabian in 1504 and printed in 1516 (Elis probably used the 1533 edition, the first to name Fabian as the author). Fabian was himself drawing on several earlier chronicles, including Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon*, itself indebted to Geoffrey. Although Elis only mentions Fabian once in the Arthurian narrative, he often uses Fabian for details not found in Geoffrey or the Welsh *Brut*, such as the list of Arthur's twelve battles. At this point Elis Gruffydd cites the *Polychronicon* as the source ('megis ac J mae Polikronickon ynn dangos') but in fact he has remained

sufficiently close to Fabian's rather idiosyncratic text to reveal that Fabian rather than Higden was in fact the source at this point. He does, however, use Higden elsewhere. From my analysis of the Arthurian section of the text I can identify the following Galfridian sources, among others:

Latin

- Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*
- Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon* (or Trevisa's English translation of it)

Anglo-Norman or French

- Wace, *Roman de Brut* (1155)

English

- La3amon, *Brut* (13th cent.)
- William Caxton, *Chronicles of England* (1st ed. 1480; an English Prose *Brut* continued to 1461)
- Robert Fabian (d. 1513), *New Chronicles of England and France* (1st ed., unattributed, printed by Pynson, 1516; first attributed ed., Rastell, 1533).
- John Rastell, *The Pastyme of People* (1529–30). Partly based on Robert Fabian. Elis Gruffydd used a later edition.

Welsh

- *Brut y Brenhinedd* (Uncertain which version(s). Perhaps Gutun Owain's late 15th text in the Black Book of Basing, held in the abbey near Elis's home? More research needed).
- *Y Pedwar Brenin ar Hugain* (compiled 15th cent., series of triads based on the *HRB*. Elis had copied out a version of this text in his first work, the miscellany in Cardiff MS 3.4).
- *Darogan yr Olew Bendigaid* (15th cent.; sources include the *HRB* or *Brut y Brenhinedd* or both, as well as other Latin chronicles and French romances of the Vulgate Cycle).

Precisely because it draws on so many sources, Elis Gruffydd's *Chronicle* provides a valuable insight into the circulation and availability of all these texts, dating from the 12th century to the 1530s, and it is this, I would suggest, which is of interest for a study of the circulation and reception of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* and its vernacular descendants. Elis was steeped in Welsh literature especially Arthurian and historical or pseudo-historical material, much of it ultimately derived from Geoffrey. But his residence in England and on the continent had enabled him to read very widely indeed in Latin, French and English as well. No doubt his service with Sir Robert Wingfield had provided him with training and opportunities, for Sir Robert had both a love of books and a classical education. Calais was of course an English *milieu* (though Elis only one of many Welsh residents), but the town was uniquely placed for access to a great variety of texts, looking as it did north-west to the Low Countries and Germany and bordered on south-east by French territory. The town was an important conduit for trade between England [*sic*] and the Continent and it was above all through Calais that books were imported into England, both officially and in a more clandestine fashion in the case of new and potentially dangerous Reformist religious texts from Germany and the Low Countries (e.g. works of Martin Luther).

Moreover, some of the senior figures in the town had extensive libraries. To take just one example: Lord Berners, deputy of Calais, was well known for his many translations from French. These included an Arthurian narrative (*Arthur of Lytell Brytayne*, 1510/1520, < *Artus de la Petite Bretagne*, a 14th-century prose romance, 1st ed. Lyons, 1493; Berners used the second version of 1496). He was also interested in Chronicles and translated Froissart. When Berners died in the town in 1533, three years after Elis Gruffydd settled there, he left 80 books, some of them in Latin or French, although these are not named individually in the inventory of his goods. But Elis Gruffydd states explicitly that he was able to borrow books from other residents of Calais. In his volume of medical translations, for example, he mentions borrowing from an elderly burgher:

Yma ynn ol i dilin kyuri venneginiaetha yn erbynn goui kylla, o waith ymrauaelion ffesygwyr, yr hrain a geuais mewn hen llyure ynn ysgri[ue]nedig Ynghalaith, megis o llyuyr i henn vwrdaes o'r dref megis Mastyr Bwrddwn (MS Cwrtmawr 1, p. 819)

Here follow a number of medical remedies for belly-ache, which I found written in old [?manuscript] books in Calais, such as a book belonging to an old burgher of the town, Master Burden.)

Again in his medical manuscript he refers to having sight of old books in Calais:

O'r h[r]ain ynn ol opiniwn hrai o'r hen lyure, megis ac J gwelais J mewn henne lyuyr Ynghalais, yr hwnn a viasai ymeddiant vi. ne vii. o hennafgwyr ac a viasai ynn gymeradwy am i pwyll a'i synnwyr o vewn y dref megis y iii yma ... yr hrain a via[sa]i y[n?] bennseiri o waith y brenin Ynghalais bob un ynn ol i gilidd, neithyr nid oedd yntho ef vn gair yn dangos pwy o[a?] viasai'r awdur kyntta ohonaw. (MS Cwrtmawr 1, p.836).

... according to some old books, as I saw in an old book in Calais, which had been in the possession of six or seven elders of the town [perhaps aldermen?] known in the town for their wisdom and good sense, such as these three ... who had been supervisors of the king's works in Calais, one after the other, but there was not one word in it to show who was the original author).

Some of Elis's sources may have come into his hands before he settled in Calais, perhaps as early as the 1520s, when he was in London. He may have started planning his chronicle some years before he actually started writing it, taking notes from books as and when he could get his hands on them. But some of the English texts he used were so new that they would not have been available to him before he moved to Calais in 1530.

As well as providing insights into the availability of Galfridian texts, Elis Gruffydd's *Chronicle* also responds to the burning contemporary controversy about the historicity of Arthur, ignited by Polydore Vergil's incisive deconstruction of Geoffrey's version of history in his *Anglica Historia*, which he began in the early 1510s and was first published in 1534. Elis Gruffydd responds to these arguments in a long section following the account of how the wounded Arthur is spirited away from the lakeside by maidens after the last battle. (Although a folio is missing from Elis Gruffydd's manuscript at the crucial moment – the text now breaks off when Custennin returns to Arthur after failing to throw the sword into the water – the lost text has been mercifully preserved. This section was transcribed in the early 17th century by John Jones of Gellilyfdy which was in turn copied by David Parry

(?1682-1714) the bibulous assistant to Edward Lhuyd and Lhuyd's successor as curator of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford). This section addressing Polydore Vergil's arguments is presented as if it were Elis Gruffydd's own response, in fact at first reading I was completely fooled by it, but on closer inspection I found that it is mainly derived from John Rastell's *Pastyme of People*, sometimes following Rastell almost word for word:

A'r awdur Wilhelimus de Regibus yn ei hanessau a ddywaid mae hwnn ydiw yr gwr y mae y Bruttaniaid yn traethu llawer o ffuent ac o enwiredd amdanaw. (MS NLW 6209E, p. 86)

And the author, William [of Malmesbury in his Gesta Regum Anglorum] in his histories states that this the man about whom the Britons tell many false and untrue tales.

Compare:

And Will(elmu)s de regibus seyth that this Artur is he of whom the Welchemen tell fantasies and fablys. (John Rastell, Pastyme of People, C.iii.)

However, there is some indication that in his discussion of Arthur's supposed seal displayed on the shrine of Edward the Confessor in Westminster Abbey, Elis was drawing not only on Rastell but also on the preface to Caxton's 1485 edition of the *Works* of Sir Thomas Malory and perhaps too the more detailed account included by John Leland in his angry response to Polydore Vergil, in his *Assertio inclytissimum Arthurii Regis Britanniae*, published in 1544. Elis Gruffydd is typically cautious on the vexed question of Geoffrey versus Polydore Vergil, but he has enough of the shrewd textual critic in him to see that the Italian scholar's arguments were uncomfortably convincing. He is clearly torn between his rational, modern impulse to condemn Geoffrey's history and his more emotional, traditionalist Welsh desire to believe that Arthur was a genuine historical figure. Elis is clearly annoyed that English scholars like William of Malmesbury castigate the Welsh for believing in fairy tales, and in the final passage of this section, he comments tartly that in fact the English make far more fuss about Arthur than the Welsh do. He adds rather scornfully that some of the English even believe in Arthur as the 'once and future king', and say that Arthur is sleeping under a hill at Glastonbury and that from time to time he has popped out to speak to people. As far as I know, this is the earliest instance of a Welshman's response to the controversy, written within ten years of the publication of Polydore Vergil's iconoclastic text.

Finally, in combining sources from Welsh, Latin, French and English Elis Gruffydd was following in a well-established tradition for Welsh authors. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a number of writers had built up new narratives by drawing material from Geoffrey's work, whether in Latin or in one of the Welsh versions, and from a host of other material, especially French Arthurian romance. Elis's sources are far, far more extensive, just as his *Chronicle* is probably the longest Welsh text ever produced before the Welsh translation of the Bible in 1588. But Elis Gruffydd is also a pioneer. His professional life brought him into contact not only with a range of texts wider than a Wales-based writer could imagine, but also with new ideas – like his master, Sir Robert Wingfield, he was a convert to Protestantism, and was evidently well aware of new learning. It was this background that led him, again for the first time in Welsh, to begin to develop a critical approach to sources and to recognise the need to read widely and compare variant accounts.

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