‘OF HIS BREAST NOBLE POETS SHALL EAT; OF HIS BLOOD SHALL MEN BE DRUNK’: NATIONALISM, LITERATURE, AND ARTHURIAN ‘THINGS’ IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN BRITAIN

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation examines the intersection of medieval and Early Modern Arthurian literature, English and British nationalism, and new materialism – specifically thing theory and object-oriented ontology. Arthur was not a true historical figure, yet throughout much of British history his cultural and propagandist value has been immeasurable both to the ruling class and those who would rebel against it. The end result is that Arthurian objects such as his alleged body, the Round Table, and seals and maps were constantly being produced. Because of the doubtful status of such objects, each new era had to come up with a new theoretical lens through which to discuss these ‘things’ in order to have them hold meaning or value in their current cultural climate. Through the course of this dissertation I follow this trend from the twelfth century to the sixteenth century, tracking these material signifiers as they change in dialogue with shifting cultural needs.

While the focus on objects remains consistent throughout these eras, the meaning of the Arthurian objects is fluid and multitudinous, as are the types of lenses through which they are discussed. In some cases these objects show the failure of contemporary Britain in comparison to the golden age of Arthur; in other cases these objects demonstrate that the glorious Arthurian past should bolster support for the politics of the present; in others still these objects critique even Arthur himself. In some cases a true belief in a historical Arthur is actually necessary; in other cases he is merely used as a symbol for an emotional or political truth.
To Margaret Weis and Maigrey Morianna
for inspiring me to read Malory for the first time

To Carol Kaske
for inspiring me to read Malory every time since
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PREFACE

In July 2010 newspapers across England and the world excitedly reported that King Arthur’s Round Table had been found and that it was actually a Roman amphitheater in Chester that was large enough to seat the entire Arthurian court. Historians, according to these newspapers, claimed that because there was a shrine dedicated to Christian martyrs within the amphitheater it matched Gildas’ description of Arthur’s location, a place that Gildas refers to as the “urbs legionum.”¹ The newspapers ignored the fact that the city was merely one near which Arthur fought a single battle, rather than anything connected to Camelot itself, nor was there any mention that the Round Table did not come into the Arthurian legend until approximately six hundred years after Gildas wrote his *De excidio Britanniae*.² Further P. J. C. Field has convincingly proven that this unnamed city that contained a martyr’s shrine was most likely York, rather than Chester.³ If this find was not already then clearly dubious at best, the fact that The History Channel was eagerly preparing a special on the discovery should

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¹ The Round Table first is mentioned by Wace in his mid-twelfth century “Roman de Brut.” See Wace, *Le Roman de Brut*, trans. Arthur Wayne Glowka (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005).


³ P. J. C. Field, “Gildas and the City of Legions,” *The Heroic Age* 1 (Spring/Summer 1999).
be enough to make most true historians doubt the claim. Yet dozens of newspapers and websites around the world reported on the find.⁴

All of this probably made it even more shocking to the general public when just a year later in August of 2011 newspapers began reporting that King Arthur’s Round Table had been found again. This time the table was found in Stirling, Scotland, the newspapers claimed, and was really just a well known site called the King’s Knot, a “geographical earthwork in the former royal gardens below Stirling Castle.”⁵ In this case the historians from Glasgow University were prudently hesitant to connect the mound to an actual historical figure but instead said that the shape of the mound could “explain the stories and beliefs that people held.”⁶ However, their reasonable argument did nothing to dissuade the wider media from reporting as if the actual table had been found with links to a true historical person. A current online search still finds dozens of archived articles all describing the find itself but with most of these articles removing or downplaying any logical explanation from the archaeologists.

While it would be easy to assume that either of these claims were then quickly forgotten, over the last five years it has struck me how often one or the other was mentioned to me as evidence of Arthur’s historical existence, primarily by those of English or Welsh nationality. Nearly any time that I am in the UK and a non-academic

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⁵ “King Arthur’s round table may have been found by archaeologists in Scotland,” The Telegraph. August 26, 2011.

⁶ Ibid.
acquaintance finds out about the topic of my research, I am immediately told that Arthur was real and that this is the proof. My own husband, born in England and of Welsh descent, who admittedly knows little about British history prior to the Victorian period, and who is an otherwise very reasonable and intelligent man, staunchly refuses to believe that there was not a true historical King Arthur. He frequently argues that since Arthur’s Round Table has been found, he must therefore have been real.

What I find so fascinating about this repeated experience is not the fact that British citizens still find Arthur to be an important national touchstone, nor that they want to believe that he did historically exist. Instead, it is the fact that they point to material objects as their primary source of evidence, and further the standards of this physical proof that they present that I find so intriguing. Not one person has mentioned the Round Table at Winchester – an item that actually is a table and that has been linked to Arthur since the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. Nor do any mention Arthur’s grave at Glastonbury, where to this day there is a marker noting that the bodies of Arthur and Guinevere were found at the site in 1191. Both of these objects, it seems, are considered too fake and implausible to be evidence of Arthur’s existence for a twenty-first century person, and both are linked to a medieval version of Arthur that seems too fantastic. In the two examples that are instead cited, it is a Roman version of Arthur and a Round Table that is not even remotely an actual table that people currently seem to believe in. The fact that both of these details are barely associated with the original Arthurian story seems to be the very thing that makes them more believable - as is the fact that they were found by contemporary archeologists whom appear as scientists to be more trustworthy to the modern public.
Yet even as my friends attempt to distance themselves from appearing to believe in the legendary Arthur of the medieval period, little do they realize that by citing this ‘modern’ evidence instead they are actually mimicking the exact behavior of the medieval and Renaissance scholars that I am studying for this dissertation. The writers, antiquarians, and politicians of the medieval and Renaissance eras, like my friends, also wrestled with the issue of presenting believable physical proof of the Arthurian past despite the lack of actual evidence or historical reality. They too wanted to believe in a historical Arthur but knew that there were problems in doing so. As such these medieval and Renaissance era writers similarly had to continuously adjust their standards as to what was considered credible evidence based on the current beliefs - religious and scholarly - of their period, while constantly distancing themselves from any discredited beliefs of the past.

In the following dissertation then my primary goal is to explore the intersection of these various concerns - Arthurian literature, English and British nationalism, and the shifting ways in which material objects were viewed as evidence or signifiers from the twelfth to sixteenth century. I examine the change over time in how the Arthurian story and its objects – both in the stories themselves and those real life ‘found’ items - were utilized as proof of both supposed historical fact as well as the emotional and nationalistic truths of the Arthurian story. In some cases the resulting texts reveal a coherent vision of a lost Arthurian past, while in other cases such objects and texts only serve to further destabilize both the legendary story and its contemporary usage.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The story of materialism and the search for proof of an historical King Arthur should be one of absence and lack. Yet instead it is a story of both absence and an overwhelming glut of objects. The absence of objects makes sense as Arthur was, as best as historians can tell, never a real person but instead the offshoot of a Celtic folkloric tradition.\(^1\) A legend, no matter how important, cannot leave actual ruins or artifacts behind. Yet, the British need for belief in Arthur during the medieval and Renaissance periods was both intense and socially necessary – the Arthurian story provided both an internationally conquering British hero who stood up to Rome and France, and also a foundational local hero who fought the Saxons and had communal ties with everyone from the Welsh, to the Anglo-Normans, to the Tudors. The result is that this lack of sixth-century evidence of Arthur was not simply an absence, but instead I would term it a void – a gaping, unignorable fissure that forces those of subsequent generations to create, manufacture, or otherwise innocently believe in the multitude of objects that rushed to fill the empty space that a real person should have occupied. Had Arthur existed and a small

\(^1\) David Dumville argues that "there is no historical evidence about Arthur; we must reject him from our histories and, above all, from the titles of our books." Even a more tempered view of this position is that if there was a historical Arthur that he is too disconnected from the legend to have any real historical meaning. Thomas Charles-Edwards notes that "there may well have been an historical Arthur [but] … the historian can as yet say nothing of value about him." See Dumville, *Histories and pseudo-histories of the insular Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Variorium, 1990). Charles-Edwards, “The Author of History,” in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, ed. Rachel Bromwich (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), 29.
handful of evidence confirmed it, then a very different, and probably far less controversial story would have emerged. However, the absolute void that his legend left in its historical wake meant that from the twelfth century onward, particularly during eras of conflict, there was a struggle to fill this historical void with artifacts, relics, bodies, graves, maps, and an at least somewhat sincere belief in them. Yet because of the falsity of these objects – despite an often very true belief in them – there was also a constant cycle of backlash and skepticism, and a need for new, more credible objects based on new, more credible beliefs to fill the void that these now discredited objects could no longer fill. The literature of these eras similarly mimics this trend, as the Arthurian tales are themselves filled with an overabundance of objects that are constantly being glossed and misglossed by those using them and trying to understand their true history, value, and meaning.

In the course of this dissertation I look at a range of examples of these objects starting with the twelfth century conflict between the Anglo-Normans and the Welsh and continuing until the sixteenth century when Elizabeth I would use the Arthurian past for her own propagandist purposes. While the political circumstances changed throughout this span of time along with the belief systems and theoretical lenses used to theorize these Arthurian objects, the fundamental desire to keep discussing them remains. However, because of this constant shift in beliefs and standards of proof, there was also, I argue, a critical need for texts that helped explain these objects and filter them through the appropriate language to either gain credibility or challenge other kinds of credibility. Texts and stories alone could not fill the void of Arthur’s absence, but neither too could objects alone. Thus I look at not simply evidence for Arthurian objects having existed,
but more specifically at the texts that seek to frame, explicate, and theorize these objects in ways that were appropriate to current cultural, political, and religious standards. I argue that by using such varying theoretical lenses, these writers reveal a complicated network of ways in which Arthurian objects were utilized. In some cases the objects support a coherent but lost Arthurian past that serves to stabilize or celebrate the British (or English) present. In other cases these objects challenge both the coherence of the Arthurian past and any attempt to utilize them.

In doing so, I argue that these writers of the medieval and Renaissance periods were taking advantage of both a historical and theoretical gap that allowed them to partially manipulate the nature of how these objects were understood. While the historical gap comes from the doubtful past of the Arthurian story, the theoretical gap comes from the fluid ways in which such objects themselves were understood during these periods. Both eras had a cultural understanding of the instability of the signification of material objects and as such allowed a space in which the meaning of these objects could be purposely transformed and manipulated, though in an fluid way that was constantly shifting as new writers took up the same task of explicating the Arthurian past and its objects – and fluid as well in that such objects often resisted the new readings and cultural filters that were laid on them by refusing to fully shed the previous meanings.

This theoretical gap is, I suggest, most evident when understood through the recently developing field of new materialism, a movement that demonstrates that this understanding of material instability is still with us. While new materialism itself is characterized by its wide ranging interdisciplinarity and varied – if even to the point of
unfocused – modes of conceptualization, its common core is also the rejection of dualist thinking and essentialism and a turn towards multiplicities and what Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin term the “morphology of change” with a focus specifically on “matter.”

This monist concentration yields an interest in matter not only because it is a subject that has been previously “neglected by dualist thought,” but also because many of the traditional dualisms – such as a separation between mind and body – can be broken down through the examination of matter.

Up until now I have been referring to the physical matter associated with the Arthurian story as ‘objects’ but they are often more properly termed in the language of new materialism as ‘things’ due to Bill Brown’s thing theory, which defines the distinction between the two terms. Brown, basing much of his theory on Martin Heidegger, argues that an ‘object’ carries a single meaning whereas a ‘thing’ carries a multiplicity of meanings. He describes this multiplicity as a thing’s “all-at-onceness,” that is, that “all at once, the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names some thing else.” This is similar to Heidegger’s etymological argument that ‘thing’ – being a word coming from the Old High German for ‘a gathering’ – still retains some of its original sense in that ‘things’ gather a multiplicity of meanings, and specifically a

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3 Ibid.

4 Note that given new materialism’s primary focus, there is not a dualist distinction between objects and things - a thing can encompass an object as well, and a material item can alternate between the two depending on the circumstances.

multiplicity of relationships to the world around it.\textsuperscript{6}

Further, Brown notes that objects become things when they assert themselves as being more than just their basic function, often due to a moment in which the object fails to behave the way that the user expects or understands. Brown states that

we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.\textsuperscript{7}

These objects thus become things when the user of such an object is confronted with its existence and forced to contemplate it, think about it, and attempt to understand their own relationship to this thing.

Yet Brown states that objects can become things not only when “badly encountered” but also when “not quite apprehended.”\textsuperscript{8} He clarifies that this can include both an excess of meaning being bestowed upon an object by the subject, but also can be the result of an overwhelming lack of meaning. In the case of excessive meaning, Brown notes that “fetishes, idols, and totems” have more meaning than their actual functionality as an object should allow.\textsuperscript{9} Yet an object can also be become a thing, according to Brown, when the subject is confronted with objects from the past that have no obvious or


\textsuperscript{7} Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” 4.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
intrinsic value. Brown, for example, describes an exhibit of typewriters at a gallery and a small child who has no idea what such a device is. Because of the child’s confusion, he argues, “this abandoned object attains a new stature precisely because it has no life outside the boundary of art – no life, that is, within our everyday lives. Released from the bond of being equipment, sustained outside the irreversibility of technological history, the object becomes something else.” Brown continues by saying that the typewriter “helps to dramatize a basic disjunction, a human condition in which things inevitably seem too late – belated.”

The temporality of things thus matters, and a thing can also be labeled what Brown terms the “before and after of an object.” As such, the temporality of things is particularly critical for Arthurian things specifically as they are physical remains of the legendary past – necessary to define and understand that past but also necessarily belated and thus not easily understood. This contributes to the multiplicity of meanings that medieval and Renaissance writers can associate with these things – creating whatever specific interpretation is best suited for their goals. Arthurian things also highlight their ‘thingness’ in that they have both a lack of meaning and an excess of meaning at the same time, embodying both of Brown’s potential subject-object relationships. They are physical items from the past that in many cases are misunderstood or – depending on the

10 Ibid., 15.

11 Ibid. For a similar example, see the YouTube series in which children react to only slightly outdated technology such as floppy disks. In many cases they treat them as purely physical things and literally start banging the objects into each other for lack of any context on a real use. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ki9CCjhBPE

12 Ibid.
subject – totally devoid of meaning, but they are also objects that for a different subject have an excess of meaning, especially in the case of real world objects assumed to be Arthur’s. Such things attained a fetish-like status and had more meaning than such faked or misunderstood items should possess.

Yet medieval things more generally still demonstrate the same principles of Brown’s theory, and ‘things’ – in Brown’s very sense of the word – were critical to medieval writers themselves. Aden Kumler and Christopher R. Lakey point out that “across the disciplines, it has become difficult to think or talk about the Middle Ages without confronting the material res.” 13 While new materialism is primarily a product of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Freidrich Ohly in his 1958 article “The Spiritual Sense of Words in the Middle Ages” demonstrated much earlier a clear importance of objects in the medieval period and additionally the complexity and fluidity of the relationship between objects, words, and meaning for this era. Ohly’s study primarily focuses on the fact that medieval religious texts often looked at not only the exegesis of words but also of things or objects as well, and that the one relied heavily on the other. 14 He argues that the understanding of nature and properties of the physical world helped imbue meaning to scriptural texts, and that the medieval period understood a complex and non-binary relationship between the signifier and the signified and between word and object. Ohly notes that the “significance of the word is confined to one thing. But the thing has a world of meanings, which extends from God to the devil


and is potentially present in every single thing denoted by a word.”¹⁵ Thus, Ohly demonstrates that the medieval world had an inherent understanding of there being a multiplicity of meanings in things and that such things could offer varied meanings to a subject depending on the situation.

Yet Ohly’s work also reveals that the medieval world had an inherent understanding of another of new materialism’s main theoretical lenses, object-oriented ontology. This philosophy, amongst other issues, challenges the privilege of the human over the non-human and of the animate over the inanimate, and rejects the inherent dualism of such comparisons, instead seeing a fluidity between such distinctions. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it, in this philosophy things “apprehend and act, possessed of integrity, mystery, and a flourishing that may be contingent or autonomous.”¹⁶ For Ohly, this is clear when he cites Bernard of Clairveaux who famously wrote “experto crede: aliquid amplius invenies in silvis, quam in libris. Ligna et lapides docebunt te, quod a magistris audire non possis. [Believe me, you will find more lessons in the woods than in books. Trees and stones will teach you what you cannot learn from masters.]”¹⁷ In doing so the Cistercian abbot was essentially arguing that the physical world was capable of teaching lessons in a way that words alone could not. Discussing physical objects in nature through a lens in which they are granted some animate qualities is directly in keeping with the autonomy that object-oriented ontology affords all objects. While

¹⁵ Ibid., 23.


¹⁷ Quoted by Ohly, “The Spiritual Sense of Words in the Middle Ages.” Originally published: Epistola CVI, sect. 2; trans. Edward Churton, The Early English Church (1841), 324.
object-oriented ontology is, much like new materialism itself, widely branching and encompasses other aspects to its philosophy, in the course of this dissertation I am primarily concerned with the concept of self-determinism for objects, the idea that objects have meanings beyond human interactions – though those interactions, I argue, do create some or much of their meanings – and the notion of an animate-inanimate spectrum.

Indeed, while not all of object-oriented ontology is in keeping with thing theory, even Bill Brown discusses what he terms “the life of things,” stating that many objects only become things, and give meaning to a subject because of the “human vitality that the depicted objects seem to express.”\(^\text{18}\) While this animate quality to things, for Brown, may only exist in certain societies during certain time periods, and thus still be dependent on a subject, he does also note, in keeping with object-oriented ontology, that things unto themselves do have a “force” in society.\(^\text{19}\) Similarly, Graham Harman has demonstrated that Heidegger, over the course of his work, eventually came to argue for the independence of ‘thinghood’ independent of any subject.\(^\text{20}\)

While Brown’s look at the animate qualities of ‘things’ specifically examines American modernism, this spectrum of animate and inanimate is also widespread in the medieval period beyond even the philosophical works of those such as Bernard of Clairveaux and was more fully part of the entire world-view of the era.\(^\text{21}\) Kellie


\(^{19}\) Brown, “Thing Theory,” 9.


\(^{21}\) See Brown, *A Sense of Things.*
Robertson argues that the way “the line between human and nonhuman, subject and object, society and nature gets drawn is always an ideological process” and, echoing the work of Bruno Latour, that in the pre-seventeenth century “the line between subject and object, person and thing” was much more fluid. She notes that “the nature of represented ‘things’ presented very different problems for the premodern era than it does for us now” and that it was not necessarily ever clear “what constituted a ‘thing’ as opposed to a ‘person.’” Cohen further notes that because the “medieval landscape was not so densely populated with human fabrications, … the collaboration of hand and matter was likely more evident.”

Thus there is a multiplicity and instability to material objects that both twenty-first century thing theory and object oriented ontology, and twelfth to sixteenth century Arthurian literature understand. This fluidity, I argue, allows for the theoretical space for Arthurian objects to radically change their meaning or gain meanings over time.

Throughout the following dissertation, I examine what happens when medieval and Renaissance writers exploit both this theoretical space as well as the void of the Arthurian historical past in order to shift the ways that Arthur and Arthurian ‘things’ are understood for varying nationalistic purposes.

In Chapter Two I examine how the Anglo-Normans in the twelfth and thirteenth

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23 Ibid.

centuries suppressed Welsh nationalism via the literal appropriation and translation of their Arthurian objects into English hands. In doing so, the Anglo-Normans not only physically marked their subsummation of Welsh identity, but also gained objects through which they could reimagine the past such that it supported their own otherwise fractured national identity. In this chapter I look primarily at the writings of Gerald of Wales including his 1216 *Speculum Ecclesiae* in which he discusses the supposed exhumation of Arthur and Guinevere’s bodies at Glastonbury under Henry II. I also look at Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* and the Arthurian portions of the chronicles by Layamon and Wace in order to help uncover the standards of proof needed in this period in order to provide a credible historical Arthur and the resulting cultural capital that he provides. In doing so I argue that the writers of this period theorized Arthurian objects by using the language of relics, and that this sacred lens was an acceptable standard of evidence particularly for a legendary and otherwise larger than life figure like Arthur who took on religious undertones himself.

As Cohen and Robertson suggest, the line between object and person was understood as fluid during this period and I argue that this was exceptionally true in the case of Christian relics. Seeta Chaganti has shown that sacred objects such as relics have a particularly fraught dividing line between subject and object and between animate and inanimate – the wafer is both bread and body, a saint’s finger is both body and commodity, and the reliquary itself often is both container and visual representation of the life of the object.  

Similarly, Arthur’s body at Glastonbury, which was treated like

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that of a saint, gave outward signs of the miraculous as did the grave itself where he was buried. The things that Arthur carries in various chronicles likewise are described as having seemingly divine powers and often act somewhat of their own accord. Further, a piece of Arthur’s crown that was surrendered by the Welsh to the Anglo-Normans was then carried alongside a piece of the True Cross and was treated with equal respect. These Arthurian things additionally connect to relic theory in that, as Patrick Geary argues, relics had multifarious roles in a medieval community ranging from sacred object, to commodity, to local societal foundation, and, given such importance, often were stolen or faked. He argues that there is “intentionality behind hagiographic production” and that relics were at the heart of this construction. Like the Arthurian void that requires objects to fill it, Geary demonstrates that the societal need for relics was so great that theft and forgery became a natural result.

In Chapter Three I look at Arthurian things in Sir Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century romance *Le Morte Darthur* and find both a different ideological system – chivalry – through which to understand these objects, and concurrently the failure of that system. Specifically I argue that Malory fills his pages with an overabundance of things in order to demonstrate not simply the absence of Arthur in general, but specifically the loss of his own belief in Arthurian chivalric ideals during the bloody and excessively violent War of the Roses. In examining the ways in which Malory views the failure of chivalry and the Arthurian ideological system, I turn to Malorian scholars such as Felicity Riddy who argue that *Le Morte Darthur* reflects the fact that the War of the Roses was a

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civil war and a particularly brutal and anarchical one. As such, she argues, the text is marked by a strong sense of political and social nihilism. While previous scholars have primarily focused on the behavioral failings of Malory’s knights in order to discuss such issues, I argue that it is the chivalric system itself that Malory sees as inherently flawed. As a result I instead turn again to thing theory in order to look specifically at how the knights’ inability to correctly gloss and use objects – along with the loss of objects at the text’s conclusion – demonstrates this inherent flaw in the chivalric code.

The knights of Malory’s Round Table are constantly encountering Arthurian things, and while the things that his knights encounter often signal Malory’s pride in English history, more often than not these things are instead misunderstood or misglossed and the knights fail. Mirroring real British history, the things of Malory’s Arthurian world in the end demonstrate only the falsity of Arthurian chivalry and the tale concludes with the sudden and rapid loss of material items: things and bodies. To examine how this misglossing problematizes the knight’s chivalric behavior, I return to Brown’s thing theory that argues that an ‘object’ becomes a ‘thing’ – something noticeable and with socially encoded value – the moment that the object fails to behave the way that the user expects or understands or when the subject is too belated to possibly understand it. While the knights of Malory’s Arthurian world are not literally belated compared to the things around them, I use Brown’s theory to argue that they – and Malory himself – are ideologically belated in that the chivalric code with which they try to analyze these

Arthurian objects is so inherently faulty as to constantly cause their inability to use the objects correctly. As a result, these Arthurian objects become ‘things’ that the knights cannot properly understand, gloss, or use. As the inherent disjunction between the presumed chivalric objects and resulting failed ‘things’ grows, the tale eventually spirals into a loss of those objects as the knights become belated literally in addition to ideologically. Arthur makes an *ubi sunt* speech for his lost civilization, and the Arthurian things themselves are looted, discarded, and buried – lost to both Arthur and to Malory’s own age.

In Chapter Four I look at the early to mid-sixteenth century at the transition between the traditional scholarly boundaries between the English medieval and Renaissance periods, and also at another transition in the type of theoretical lens through which Arthurian objects were discussed. As Philip Schwyzer demonstrates, no longer could the religious or chivalric lenses of the medieval past sustain an Arthurian story that was believable as true historical fact. This was owed to a shifting culture of Renaissance humanism and scholarship, the rise of the archeological leanings of the antiquarian movement, and the Reformation under Henry VIII. This was problematic as the Arthurian story was a foundation for the Tudor dynasty both in its claims to the English throne and also in Henry VIII’s fight against Rome and in his founding of the Anglican Church. Arthur was a supposed ancestor of Henry and his own independence from Rome was a model for Henry to follow. Yet, the earlier rhetoric of Arthur was far too outdated and superstitious for Henry to evoke.

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To examine the result of this Arthurian contradiction, I look at Henry’s antiquarian writer John Leland and his written works. Throughout Leland’s extensive writings he documents his time traversing the ruinous English countryside, including the people, buildings, and libraries that he encounters. Leland was specifically sent out to help with the dissolution of the monasteries and their library holdings, all of which he records in detail. In the course of these journals Leland creates a new vision of the English landscape, and a national identity that is based heavily upon material things, ruinous buildings, and the physical land itself. While many previous scholars have claimed that the nationalistic leanings of Leland’s journals were born entirely out of his guileless love for antiquarianism and the English countryside, I instead follow current scholars such as James Simpson, John Chandler, and Jennifer Summitt in their belief that Leland’s work was directly “supporting and upholding the interests of the state” and as such was aiming his writing at bolstering Henry’s nationalistic desires. In this chapter I extend that argument to demonstrate that the antiquarian and materialist based scholarship that Leland uses throughout these journals creates a theoretical basis for his reframing of the Arthurian story for nationalistic purposes as well.

Leland’s 1544 work the Assertio inclytissimi Arturii regis Britannia argued in favor of a historically true Arthur, and he uses the same antiquarian language and materialist lens to reframe the Arthurian story in order to make it palatable for his current

audience. In the text Leland argues for Arthur’s existence via his own eye-witnessed research and archeological studies including a rewritten account of the exhumation of Arthur originally detailed by Gerald of Wales. Leland’s new antiquarian lens retained the objects and evidence of old but filtered them through a language and scientific discipline that was now considered relevant and credible. Indeed the Arthurian objects themselves that Leland discusses are primarily ones that had already been extensively documented and written about by previous generations, but for this early Tudor era it is the theoretical reframing of such objects that is most critical. This method was not only the model for the Arthurian objects and writings of the era but, in fact, I argue demonstrates a larger trend of Reformation era political choices that allowed for buildings, cathedrals, and monasteries connected to the Roman church to be successfully reframed into Anglican holdings.

Finally in Chapter Five I look at how these Tudor era problems of the credibility of Arthur continued during the reign of Elizabeth I. For Elizabeth the Arthurian issue was not so much a domestic problem as an international one, as she used Arthur not only as a domestic foundation to her Tudor claims to the throne but more so as a basis for her claims to empire. I first look at court alchemist and scholar John Dee who in the late 1570s would have to defend Elizabeth’s imperial ambitions using cartography and antiquarian research to prove her Arthurian claims to America. While Dee has often been dismissed thanks to his sensationalistic Enochian interests, I follow recent scholars such as Andrew Escobedo, William H. Sherman, and Ken MacMillan who argue that Dee’s importance to Elizabeth’s imperial interests has been largely overlooked. Like Leland, Dee would use an antiquarian, and seemingly more scientific lens through which to
discuss the Arthurian story. Dee’s scientific and historical framing of Arthur was critical
to his arguments as any claims to the Americas based on the idea that Arthur both existed
and had been to America had to be believable by even competing international powers.
Dee’s rhetorical framing had the intended effect at Elizabeth’s court where his maps and
extensive historical documentation was well received. However, Dee’s work was
dismissed internationally and seemingly was finally inconsequential to Elizabeth’s
claims.

In order to examine the problem of Arthur’s cultural capital abroad, I then turn to
Edmund Spenser’s 1590 allegorical Arthurian epic *The Faerie Queene* in which he too
uses Arthurian objects for Elizabethan propaganda and imperialism. Here I follow Carol
Kaske’s argument that throughout *The Faerie Queene* objects are used *in bono* and *in
malo* in order to demonstrate universal truths and reveal the failure of certain characters
to be able to gloss those truths. Unlike Malory’s knights who fail to correctly gloss
things based on a failed system around them, in *The Faerie Queene*, Kaske demonstrates,
it is the inner qualities of the characters and their understanding of the glossing system
itself that creates problems for Spenser’s knights. Given that the poem is allegorical and
thus filled constantly with objects, this allows for many instances of incorrect glossing
and many moments to determine why exactly a knight fails.

I examine Books I, II, and III in order to question how misglossing Arthurian
objects ties to the question of Arthur’s international viability. In doing so, I argue that the
characters in Spenser’s work often misgloss and misunderstand objects specifically

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30 Carol V. Kaske, *Biblical Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). Note also
that this *in bono* and *in malo* system is also discussed by Ohly (“Spiritual Sense of Words
in the Middle Ages” 22) and is the reason, he argues, that the medieval exegetist had to
understand the multitudinous nature of all physical things.
because, like in Dee’s real world attempt, they come from a different land or country, and thus have the wrong knowledge base through which to understand an object. This results in Arthur’s knights, and even Arthur himself, being misidentified, and the objects that they use being misunderstood. Additionally, the multiple Arthurian books read within *The Faerie Queene* are confusing and misunderstood, and even when Arthur reads his own story he does not understand what is going on or how he himself is connected to it. Spenser thus demonstrates his own understanding that books and texts alone cannot fill the void of Arthurian history, but nor can objects fill that space when they become misunderstood ‘things.’
CHAPTER 2

BODIES, RELICS, AND MIRACULOUS ARTHURIAN THINGS

The story of King Arthur was from its very birth a fraught tale. It immediately lay somewhere between legend, history, and fabrication, and yet also had the weight of nations resting upon it. In twelfth-century Britain the conflict between the Welsh and the Anglo-Normans would highlight and exacerbate this contradiction between the legendary quality of the story and its crucial role for intra-island politics and identity building. As a result, the doubtful status of the Arthurian story became an even more central discussion for Arthurian writers of the era, and for those who would use the story for their own purposes. Indeed, despite an often modern sense that this era was gullible and naïve when it came to the Arthurian story – a sense shared even by later Renaissance writers and historians, as I will discuss in upcoming chapters – it is clear that even from these early days there was constant debate about the veracity of the Arthurian story, and a continuous attempt to navigate the best methods of understanding, documenting, and exploiting such a controversial historical tale. In doing so, writers of this era looked to objects to help create their vision of a coherent Arthurian past that, despite – or even because of – doubt, would also affirm their various stances on the politics and communal identities of Britain, England, and Wales. The result, I argue, is an object-oriented philosophy that blends the animate with the inanimate and the religious with the secular.
Take, for example, Gerald of Wales’s 1191 *Itinerarium Kambriæ*, in which he wrote of an illiterate man named Meilyr who was often beset by “unclean spirits.” Among other feats, Gerald claims, these spirits would help him determine the veracity of a book simply by touching it. “Although he was completely illiterate,” Gerald says, “if he looked at a book which was incorrect, which contained some false statement, or which aimed at deceiving the reader, he immediately put his finger on the offending passage” after a “devil first pointed out the place with its finger.” Gerald goes on to explain the accuracy of Meilyr’s demons by saying that when “St. John’s gospel was placed on his lap” then the demons “all vanished immediately.” But if afterwards the gospels were “removed and *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth put there in its place, just to see what would happen, the demons would alight all over his body, and on the book, too, staying there longer than usual and being even more demanding.” As stories go in this particular text, and in Gerald’s corpus in general, this tale is not all that

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unusual. Gerald routinely tells of marvels that he has seen or heard, combining bizarre supernatural or unnatural physical manifestations and objects with a moral truth that he believes they reveal.

While much has been made of many of these anecdotes, particularly of late by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his discussion of monsters and hybridity, a recurring theme in Gerald’s supernatural narratives, the story of Meilyr and his demonically inspired literary polygraph has been widely overlooked by scholars. Yet this short tale is a useful and pithy demonstration of many of Gerald’s larger concerns, especially as it comes to the historical veracity of chronicles and textual evaluation. Not only does it reveal Gerald’s personal opinion of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s text (false) and his opinion of Geoffrey’s version of Arthur (doubtful), but it further reveals a worldview in which textual evaluation lies not necessarily in the study of the words held within alone. Instead, it shows a worldview in which, much like in the rest of Gerald’s anecdotes, the truth can also be seen through miraculous outward signs and physical manifestations of inner knowledge. Where Cohen reads Gerald’s monstrous hybrids to reveal the inner reality of colonial hybridity, I argue that Gerald’s distinctly sacred landscape serves as a space for other theoretical hybrids that forcibly blur the line between text and object, as well as between the sacred and the profane. Strangely, this worldview of Gerald’s would have been very much in line with that of his maligned predecessor Geoffrey who, when it came to his Arthurian history, blurred these same lines repeatedly.

Indeed, it is my argument for this chapter that Gerald’s anecdote is indicative of larger trends that are occurring in twelfth-century Britain. Namely, the evaluation of

historical texts, particularly as they relate to Arthurian chronicles, is being informed by
the ‘things’ that occur in conjunction with them – the objects being described in these
texts, the actual artifacts and objects found in connection to the historical and legendary
Arthurian past, and the physical texts themselves – and that these things are being
specifically understood through a lens that freely borrows from and blends with religious
discourse. Moreover, the miraculous and religious connotations that the objects
themselves take on are demonstrative of the major model for object evaluation from this
period – that of relics and reliquaries. Relics, I argue, serve as the model in this time
period for any historically problematic but emotionally valuable – both to individuals and
the community at large – objects, and as such the modes in which relics are theorized
during the twelfth century inherently influence the ways that Arthurian objects are
understood.  

Relics in general, like the figures from Gerald’s anecdotes, have the quality of
their interiority being illuminated and verified by their exteriority, or, in other words, they
have the quality of being both the sign and the signified as once. Similarly, both types of
objects often have miraculous events surrounding them – as seen in Gerald’s anecdote –
that help to explain the veracity of their story and provenance. Veracity is a critical
problem in both cases as these objects are helping writers to fill gaps in history –
religious and secular – that words alone do not necessarily satisfy. Moreover, the very
doubtful quality that each story has surrounding it actually lends an air of mystery to
these objects, meaning that the doubtful quality of the Arthurian story, when viewed as a

35 Friedrich Ohly, “The Spiritual Sense of Words in the Middle Ages,” trans. David A.
relic, actually gives it more credibility. Finally, I conclude that both relics and Arthurian objects have similar value in establishing identity – local, regional, and national – that raise the stakes involved in their veracity and their ownership. It is this combination of communal necessity combined with mysterious provenance, I argue, that leads Arthurian objects to be theorized in such a way that so heavily borrows from and blends with the discourse of relics and hagiography.

Indeed, the idea that words alone are not enough to understand spiritual truth is a fairly standard medieval concept. As noted in Chapter One, Friedrich Ohly demonstrates that medieval Christianity is fairly unique in its ability to understand that a word or signifier had a single meaning but that, when one studied the signified thing, the word referring to that the thing itself was open to a world of meanings depending on context. Ohly cites Richard of St. Victor in saying that “non solum voces, sed et res significativae sunt [not only the sounds of words but also things carry meaning.]” Ohly goes on to explain that the implication of this idea is that a “profane word has only an immediate, superficial meaning” which can include its “historical or literal sense.” However, he argues, the word of scripture points to a “thing” which is then “connected to something higher.”1 A single ‘thing’ can point to a multitude of different higher meanings depending on context and on the properties of the ‘thing’ involved so that while a single word is limited, the thing that is contained in that word can connect to the whole world. In other words, it would be standard medieval practice to not simply read a text, particularly a spiritual one, and look to the words on the page, but instead to conflate these words with the actual objects that they signified and from there to elucidate a true spiritual meaning. It is this practice that allowed medieval Christians to appropriate the
Old Testament and to read it as an almost entirely symbolic text that prefigured New Testament truths. I argue that while Ohly sees this as a purely religious practice, chroniclers such as Gerald could understand profane texts such as an Arthurian chronicle in similar ways primarily because of the blending of religious and non-religious discourses.

Given that twelfth century chroniclers – for this model is used by others beyond just Gerald – are using the language of relics to understand Arthurian objects, so too will I be using the theorization of relics by scholars such as Patrick Geary and Seeta Chaganti to examine these objects as they appear in the Arthurian chronicles of Gerald, Wace, Layamon, and Geoffrey of Monmouth, and to explore how this theory of relics allowed Arthurian objects to not only take on more authenticity than they would otherwise be allowed, but also to play a key role, as relics did, in early Angevin and Plantagenet nation-building and in the era’s conception of their own past – be it English, Welsh, British, or a hybrid thereof. In doing so, I also argue that this blending of the religious and secular theoretical lenses leads to texts from this period often taking on the characteristics of accompanying religious works, such as hagiographies and *translationes*.

Before looking at any Arthurian objects or relics specifically, I would first like to briefly examine the trend of doubt in the Arthurian legend specific to the twelfth century that these objects are responding to. While later medieval and Renaissance writers became increasingly worried about the truth of the Arthurian legend as a whole, the doubt surrounding his story first becomes widely articulated during the twelfth century. Unlike these later writers, the writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries did not appear to
have doubted that Arthur had indeed lived and had truly been king. Instead, it is the
details of his story, the magnitude of his feats, and the nationalistic implications of his
life that were all called into question. Partially this doubt speaks to the stakes involved
in the authenticity of the Arthurian story, which was critical in its details. However, this
doubt seems more tied to the paradox of the medieval chronicler who both heavily relied
on previously written texts as a basis for his own work but who also was intimately aware
of the amount of gaps and missing information that a chronicler has to fill in one way or
another. Where a modern critic can cynically see how these gaps in history and
knowledge were useful in giving a space for a writer – either historical or religious – to
fill in whatever information he saw as being necessary to include, the medieval chronicler
was in a more fraught position.

36 Note, however, the critical exception of William of Newburgh, who was Geoffrey of
Monmouth’s most outspoken critic and who was even more vocal and definitive in his
distrust of him as a source on Arthur and in the very existence of Arthur as a whole.
While he trusted Bede implicitly, William calls Geoffrey a “fabler” who wrote
“mendacious fictions” when it came to Arthur and Merlin in order to please the “silly
Britons.” He sarcastically argues that if someone believes that Arthur conquered so much
of the world that they would also believe that “the little finger of the British was more
powerful than the loins of the mighty Caesar” and “of Alexander the Great.” While he
argues actually quite convincingly for the entirety of his preface against Geoffrey and the
Arthurian story, Allen J. Frantzen notes that his disapproval did not catch on until much
later as there are only “three writers – all of them writing in the fourteenth and fifteenth
centuries – who validated William’s criticism.” While others such as Gerald criticized
some aspects of Geoffrey’s work in this era, William is the only one to take so fully
disbelieving of a tone. Also worth noting, William is one of the only chroniclers in the
era to use the type of scholarly criticism that a modern scholar would argue for, such as
comparing the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth to chronicles from other countries to see
what material overlapped and therefore was more likely accurate. William notably does
not use material objects as his evidence, nor relic theorization at all, and as such seems to
not get lured in by this line of reasoning. See Allen J. Frantzen. “The Englishness of Bede
from Then Til Now,” in A Cambridge Companion to Bede, ed. Scott DeGregorio
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 233. William of Newburgh Historia
Stevenson (London: Seeley's, 1861).
The chronicler first had to navigate a general underlying distrust of written documents held by people in the twelfth century that resulted from that fact that the technology and skills associated with the use of written documentation was still in its relative infancy in terms of widespread daily use. M. T. Clanchy argues that there were a variety of reasons why the average twelfth-century European would have been distrustful of this new technology. On a basic level, the overall ability to record accurate information was still an evolving process. Clanchy notes that early legal documents, for example, suffered from a lack of dates, signatures, or register copies, and that each one was drawn up almost at random rather than conforming to a set standard. As a result, there was a proliferation of forgeries and fakes with little way to tell the difference between a fake and a genuine article. A true charter, for example, could have just as easily been written by a first-time scribe using idiosyncratic methods as someone skilled could draw up a fake.

Beyond the issue of forgeries and fakes, however, Clanchy argues that there was simply a fundamental distrust in a practice that directly conflicted with the previous methods of storing and passing on information – that of memory and of spoken statements. This is not only because of an understandable distrust by humans in any new technology, but also because written records specifically created new and confusing problems and conflicts in the passing down of information, even from genuine sources. Clanchy states that, before the proliferation in written records, a “remembered truth was

37 M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing, 1979) 294.

38 Ibid., 297.
… flexible and up to date, because no ancient custom could be proved to be older than the memory of the oldest living wise man. There was no conflict between past and present, between ancient precedents and present practice.”39 In other words, whatever truths needed to exist for a given time and place could exist, with no competing storyline for people’s beliefs. This made believing these remembered truths more comfortable and less confusing. Clanchy argues “written records, on the other hand, do not die peacefully, as they retain a half-life in archives and can be resurrected to inform, impress, or mystify future generations.”40 The very issue that chroniclers indeed faced from conflicting sources of information – or worse, information that they fundamentally did not understand – was a thus a source of immediate anxiety for the twelfth-century public. It is arguably for this reason that objects and things are such a fundamental element of both historical chronicles and religious texts, as they are first widely spread during the twelfth century. Similarly, this same concern is what leads doubtful Arthurian chroniclers in particular to rely so heavily on object-based evidence.

Agnellus of Ravenna’s religious history in The Pontiffs of the Church of Ravenna demonstrates the problematic ways in which knowledge and history are being recorded. Agnellus constructs a written chronicle based on three types of potential knowledge: remembered history, written texts, and finally, where all else fails, the filling in of missing knowledge with supposedly divine inspiration. Agnellus writes:

Wherever I have found material they [the brothers of the see] were sure about, I have presented it to you; and anything I have heard from the elderly graybeards, I have not withheld from you. Where I could not uncover a story or determine what kind of a life they led, either from the most aged or from inscriptions or

39 Ibid., 296.
40 Ibid.
from any other source, to avoid a blank space in my list of holy pontiffs in proper order according to their ordination to the see one after another, I have, with the assistance of God through your prayers, made up a life for them. And I believe no deception is involved, for they were chaste and almsgiving preachers and procurers of men’s souls for God.\(^{41}\)

While Agnellus argues that there is “no deception involved” in having “made up a life” for the blank spaces in his history because it was divinely inspired, the very fact that he feels it necessary to argue this fact points to some unease with this process either in his own mind or in that of his presumed readers. Given this practice in solving the issue of missing historical information, it is no wonder that Arthurian chroniclers – or, indeed, the twelfth-century public in general – had trust issues. This is particularly true for Arthurian chroniclers, as they were dealing with a much more unbelievable history and one that had more important political stakes than that of a history of local pontiffs.

Gerald of Wales is thus rightfully doubtful of any Arthurian knowledge when he distrusts the *Historia Regum Britanniae*. He warns his readers in his *Descriptio Cambriae* saying that

the Britons maintain that, when Gildas criticized his own people so bitterly, he wrote as he did because he was so infuriated by the fact that King Arthur had killed his own brother, who was a Scottish chieftain. When he heard of his brother’s death, or so the Britons say, he threw into the sea a number of outstanding books which he had written in their praise and about Arthur’s achievements. As a result you will find no book which gives an authentic account of that great prince.\(^{42}\)


Gerald therefore, though praising Arthur in the process, essentially warns his readers that the written word as it comes to Arthur is simply not trustworthy. That Gerald himself eventually tries to contribute to the recording of contemporary Arthurian history only speaks to the ironic and fraught position of the medieval chronicler. Aware of the limitations of the form, they could not help but warn their readers to be distrustful even as they themselves put forth their own authoritative accounts. Gerald, as Siân Echard puts it, “shows himself equally susceptible” as Geoffrey to such Arthurian stories and thus could not help but include the very type of Arthurian writing that he “professes to despise.”

Such writings speak to the complicated relationship that medieval writers and particularly chroniclers had with understanding their own past and the attempt to record a factual history.

Writing around 1155, Wace has one of the most definitive statements of the problems of Arthurian history in the twelfth century. While the majority of his Roman de Brut is a translation from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae, he also breaks away from the original text in a few key places to mention his discomfort with attempting to know or write Arthurian history, saying that “noiant ne vous en mentirai.” [I will not lie to you at all.]

This is his explanation for why he refuses to translate projicit. Cujus rei causa, nihil de tanto principe in scriptis authenticis expressum invenies.” Thorpe, 259.


Merlin’s prophecies that were famously included in Geoffrey’s chronicle. Instead, Wace says that “ne voil son livre tranlater./Quant jo nel’ sai entepreter;/Nule rien dire ne volroie/Qu’issi ne fu com jo dirroie.”45 [I do not wish to translate his book/Since I cannot interpret it:/I do not wish to say anything at all/If it were not to be as I were to say it.]

Thus, even knowing the correct words to the prophecies is the not enough for Wace if he does not know the meaning behind these words or whether the outcome will be accurate. Any attempt that he makes to explain the prophecies will most likely be untrue, rendering him a liar, a risk he is not willing to take.

Wace has his most decisive moment of distrust as to Arthurian history when he breaks away entirely from his translation in order to warn his reader that the nature of believing Arthurian histories is fraught and complex. He addresses the reader directly saying:

Ne sai se vos l’avez oi,
Furent les mervelles provées
Et les aventures trouvées
Qui d’Artu sont tant racontées
Que à fable sunt atornées:
Ne tot menejonge ne tot voir
Tot folie, ne tot savoir;
Tant ont li contéor conté
Et li fabléor tant fable
Pour lor contes ambeleter,
Que tont ont feit fables sanbler.46

[I do not know if you have heard
Marvels were experienced
And aventures were discovered
That are often told of Arthur
In stories that have been dressed up:

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45 Ibid., ll. 7539-42.

46 Ibid., ll.10033-43.
Not all lies, not all truth
Not all folly, not all wisdom;
The storytellers tell so much
And the romancer tells fables so much
Embellishing their stories
Such that all stories go imitating a fable.]

Wace’s argument here is actually quite accurate as to the nature of the relationship between historical fact and the transmission of such history in the form of entertaining tales. Yet it further demonstrates an essential problem for a medieval writer who is balancing the rival goals of disseminating historical fact, writing an entertaining tale, and, in Wace’s case, appeasing a royal patron in Henry II, who, as I will discuss later, had particular stake in certain versions of an Arthurian past. Wace’s listing of different potential genres and their various levels of veracity is also interesting in that he places Arthurian chronicles as being essentially a melding of all of them – part-way in between all of these various options. While Wace warns that the Arthurian story is not a gospel truth, he also tells the reader that it is not the opposite of the gospel truth either, but instead it lies somewhere in between a sacred text and a flat out lie.

Wace then concludes his chronicle by again returning to his doubt stating:

Maistre Gasse qui fist cest livre,
N’en valt plus dire de sa fin
Qu’en dist li profetes Merlin.
Merlin dist d’Artus, si ot droit,
Que sa fin dotose seroit.
Li profete dit verite:
Tostans en a l’on puis dote
Et dotera, ce crois, tos dis,
Ou il soit mors, ou il soit vis.

[Master Wace, who made this book
Does not want to say more of his end
Than what the prophet Merlin said of it.
Merlin said of Arthur, and he was right
That his end would always be doubtful.]
The prophet said truly:
Always it has been in doubt
And it will be every day I think
If he is dead, or if he is living.\footnote{Ibid., ll. 13688-96.}

Thus, Wace is only willing to translate one set of Merlin’s words for his reader, ones that he is sure that he has not mistaken, ones that speak only to the fact that Arthurian history will always be doubtful.

Similarly, Layamon, writing around 1190, also spends a large portion of the Arthurian sections of his Brut trying to warn the reader that the understanding and belief of Arthurian history is complicated. Like Wace, Layamon tells his reader that

\begin{quote}
Ne al soh ne al les; þat leod-scopes singeð.
ah þis is þat sodðe; bi Arðure þan kinge.
Nes næuer ar swulc king; swa duhti þurh alle þing.
for þat soðe stod a þan writen; hu hit is iwurðen.
ord from þan ænden; of Arðure þan kinge.
no mare no lasse; buten alse his læzen weoren.
Ah Bruttes hine luueden swiðe; & ofte him on liʒeð.
and suggeð feole þinges; bi Arðure þan kinge.
þat næuere nes i-wurðen; a þissere weorlde-richen.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
[It is not all sooth nor all lies; that minstrels sing.
But this is the sooth; by Arthur the king.
Was never ere such king; so doughty through all things.
For that sooth stands in the writing; how it is come to pass.
From beginning to end; of Arthur the king.
No more no less; but as his laws were.
But Britons loved him much; & often of him lie.
And say many things; of Arthur the king.
\end{quote}
Again the medieval reader is reminded that much of the Arthurian history that is written and spoken is laced with falsehoods.

Further, like Wace, Layamon then continues with a description of Arthur that plays on the idea of orally transmitted legend and storytelling. However, Layamon adds to this with his inclusion of directly religious language. In perhaps the most fraught description of Arthur ever committed to ink, Layamon writes of Arthur in explicitly Christian terms, saying that

Longe beoð æuere; dæd ne bið he næuere.  
þe wile þe þis world stænt; ilæsten scal is worð-munt.  
and scal inne Rome; walden þa þæines.  
Al him scal aburþ; þat wuneð inne Bruttene.  
of him scullen gleomen: godliche singen.  
of his breosten scullen æten; ædele scopes.  
scullen of his blode; beornes beon drunke.  
of his eþene scullen fleon; furene gleden.  
ælc finger an his hond; scarp stelene brond.  
scullen stan walles; biuoren him to-fallen.  
beornes scullen rusien; reosen heore mærken.  
Þus he scal wel longe; liðen þeond lunden.  
leoden biwinnen; & his lægen sette.

[As long as eternity, he shall never be dead.  
The while that this world stands; his glory shall last.  
and he shall in Rome; rule the thanes.  
All shall bow to him; that live in Britain.  
of him shall gleeman; goodly sing.  
of his breast shall eat; noble poets.  
Shall of his blood; men be drunk.  
From his eyes shall fly; fiery embers.  
Each finger on his hand; a sharp steel brand.  
Stone walls; before him shall fall  
Barons shall cede; their standards give way.  
Thus he shall well long; rule over the land.  
People to conquer; & his laws to set.]

While the language here is intense and religious, Layamon is speaking in metaphorical terms in attempting to explain the longevity of the Arthurian legend, rather than of Arthur himself. Just as Wace, Layamon is aware of the importance of Arthur to the oral traditions of storytelling in Britain and that through this tradition Arthur will be famous and talked of forever. However, Layamon, in exact opposition to Wace, awards Arthur the “gospel truth” language that Wace denies him. While Layamon’s language is symbolic only, he still assigns Eucharistic language to the Arthurian story by saying that poets shall “eat of his breast” and “of his blood shall men be drunk.” This language is not only powerful in connecting Arthur to Christ and in giving Arthur’s body a symbolic power akin to Christ’s, but also in the transformative power inherent in the Eucharist metaphor. That Layamon uses such powerful religious language to discuss the Arthurian story and does so in such a casual manner – as this description is not one that is set apart or highlighted in any way in the text itself – speaks to the fact that such a connection seems both appropriate and obvious in his own mind. That Arthur’s body and his story itself has the properties of not only a relic, but the Eucharist itself, seems like simply a given for Layamon as a writer.

The Eucharist is arguably an uber-relic in the theoretical sense. It is an object that can only have its immaterial power and reality demonstrated through the precise words (prayer) said in conjunction with it by the proper person who correctly reads its true significance. The words alone would not conjure Christ’s body, nor can the Eucharist in its wafer form alone be a sacrament. It is only the combination of words, object, and the correct speaker/reader of the object that can produce a religious miracle.
While Layamon does, in other points throughout the text, warn his readers that the story of Arthur is a mix of lies and truth and can hardly be trusted, in this one moment, Layamon demonstrates that the language of the religious and of the Eucharist is actually accurate, at least symbolically for Arthur’s story. In doing so, Layamon again blurs the concept of words, objects, and spoken text freely in describing the power of the Arthurian legend. Arthur’s story becomes a powerful object or body that is akin to the Eucharist. It is the story itself that Layamon says these people are feeding on, and as such the idea of the story becomes a physical thing. Because those who are partaking of the story are specifically poets, it is only after they consume the story-as-object that they can then recommit it to writing. In doing so they then transform the Arthurian story from an object with a life of its own back into text.

Here I turn to again Kellie Robertson’s study on medieval things to argue that Layamon’s Eucharistic Arthurian passage is beautifully demonstrative of not only the crossing of religious and historical boundaries in the discussion of Arthur, but also of the fraught medieval understanding of things – objects – themselves. Specifically, Robertson argues that how “the line between human and nonhuman, subject and object, society and nature gets drawn is always an ideological process” and, calling on Bruno Latour, that in the pre-seventeenth century “the line between subject and object, person and thing” was much more fluid.50 Robertson – and Latour – make it clear that the instability of boundaries in understanding medieval material culture moves beyond a blurring between text and object and between religious and secular, but also, as in the case of the Eucharist and in so many of Gerald’s examples, animate and inanimate. This unstable

categorization of animated things lends itself particularly well to the discourse of relics and the Eucharist, but also to marvels and to the morals and spiritual examples that Gerald finds in them.

Like his story of Meilyr the illiterate hermit, Gerald’s anecdotes of his travels are filled with such stories of people and animals that are deformed or hybridized in order to demonstrate an internal moral failing. In his *Itinerarium Kambriae*, Gerald structures his journey as anecdotes learned from those that he encounters, many of which reinforce the same themes along the way. He encounters stories that he retells of people who have been punished for moral and spiritual failings by having some physical sign, deformity, or hybridization cast upon them. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it, “what thematically connects these episodes widely scattered through time and geography is their fascinated gaze upon the body as the site for a public spectacle of truth.” More importantly, it is not simply that the body demonstrates a truth, but that the body is suddenly unwilling conjoined with sacred objects – what Cohen calls “material fragment[s] of the ecclesiastical institution whose regulatory power over themselves they must now recognize.”

While Cohen does mention this repeated use of sacred objects as a site for Gerald’s hybridizations, for the most part his concern is on the body and, beyond that, its relationship to racial and colonial hybridization. However, I would like to pick up this thread, and argue instead that the use of sacred “material fragment[s]” is just as important a trope in understanding Gerald’s worldview as hybridized bodies are.


52 While many of Gerald’s concerns on his travels are quite regional, the nature of colonialism as well as his repeated concerns regarding his own Welsh/English identity split speaks to the nationalistic nature of his concerns as well.
Gerald never speaks of bodies that are transformed by joining to a non-sacred object. Bodies can be hybridized with animals or struck blind, but if they are to meld with an object, it is always a sacred one. While this makes sense from a narrative standpoint, as it is the religious power of these objects that allows such a supernatural occurrence to take place, the use of holy materials as messengers of truth goes beyond that. These objects, some relics but some more general sacred objects, all are essentially expected to have the ability to, sometimes through the will of their patron saint and sometimes seemingly through their own will, demonstrate moral truths. In doing so, they combine the understanding of animated objects that Robertson puts forth with Ohly’s reading of spiritual objects as always demonstrative of greater symbolic truths. This makes sense in the context of twelfth-century religious beliefs and, as Echard puts it, Gerald’s work often “includes material which appeals directly to the twelfth-century appetite for marvels.”

In one example, Gerald tells of a poor woman who used to visit the shrine of Bury St. Edmunds. Once there, the woman would steal the coins offered as devotion by kissing the coins and then hiding them in her mouth. Her punishment was that one day, “caught in the act by divine intervention,” her “lips and tongue stuck fast to the altar.” The woman is then trapped on the altar while the rest of her town comes to stare at the marvel. Gerald concludes that she “remained, fixed and motionless, for the greater part of the day, so that the miracle was clear for all to see.”

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54 *Itinerarium Kambriae* I.ii: “Mulier miserrima, ad scrinium viri sancti quasi sub devotionis obtentu accedere consueta, non tamen afferre quicquam sed auferre parata,
at the site of the Bury St. Edmunds shrine furthers the connection between these physical marvels to religious ties. The shrine is devoted to St. Edmund, the saint-king who demonstrated his spiritual importance through miraculous acts of his body when, after being beheaded as a martyr, his head was able to be found and recovered by still being able to speak and calling out “hic, hic hic [here, here, here]” as people were looking for him. His body then became an important relic that was housed at Bury St. Edmunds, leading to the site being one of pilgrimage and leading to the cult of St. Edmund. I would argue that because the woman conjoined with coins in Gerald’s story puts the offending items in her mouth, the site of Edmund’s own miracle, she demonstrates a perversion of Edmund’s story, specifically as she replaces the holy words in Edmund’s mouth with sinful objects in her own. The physical nature of her transgression becomes inexorably tied up in her spiritual failing even before the melding occurs, and is highlighted when the hybridization happens.

Gerald also speaks of objects that, while never specifically called relics, do have the power to intervene in healing the body – for example, St. Curig’s staff from the same district of Gwrthrynion through which he is traveling. Interestingly, he first gives a physical description of the staff, noting that it is “completely encased in gold and silver”

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argentum et aurum ab aliis oblatum, exquisite furti genere, deosculando ablambero solebat, et ore reconditum asportare. Quae cumsemel, ut saepius consueverat, id fecisset, labis et lingua feretro firment adhaesit, argentumque ingestum divinitus deprehensa palam evomuit. Accurrentibus quoque multis et admirantibus … majori diei parte, ut amplior virtus elucesceret et nulli dubium foret, ibi immota remansit et inconvulsa.” Thorpe, 84.
and has a top piece in the “rough shape of a cross.” This sacred object’s physical form, both in mimicking the cross and in its sumptuousness, is the first thing that the reader encounters as it is intended as a first warning that they should be in awe of the staff. Even without the next description of its abilities, merely knowing its physical shape tells the reader that they should be wary of its sacred power.

Gerald then tells the reader that, indeed, the staff’s power matches its physical form and has been “proved in all manner of cases.” In particular, the staff is meant to cure “gross tumours” when the sufferer gives two half-pennies to the crosier. Gerald tells of a particular man who promised to give a penny on a later date if he was cured, but, after having his tumor relieved, failed to pay. He was immediately stricken with his tumor again but “in great fear and trembling” paid instead threepence and was so restored to health.  

In the case of the altar and the woman who becomes trapped kissing it, the hybridized result shows a literal halfway point between object and person. Gerald’s


56 *Itinerarium Kambriae* I.i: “Qui quanquam virtuosissimus in omni negotio comprobetur, longe plus tamen ad glandiculas, gibbosasque strumas, quae in humanis corporibus excrescere solent, evacuandas penitus et delendas, speciali quondam virtute praepollet; adeo quidem ut omnes passim, qui hujuscemodi vexantur incommodes, si baculum devote cum unius denarii oblatione petierint, optatam recipient sanitatem. Contigit autem his nostris diesibus, strumosum quemdam solum obolum baculo praebeat; cui per medium illico residens strumosus ille tumor evanuit. Et post pusillum, postquam alterius oboli relatione debita est oblatione redintegrata, et integra quoquo statim curatio est subsecuta. Item alius ad baculum accedens, cum certa denarii promissione, curatus est; qui tamen die statuto promissa non complens, pristinum statim incommodum cum onfusione recipit; sed ut delicti veniam facilius impetraret, cum trium denariorum oblatione, non absque timore magno et devotione, beneficium triplicasset continuo stabilis curationis guadia recuperavit.” Thorpe, 78-9
hybrid person/sacred object combinations speak to the fact that the object is barely inanimate to begin with and, through its own sense of morality, chooses to join with a person who then becomes an object himself (or herself). Indeed, Robertson claims that it was not necessarily ever clear “what constituted a ‘thing’ as opposed to a ‘person.’”\(^5^7\)

The thieving woman is trapped motionless and put on display as a marvel, an object, to be viewed. Further, it is certainly not the crosier who chooses whom is healed by the staff, but it is also never mentioned that it is St. Curag. It is the power of the staff itself that is being demonstrated by this anecdote and, in some sense, the staff’s own sense of morality. In essence, these objects are able to choose to show inherent truths about the world around them.

Thus, just as the physical forms of relics have the ability to show the truth of ecclesiastical history, so too do these sacred objects in Gerald’s anecdote have the ability to show the contemporary truth of the world around them, seemingly of their own volition. While, with the exception of the story of Meilyr, these tales are not Arthurian themselves, I believe they provide an important context in which to understand both Gerald’s understanding of sacred objects and relics specifically, and also to demonstrate more generally what to him constituted undeniable truth. Despite having not seen most of these occurrences, Gerald still believes the miraculous stories that he hears on his travels, so compelling is their evidence to him – perhaps, as Clanchy might suggest, more compelling than any written text would be. Beyond that, as Robertson demonstrates, Gerald’s use of anecdotes that specifically contain these unstable figures – partially words, partially objects, halfway between animate and inanimate, crossing between

\(^{57}\) Robertson, “Medieval Things,” 1072.
sacred and secular – is indicative of the larger medieval understanding of objects, particularly those with power and significance attached to them.

To back up briefly then to Gerald’s much distrusted source, Geoffrey of Monmouth, it becomes clear that many of Gerald’s techniques – though he would arguably deny it – in hybridizing the Arthurian tale are already present in Geoffrey’s earlier twelfth-century chronicle, the *Historia Regum Brittaniae*. The *Historia Regum Brittaniae* is the first time that the Arthurian tale is unified into one complete story, and as such it is one of the most prominent versions of the tale to ever be recorded. It would become the primary basis for most of the later chronicles, including those of Gerald, Wace, and Layamon among many others. While the complex blurring of person, text, and object in the *Historia* is less wide-spread and systematic than in Gerald’s later work, the use of relic discourse is still clearly present and still plays a crucial role in creating the lens through which the reader is meant to understand Arthur. Indeed, I would argue that the hagiographic discourse that surrounds Arthur’s life in many later chronicles and literary romances becomes fully realized for the first time in Geoffrey’s work.58

This use of hagiographic discourse in the story of a heroic king should not be surprising, though. Much like the other instabilities involved in the understanding of medieval categorization, Alison Goddard Elliott argues that the topoi of hagiography and heroic tales were often blurred and even interchangeable, and that the depictions of historical heroes and saints often played into these same traditions since, after all, “in the

58 There are certainly some precedents for religious connotations in connection with Arthur, including in the *Historia Brittonum* by ninth century Welsh monk Nennius. However, these are relatively minor motifs that play into various genres. For example, Arthur is said to have a dog companion that leaves footprints behind in rock. While there are saint’s lives that include that motif, it is also one tied to more secular Welsh folklore.
Middle Ages saints were heroes.” To use such discourse, in other words, is not necessarily even to pick a genre, but rather to use language that can apply to both the religious and the secular. Yet by using the tropes of hagiography, Geoffrey is able to make this historical discourse a very specific type: one that is legendary and unverifiable, yet one in which his readers would want to believe. In other words, by co-opting the language of the religious past, Geoffrey is giving his own equally doubtful story of the past the weight of sacred truth – and the inherent believability that accompanies it – in a language that already works for such a genre.

This generic blurring of the hagiographic and the historical further works in parallel with the interchangeability of secular Arthurian objects and true relics. Seeta Chaganti, in her reading of Saint Erkenwald, argues that “even texts that concern themselves with aspects of secular culture are still fundamentally informed by surrounding material cultures of devotion.” In other words, while the purpose of Arthur’s seemingly holy nature may be to highlight his importance in Geoffrey’s tale, the sacred nature of the objects that he carries also speaks to the fact that important material objects were often necessarily viewed through a devotional lens, simply because of its

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60 Note that the combining of religious and political discourse during an English chronicle is certainly not an innovation here. Bede most obviously comes to mind for an example of English/British histories that combine with religious discourse. The perhaps most critical difference, however, is that Bede is specifically writing a history of the English church as opposed to coopting religious language to discuss what is, at least in theory, a secular history.

overwhelming familiarity. Further, the discourse of relics, like hagiography, provides a mode of proving the truth that inherently reads as being trustworthy and familiar when dealing with otherwise unverifiable claims. In referring back to Ohly’s discussion of spiritual words, it is clear that even a written text that discusses relics or a relic-like object would allow the reader to use the same methodology that Ohly suggests, allowing them to immediately connect the word on the page to the physical thing and then to the greater truth that it demonstrates.

Thus, I find it striking that the majority of Arthur’s most saintly or Christ-like qualities in Geoffrey’s version actually stem directly from these objects. Even his body – which I argue here is an ‘object’ in the same way that a saint’s body becomes a relic – has sacred qualities to it in a way that his story should not otherwise allow for. Indeed, there is a melding here of Arthur’s body and the armor he possesses that speaks both to the medieval era’s blurring of animate and inanimate qualities and to the instability of a knight’s identity as it is generated by the physical objects that he is associated with: armorials, shields, and other regalia as proof of lineage, family, and honor.

Robert W. Barrett, Jr. makes the case that there is an “effective identification of the knight with his arms,” not only in terms of literal familial identity but also in terms specifically of inner “character.” This is true, he argues, both in literary contexts as well as historical ones. Barrett highlights this in his reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight saying that Gawain, finally reunited with his shield towards the close of the poem, rests it so that it “blur[s] into [his] shoulders” and as such demonstrates a general blurring

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of “heraldic arms into men.” The object and the body become not just interchangeable but one unit, one thing. Barrett also argues that the same discourse was used in historical settings by citing the Scope-Grosvenor controversy in which two men had inadvertently ended up with the same coat of arms and went to court to see who held the true claim. In arguing their cases, Barrett says, neither man simply tried to argue for historical precedent or written documentation of their claim – indeed, some of the only written documentation involved was accused of being a forgery. Instead both pointed to physical markers of their identity including “local muniments and architectural features” which turned the court case into “effectively a competition of [physical] proofs and regalia.” This competition, Barrett argues, demonstrates a conflation of the men’s bodies and their arms as the “knights’ social and translocal bodies stood in for their physical ones.”

A similar conflation of knight and body occurs in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, as Arthur’s body and carried things blur to form both an identity but also to form a holy object. Geoffrey says that Arthur carries a “circular shield called Pridwen, on which there was painted a likeness of the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, which forced him to be thinking perpetually of her.” The shield thus informs Arthur’s behavior constantly, forcing his mental state and identity to be molded in a particular way when he carries it.

63 Ibid., 163.
64 Ibid., 141-3.
65 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966), 217. Note that, as Lewis Thorpe argues, there is an extreme “difficulty of finding a reliable version of the original Latin text” (33) not only due to a lack of published editions as of his writing in 1976 but because of the many variants of the text which a translator needs to consult. As a result I have used Thorpe’s definitive translation as my proof text throughout without including any original Latin.
Much like Gawain’s shield that Barrett argues is gold in order to demonstrate “the symbolic gold of Gawain’s character,” Arthur symbolically takes on the qualities of the shield he carries – that he is “forced” to be thinking of Mary when carrying the shield means that Arthur indeed starts to meld his identity with Pridwen as he carries it – becoming more holy by necessity.\(^{66}\) Similarly, Geoffrey records that in battle Arthur “drew his sword Caliburn, called upon the name of the Blessed Virgin, and rushed forward at full speed into the thickest ranks of the enemy. Every man whom he struck, calling upon God as he did so, he killed at a single blow. He did not slacken his onslaught until he had dispatched four hundred and seventy men.”\(^{67}\) While Arthur’s holiness in this case is demonstrated by the slaughter of pagans, it is still arguably a holy act, one in which he calls upon both God and the Virgin Mary in order to achieve, and does so only through the physical miraculousness that his shield lends him when he melds his identity with it.

Thus, while these objects cannot be read as true relics, per se, they do have a similar nature in that they are sacred objects that have more to their reality and their power than their literal forms would show. They, like the spiritual things of Ohly’s reading, necessarily point to a larger world of meanings than a single word should normally allow. Michel de Certeau in *The Writing of History* argues that a key generic element of hagiography is that the work must be “a discourse of virtues, but the term has only a secondary moral meaning – and not always. It borders instead on extraordinary


\(^{67}\) Geoffrey of Monmouth, 217.
and marvelous deeds, but only insofar as they are signs.”68 This too points to the meaning imbued in Arthur’s acts. His killing of pagans may literally be an act of warfare, but it is an act that is marvelous in scale and demonstrative, given how it is accomplished, of greater meaning both spiritual and nationalistic, just as the shield itself is.

Indeed, to specifically frame Pridwen again in the language of relics, there is a necessarily performative act on Arthur’s part in order to access the true meaning of the shield. Arthur’s behavior and identity must be first correct – thinking constantly of Mary and taking on the identity that the shield lends him – and then he must pray, calling on Mary, to act out a result of her divine will. The meaning of the shield is thus entirely dependent on its relationship to its bearer, Arthur, and more importantly to his ability to correctly interpret it and then perform a proper act. The very fact that Arthur does not read the shield as being simply a protective secular object, but instead views it as means of focusing his own holiness, gives the shield its power though his body, just as one might expect with a relic in a ritual. In other words, it is only because Arthur correctly does blur his identity with that of Pridwen that he is able to perform miraculous acts.

Again calling on Chaganti’s work, I read Arthur’s use of Pridwen thus as a sacred object that interacts with him and his bodily performance just as any relic would.69 Chaganti argues that such an object “offered a model of representational practice in which inscription and performance existed dialectically” and was able to “[contact] and


69 Note again that this subject-object relationship that creates meaning is also directly comparable to Brown’s thing theory and that relics in general are in line with his work.
[contribute] to a reality exterior to itself through its implication in ceremony and vocal utterance.” In other words, devotional objects, while having inherent value and sacred power of their own right, were able to affect their surroundings through their interactions with their users. Arguably, this is the spiritual side of the discourse that Barrett uses to describe a chivalric melding of identity between knight and arms, as the relic becomes more animate and active through its interaction with its bearer. It is through the interaction with people who use these relics in ceremonies and imbue significance to their visual representations that these objects take on further meaning.

As such, I would argue here that Geoffrey does not necessarily blur sacred and secular lines so much as he uses discourse that applies to both, demonstrating that they already inherently have an unstable boundary. Arthur melds with Pridwen both in terms of his identity but also in the acts that he performs – acts that have both intrinsically secular (nationalistic) and holy components. In turning again to the hagiographic definition that I earlier applied to Geoffrey’s text, it becomes even clearer that hagiography as a genre itself can never truly be separated from its secular ties. Not only does hagiography share many tropes and generic elements with historical chronicles and heroic tales, but its actual purpose, even in its most pure form, is still at least partially secular. De Certeau argues that the creation of hagiography is a fundamental basis for establishing group identity on a secular level as much as a religious one. Geofferey’s use of hagiographic tropes then ties in neatly to his political goal of discussing both English and British identity and in helping to establish a defined national identity. Indeed, much

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in the same way that the objects in the *Historia Regum Brittaniae* act as both chivalric things and religious relics, so too does the language that Geoffrey employs occupy both the realms of hagiography and secular nation building.

This becomes even clearer when looking at further generic overlapping between historical and hagiographic stories, as well as their usefulness to Geoffrey’s chronicle. One key change from Nennius to Geoffrey, for example, is the addition of Arthur’s definitive royal heritage. This royal blood is important for the obvious secular reason of making Arthur a true king, worthy of inclusion in Geoffrey’s history, who can pass down his kingdom to the eventual Anglo-Normans. Geoffrey is careful to point out that Uther and Ygerna were not together until Gorlois was already dead, thus making Arthur closer to legitimate. However, from the perspective of hagiographic topoi, Arthur also now fulfills the criterion of having the noble blood that is often critical to a saint’s life. De Certeau notes that, “in hagiography, individuality counts much less than character” and “in order to indicate the divine origins of the hero’s action and the heroism of his virtues, the Saint’s Life often confers a noble background upon the character.”72 Noble blood acts as a physical signifier of the nobility and holiness of the bearer’s virtues, again enabling the tropes of hagiography and nation-building to come together to suit Geoffrey’s needs.

While there was surely some intention on Geoffrey’s part to give a correct historical chronicle of English and British history, he also had the intention of giving his readers a political and religious message. Martin B. Shichtman and Laurie A. Finke, representing a dominant view on Geoffrey’s intentions, believe that he wrote primarily

72 Ibid.
for the Anglo-Normans in order to give them a proper genealogical and spiritual base upon which to lay their claims to the throne and to give them a symbol upon which to unify the country and more importantly the whole island. While there has been seemingly endless debate as to when nationhood or nationalism can truly be ascribed to England, Adrian Hastings argues that the current trend in medieval historiography points to the fact that “by the middle of the twelfth century an English identity was being very clearly re-established.”

Hastings further argues that, while English identity was re-established and indeed thriving under the Anglo-Normans, the Anglo-Norman ruling class depended “less on domination than upon assimilation” during the post-Conquest era in order to survive. If anything, he claims, it was the “conquered [who] digested the conquerors.” Rather than replace the identity of England or of Britain as a whole with an Angevin identity, the strategy instead was to co-opt the existing identity for themselves. This lead to a sudden abundance of national histories, as well as geographic and topographic studies and maps, in order to demonstrate the unity that a small island physically required. Hastings claims that in addition to this discourse of physical and topographical unity there was also an

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75 Hastings, The Construction of Nationhood, 44.

76 Ibid., 43.
effort to demonstrate unity “extend[ing] in time as well as in place” which accounts for the need for a unifying past.\footnote{Ibid., 36.}

From another standpoint of the early English nationalism debate comes the claim that English nationalism, while it did fully exist at this early standpoint, was an identity that sought imperialism and international acceptance for the ruling class rather than internal unity. Yet Kathy Lavezzo demonstrates instead that “the internationalism of the High Middle Ages did not eliminate national impulses” and that as much as England wanted to be cosmopolitan and international, that there is an equally strong “desire to bind the English not to the world but to themselves.”\footnote{Kathy Lavezzo, \textit{Angels on the Edge of the World} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 52.}

Thus the use of Arthur as a conquering saint figure is useful to Geoffrey in a few ways. The conquering aspect of the Arthurian story speaks to Lavezzo’s argument that there were cosmopolitan desires on the part of the Anglo-Normans who wished to be part of a greater “international sociopolitical order.”\footnote{Ibid.} Arthur’s greatness as well as his conquering of most of Europe certainly gestures to this impulse. Yet the hagiographic tropes that are being associated with Arthur, I argue, are what allow him to also be used as a figure of national unity. Lavezzo reiterates that as much as England was seeking international respect and connections, that even more so did they “[turn] inward, toward themselves and the geographic remoteness that seemed to unite and even elevate them above other people” and which is demonstrative of the Angevin “investment in national
It is hagiographic tropes that are able to turn the language of conquest and internationalism simultaneously into something national or even local. Local, I say, in the sense that, as Lavezzo argues, England was framing itself as being small, isolated, and on the margins of the known world as a trope specifically to “combine otherworldliness with a sense of sacred cohesiveness.” By imagining itself as something tiny and remote, England could also feel united and elevated. Using hagiographic language to frame Arthur’s conquests allows him to be a unifying national or local figure as much as he is one that demonstrates international conquest.

I connect this hagiographic language to nationalism as well as localism, as it has long been recognized that the veneration of saints and the reading and writing of hagiography is a traditional avenue for creating a group identity, traditionally locally or nationally rather than religiously based. De Certeau states that a saint’s life in “its return to origins allows unity to be reestablished at a time when the group, through its development, runs the risk of being dispersed.” Patrick Geary argues that there was always an “intentionality behind hagiographic production” and that this goal of community unification was a standard, planned element of all hagiography. Geary claims that saints “often succeeded where other efforts failed or faltered” in “creating a sense of identity, means of protection, and economic vitality” – specifically in “intensely

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 De Certeau, The Writing of History, 272.

83 Ibid., 22.
local, fragmented” communities. While Geary is referring to small isolated populations within a national or regional community, I would argue that this theory could again extend to English nationalism in this era, given the discourse at this time that framed England as in fact small and isolated in an attempt to overcome such fragmentation. Further, Arthur himself still reads as a national symbol of unity rather than a local one given that his position as king and his already established status as national hero. Thus, creating saints and hagiography at this unstable time could help England as a national group to both define their past and their present as a unified identity. For Geoffrey, writing just seventy years or so after the Conquest, presenting Arthur as a unifying saint figure is every bit as necessary as his being a conqueror as well.

In turning back, then, to Geoffrey’s successors, a few things are worth mentioning. Wace and Layamon both seize upon and develop the same hagiographic and relic discourse that Geoffrey offers them while, as previously mentioned, still suffering the anxiety of doubt in the legendary history of Arthur. Indeed, I argue that the doubt displayed in these texts actually highlights the relic-like qualities of the Arthurian objects involved – lending them an air of mystery and mysticism. In other words, the theoretical lens of relics is a way to safely contain this doubt and channel it in a way that is familiar and understandable to the audience. While I will not quote at length what is essentially a translation of Geoffrey’s text, it is important to note that Wace does give the same detailed description of Pridwen and its religious power that Geoffrey describes. He also expands upon the physical imagining of Arthur. Wace tells his reader of additional objects that Arthur carried including his lance, Ron, and his sword, Excalibur. Indeed,

Wace is the first chronicler to add Excalibur to Arthur’s legend. Further it is just as Wace anxiously discusses the problems of distrusting Arthurian history that he introduces the other major addition of an object to the story in the form of the Round Table, “dont Breton dient mainte fable.” [of which the Bretons tell great tales.]\(^5\) He further goes on to discuss the material splendor of Arthur’s hall and specifically says that every knight in the country wanted to be physically marked as having been at the court by having the “vesteure/Et contenance et armeure,/A la guise que eil estoient/Qui en la cort Artur servoient.” […clothes,/And appearance and armor,/of the fashion used there/By those who served at Arthur’s court.]\(^6\)

Returning finally to Gerald of Wales, it should not then be surprising, despite his dislike of Geoffrey of Monmouth, that his own contribution to the Arthurian canon increases the use of relic and hagiographic discourse even further, given his general use of hybridized sacred objects throughout the entirety of his works. Yet curiously, Gerald further problematizes his Arthurian story by chronicling an event that took place in his own time as well as by greatly raising the political stakes involved, despite putting forth what is assuredly an at least partially fabricated event in his description of the exhumation of Arthur and Guinevere during passages from both *De Instructione Principis* and *Speculum Ecclesiae*.\(^7\) The political stakes for Gerald were somewhat

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\(^5\) Wace, *Roman de Brut*, l. 9999.

\(^6\) Ibid., ll. 10,016-9.

\(^7\) There are a handful of other chronicled accounts of this exhumation including one in Adam of Domerham’s *Historia de Rebus Gestis Glastoniensibus*. However, in these other chronicles the exhumation is given little attention and not does contain Gerald’s literary flare, instead marking just the year in which the exhumation occurred and the bare details of the event.
different from those of Geoffrey of Monmouth, though the use of hagiographic discourse to achieve these ends is quite similar. While Geoffrey was concerned with Anglo-Norman assimilation into the English identity, Gerald, writing some fifty years later, was more concerned with the Anglo-Norman conquest of Wales in particular which had been a holdout in falling under English rule.

Much like in the conquest of England, the attempted Anglo-Norman conquest of Wales was arguably fought with a mix of both actual warfare and cultural assimilation, though with much lesser success. Henry II, Gerald’s patron at the time, attempted to take up the invasion of Wales that had been stalled after years of off and on campaigns since the Conquest. While some earlier Angevin monarchs had had greater success, Henry II’s own campaigns ended badly after an embarrassing final attempt at conquest in 1165. R. R. Davies explains that in Henry II’s earlier campaigns in Wales he had seemingly been attempting to “[restore] the status quo” of previous generations of English and Welsh circumstances by reinstating an overlordship which had been lost in the previous generation, largely due to Stephen’s general ineptitude at both ruling England and conquering anything else.88 While Henry II’s earlier battles had gone relatively well and he had in fact managed to regain much of the foothold lost by Stephen, it was when Henry tried to press further that things fell apart. Henry launched a full scale expedition into Wales in 1165, which Davies says was so massive in scale that it “indicate[d] an intention to crush the Welsh, if not to conquer them.”89 While the Welsh gathered forces

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89 Ibid.
to defend against this assault, it was instead Henry’s own poorly planned land route through harsh terrain that led to his failure and he returned home with nothing to show for the expedition. The era of Henry’s excursions into Wales thus ended in dramatic failure, and as such Henry had to instead content himself with reconciliation, ceremonial gestures of good will, and the giving of honorary authority and titles.

However, while Henry II may have reconciled with the Rhys ap Gruffudd and many of the other main princes of Wales, that did little to satisfy the Welsh as a whole who, as Davies explains, were far from united and in fact thrived on the “instability and competitiveness of Welsh political society,” which was the result of a complicated system of inheritance, a non-centralized military system, and a strong cultural “military ethos.”90 This lack of unity was coupled with what Davies calls “an intense pride in the past,” which also lead to “a profound sense of shame and loss” due to the Anglo-Norman conquests in Wales.91 While Henry had satisfied himself with a reconciliatory agreement with Rhys, even this was too much to give the Anglo-Normans in the eyes of the rest of the fractious Welsh. Davies notes that this majority of the Welsh who were discontent in their loss “could hardly have borne their sense of loss had it not been relieved by a prospect of deliverance” which centered on a belief that British prophecy had promised a return to Welsh dominance over the whole island.92 These prophecies, which were often associated with Merlin, spoke of a myriad of Welsh historical heroes – but most critically

90 Ibid., 70.
91 Ibid., 78.
92 Ibid., 79.
of Arthur – returning to restore the island to its rightful owners. Davies cautions that the “Merlinic prophecies were the staple political ideology of medieval Welshmen” and “should not be underestimated in any analysis of contemporary political attitudes and behavior.”

The fear of this sentiment can also be seen in an Anglo-Norman historiographical text, the Description of England. The text is a chorographic survey of the Saxon and post-Saxon era of both England and Wales, despite its title, and draws on Henry of Huntington and Geoffrey of Monmouth in addition to adding seemingly new material, which Lesley Johnson argues “gives more space to the political and cultural divisions and distinctions that can be traced in the landscape.” The text, which seems particularly concerned with various insular identities, says that the Welsh claim “qu’a la parfin tute l’avrunt,/Par Artur la recoverunt,/E cest pais tut ensement/Toldrunt a la romaine gent,/A la terre sun nun rendrunt,/Bretaine la repelrunt.” [that in the end they will have everything, through Arthur they will recover it, and so this country they will take from the roman race, to the land they will give back its name, Britain they will call it again] Thus, while Henry II may have not had any actual fear of Arthur returning from the dead

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93 Ibid., 79-80.


to lead the Welsh against him, he did understand that the rhetoric of such a claim was not one that, as Davies warned, should be underestimated. 96

Gerald, who was writing for Henry II as his patron, did not underestimate Welsh militarism, their lack of unity, nor their belief in the return of Arthur. In the final decade of the twelfth century, after having written his topographical and anecdotal survey of Wales in 1191, Gerald wrote of the exhumation of Arthur, which took place under Henry II at Glastonbury Abbey and which had the goal of appropriating Arthur from these potentially rebellious Welsh to claim him as an English figure instead. Arguably Geoffrey of Monmouth and the myriad of other English chroniclers who had all claimed Arthur as either a pan-British or specifically English king had already done this. However, Gerald was the first to record the seizing of not just the Arthurian corpus from the Welsh but also his literal corpse.

While someone may have been exhumed at Glastonbury, it was clearly not Arthur; nor are many of the other marvelous elements that Gerald records particularly believable. It is unclear how much of his own story Gerald actually believes, but one has to at least question the total sincerity of his chronicle given his own direct involvement in the event. Given that Gerald was especially distrusting of earlier sources like Geoffrey of

96 Note also the *Draco Normannicus*, which is the ‘reverse’ text from the *Description of England*. In the *Draco*, Etienne de Rouen, writing in favor of Henry II, writes a purely fictional account in which the rebel lords of the Bretons write a letter to an alive-and-well King Arthur asking for his help. In the epistolary text, Arthur responds and demonstrates himself to be an angry and unjust king while Henry II, written as a character, proves himself to be the opposite, wise and fair. Etienne, through his mockery, demonstrates that the idea of Arthur returning to help Henry’s enemies has become an entire genre at this point, worthy of parody. See Etienne de Rouen, “Draco Normannicus,” ed. R Howlett, *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I* (RS 82, 1885), vol 2.
Monmouth, it is acutely ironic that he should then record an event that contains at least some obviously feigned or falsified elements. Further, as Lewis Thorpe originally showed, Gerald’s “debt to the Historia Regum Brittaniae is considerable” in terms of actual events and details as well. Much like Wace and Layamon, Gerald was left in the contradictory place where his greatest written authority was someone whom he highly distrusted, and was thus forced to sort out which parts of history he believed and, worse, which he needed.

Yet beyond Gerald’s use of the now standard relic discourse and general hagiographic language, he also styles his text in such a way that it reads as a translatio, the hagiographic genre which tells of the “the search for the relic, miracles upon its discovery, difficulties in moving it, and its joyful and honored reception.” Geary argues that a translatio does not lose its generic distinctions even when put into another genre of text, such as a chronicle, and, as such, would be recognizable even out of context, its genre being based in “subject, not form.” Thus, while the text is not literally purporting to be a translatio, it is still recognizable as being tied to the genre. It makes sense that it would follow a similar format, given that such texts were normally written for similar purposes to Gerald’s. In other words, the chronicle of the exhumation and a translatio would both be recording events that were at least partially untrue, that needed to fill in gaps in time and knowledge, doing so in order to help verify the identity and provenance of a set of bones-as-relics. In both cases, there would also be strong markers of

97 Thorpe, editors note to Journey Through Wales, 280.

98 Geary, Furta Sacra, 12.

99 Ibid., 14.
communal identity – local, regional, or national – that were tied to the saint themselves, their body, and their final resting place.

Gerald begins his pseudo-\textit{translatio} by establishing its ties to a particular monastery, Glastonbury. Just as in true texts of the genre, Gerald attempts to make sense of the fact that Arthur has ended up at this specific location – an issue just as relevant to Gerald’s exhumation as it is to the stolen relics that Geary is concerned with. Gerald argues that the ties to Glastonbury indeed make sense by giving a standard linguistic argument, claiming that Glastonbury is actually Avalon, and thus that Arthur has always been linked to the locale.\textsuperscript{100} Further, by giving Arthur a specific holy location, Gerald positions Arthur as almost a patron saint – someone who had ties to a location in life and whose body and relics give that location power and wealth-via-pilgrimage after his death. He says that of Glastonbury, Arthur was a munificent patron of the famous Abbey at Glastonbury, giving many donations to the monks and always supporting them strongly, and he is highly praised in their records. More than any other place of worship in his kingdom he loved the Church of the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, in Glastonbury, and he fostered its interests with much greater loving care than that of any of the others.\textsuperscript{101}

Gerald specifically repositions Arthur here as an English pseudo-patron saint by tying him to Glastonbury rather than a Welsh site, which is the first step in his appropriation of


\textsuperscript{101} \textit{De Principis Instructione Liber} I.xx: “Arthuri quoque Britonum regis inclyti memoria est non suprimenda, quem monasterii Glastoniensis egregii, cujus et ipse patronus suis diebus fuerat praecipuus et largitor ac sublevator magnificus, historiae multum extollunt. Prae cunctis enim ecclesiis regni sui sanctae Dei genitricis Mariae Glastoniensem ecclesiam plus dilexit et prae caeteris longe majori devotione promovit.” Thorpe, 281.
Arthur and his body. Indeed, by refiguring Avalon as Glastonbury he appropriates Avalon itself. He then calls upon the tradition contained in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, saying that Arthur “had a full-length portrait of the Blessed Virgin painted on the front of his shield, so that in the heat of battle he could always gaze upon Her; and whenever he was about to make contact with the enemy he would kiss Her feet with great devoutness.” Thus, in addition to his overall generic format, Gerald also picks up the key hagiographic elements of earlier works, again tying Arthur’s identity directly to his shield.

The discovery and exhumation itself was also, according to Gerald, marked by the type of divine signs normally reserved for a saint and discussed in a *translatio*. The very discovery of where the body would be is brought about, in part, by “holy monks and other religious men [who] had seen visions and revelations,” and is confirmed via Henry II who spoke to an “old British soothsayer.” These types of revelations are typically a saintly topos, with someone holy having a vision as to where to find a lost saint’s body or, more broadly, tied to “miraculous knowledge of identity,” in this case the identity of the grave’s body. Again, this type of motif, which normally occurs in the context of trying to establish the provenance of a lost or stolen saint’s relic, blurs the line between

102 *De Principis Instructione Liber* I.xx: “Unde cum vir bellator exst iterit, in anteriori parte clipei sui Beatae Virginis imaginem interius, ut eam in conflictu prae oculis semper haberet, depingi fecerat; cujus et pedes, quoties positus in congressionis articulo fuerat, deosculari cum plurima devotione consueverat.

103 *De Principis Instructione* I.xx: “…aliaqua quoque per visions et revelationes bonis viris et religiosis factas, maxime tamen et evidentissime rex Anglie Henricus secundus, sicut ab historico cantore Britone audierat antique…” Thorpe, 282.

104 Elliott, *Roads to Paradise*, 176.
sacred and secular in Gerald’s account. Holy men having revelations force this political and secular exhumation into the realm of the religious, or at least onto a spectrum that destabilizes that distinction further.

Moreover, Gerald says that the tomb is “provided with most unusual indications which were, indeed, little short of miraculous.”105 Gerald says that the “body [was] buried at least sixteen feet in the ground, not in a stone coffin but in a hollowed-out oak-bole. It had been sunk as deep as that and carefully concealed, so that it could never be discovered by the Saxons.”106 The physical form of Arthur’s tomb then speaks to a need for this sacred object, as it were, to have outward signs of the miraculous nature of the exhumation. Chaganti refers to enshrinement and enclosure of a relic or sacred object as actually being a “complex effect whereby contained and containing are interchangeable, and the borders between them are indeterminate even as the containing act continues to articulate itself in the object’s physical features.”107 Thus, this hollowed-out oak-bole, in acting as a tomb or even an enshrining container, potentially crosses a blurred line to sacred object or relic itself. The fact that it was marked with “miraculous” indications fits this nature, and is meant to be a sign proving both the veracity of Arthur’s body and the truth of the marvelous finding of the body.

105 De Principis Instructione I.xx: “…et signatum miris indiciis et quasi miraculosis, est inventum…” Thorpe, 282.


107 Chaganti, The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary,15.
Gerald then claims that the discovery of Arthur’s body is, in fact, fulfilling ancient prophecies, a claim which has the air of hagiography to it, but also ties in directly to his appropriation of the Welsh Arthurian story. Geoffrey of Monmouth in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* speaks of important British relics being buried deep in the earth when the British fled from the Saxons, noting that it would not be until “the relics which had once belonged to the British had been taken over again” that the British would rule the island once more.\(^{108}\) Gerald says that this exhumation is an indication of those very relics that would “someday nevertheless [be] disclose[d] … in the [right] time and place.”\(^{109}\)

However, both Geoffrey and Gerald are referencing one of the Merlinic prophecies that initially had been referring to an eventual Welsh return to power, along with Arthur himself.

Yet, Gerald reframes this prophecy in a way that decidedly favors the English rather than the Welsh. Gerald says that these relics are now being revealed since the true British heirs to the island are once again in power, but associates this term with the Anglo-Normans rather than the Welsh. He further has these relics being revealed not alongside a risen, heroic Arthur, but instead a thoroughly dead one. In doing so, Gerald reaffirms the deadness of Arthur, but also demonstrates his goal of creating not just a *translatio* for Arthur, but rather a *translatio imperii* – the translation of god’s ordained right to power from one empire to another, the same process that allowed the British to be the rightful heirs to Rome. In this case, Gerald argues that god’s favor for the “British” is

\(^{108}\) Geoffrey of Monmouth, 283.

\(^{109}\) Ibid.
passing from the Welsh to the English, along with Arthur’s body, and as such that the Anglo-Normans are the divine heirs to insular power.

Therefore, in highlighting Arthur’s marvelous but quite dead body, Gerald is able to help translate British power to the Anglo-Normans, not only through their physical taking of Arthur’s body, but also through the demonstration of his corrupted body that is unable to return to the Welsh. And indeed, Arthur’s body itself is particularly striking in its physical uniqueness and marvelousness and does easily read as an outward marker of the truth of its history. Most notable is the size of the bones. Gerald says that the Abbot showed [him] one of the shin-bones. He held it upright on the ground against the foot of the tallest man he could find, and it stretched a good three inches above the man’s knee. The skull was so large and capacious that it seemed a veritable prodigy of nature, for the space between the eyebrows and the eye sockets was as broad as the palm of a man’s hand. Ten or more wounds could be clearly seen, but they had all mended except one. This was larger than the others and it had made an immense gash. Apparently it was this wound which had caused Arthur’s death.110

Even in death, the bones, like a saint’s body or relic, demonstrate the interior truth of the man’s life. Arthur’s bones are miraculously large and as such must be confirmation that they belonged to such a great man. Just as the physical descriptions of Arthur’s body confirmed his importance in Geoffrey’s text, so to do his bones for Gerald.

Yet while a saint’s body shows the inner holiness of the saint through its incorruptibility, Arthur’s body does the opposite. In this sense, I would like to argue that

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Arthur’s body (and, in fact, Guinevere as well) reads as almost an “anti-relic” in that, while its exteriority does demonstrate its inner truth, its truth is that this body is nothing more than just an object – and a corruptible one at that. Unlike a saint’s body or a true relic, Gerald seems to be asserting, Arthur’s body has no power from beyond the grave to act almost animate and almost alive, and as such has no ability to help the Welsh. His bones are not only all that remain of him, but they are scarred by the very wounds that killed him, reminding the Welsh exactly how dead Arthur truly is. In a world in which bodies and relics live on a spectrum between animate and inanimate, even Arthur’s bones themselves need to be marked as particularly dead. In following the *translatio* tradition so closely, it is here where Gerald breaks away from that genre, making his point so obviously felt.

Indeed, the very corruptibility of the remains is emphasized by the account of Guinevere’s exhumation. In the *De Principis Instructione*, Gerald first tells of Guinevere’s body being in the same tomb as Arthur’s. While he does not mention her by name, he does say that the bones of Arthur’s second wife were in the bottom third of his tomb. Gerald then describes the most anomalous element of the exhumation, in which the monks find “a tress of woman’s hair, blond, and still fresh, and bright in color” that a monk then “snatched … up and it immediately disintegrated into dust.”

Gerald then elaborates greatly on this particular element in his later *Speculum Ecclesiae*, making both Arthur and Guinevere even more clearly dead and lost – their bodies even more decidedly corruptible. In this later account he does not give a

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111 *De Principis Instructione* I.xx: “…ubi et trica comae muliebris flava cum integritate pristina et colore reperta fuit, quam ut monachus quidam avide manu arripuit et sublevavit, tota statim in pulverem decidit.” Thorpe, 282.
description of Arthur’s bones at all, and instead describes his remains as simply “reduced to dust.” In this second account, Gerald is not even willing to give Arthur the thing-ness of having bones, leaving his remains only as dust. His description of Guinevere, however, is elaborated upon, again to the same ends. He tells us that “in the same grave there was found a tress of woman’s hair, blond and lovely to look at, plaited and coiled with consummate skill” and that the monk who saw it then jumped down into the grave in order to grab the hair in a fit of fetishism. Gerald comments on this “feeble-minded” lust before turning to the hair itself as an object. He says that

hair is considered to be imperishable, in that it has no fleshy content and no humidity of its own, but as he held it in his hand after picking it up, and stood gazing at it in rapture, it immediately disintegrated into fine powder. All those who were watching were astounded by what had happened. By some sort of miracle…it just disappeared, as if suddenly changed back into atoms, for it could never have been uncoiled and examined closely.

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113 *Speculum Ecclesiae* II.viii: “…inventa fuit in eodem sepulchro trica muliebris, flava et Formosa, miroque artificio conserta et contringata, uxoris scilicet Arthuri, viro ibidem conseptuia. Thorpe, 284.

114 *Speculum Ecclesiae* II.viii: “Et licet capilli imputribiles esse dicantur, quia nihil in se corpulentum, nihil humidum habent admixtum, tamen simul ut erectam, et diligenter inspectam manu tenuit, multis intuentibus et obstupentibus in pulverem illico decidunt minutissimum, et tanquam in atomos, sicut dividis sic et discerni nescias, subito conversa disparuit, et eventu mirabili…” Thorpe, 284. This is a widely discussed passage due to its seemingly anomalous inclusion and for its unusual discussion of hair fetishes. Gerald specifically argues that the loss of the hair is meant to be a sign of the transitory nature of beauty. However, I chose to give him credit for having additional purposes in mind for the inclusion and the expansion of this anecdote, and to not take him entirely at face value.
Thus Guinevere’s hair becomes yet another reminder of exactly how lost the Arthurian past is. Saint’s bodies are incorruptible, when by nature they should not be, while Guinevere’s body acts in the opposite way. Her hair, which should be able to survive, is by “miracle” taken away. The animate/inanimate spectrum that Latour argues medieval objects occupy – the same that Chaganti shows is particularly relevant to relics – is a theory that Gerald tries desperately to quash in this one case. Therefore, while Gerald marks Arthur and Guinevere as miraculous but clearly dead in the first of his accounts, he leaves them as nothing but dust and atoms in the second account, just to emphasize his point.

Yet Gerald does return to his translatio genre in both accounts by then describing another traditionally saintly topos: the translation of relics – in this case, Arthur’s bones, or at least whatever dust remained of them. This is normally the last step in a translatio, and indeed, Gerald finishes his texts by saying that after Arthur was found, he “was moved into the church with honor and committed properly to a marble tomb.”

According to W. A. Nitze, Arthur was actually entombed a second time, one hundred years later and at the command of Edward I, this time with Arthur’s remains moved directly into a major church which had just been rebuilt. The description of the first translation, contemporary to Gerald’s account, again makes it clear that he is concerned not just with translatio but with translatio imperii and, as such, when Gerald closes the story of Arthur’s exhumation in his latter Speculum Ecclesiae, he makes a pointed remark


to those “British” folks who are clinging to the hope of Arthur’s return. He further adds a striking paragraph in which he breaks away from the narrative, noting that many tales are told and many legends have been invented about King Arthur and his mysterious ending. In their stupidity the British people maintain that he is still alive. Now that the truth is known, I have taken the trouble to add a few more details in this present chapter. The fairy-tales have been snuffed out, and the true and indubitable facts are made known, so that what really happened must be made crystal clear to all and separated from the myths which have accumulated on the subject.  

He clarifies that his purpose in including this tale twice over in his works is specifically to keep those superstitious ‘British’ from believing fantasy stories. In other words, the Welsh, who clamored for Arthur as a figure to stand behind in their resistance and revolt, need to let him go and to understand that by finding and translating Arthur’s remains the Anglo-Normans have rightfully seized insular power under the divine sanction of *translatio imperii*.  

In thinking further, then, about both Gerald’s religious and political discourse surrounding Arthur’s body and its entombment, the conflation of physical *translatio* and political *translatio imperii* actually works quite neatly, given the ways in which both the language of relics already worked and the ways in which the Anglo-Norman versus Welsh conflict was already appropriating religious language for their propagandist purposes.  

From the relic standpoint, I would like to turn to Chaganti’s reading of *Saint Erkenwald* as a productive example of how religious and, specifically, reliquary

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discourse was commonly used outside of the strictly religious realm, particularly in literary accounts of seemingly historical events. She sees the text as an example of “how medieval artistic productions formulate sacred and secular as a continuum and not two dichotomous categories.” She also argues that the “deceptively complex relationship that medieval writers and thinkers envisioned between themselves and their historical past” allows hagiographic tropes to help reestablish a secular character as a religious figure and, as such, essentially assign power, or at least a specific type of power, to a figure who previously did not have it. In the case of Erkenwald, Chaganti argues that the uncovering of his very political body can be made religious simply through the framing of the discussion of his physical remains. Erkenwald, who is not a saint and therefore should be more on the fully-dead end of the spectrum, instead speaks and tells his life story, marking him as saintly and allowing him to inhabit the spectrum closer to animate. In this sense, the religious traditions that Chaganti is referencing are all essentially primed to allow for the opposite occurrence, and Arthur’s body – a body which is traditionally assumed to be at this relic-like crossroads between life and death – through the use of this type of discourse – is instead moved in the opposite direction, becoming a fully dead object.

Beyond the animate/inanimate instability that Gerald’s account addresses, this discourse further allowed for him to address many of the gaps in his story that would have been more easily doubted. Both in the case of Gerald’s text and that of many a true translatio, the goal of the account was to “establish a claim on a particular relic or to make acceptable the presence of a saint’s body in a remote monastery with which he

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118 Chaganti, The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary, 48.
never had any connection."¹¹⁻¹⁹ Geary argues that because of these restraints – particularly in the case of the many stolen relics that circulated at the time – translationes often were fictional and stole their topoi from other accounts including the vitae.¹²⁰ This follows the same pattern as the early saint’s lives, in that they all end up becoming remarkably similar due to their shared fictional topoi. Thus, it also follows that Gerald’s account would be based on the translatio tradition, stealing from other translationes just as those very texts did themselves. Given that his account must have been at least partially fictional, Gerald needed to fill in the gaps with details that would seem correct to his audience. By using the translatio tradition, Gerald is not only able to better fabricate his own tale, but in doing so further ties Arthur to a saintly tradition. Most importantly, however, in appropriating the saintly traditions for the Arthurian story, Gerald is able to ironically neutralize the only truly saintly or Christ-like element of the original legend: Arthur’s return from the dead.¹²¹

¹¹⁻¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ While the religious discourse that Gerald employs ties to his story quite neatly, the context for his political goals is somewhat more problematic. Gerald himself, like his hybrid characters, was torn between his own Welsh and English heritage and allegiance. Throughout his life and his writings, Gerald wavers on his feelings towards his Welsh half and towards the land and people of this half of his ancestry. While the Itinerarium Kambriae contains multiple moments that make the Welsh seem stupid and backwards, Gerald contrastingly ends his Descriptio Kambriae on the fairly definitive note that “nec alia, ut arbitror, gens quam haec Kambrica, aliave lingua, in die districti examinis coram Judice supremo, quicquid de ampliori contingat, pro hoc terrarium angulo respondebit.” [whatever else may come to pass, I do not think that on the Day of Direst Judgment any race other than the Welsh, or any other language, will give answer to the Supreme Judge of all for this small corner of the earth.] Descriptio Kambriae II.i. Thorpe, 275.
Moving onwards into the early thirteenth century, it becomes clear that the Welsh/English conflict is not yet settled by any means, but that the appropriation of Arthur remained a mainstay. For example, Layamon’s intervention in the issue of this attempt at *translatio imperii* is surprisingly direct. It appears that he simply ignores previous convention in order to solve this problem – that of hedging and refusal to comment – and says of Arthur instead that

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Bruttes ileueð ðete; þat he bon on liue.
and wunnien in Aualun; mid fairest alre aluen.
and lokieð euere Bruttes ðete; whan Arður cumen liðe.
Nis nauer þe mon iboren; of nauer nane burde icoren.
þe cunne of þan soðe; of Arðure sugen mare.
Bute while wes an witeʒe; Mærlin ihate.
he bodede mid worde; his quiðes weoren soðe.
þat an Arður sculde ðete; cum Anglen to fulste.
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[The Britons believe yet; that he is alive.
And lives in Avalon; with the fairest of all elves.
And the Britons look ever yet; when Arthur shall return.
Was never the man born; or ever any lady chosen.
That knows of the sooth; of Arthur to say more of.
But once was a sage; named Merlin.
He said with words; his quotes were sooth.
That an Arthur should yet; come to help the English.]\(^\text{122}\)

Thus Layamon admits to the British desire to have Arthur return, but simply says that those ‘British’ that Arthur will be helping are exclusively the English.

Similarly, it is towards the end of the thirteenth century when the second translation of Arthur’s bones occurs that, just as Henry II before him, Edward I realized the propagandist value of Arthur in his continuing fight against the Welsh. It is on his way to fight the Welsh in 1278 that Edward stops by Glastonbury to honor Arthur and commands that he be moved to an even more honored tomb. Indeed, it is during this

\(^{122}\) BL Cotton Caligula A.IX lines 14291-8. My own translation with notes from Mason.
period that the concept of an Arthurian relic became more literal, as the appropriation of
Arthur from the Welsh – mirroring the final success of the conquest of the Welsh in 1283
– was fully realized.

Much like in Gerald’s account of Arthur’s exhumation, the appearance of
Arthurian pseudo-relics in the era of Edward I take the form of actual physical objects
rather than literary tropes. In addition to the pseudo-saintly handling of Arthur’s body
and its retranslation, Edward also seized upon the sacred potential of Arthurian relics in a
piece of Arthur’s crown. Chronicles record that after Edward’s defeat of the Welsh in
1283, the Welsh ceded a variety of relics to Edward. The *Annales de Wigornia* records
that in 1283

\[
\text{portio Dominicae crucis magna, quae lingua Wallensium dicebatur Croizneth,}
\]
\[
domo Edwarde regi Angliae cum multis famosis reliquis tradebatur. Apud
\]
\[
Kanervan, corpus magni principis, patris imperatoris nobilis Constantini, erat
\]
\[
inventum, et rege jubente in ecclesia honorifice collocatum. Corona quondam
\]
\[
famosi regis Britonum Arturi regi Angliae cum aliis jocalibus reddebatur. Sic ad
\]
\[
Anglicos gloria Wallensium, invite Anglorum legibus subditorum, per Dei
\]
\[
providentiam est translata.}

[...]

A similar account, most likely based on the *Annales de Wigornia*, also shows up in the
*Annales Londonienses* and notes that

\[ tunc portio Dominicae crucis Angliae cum multis famosis reliquis tradebatur, et \]

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Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1869), 489. My own translations for all translations in this
chronicle.
This account is particularly interesting in a few of its word choices, including the fact that the chronicle says that the piece of Arthur’s crown was “reddebatur,” meaning not just given, but specifically ‘returned’ or ‘restored.’ In other words, the implication is that this piece of the Arthurian crown rightfully had always belonged to the English and was only now properly being returned.

Other similar accounts show up in Rishanger’s Chronica et Annales, the Flores Historiarum, and the Annales de Waverleia, all of which specifically mention Arthur’s crown and the shame of the Welsh. Geary, in describing actual relics, notes that while they are “symbolic objects, they are of the most arbitrary kind, passively reflecting only exactly so much meaning as they were given by a particular community.”

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126 Geary, Furta Sacra, 5.
words, these particular objects that Edward takes from the Welsh had only as much significance as each group gave them. A piece of the cross has literally no value or meaning outside of a community who recognizes its sacred significance. Similarly, while the jeweled crown may have monetary value, it has no historical or political significance outside of the meaning that these two groups bestowed on it. As such, the chronicle reader is told very little about the visual descriptions of these objects, particularly of the cross. The reader is instead clued in to the significance coded to these objects in their British context.

Indeed, the political and cultural context of how one is meant to read these objects trumps the normal religious significance. While the cross has many levels of religious discourse normally surrounding it, in this case the religious meaning is entirely tied to the adjoining political one – a fact that the chroniclers in both accounts are careful to point out by noting that the “glory of the Welsh” has been “translated” to the English via this “return” of relics. The transferal of the cross clearly demonstrates the final transferal of God’s favor from the Welsh to the English. Similarly, the transfer of the crown demonstrates the transferal of British political power between the two groups “per Dei providentiam.” The translatio imperii is complete only as the English receive the last physical piece of Arthur, and of God’s favor, that the Welsh possess.

We again hear about these relics when the Annales Londonienses says that, in 1284, “eodem anno Alphonsus regis Edwardi primogenitus quadam aureola, quae fuerat Leolini principis Walliae, cum aliis jocalibus, feretrum Sancti Edwardi ornavit.” [The same year Alfonsus, king Edward’s firstborn, adorned the bier of Saint Edward with that
same gold item, which Llewellyn, leader of Wales, had, with the other jeweled items.]\textsuperscript{127}

Presumably, this specific gold item is Arthur’s crown, and the jeweled items are the same ones mentioned above. Although the chronicle does not take the time to discuss the significance of this act, merely recording it, the historical moment itself still falls into the same pattern of sacred/secular destabilization. While the chronicle does not engage in this discourse, clearly both Edward I and Alfonsus chose to by placing the crown of Arthur among the objects that are translated to Saint Edward’s shrine.

Yet the relics do not stay there permanently, as it is later noted in the \textit{Annales de Wigornia} that in 1286 “pridie kal. Maii, post Walliam subjugatam, ad Westmonasterium veniens rex Edwardus, praecedentibus archiepiscopo Cantuariae et suffraganeis suis episcopis revestitis, cum turmis nobilium et popularium comitiis, portionem Dominicae crucis non modicam, ornatam auro et argento et lapidibus pretiosis, quam de Wallia secum tulit, super magnum altare Westmonasterii obtulit et resumpsit.” [The day before the kalends of May, after the Welsh subjugation, King Edward going to Westminster, proceeded by the archbishop of Canterbury and his own robed suffragan bishops, with a group of nobles and the elected populous, offered and recovered on the great high altar of Westminster, a not insignificant piece of the Lord’s cross, ornamented with gold and silver and precious stones, which was won from the Welsh.]\textsuperscript{128}

Thus we find that the true cross eventually makes its way to Westminster Abbey’s high altar. Strikingly, the \textit{Chronicle of Florence of Worcester} offers a slightly different version of this event, saying that in a “solemn procession from the Tower of London to

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{127}]\textit{Annales Londonienses}, 92. This also shows up in the \textit{Annales de Wigornia}, 490.
\item[\textsuperscript{128}]Ibid., 492.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Westminster” Edward brings instead the “other relics which he had brought with him out of Wales.” Putting these two chronicles together, both Loomis and Davies argue that during this procession both the cross and Arthur’s crown were presented together on the high altar. Thus, the two objects taken from Wales to mark the Welsh surrender of their power and their glory finally and officially become the glory of the English.

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CHAPTER 3

THE FAILURE OF CHIVALRIC OBJECTS IN MALORY’S *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

After the early establishment of the trend in Anglo-Norman England, objects as relics with ties to English identity were an ongoing occurrence in Arthurian literature, persisting into, and beyond, the fifteenth century. The earlier instantiations of Arthurian objects that I discussed in Chapter Two were primarily used to confirm a specific vision of the Arthurian past in which doubt in the Arthurian story was contained through religious language and then deployed in order to bolster English communal and national identity and to help the Anglo-Normans suppress Welsh identity. By the fifteenth century, however, the English had safely appropriated Welsh identity, and the Arthurian story and its objects were instead free to be redirected in an introspective and often critical turn back towards England itself. Further, by this era Arthurian literature had also expanded to include romance as a genre along with historical chronicles, and such romances allowed a focus on critique as opposed to a primary concern on historical accuracy and the containment of doubt. The language of Arthurian objects remained in some ways very similar to prior instances, the use of religious language persisted for example, yet Arthurian objects were now also being used to understand, discuss, and critique the social and political mores of the established English gentry, monarchy, and country as a whole. While the Arthurian past was still affirmed by objects in these romances, I argue that it was now a past that challenged the coherence and success of contemporary England.
I examine this trend and its arguably most significant manifestation by looking at Sir Thomas Malory’s fifteenth-century romance *Le Morte Darthur*. *Le Morte Darthur*, adapted from a French source but systematically revised and amended to reflect Malory’s social and political views, has long been accepted as a crucial work of the Arthurian canon and stands as the most well-recognized instance of fifteenth-century English Arthurian literature. While the identity of Malory himself is debatable, the general scholarly consensus is that he was Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel in Warwickshire, as originally argued by P. J. C. Field. The argument for this identity is based on Malory’s colophons in which he describes himself as a “knyght presoner” and places his writing of the book in the “ninth yere of the reygne of Kyng Edward the Fourth.”

Though there are other potential options, this Lancastrian political prisoner during the War of the Roses appears to be the best candidate as he is the only known Sir Thomas Malory to be actually imprisoned at that time.

From this context and from what is known about Malory of Newbold Revel, much has been made about the political and social commentary that is potentially included throughout *Le Morte Darthur*. Indeed, critics such as Raluca L. Radulescu, Christopher Cannon, Edward Donald Kennedy, and Kenneth Hodges all read some primarily political

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131 P. J. C. Field, “The Malory Life-Records,” in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A.S.G. Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 115. Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 2003), 112, 698. Although I have consulted the Vinaver edition, as well as Winchester editions by both Shepherd and Cooper and a Caxton edition by Cowen, I have chosen to use the Shepherd edition as my proof text. Given that the Winchester is the older manuscript and that Caxton has not demonstrably improved it in any meaningful way, I have chosen to use a Winchester edition. I have chosen the Shepherd edition of the Winchester as it is the most recent edition and Shepherd’s editorial notes are complete and accurate. As I believe that the text is meant to be a unified work, I was also hesitant to use Vinaver as a proof text despite the editions value for comparative purposes. All citations of Malory will be from this edition unless otherwise noted.
concern into Malory’s work related to the War of the Roses, Henry V, and Edward IV. The argument as to what exactly that concern is varies broadly, from readings that sync up precisely with national issues, to those that deal primarily with local politics, to even those that claim that Malory was deliberately being as apolitical as possible. What does not seem to be under debate, however, regarding Malory’s point of view is that he was in some way deeply concerned with the fact that his era was one of turmoil and violence stemming from the War of the Roses – turmoil and violence that seemingly went beyond anything in recent English memory. As Colin Richards puts it, this era was “one of the lowest points in English politics” and was marked by “brutality” and “political anarchy.”

Felicity Riddy further argues that, in addition to the political failings and violence of the era, Malory was also concerned with the social chaos of the time: what Riddy refers to as the “death-wish” of the gentry class and collapse of the aristocracy. Riddy claims that because the War of the Roses was essentially a civil war, contemporaneous with the sudden rise of resources and power in the peasant class, the aristocracy believed

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That “its values [were] under threat” and as a result the era was of one of social “crisis.”  

That Malory’s tale of extreme violence, repeated fratricide, and the nihilistic collapse of Camelot reflects such a view is certainly convincing.

Yet this violent and condemnatory aspect to Malory’s text is specifically unique neither to Malory nor to the fifteenth century. Instead, Malory’s text is indicative of the critical stance that chivalric literature has always taken towards itself. Richard W. Kaeuper argues that chivalric literature has traditionally both praised the system for its glory and honor while also critiquing the violence and chaos it could create. Similarly, Maurice Keen states that “chivalry has always been aware that it was at war with a distorted image of itself.”

Yet Le Morte Darthur is also indicative of a new trend in this type of critique that is unique to Malory’s era. Keen argues that there was a widespread turn during the fifteenth century of critiquing the chivalric system, both by using nostalgia specifically and through a “re-appeal to the traditional value of loyal and faithful service,” which contrasts “the abandonment and pillaging of contemporary knights and their love of luxury with the disciplined dedication of the heroes of old.”

Thus, I argue that Malory’s text is representative of this fifteenth-century trend towards nostalgia, as well as indicative of the long-standing tradition of chivalric literature critiquing itself through a demonstration of its chaos and violence.

Indeed, I would like to build on both Keen’s and Riddy’s scholarship to claim that

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137 Keen, Chivalry, 234.
Malory, though representative of his era’s Arthurian chivalric literature, is also to some extent unique for his time. *Le Morte Darthur* goes a step further than other texts by seeing the chivalric system not as merely flawed thanks to poorly-behaved knights but as inherently doomed to fail as a system itself. As such, Malory’s text is, I argue, not just nostalgic but elegiac as well. Instead of being fully akin to contemporary texts, Malory’s work is constructed very much like earlier Old English elegies; it nostalgically looks on the past to celebrate a supposed golden age but is also acutely aware of the flaws that will lead to its fall and spends much of its space lamenting the loss, all of which serves to construct some present identity and to work out the issues of its current age. The sense of doom that hangs over both a standard Old English elegy, as well as *Le Morte Darthur*, serves to highlight the love of those things that are about to be lost but also the inevitability of such a fall. In the case of *Le Morte Darthur*, Malory is the ultimate champion of Lancelot and admirer of the chivalric system throughout his tale, but champions them while constantly knowing that this same system will lead to the collapse of Camelot and eventually to the crisis of Malory’s own time. Again, this is not so radical a departure from other tales of Malory’s era as much as it is an amplification of their concerns, with both an arguably stronger sense of love for the Arthurian age and its heroes, but also with a stronger sense of doom hanging over the tale.

In other words, while Malory may have the nostalgia and social critiques that are similar to many other fifteenth-century Arthurian romances and chivalric texts in general, I argue that the elegiac qualities, as well as the direct critiques and failures of the Arthurian knights themselves, signal a far more complete failure of the chivalric system than was common for these texts. While many Arthurian works saw themselves as
belated compared to the golden age utopia of Camelot, Malory, I argue, saw his time as
belated compared to both the Arthurian age as well as to the entire chivalric value system
being successful. It is not a single utopian kingdom that has collapsed for Malory, but the
entire worldview of his era.

In analyzing Malory’s view of the medieval and Arthurian past, I continue to look
at how objects and materialism intersect with Arthurian literature and English identity. I
turn specifically to a ‘thing’-based reading in order to explore Malory’s themes of
belatedness, elegiac lament, nostalgia, and of the failure of chivalry, as it is specifically
the ‘things’ of Le Morte Darthur that most obviously demonstrate Malory’s views on
both the glory of the medieval past, as well as on the inherent flaws in the system that
loom over the era. Indeed, it is the very concept of how ‘objects’ become ‘things,’ as
according to Bill Brown, that matters the most in Malory: the moment when an object
becomes problematic and therefore noticeable, imbued with meaning, unignorable,
significant.

Brown, as previously mentioned in Chapter One, argues that the difference
between objects and things is that an ‘object’ becomes a ‘thing’ – something noticeable

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138 Renee Trilling, in discussing Old English poetry, describes nostalgia as when “the
lack of the past becomes the object of desire” but clarifies that “what is lacking is not
simply the lost past, but a sense of meaning in the present.” See Renee Trilling, The
Aesthetics of Nostalgia: Historical Representation in Old English Verse (Toronto:
University of Toronto Press, 2009), 6. Further Susan Stewart claims that “nostalgia is a
sadness without an object” and that this sadness drives a need to recreate what is lost,
though with inevitable inauthenticity (23). Both thus suggest that the longing for the
material past and an impossible physical connection to it is what drives nostalgic writing.
See Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir,

and with socially encoded value – the moment that the object fails to behave the way that
the user expects or understands. Brown states that

we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us:
when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their
flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and
exhibition, has been arrested, how-ever momentarily. The story of objects
asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the
human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than
a particular subject-object relation.140

It is these very moments in Malory when his knights encounter ‘things’ that they cannot
ignore, and instead they must analyze and gloss and respond to them, that the struggle for
Malory is clearest. These ‘things’ are frequently difficult to gloss, are often misglossed
by the knights themselves, and, most importantly, can often be interpreted through
multiple lenses with only one lens actually being correct – an issue particularly
significant to the Grail quest.141 The characters frequently fail in their behavior and their
quests when they pick the wrong lens through which to view the world and analyze these
things – when they pick the wrong “socially-encoded value” and see an object as the
wrong ‘thing.’ Similarly the knights sometimes fail due to an inability to understand the
basic importance or even use of an object. I argue, then, that this pattern of problematic
‘things’ demonstrates Malory’s belief that the chivalric system has failed to properly
provide a viable and sustainable worldview for its adherents. When using the chivalric
code to understand the world around them, Malory’s knights inevitably fail. Where


141 There is an absolute glut of objects throughout the entirety of the whole Le Morte
Darthur that I could be looking at that work with the following reading, but in some
attempt to narrow my reading down to a reasonable chapter, I am only focusing on the
Grail Quest and the Death of Arthur with some brief mentions of other particularly
interesting passages from other sections.
Arthurian objects that had complicated but understandable signification helped found community and identity in the twelfth century, Arthurian ‘things’ can only unravel a fifteenth-century community that is firmly established but chaotic.

In addition to these misglossed objects – which I will look at in the Grail Quest as well as the concluding two tales of the book – there is also a striking connection between Malorian objects and loss that I will be examining as well. It is the misglossing of objects thanks to the failure of the chivalric value system that directly leads to the loss of these objects. This loss is demonstrated through a sudden lack of objects in the final tale – this includes grave robbing, the return of Excalibur to the lake, and the absence of Arthur’s body itself – but it also is marked throughout the physical text as a whole in the form of marginalia acting as grave markers that are littered throughout the Winchester manuscript, the only extant copy of the work. Indeed, the most notable object that does appear in the tale’s conclusion is one that does not belong – Mordred’s ‘great guns’ that, as cannons, are anachronistic monstrosities that serve only to even further damage Camelot and disrupt Malory’s connection to the chivalric past.

Anachronism is where I want to begin my discussion of Malory and Le Morte Darthur and do so through a reading of the Grail Quest. Anachronism is a useful concept for analysis of Malory, here, for he is often discussed as being belated compared to the age of Arthur. I would argue, though, that Malory is even further belated when compared to the medieval age itself. From one standpoint this makes Malory ahead of his time – Renaissance authors would of course make similar rhetorical moves – but from perhaps a more interesting standpoint this makes Malory an anachronism within his own time – a concept that I would like to borrow from Caroline Dinshaw’s recent discussion of
Margery Kempe. Dinshaw places Kempe out of her own time by saying that she was a living anachronism, and that her worldview most closely synced up with the female mystics of a century earlier, arguing that Kempe was “living in the wrong century and a generation late”¹⁴² – a phrase which I argue could as easily apply to Malory. Dinshaw continues her discussion by saying that Kempe’s affective piety stems from her sense of actually feeling like she existed in two times at once – her own time and the coexisting time of all biblical events – which she terms “multiple temporalities” or “expanded temporality”.¹⁴³ Kempe so actively wept for Christ because his suffering, for her, was still occurring. Dinshaw concludes that multiple or expanded temporalities could account for much of Kempe’s worldview and indeed the worldviews of many or even most medieval Christians when it came to their religious beliefs.¹⁴⁴

I would like to take this concept of multiple temporalities and apply it to Malory and his own quite peculiar world-view and sense of time. While Malory does not concern himself with the issue of cyclical or coexisting time from a Christian standpoint, this concept works equally for him from a secular point of view. He too, I argue, is an anachronism living generations too late and – at least emotionally – living in multiple temporalities. Moreover, I would also like to extend the idea of anachronism to the characters of Arthur and Lancelot in Malory’s text. Arthur, like Malory himself, is an anachronism in his own world. He frequently voices Malory’s own elegiac laments for

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¹⁴³ Ibid.

the dying of the age and often is prophetic as to the inevitable fall of Camelot in a way that someone truly of his own time could not be.

Of course in some ways Malory is arguably quite medieval in his worldview. The entirety of *Le Morte Darthur* offers a near constant variety of ‘things’ to be glossed, many of which are highly reminiscent of the Arthurian relics of Chapter Two in that they come bearing inscriptions, often written in the first person, that give them borderline status between animate and inanimate. These objects precisely fit that model as they are not only religious or mystical objects that seem to have power and free will, but they also have inscriptions that allow them to actually express themselves.

Yet, the major difference here between Malory and his earlier counterparts is that while there was previously only one obviously correct way to interpret a relic or a relic-like object – through a holy lens – in *Le Morte Darthur* the issue is that there are multiple glosses for each object that seem correct, though only one actually is at any given time. For much of the book, an interpretation based on the rules of chivalry is the correct lens through which to gloss these objects. However, there are times scattered throughout the text when the chivalric lens just plainly fails the knights, often resulting in accidental fratricide (or near-fratricide) or other acts of violence, most notably in the Tale of Balin and Balan, which I will discuss further on.

I would like, for now, to focus on the Grail Quest, where the question of correct interpretive abilities becomes the very concern of the tale. During the Grail Quest, the chivalric lens suddenly ceases to function entirely as a mode of interpretation, while a heavenly interpretation takes precedence and demonstrates the inherent flaws in the prior system. In choosing between these two options throughout the Grail Quest, the earthly
knights suddenly start to fail in ways that they never had in previous tales. These failures, I argue, demonstrate both Malory’s condemnation of the chivalric system as ultimately being flawed, but the elegiac, belated tone to the tale also speaks to Malory’s deep desire that it were not so.

It is with this in mind that I want to begin by examining the “mervaylous thynge[s]” of Malory’s Pentecostal Round Table that all suddenly take on the ability to speak for themselves in the tale of the Sankgreal.\textsuperscript{145} While objects throughout the tale have this ability, it is first seen when each seat of the round table is “all aboute wretyn with golde lettirs” including the Sege Perelous which says “Foure hondred wyntir and foure and fyfty acomplyuysshed after the Passion of Oure Lorde Jesu Cryst oughte thys siege to be fulfilled.”\textsuperscript{146} After the knights all see this inscription, Lancelot requests that the seat be covered so that “none of thes lettirs were sene thys day tyll that he be com that ought to enchyve thys adventure.”\textsuperscript{147} Here, there is an emphasis placed on seeing the words of this marvel and on concealing this knowledge from anyone who would try to achieve this marvel incorrectly.

In addition to the seats of the Round Table speaking for themselves, the sword in the stone floats by moments later and also has an inscription.\textsuperscript{148} On the pommel of the sword is an inscription: “Never shall man take me hense but only he by whos syde I

\textsuperscript{145} Malory, 497.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 498.

\textsuperscript{148} The sword in the stone being Balin’s sword meant for Galahad rather than the sword in the stone and anvil that Arthur achieves in order to become king.
ought to honge: and he shall be the best knight of the worlde."\textsuperscript{149} Initially, Arthur mistakenly believes one of his knights – Lancelot or Gawain – to be this “best knight” but each fails in removing the sword, proving that this assumption is untrue. Arthur is still working by the definition of “best knight” that has existed throughout the rest of Le Morte Darthur up until this point – a definition based on the chivalric system. It is only when Galahad comes along that both the Sege Perelous and the sword in the stone cede to him as this best knight. The Sege Perelous itself announces that it belongs to Galahad with a new inscription, manifesting the words “thys ys the syege of Sir Galahad, the Hawte Prynce.”\textsuperscript{150} Notably, it is Galahad himself who interprets correctly that he alone is meant for the Sege Perelous – Arthur is unable to guess this on his own.

After Galahad achieves this adventure by successfully sitting in the Sege Perelous, Arthur then brings him to the sword. Arthur interprets the sword as a “grete mervayle as ever [he] sawe” but Galahad corrects his reading of the sword by saying that “hit ys no mervayle” and explains that the sword was not meant for either Lancelot or Gawain, saying it “ys nat theirs but myne” upon which he easily draws the sword for himself.\textsuperscript{151} As such, there is a relationship between the sword and its ability to show the truth of the world, surprisingly similar to the relationships that existed for the relics of Chapter Two. Its physical appearance - “a fayre ryche swerde” that is staked in “rede marbyll” with a pommel that was “of precious stonys wrought” – speaks to the fact that it is precious – and the fact that its appearance is given such a long description shows that

\textsuperscript{149} Malory., 498.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 500.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 501.
its physicality is not insignificant to Malory - while the words on the sword itself seem to
proclaim clearly that its preciousness is actually of a different standard that than of
simply physical appearance. Finally, it takes the correct interpreter to understand the
code by which these words must be explicated. Only Galahad, for whom the sword was
meant, has the proper understanding of the world in order to explain the words inscribed.
Kenneth J. Tiller argues that, to Galahad, everything around him “become[s] signifiers of
something else as soon as he sees them.” But beyond that Tiller explains it is an “elusive
signification system” that only Galahad truly understands.\footnote{Kenneth J. Tiller, “So
preciously coverde: Malory’s Hermeneutic Quest of the Sankgreal,” \textit{Arthuriana} 13, no
3 (Fall 2003), 86.} While Arthur continues to
interpret the world through the standards of an earthly, chivalric king – standards that up
until that point in the text have been correct – Galahad knows that for this tale heavenly
and earthly standards will be shown to be in harsh contrast to each other.

Indeed, up until this point in the overall text, Lancelot has been repeatedly
referred to as the best knight in the world. When the Round Table, save Galahad and
Lancelot, are confused as to this change in status, it takes a damsel sent from Nacien the
hermit to explain that, while Galahad is now the best knight in the world, Lancelot was
indeed the best of any before “and [is] yet, of ony synfull man of the worlde.”\footnote{Ibid.}
Again, the standards have changed from essentially the best knight among those who are sinful
humans, to a new saintly sinless standard that only Galahad can achieve. A new
worldview is suddenly and overwhelmingly thrust upon the knights, and only one person
is equipped to understand it. Again, I read this as a demonstration of Malory’s own
feeling of belatedness and of multiple temporalities— he wants this chivalric social code that he sees as beautiful and glorious to continue to function, but is left with the knowledge that, both in the real world of his own time and within the story that he writes, the flaws in this system will inevitably lead to violence and chaos. The presence of Galahad forces those around him to both examine the flaws of the chivalric system and to suddenly move away from it. The result is confusion and chaos.

As such, this split between Galahad’s ability to gloss objects during the Grail Quest and the failure of other knights to do so is arguably, to Malory, the very point of the Quest. Tiller argues that the Grail Quest is specifically one exploring “multiple modes” of understanding and “the difficulty of uncovering veiled meaning.” While Tiller sees the quest as one of hermeneutics and literary understanding, his thesis holds true for an object-based lens as well. Tiller argues that throughout the quest the

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154 The goal, I would argue, is not religious in nature, at least not primarily. Eugene Vivaner famously argued that while Malory felt compelled to include the Grail Quest from his sources that his primary goal was “to secularize the Grail theme as much as the story will allow” (Vivaner 3:1535). A multitude of critics have all followed this theory arguing in various ways either that Malory actively minimizes the Christian elements compared to his sources or that alternatively he at least de-emphasizes them whenever possible. Sandra Ness Ihle argues that the Grail Quest in Malory is massively secularized and simplified. See Ihle, Malory’s Grail Quest: Invention and Adaptation in Medieval Prose Romance (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). K. S. Whetter goes as far as to argue that most of the Grail knights, “like Lancelot before them, are simply paying lip service to religion.” See Whetter, “Malory’s Secular Arthuriad,” in Malory and Christianity, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. and Janet Jesmok (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2013) 75. Even many critics that do see religious themes as a main concern for Malory still argue for what Fiona Tolhurst calls a “secularized salvation” which she believes allows for less rigorous and alternative modes of salvation and would thus be more relatable to a fifteenth century audience. See Tolhurst “Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Secularized Salvation in Le Morte Darthur,” in Malory and Christianity, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. and Janet Jesmok (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2013), 148.

155 Tiller, “So preciously coverde,” 84.
“possibility of interpreting signs becomes increasingly problematic” and that “failed reading” is the primary fault of the knights.\textsuperscript{156}

Dorsey Armstrong further argues that Galahad’s presence in the Grail Quest “ironically threatens [the] very wholeness [of the Round Table] through his spiritual superiority to other knights.” Armstrong clarifies that even when the Grail Quest concludes that Galahad has “irrevocably changed the community” by challenging the “values and code of conduct by which the chivalric society has sought to define and organize itself.”\textsuperscript{157} The Grail Quest, she argues, destabilizes the Round Table because “the rules of knighthood that have served the community so well up to this point are insufficient and inappropriate.”\textsuperscript{158} Like in Malory’s own era itself, the knights of the Round Table, post-Galahad, are suddenly left with a value system that they recognize as too flawed and violent to function, but have no new alternative that they yet can comprehend either.

Arthur’s reaction to the Grail Quest confirms both the destabilizing power of the Quest as well as Arthur’s anachronistic role that mirrors Malory’s own position and beliefs. Upon having Galahad achieve the Sege Perelous and hearing that the Sankgreal had appeared and fed all of the Round Table, Arthur’s immediate reaction is to mourn and give an elegiac lament. Arthur does not even momentarily celebrate this amazing

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 85.

\textsuperscript{157} Dorsey Armstrong, “The (Non-) Christian Knight in Malory: A Contradiction in Terms?” \textit{Arthuriana} 16, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 31-2.

marvel, the idea of a new grand quest, nor the religious power of the experience. Instead, the very first words out of his mouth are his regret that “nevyr shall I se you agayne hole togydirs” after this quest. Arthur then demands a tournament be held before the quest begins so that “aftir [their] dethe[s] men may speke of hit that such good knyghtes were here, such a day, hole togydirs.” Arthur repeats the words “whole together” throughout this lament, linguistically signifying the assured rupture of unity that he knows is now coming. He then laments twice more before the Grail quest begins, repeating his assumption that the Round Table will never again be whole after the quest. First, in a lament to Gawain Arthur complains that “ye have bereauffte me the fayryst and the trewyst of knyghthode that ever was sene togydir in ony realme of the world. For whan they departe frome hense, I am sure they all shall never mete more togydir in thys worlde…And so hit forthynkith me nat a litill, for I have loved them as well as my lyff, wherefore hit shall greve me right sore” all the while “the teerys felle in hys yen.” Shortly after Arthur, who is unable to sleep that “night for sorrow,” repeats the complaint a final time, this time to both Gawain and Lancelot, and again the reader is told that as Arthur laments the Grail Quest, “tearys began to renne downe by hys vysayge.”

These repeated passages highlight Arthur’s displeasure at the Grail Quest, as well as his conviction that the Grail Quest specifically is what will cause the end of the Round Table. As such, Arthur essentially begins to mourn the loss of this ideal moment in British history before it even has come to pass, and even predicts the nostalgia and lament

159 Malory, 502.

160 Ibid., 503-4.

161 Ibid., 504-5.
that those in the future – Malory and his readers – will feel. This is an important moment because, while the Round Table does not truly dissolve until after the war, as far as Arthur is concerned it is this moment that marks the end of Camelot and the start of the lament for what it was. It is the moment when the chivalric system begins to have its flaws finally revealed, and when objects can no longer be correctly glossed or achieved using its code that Arthur laments.

Indeed, the Grail Quest ends up not being so much a glorious achievement for the majority of the knights as it is instead a study in being denied the attainment of an object. Galahad, of course, achieves the Grail but only does so because he, as the reader is informed repeatedly, is not an “earthly” man and therefore can achieve something that is not truly an earthly object. When Galahad actually achieves the Grail, it is a moment that is bizarrely without physical description. The reader is only told that there was a “table of sylver – whereupon the Sankgreall was.” There is no other physical description of the Grail other than its being called a vessel and a “holy dysshe” later in the same scene.\(^{162}\) And while Galahad is told that he must “beare … thys holy vessell,” there is no description of him actually doing so. Instead, Galahad shortly after ascends directly when his soul by “a grete multitude of angels bare hit up to hevyn”, again demonstrating his lack of corporality.\(^{163}\) Indeed, Field argues that this linguistic “elusiveness” is the key characteristic of Malory’s Grail. He notes that over the first seven references to the Grail that the reader finds out almost nothing about it and that when the reader does finally get a physical description of it, that the description is so minimal that it “suggests that its

\(^{162}\) Ibid., 582-3.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 586.
physical appearance is unimportant.”\textsuperscript{164} Similarly, Tiller argues that while the Grail must literally have a material form at some point, “its very materiality renders it more difficult to understand because the literal and allegorical levels operate simultaneously. The Grail’s materiality proves a deceptive cover for its ultimate inscrutability.”\textsuperscript{165}

On the other hand, Lancelot, unlike Galahad, is repeatedly marked in the Grail Quest as being “earthly” – not only during the initial glossing of Galahad’s sword, but throughout the rest of the tale as well. The term is used excessively throughout the quest, but most specifically in cases of outsiders glossing the events of the quest for Lancelot. In addition to the maiden of the hermitage’s gloss of Lancelot in relationship to Galahad’s sword, there is a later hermit that explains a vision that Lancelot had of great holy knights and kings. He tells Lancelot that Galahad is meant to “passe all maner of erthely knyghtes” and that as such Lancelot belongs in a whole different, ‘earthly’ category than him. The hermit continues that Lancelot ought to “thanke God more than ony othir man lyvyng, for of a sinner erthely [he] hast no pere as in knyghthode, nother never shall have.”\textsuperscript{166} Similarly, an anchorite that Lancelot comes upon soon after tells him that “as longe as [he] were knyght of erthly knyghthode, [he] were the moste mervayloust man of the worlde, and the moste adventurest.” But now that he must be “sette amonge the knyghthis of hevynly adventures” he can no longer compare.\textsuperscript{167}


\textsuperscript{165} Tiller, “So preciousely coverde,” 92.

\textsuperscript{166} Malory, 535.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 537.
Malory is thus obsessively marking Lancelot as being far more corporeal and worldly, and physically oriented than Galahad and the other heavenly knights – not only in terms of his physical sin of being with Guinevere but in general how the reader is supposed to interpret him in the context of the Grail Quest. Even Lancelot’s penance over the course of the Grail Quest is one marked by a physical experience: wearing a “hayre” shirt next to his “skynne” as a method of atonement. Thus, while Galahad is concerned with achieving the Grail on a spiritual level, Lancelot’s experience with the Grail is a wholly physical one. He attempts to literally see the Grail rather than come to a religious experience with it. In essence, the difference between Lancelot and Galahad’s experiences with the Grail is the distinction that Bill Brown makes between objects and things: for Lancelot, the Grail is a material object that he needs to physically obtain – it has no secondary non-physical meaning for him. Galahad, on the other hand, views the Grail truly as a thing – it is imbued with meaning and purpose that he sees as far more important than a mere physical vessel. Indeed, when Lancelot manages to get as far as seeing “the holy vessel coverde with rede samite,” he tries to directly approach the vessel to physically interact with it and is immediately smote down, such that he “loste the power of hys body, and hys hyrynge and syght.” His final penance for wanting a physical thing is a physical punishment.

Lancelot thus comes extremely close to achieving the Grail on the physical level due to his proximity to the vessel, and yet is in the end brutally and bodily denied it. This seems, at first, a critique of Lancelot, as the hermit who helps him after this incident

168 Ibid., 533.

169 Ibid., 576-7.
essentially tells him that this bodily harm will last him twenty-four days to pay for his twenty-four years of sinning with Guinevere. Yet, I would argue that much of Lancelot’s ‘sin,’ here, is that he essentially misjudges the quest itself as one that is physical and earthly, and thus one that he can even participate in at all. He has been told repeatedly up until this point that he is the best earthly knight of the world, but in the end this quest is simply not earthly, and so he cannot achieve a ‘thing’ during it.

Indeed, I would argue that this moment is actually meant to show this same truth to the reader: Lancelot is not meant to be judged on the same scale, or even through the same lens, as Galahad or the other heavenly knights. So while it is true that Lancelot essentially fails the Grail Quest at this point, Malory constantly tries to mitigate the issue by reiterating how the reader is meant to be interpreting these events. Lancelot is an earthly knight who failed a heavenly quest by believing that it was earthly, but the reader is reminded constantly that this is not how they should think of these events. To make this even clearer, Malory adds a passage that is unique to the Morte in which a hermit explains that Lancelot shall “dye right an holy man, and no doubte he hath no felow of none erthly synfull man lyvyng.” Therefore, Malory tells us, while Lancelot may have failed at being a heavenly knight, he is still the best earthly knight to ever live, and that we as readers should continue to hold his behavior up as the standard for all contemporary, earthly aristocrats, mourning for the loss of Lancelot’s time and social code, despite its clear flaws.

Further, it seems that the loss of the earthly, chivalric, medieval past is what Malory is most lamenting throughout this otherwise religious tale. While the Grail may

\footnotetext{170}{Ibid., 543.}
be unrecoverable, it is never the Grail itself that Malory, nor any other character in this episode, mourns for – it is for the Round Table and, ultimately, the medieval age, as he laments the new system that is going to unseat Lancelot as best of the best and scatter the knights away from Camelot. While this new system reveals the flaws of chivalry and of the medieval era, these are flaws that Malory constantly tries to mitigate and wish away despite his knowledge that they cannot be erased. Here, his belated position that puts him in multiple time periods essentially leaves him once again with more knowledge than he wants. He knows the chivalric system will fail horribly both in the world of Arthur and in his own time, and yet he desperately wishes to try to contain that failure in his book for as long as possible, glorifying Lancelot and his world despite their flaws.

The tale concludes by the narrator giving a seemingly random detail: that when the few remaining Grail knights meet back up together, they each tell the others the “adventures of the Sangreall that he had sene. And all thys was made in grete bookes, and put up in almeryes at Salysbury.”\textsuperscript{171} This moment is one of the very few of the entire text that tells us what happened after the fact, or in Malory’s contemporary time. Interestingly, this unique moment is essentially telling Malory’s readers that, while the objects of this chivalric past have been lost, there is one type of object that has partially rescued and saved this otherwise lost time: books – just like the one that Malory writes.

The power of the written text, then, is something that Malory hints will help save what is left of the medieval past, as well as allow his contemporary reader to feel a connection to this lost time – though it is arguably also the one way that they will understand the failure of this time and of their own. By again evoking the power of the

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 587.
written word and of physical books themselves, Malory here demonstrates some of the same theoretical moves made by later antiquarian and Renaissance writers in their own attempts to revitalize interest in the medieval era. In doing so, Malory again marks himself as being a man of multiple temporalities, and further does what he can to compel his readers to feel this same sensation. By mentioning where his readers can track down more texts from this era, he is marking his readers as being of this new and different age – one where they can only find these stories in a book – but he is also telling them specifically how to pursue their own feelings of anachronism and how to connect to a different era.

I would argue that Malory routinely forces the reader to feel this sensation of existing across multiple temporalities, and to experience the world of these knights in more complicated ways from a temporal standpoint. *Le Morte Darthur* itself is not written in sequential order, but is instead structured overall for thematic purposes. Further, the reader is often confronted with objects that they know more about than the knights do themselves, due to what is essentially the reader’s own temporal superiority. For example, the very first object that is encountered by any of the knights during the Grail Quest is Galahad’s soon-to-be-acquired shield. Again, the shield is glossed as not simply an object, but as a sign – as a monk explains, his shield “oughte nat to be honged aboute the nek of no knyght but he be the worthiest knyght of the worlde.”

\[172\] Galahad, of course, now fits this description and is easily able to claim the shield. However, the history of the shield – and, indeed, its physical appearance – tell even more of the story. The shield, the reader is told, came from King Evelake, who bore the shield when he

\[172\] Ibid., 506.
encountered Joseph of Aramathea and used the image on the shield to protect himself in battle. The image on the shield: none other than a red cross, painted with the blood of Joseph of Aramathea, on a white background. King Evelake would carry the shield and have the image of the cross covered with cloth most of the time, but when “he was in the grettist perell he lett put awey the cloth” and his enemies would be “discomfite” by the image.\(^{173}\)

While Malory gives a long explanation of the history of Galahad’s shield, tying it to a biblical history and lineage, what he does not specifically tell the reader is what happens to the shield in the future. However, every reader of the text would have known exactly what the shield was, and what eventually happened to it, as the shield ultimately would belong to Saint George, the dragon-slaying patron saint of England. The symbol from his shield was, by Malory’s time, also an English emblem (sometimes already used as a flag) and was the sign of the English crusaders. For later readers of *Le Morte Darthur* in the Renaissance, this symbol would be easily recognized as having become the official English national flag and, as I will address in Chapter Five, the shield that eventually belongs to Spenser’s Redcrosse Knight. This meta-knowledge, which, interestingly, only increases for the reader over time even until the present day, accomplishes two important tasks simultaneously and, I argue, most clearly demonstrates the ways in which Malory utilizes objects to play with his readers’ experience of time and nationalism in his work.

The shield is an object that unto itself has no real value other than its literal ability to protect a user. Of course, the symbol on the shield, being a cross, instantly gains

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\(^{173}\) Ibid., 508.
additional biblical significance. However, the knights who encounter the shield need someone to gloss the further meaning of this particular shield to determine why this precise object is actually a ‘thing’ and has additional value, both in its form and its image. Yet in this case, just as with Morgan Le Fey’s shield that depicts an image of Lancelot and Guinevere together – an image that only the reader is able to gloss when it appears – the reader is placed in a position of knowing much more about this ‘thing’ than the knights possibly can. They know the value of the shield before Galahad ever does, and they know more about its future than he ever will.

However, despite having knowledge much more complete than Galahad’s, the reader is still being put in a position of inferiority to him since, in the end, he is the best heavenly knight, and is able to earn the shield while living in this glorious past. Moreover, Galahad is still, in nearly all other cases when it comes to glossing the objects around him, far superior to anyone else including the reader. Martin Shichtman argues that “Malory’s reader does not share with Galahad a moment of understanding; in fact, the reader can only stand in awe of that which Galahad has already mastered. There is, then, for the reader, a feeling of being left behind, of being somehow inadequate to the monumental task of interpretation.”  

Further, even though the reader does on this lone occasion have the advantage over Galahad when it comes to understanding his shield, they are also unable to physically possess the shield, or ever genuinely experience this past era.

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In addition to Galahad’s and Morgan’s shields, the reader experiences the side effects of Malory’s multiple temporalities in a variety of other ways throughout the text. Indeed, the physical text itself, in the case of the Winchester manuscript, adds to this very sensation, just as Malory hints during the conclusion to the Grail Quest. Like Gerald of Wales’ hermit Meilyr, who experienced as much knowledge from the physicality of a book itself as from its words, the reader of the Winchester manuscript would have also gotten knowledge from their physical experience with the text. For example, in the manuscript, the very next thing that the Grail knights encounter after Galahad’s shield is a crossroads that is marked with a literal cross that bears an inscription. Like the Sege Perelous and the sword in the stone, the cross comes bearing a cryptic inscription, which, in this case, gives a warning to the knights of the dangers of each path of the crossroads, specifically as it relates to their worthiness. However, it is not this inscription that interests me, but rather the physical page of the Winchester manuscript itself, which has a red ink drawing of the cross itself in the margin. The appearance of this cross marks the official start to the Grail Quest, as Galahad is now equipped with his sword and shield and is about to set off when he comes to this crossroads. The reader then, too, is being asked to physically experience this marker as they begin the journey of reading the quest.

While it is unclear whether or not the drawing is a scribal addition or part of Malory’s original design, Thomas Crofts argues the Winchester’s rubrication and marginalia as a whole “were in all likelihood carried over from that manuscript’s exemplar and committed to the pages of the manuscript roughly at the time of its
Thus, the marginalia of the Winchester manuscript and the cross in particular, I would argue, are part of a larger intended scheme, and whichever scribe or planner chose to include it wanted the reader at this point to have a more physically interactive experience with the text and the objects within it. The cross is drawn with much more detail than textually described, and is what Stephen H. A. Shepherd calls a “graded” or “Calvary” cross, which he notes is meant to “represent the three graces of Faith, Hope, and Charity, as well as – perhaps most significant for the story of the Grail Quest – the process of death, resurrection, and ascension.” Therefore, the reader adds to their interpretation of the cross by knowing it has been drawn in this particular form and, as such, the person who chose to include this marginal drawing is giving the reader more information on how to gloss the meaning of this sign beyond the cross’s own words.

Additionally, I would like to approach the image of the cross not as an illustration or marginal drawing, but instead as an object, and additionally to discuss an element of the temporal experience that Carolyn Dinshaw touches upon but never fully explores – the physical aspect to an expanded sense of time. She calls on Foucault, who describes in his “Lives of Infamous Men” the experience of finding archives from the past and having a physical reaction to interacting with documents and other objects, saying that such a reaction is caused from experiencing “an expanded now in which past touches present,

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176 Shepherd in his notes on Malory, 510.
making a 'physical' impression."¹⁷⁷ It is the physical objects that, for Foucault, suddenly force him to feel as if he is experiencing the past in a literal way – feeling the multiple temporalities that Kempe found herself always juggling. Foucault himself describes the experience of encountering such documents as creating a “resonance” that he experienced for years after because of the “intensity” of the objects themselves. Indeed, despite the majority of the items that he was using being written documents, Foucault still understands them to be powerful objects rather than just text, calling the reaction that he had to them a “physical” one which “stirred more fibers within [him]” than he ever experienced from just text alone.¹⁷⁸ While Dinshaw mentions this anecdote, she never fully explores how the physical aspect of this experience is arguably the key element to it – a concept that is demonstrated here by the physicality of the Winchester manuscript.

Thus, when the reader comes to this cross in the margin, I argue that the reader experiences, like Foucault, the resonance of multiple temporalities. The reader encounters the cross and suddenly feels themselves existing in that same time and place as the knights, about to begin this same journey, posing to themselves the same question that the knights are being asked. The reader, then, is not just given more information in glossing the cross, but made to feel the experience of the encounter – feeling that same “intensity” that Foucault describes when encountering objects from the past.¹⁷⁹


¹⁷⁹ Ibid.
No matter who chose to include this marginalia, whether it was Malory himself or a later scribe, this instance is significant in the Winchester manuscript in that it marks a need to connect the reader physically to this moment and this particular object. The reader feels themselves in both times, knowing on one hand of Arthur’s earlier warning that this is the beginning of the end, and yet briefly transported back to reclaim that time. This same effect is indeed felt throughout the entirety of the Winchester manuscript as there are repeated “death-and-burial sequence[s]” throughout the text in which the deaths of the knights are consistently signaled in the margin, denoted by a shield that surrounds text glossing the event - shields that visually read as almost tomb-like markers.\textsuperscript{180} Again, the experience of reading the text becomes more physical and visceral because of the \textit{mise en page} of the manuscript.

Most interestingly, these shields often mark the death of a knight at a point in the text before the death actually occurs and, much like Galahad’s literal shield, gives the reader a different temporal perspective and, therefore more knowledge than the characters themselves – perhaps even more knowledge than they want, given the sense of doom that it creates. Crofts notes, for example, that there is a marginal shield right when Arthur first meets with Lady of the Lake that notes that “here ys is a mencion of the Lady of the Laake, whan she asked Balyne le Saveage his hede.”\textsuperscript{181} This occurs prior to Balin’s introduction as a character at all – he does not appear until a few folios later – and instead is marked when the Lady appears with Excalibur for the first time, informing Arthur that she wants something in exchange for it. Crofts argues that the result of this marginal

\textsuperscript{180} Crofts, “Malory’s Moral Scribes,” 699.

\textsuperscript{181} Malory, \textit{Le Morte Darthur}, Winchester MS fol. 21r.
shield is that now that the “reader knows something Balin does not: that he is marked for
death.” Looking at the following Tale of Balin and Balan in fact serves generally as
another strong exemplar of a portion of Malory’s text that is concerned both with
physical objects and with the collapse of the medieval value system. While it comes very
early on, this tale of unintended fratricide and chaotic violence serves as an early warning
that there are flaws in the chivalric system and that this social code, however good or
well intended it may be, cannot sustain itself.

While the focus on objects and bodies in this tale – including the introduction of
Excalibur – are well documented, I would like to point out another of the marginal
shields from this section that highlights the physical aspect of the story and its temporal
play at work. In addition to this first shield describing the Lady of the Lake’s request for
Balin’s head, there are a number of other marginal shields littering this particular tale.
One of note occurs just as Balin is officially introduced for the first time. In this case, the
shield’s text is slightly more innocuous and mentions not death but instead “vertue &
manhode ys hyed wyth In the bodye.” Both Crofts and Field spend much time doing a
reading of this marginal note through ties to well-known exempla, concerned that the
note itself slightly contradicts the main text on the page. However, I would note that the
physical shield – the drawing itself – contains a much more striking element than the text
on the shield, an element that is somehow bizarrely overlooked in the course of previous
criticism: in this one case, and one case only, the shield also has a small disembodied
head drawn at its base. And while the head drawn here certainly could be in reference to

\[182\] Crofts, “Malory’s Moral Scribes,” 692.

\[183\] Malory, Winchester MS fol. 23r.
the quote contained therein, I would argue that the reader could not possibly ignore a disembodied head appearing next to Balin’s first official introduction, particularly since we have already been told in the previous marginal shield of the Lady of the Lake’s desire for his very head. By the time the Lady of the Lake actually asks for Balin’s head, the reader has been repeatedly reminded via these physical markers in the margins that Balin is in great danger of his head becoming just as disembodied as the drawing’s. As such, the reader is again put in a position where they know more than the knights themselves, and have a bizarre temporal perspective on the entire tale, one that highlights the feeling of doom. Like Malory, they are burdened with the knowledge of the failure of the knights and the chivalric code before any tragedy actually occurs.

While Balin does manage to evade the Lady of the Lake’s request for his head, the rest of his tale is certainly not a happy one, and the episode with the Lady of the Lake starts him down a long and tragic path, frequented by both misglossed objects and marginal shields marking the deaths of various knights. The tale concludes with the ultimate of misglossed objects, and possibly the worst failure of chivalry, when Balin and his brother Balan fight each other to the death due to the borrowing of armor that was not theirs, and therefore a resulting inability to recognize even each other. Malory thus demonstrates that even when only chivalry as a lens is being used to examine objects without a conflicting heavenly code to worry about, it will still fail. Chivalry is still a social code that requires knights to fight potentially to the death, and it hinges on no communication more meaningful than the reading of each other’s armor. Chivalry, Malory laments, will still fail all on its own.
Thus Balin, marked from death from before his own introduction, does in fact die tragically by the end of his tale, all precipitated by the Lady of the Lake’s request. While this is a relatively early and short tale, it features a high frequency of marginalia as well as foreshadows many of the more important elements of the book as a whole, including Balin’s Dolorous Stroke, which features later in the Grail Quest; an early reference to the Sankgreal itself that includes a marginal shield; as well as a final reference to Balin’s sword being placed in a stone to eventually become Galahad’s.

While the frequency of these marginal shields is particularly high in Balin’s story, they do appear throughout the book as a whole and continue to highlight the deaths of the knights by, as Crofts argues, serving essentially as their tombstones. Looking to the end of the text, we see that when Gawain is mortally wounded he is given the only shield or marginalia of the final book. While this shield is less visually complicated than those relating to Balin, it still plays with time in a not all together straightforward way. Instead, the shield describes Gawain writing a letter to Lancelot “at the tyme of his dethe.”

This is a bit tricky, for although Gawain is badly wounded at the time the shield appears, he survives for another full folio as he writes his letter before succumbing to his injuries. The marginal shield subtly confirms that Gawain’s wounds are indeed fatal and that, though he is still alive to write the letter, he will soon be dead.

Of a final note, while the shields overwhelmingly mark the deaths of knights throughout the entirety of the Winchester Manuscript, they do occasionally mark other moments. In the case of the Grail Quest, they mark deaths, visions, and, interestingly, moments of physical achievement. When Galahad pulls the sword from the stone, for

184 Malory, Winchester MS fol. 477r.
example, he is given a marginal shield marking the occasion and, surprisingly, when Lancelot, almost achieves the Grail, he is granted one as well. The marginal shield in Lancelot’s case notes “the significacion of the Sankgreal that ys called the holy vessel, the which appered to Sir Lancelot.” There is no shield given to Galahad when he actually achieves the Grail, nor when he ascends a few folios later. Instead, the marginal shields seem to favor the physical experiences of the knights, even highlighting Lancelot’s lesser – though clearly more physical – achievements over Galahad’s in the Grail Quest. Like Lancelot, and arguably like Malory himself, the marginal shields thus highlight a physical connection to the objects of the medieval past but also, through the focus on the deaths of the knights, on the loss of this past as well.

I would now like to turn to Le Morte Darthur’s concluding two books and examine the direct discussion of the loss of Arthur’s age, but also, more importantly, the loss of objects throughout the conclusion that marks the end of the Arthurian era and the ultimate failure of the chivalric code. Indeed, it is in the concluding two tales that the crisis of Malory’s era is most directly addressed, and that Malory’s clearest commentary and warnings as to the result of such anarchy and violence become manifest. Further, in these concluding tales Malory even breaks away from the narrative a handful of times to rant to his reader about these issues and to comment on what has gone wrong in his own era.

The first of these rants occurs during the May Passage, which, although not directly related to objects in any way, does contain one of Malory’s only direct

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185 Malory, Winchester MS fol. 351v.
186 Malory, Winchester MS fol. 401v.
commentaries on not just his own time period, but on Arthur’s as well. The May Passage, as scholars frequently call it, occurs during “The Tale of Lancelot and Guinevere,” and is the prelude to their being caught together by Mordred and Aggravayne. In essence, the May Passage is the beginning of the end. The passage begins as a seemingly traditional medieval poetic discussion of spring and the month of May, but quickly becomes something quite different. After explaining that May was a time of love, Malory starts essentially ranting about the morals of his own time, saying that

nowadayes men can nat love seven nyght but they muste have all their desyres. That love may nat endure by reson; for where they bethe sone accorded and hasty, heete sone keelyth. And ryght so faryth the love nowadayes, sone hote, sone colde; thys ys no stabylite. But the olde love was nat so; for men and women coude love togydiers seven yerys, and no lycoures lustis was betwyxte them – and than was love trouthe and faythefulnes. And so in lyke wyse was used such love in Kynge Arthurs dayes. Wherefore I lykken love nowadayes unto sommer and wynter; for, lyke as the one ys colde and the othir ys hote, so faryth love nowadays. And therefore all ye that be lovers, calle unto youre remembrance the monethe of May, lyke as ded Quene Gwenyver, for whom I make here a lytyll mencion, that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende.\(^{187}\)

This passage is an addition to Malory’s sources that is entirely his own, and it highlights some of the oddities of Malory’s opinions on his own era. As it is the passage that comes directly before Lancelot and Guinevere are caught together, one would think that there would be moralizations here, or perhaps even blame. But instead the passage highlights the fact that Malory does not blame the downfall of Camelot on the affair. Instead, Malory celebrates the affair as one that is indicative of how people lived during this earlier age of chivalry and better behavior. When Malory mentions Guinevere’s “good end,” he means that despite the sinfulness of her affair with Lancelot, she was saved after

her death and awarded an afterlife in heaven specifically because of her being a true, faithful lover to Lancelot. In a tale that ends with Guinevere’s mournful retirement to an abbey, this is a bold and new statement – one that is unique to Malory. The only condemnation involved in the passage is instead of the contemporary loss of chivalric values, which he believes to have lead those in his contemporary age to be fickle and badly behaved as lovers and in general. While this passage is free of objects, it does highlight the ways in which Malory uses tactics similar to what Maurice Keen describes as being common in fifteenth-century chivalric literature: nostalgia for a lost era, and condemnation of the current age in comparison to those of the past.

However, Malory’s second direct critique of his own age shows again how his rhetorical tactics are an amplification of such normal fifteenth-century standards, and how his condemnation of chivalry runs deeper than that of his contemporaries. The context of this critique is the early stages of the battle between Arthur and Mordred. During this battle, Malory makes some of his few direct references to London and, indeed, the Tower of London when he describes Guinevere hiding there from Mordred’s attempts to marry her.\textsuperscript{188} It is here where Malory also includes the most egregious literal anachronism of the work, while describing Mordred’s siege of the tower. Malory says that Mordred “made many assaults, and threw engynnes unto them, and shotte grete gunnes.”\textsuperscript{189} The engine and guns referenced here are, in fact, cannons – an innovation of Malory’s own time. Much has been made of these cannons, given their strange temporal status. Field argues that this is a reference to the Yorkist siege of the Lancastrian

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 679.

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
garrison at the Tower in 1460, which would have occurred during Malory’s living memory. Shepherd cautions that this could have either been a “pro-Lancastrian allegory or … simply an evocation of historical verisimilitude.”  However, I would argue that, whether or not this was meant to have any specific political overtones, historical verisimilitude is exactly what this is not.

At no other point in the entirety of *Le Morte Darthur* does Malory reference any tools of modern warfare. Guns and cannons are specifically never a part of the Arthurian past, and that is one element of what makes it so different from his present. Thus, these cannons, beyond any political implications, are significant specifically because they are anachronisms. Like Malory, they are objects of the Malory’s present day that do not belong in Arthur’s time, but have somehow found their way there regardless. These cannons thus further destabilize the reader’s sense of time, evoking the idea of multiple temporalities. In this way, they could make the past seem more real and more relevant – more tied to the Lancastrian present. Yet these cannons also seem distinctly wrong in this Arthurian era, monstrosities that do not belong, and are too violent and destructive for the chivalric age. By having Mordred – as the single most one-sided villain of the whole book – specifically wield these guns further offers a condemnation of the objects themselves, and of the era to which they truly belong. Yet the very fact that these cannons could exist in the Arthurian past also reminds Malory’s readers that perhaps the past was not all so different than the present in demonstrating the problems of chivalry.

Indeed, Malory follows this account of Mordred’s siege with a description of how the people in general turned on Arthur and accepted Mordred. Malory then rages against

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190 Shepard, 679, note 8.
this betrayal with his second direct comparison between the time periods, this time actually addressing his readers directly saying: “Lo, ye all Englysshen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was?”\textsuperscript{191} He then compares the political instability of his own era to that of Arthur’s betrayal by blaming the general population, saying that to turn on a great, noble lord or king who has done right by his people “was the olde custom and usages of thys londe; and men say that we of thys londe have nat yet loste that custom. Alas, thys ys a greate defaughte of us Englyshemen, for there may no thynge us please no terme.”\textsuperscript{192}

Thus Malory continues his trend of commenting on the English present by defending Lancelot and Arthur against their detractors, as well as by critiquing the behavior of his contemporaries, specifically when it comes to the infighting and poor behavior of the upper classes.\textsuperscript{193} Yet, unlike in the May Passage, Malory is also critiquing the general population of the English past as well. It is not just the men of his current age that turn against great lords, Malory tells us, but English men as a whole, even in the past, who do not behave correctly. For Malory, to his despair, in this case the past and present are not two distant and separate things – just as the cannons bring together the two time periods through the type of physical assault described, so too does the critique of those engaged in said warfare. And just as the cannons are clearly objects that do not truly belong, that are wrong and condemned, so too is it clear this type of

\textsuperscript{191} Malory, 680.

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid. Catherin Batt struggles with Malory’s direct moralization here given that when it came to Lancelot and Guinevere’s earlier tryst he “chooses ignorance” as a means of resisting making a moral judgment. See Batt, \textit{Malory’s Morte Darthur: Remaking Arthurian Tradition} (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 166.

\textsuperscript{193} And, as Shepherd notes, perhaps Malory himself, given the use of the word “we” and the situation that Malory found himself in given his apparent incarceration at the time. See 680, note 6.
behavior did not belong in a world of chivalry, and yet did. The fact that such behavior can exist despite the chivalric code brings about the fall of that world, just as it brings about social and political chaos in Malory’s time. That Malory’s chief villain was to use the non-chivalric and modern cannons of the contemporary age to incite bloodshed and infighting among the English thus falls exactly in line with Malory’s sociopolitical critique and outrage in this passage. Indeed, the focus specifically on in-fighting and personal betrayal from this passage falls in line with both of the very issues of the War of the Roses as a whole and also specifically the themes of *Le Morte Darthur* as they pertain to the failure of chivalry and its eventual devolution into civil war and violence.

Lisa Robeson claims that, throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, war as a whole seems distasteful to not only Malory but to Arthur and Lancelot as well, and is shown not gloriously, but instead as an “unfortunate unintentional result of the honorable practice of chivalry.”¹⁹⁴ Robeson argues that this is a distinct change from earlier versions of the Arthurian story, such as the French *Morte Artu*, in which Arthur is far more eager to engage in war.¹⁹⁵ Robeson argues that warfare for Malory is specifically marked as something that results not from just politics, but from failed personal relationships as governed by the chivalric system. Robeson claims that warfare in the fifteenth century indeed still had a mix of public politics and private feuds motivating their escalation, and that Malory even further “intensif[ies] the obfuscation of the distinction between public

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¹⁹⁵ Ibid.
and private.” Further, Robeson argues that, through this intensification, Malory tries to hide the realities of fifteenth-century warfare and the true causes of Camelot’s downfall, allowing blame to fall on a handful of individuals rather than the system as a whole, but allows that in the end there is still a “clear relationship between chivalric loyalty and warfare.” While Malory and the knights all blame themselves personally, Robeson contends, the true cause of warfare in Malory is “the systemic problems caused by the prevailing chivalric culture.” Yet where Robeson sees this as a moment of Malory attempting to hide the true causes of civil war, I would argue instead that the final war in *Le Morte Darthur* is instead exactly intended to show the reader these underlying causes. Rather than see Malory as a foolish medieval writer who is poorly attempting to hide the true pitfalls of his social code and failing to do so, instead I argue that Malory here specifically wants these failures to become evident despite his love of the chivalric past as a whole. Robeson argues that Mordred’s clear disdain for the chivalric code and use of the cannons signals that the true villain here is someone from outside the chivalric system. Yet as Robeson herself points out, the rhetoric of the wars between Arthur and Mordred and between Arthur and Lancelot are not all that different, and the failure of one hinges on the existence on the other. Further, Malory decries the individual lords who personally betray Arthur by siding with Mordred in this passage, rather than spending his time railing against Mordred himself. While Mordred clearly is a villain here, it is the

196 Ibid., 12.
197 Ibid.
198 Ibid., 22.
199 Ibid., 27.
betrayals of personal lords and kin that Malory most rages against. Again, much like the reality of the War of the Roses, the personal failures of correct social behavior have a wider impact on the grand scale of political wars – highlighted not as a distraction from the failures of chivalry, but in order to demonstrate them.

Yet while the cannons are a physical marker of Malory’s commentary, it is their appearance that marks the beginning of the end for the Round Table, and from this point on, the text becomes marked by an ever-increasing loss of objects. This lack of objects becomes particularly noticeable in the ending of the text, as the book until that point was filled with an overabundance of them. Arthur marks this moment of change by having an ubi sunt style lament and, as he sees nearly all of his knights lying dead around him, mourns “where ar all my noble knyghtes becom? Alas, that ever I shulde se thys doleful day! For now … I am com to myne end.”200 Wilfred L. Guerin argues that the tone of the final book is, on the whole, elegiac, and that, as the ubi sunt style lament suggests, “indicates circumstances not unlike those found in Old English poetry.” Guerin then cites W. P. Ker’s description of Old English elegy to describe Malory’s final book as focusing on “the transience and uncertainty of the world, the memory of past good fortune, and of things lost.”201 Fittingly, upon completing this lament, Arthur and Mordred mutually slay each other and there is then a sudden and rapid loss of objects.202

200 Malory, 685.


202 I would point out here that there is a major exception to this loss of objects: Gawain’s skull, which Malory notes is “in a chappell within Dover castell” where “yet all men may se the skulle of hym, and the same wounde is sene that Sir Launcelot gaff in batayle” (682).
The very first thing that occurs following Mordred’s death is that “pyllours and robbers” come in the moonlight to “robbe many a full noble knyght of brochys and bees and of many a good rynge and many a ryche juell. And who that were nat dede all oute, there they slewe them for their harneys and their ryches.” As such, the robbing and loss of precious objects that had signified the nobility of their bearers marks this most grievous moment in English history. Further, such behavior marks how quickly any sense of chivalry or even basic standards of moral behavior survive once Arthur has been wounded. The system fails almost instantly.

It is also specifically because of this plundering and loss of objects that Arthur becomes obsessed with having Sir Bedivere safely return Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake, rather than let it fall into the wrong hands. Bedivere fails to honor this request multiple times before he finally does manage to return the sword. What I find interesting is Bedivere’s reasoning for refusing Arthur’s dying command: he says at first to himself “if I throw thys ryche swerde in the water, thereof shall never com good, but harme and loss.” He then reasons out the same thing a second time with almost the same language after Arthur realizes that he has failed on the first request. When Arthur finally convinces him to return the sword, it is by saying that Bedivere is putting Arthur’s life in danger in exchange for the “ryches of thys swerde,” and asks him if he would truly for this “rych swerde se [him] dede.” When Bedivere finally returns the sword to the Lady

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203 Malory, 686.
204 Ibid., 687.
205 Ibid.
of the Lake, Arthur laments that Bedivere may have waited too long and that now Arthur may die, just before being ferried away by the three queens in their barge. By essentially not losing Excalibur quickly enough, Bedivere hastens the loss of Arthur himself – and by extension Camelot as well. Bedivere, focused totally on the physicality and richness of Excalibur, ignores the symbolic value of the object as a ‘thing’ and of the loss of the things it represents. Thus Bedivere not only represents one final failure of obedience to a lord or king and to the chivalric code, favoring treasure over loyalty, but he represents a final failure of the ability to correctly gloss things as well.

Bedivere’s encounter with the hermitage that contains Arthur’s supposed tomb directly follows this passage and similarly marks a loss, as well as the confusion regarding that loss. Bedivere comes to the hermitage to find out from the hermit that the previous night “a number of ladies … brought here a dede corse” and immediately Bedivere begins to lament that it was his “lorde Kynge Arthur which lyethe here gravyn in thys chapell.” However, neither Bedievere nor the reader ever actually encounters a corpse here – a strange moment for a tale that is otherwise overrun with them. The physical body is totally excised from the text, leaving the reader only with absence and loss. Indeed, the lack of a body is perhaps doubly effective, as the reader is told that the “ermyte knew nat in sertayne” that the body he had seen earlier was even that of Arthur.

Even the inscription from Arthur’s tomb is one of uncertainty, and the reader gets only a standard Arthurian explanation of doubt, common to the chronicles from Chapter

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206 Ibid., 688.
207 Ibid., 689.
Two, in which Malory says that he could “fynde no more wrytten in bokis that bene auctorysed, nothir more of the verry sertaynte of hys dethe harde I never rede” but that “some men say in many partys of Inglonde that Kynge Arthure ys nat dede, but had by the wyll of Oure Lorde jesu into another place; and men say that he shall com agayne, and he shall wynne the Holy Crosse. I woll nat say that [Arthur’s return will] be so; but rather I wolde sey here in thys worlde, he changed hys lyff. And many men say that there ys written upon the tumbe thys [vers]: Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam rexque futurus.”

Yet at the end of the book there is one object that remains: Lancelot’s body. Much has been made of the final description of his body and of the eulogy given by Ector. Catherine Batt notes that it takes months for Lancelot’s body to be interred, and argues that “while the very existence of Arthur’s corpse is in question, the narrative seems reluctant to part with Lancelot’s incorrupt body.” She takes this to again highlight Malory’s favoring of Lancelot over all others, and to highlight his desire to

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208 Ibid.

209 The constant use of objects and bodies as signs throughout Malory and have been well documented in the past by a variety of scholars. Karen Cherewatuk has excellently examined the problem of physical wounds as social indicators, while Catherine Batt, among others, has very productively examined bodies as signs in Malory. See Cherewatuk, “Pledging Troth in Malory’s ‘Tale of Sir Gareth,’” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101, no. 1 (2002): 19-40. See Batt, “Hand for Hand and Body for Body: Aspects of Malory’s Vocabulary of Identity and Integrity with Regard to Gareth and Lancelot,” *Modern Philology* 91, no. 3 (February 1994): 269-287.

value the chivalric system above all else, stating that Lancelot’s “physicality [is meant to be] our means of connection to the Arthurian world.”

Indeed, Sir Ector’s final lament for Lancelot frames his entire worth in terms of his earthly interaction with the physical world. Ector says to Lancelot that

thou were never matched of erthely knyghtes hande; and thou were the curtest kynght that ever bare shield; and thou were the truest frende to thy lovar that ever bestrade hors; and thou were the trewest lover of a synful man, that ever loved woman; and thou were the kyndest man that ever strake with swerde; and thou were the godelyest persone that ever cam emonge prées of kynghtes; and thou was the meekest man and the jentyllest that ever ete in halle emonge ladyes; and thou were the sternest kynght to thy mortal foo that ever put spere in the reste.

Lancelot is again described as being a great man in terms of behavior, but specifically in the lens of his worldly and physical interactions, which primarily revolve around the objects in the world that he encountered. He is not simply the “curtest knyght” but the “curtest knyght that ever bare shield.” It is his how he used his shield, his sword, and his spear that mark his legacy in the world. It is again these connected physical objects that help reiterate the worldview through which Malory had been judging Lancelot: an earthly one.

Yet I would like to take the evaluation of Lancelot’s body one step further, and to look at it as a ‘thing’ in addition to an object. In other words, the fact that Lancelot’s body exists as a final physical object in the Arthurian world matters, but it matters more so as a ‘thing’ that specifically has meaning due to its outward signs. On one hand, the final condition of Lancelot’s body is actually surprisingly hopeful: as Batt mentions, it takes a month for Lancelot’s body to be buried, which suggests a bizarre lack of decay as

211 Ibid., 178.

212 Malory, 696-697.
the body itself gives off “the swettest savour aboute hym that ever [the other knight’s] felte.” The lack of decay coupled with a sweet smell is a clear physical marker of saintliness. Like the body of the supposed real world Arthur, whose exhumation was discussed in Chapter Two, Lancelot’s body takes on the characteristics of saintliness that are normally reserved for the holy figures in hagiographies. Lancelot, despite his other failings, seemingly has ascended to heaven with the acceptance of a saint or holy man, a status achieved due to the physical, earthly qualities that he displayed. As such the final ‘thing’ of the tale – the only one remaining at all, in fact – reminds the reader that while there were flaws in the medieval Arthurian past – ones that when exploited and highlighted could erupt into the full scale chaos and violence of Malory’s era – there was something beautiful and valuable about that age as well.

Yet there is one other physical marker about Lancelot’s body that is surprisingly overlooked in the majority of Malorian scholarship – that is, what must be the result of the nature of Lancelot’s actual mode of death, starvation. Lancelot’s death comes about after he mourns upon the tomb of (most likely) Arthur and (definitely) Guinevere. Lancelot mourns so intensely that he “never after ete but lytel mete, nor drank, tyl he was dede; for than he seekened more and more, and dryed and dwyned awaye – for the Bysshop nor none of his felowes might not make hym to ete, and lytel he dranke, that he was waxen by a kybbet shorter than he was, that the peple coude not knowe him.”

Thus, Lancelot’s demise comes from literally a lack of physicality as he starves himself.

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213 Malory, 696. Guerin notes that the sweet smell is a new addition to Malory, and is not found in his sources. See Guerin, “‘The Tale of the Death of Arthur’: Catastrophe and Resolution,” 261.

214 Malory 695.
to death from mourning the loss of Arthur and Guinevere. Therefore, while Lancelot’s body may be indicative of his heavenly acceptance and of the glory of the chivalric age, it is also a body that is as incorporeal a corpse as possible – a body that cannot sustain itself – and is thus finally indicative of the loss the chivalric age as well. Lancelot arguably only achieves his saintliness in the end by trading away his physicality and exchanging chivalric ideals for heavenly concerns.

Much like chivalry as a system itself, which was failing even before the collapse of aristocratic values during the War of the Roses, so too was Lancelot’s body already nearly incorporeal even before his death. And so, while Malory did everything he could throughout *Le Morte Darthur* to champion both Lancelot and the chivalric past, in the end, both were lost alongside Arthur and Camelot. Indeed, while Malory may lament the loss of Lancelot, Arthur, and their past chivalric age, the very point of *Le Morte Darthur* was the inevitability of that loss. The War of the Roses may have exposed the weaknesses in the system for Malory’s own age, but through Galahad, the Grail Quest, and the misglossed and vanished Arthurian ‘things’ of his romance, Malory shows that chivalry as a system had been doomed to fail from the start.
CHAPTER 4

ANTIQUARIAN REIMAGINING OF ARTHURIAN ARTIFACTS AND THE (NON-)SACRED ENGLISH LANDSCAPE

The Arthurian legend and its objects continue to be key to British and, specifically, English nationalism in the early sixteenth century. The Tudor dynasty, like many of its predecessors, rested its claim to the English throne partially on Arthurian heritage. However, in examining the uses of the legend and its objects in the early Tudor era, I argue that the type of narrative framework surrounding the Arthurian story undergoes a theoretical shift during the reign of Henry VIII, together with both the English Reformation and the antiquarian movement – movements that will prove to have many interrelated, but not necessarily synchronized, goals. This shift, I argue, specifically pertains to how objects were evaluated and subsequently used as proof. Ruin and decay were now favored over unnatural preservation as a sign of validity, and objects were less frequently discussed in terms that blended animate and inanimate qualities. In concert with this shift, the Arthurian narrative is also reframed to highlight the historical and archeological elements to the story and downplay the religious and legendary aspects.

In order to examine both the causes for this shift and the resulting changes it made to the Arthurian narrative, I will be looking at the writer who arguably most exemplifies the connections between Henry VIII, the English Reformation, the antiquarian movement, and the Arthurian legend: John Leland. Leland famously ties these movements together, as he was the early antiquarian scholar that Henry VIII tasked with documenting and dismantling the monastic libraries of Britain. Leland also perhaps best
exemplifies the fundamental paradoxes that both the antiquarians and Henry himself experienced when dealing with the Arthurian past. For the antiquarians, their own movement was already a bit of a paradox in itself— it displayed both a conflicting desire to focus on science, humanism, and modernism in their scholarly methodology, and yet also demonstrated a need to focus that scholarship on anything ancient, ruined, and decidedly not-modern. The Arthurian story epitomized this concern, being a frequently doubted legendary story, yet at the same time being a vital part of British history, and a representation of an idealized past. For Henry, the paradox was even more fraught: the English Reformation, of which Henry was a chief supporter and beneficiary, relied heavily on iconoclasm and the destruction of any physical reminders of that very past, and yet it also depended on the Arthurian narrative that not only gave Henry power as a Tudor, but also granted him a tradition allowing British kings the right to autonomy and dominion over Rome.

The Arthurian story thus becomes a touchstone for the primary debate of this era: destruction versus preservation. Leland, who wrote extensively on Arthur in addition to his involvement in the dissolution of the monasteries, illustrates the ways in which both movements are torn between the two sides of this debate. Leland famously had a mental breakdown by the end of his life, a madness that has traditionally been associated with his inability to reconcile his love of the antiquarian past with the part he played in destroying the monastic libraries. However, there is little evidence that this is actually the cause of his breakdown—it seems to instead be a scholar’s romantic view, looking back on one of
their own. Instead, I would like to build on Jennifer Summit’s challenge against the “assumption that it was a historical moment of total, cataclysmic destruction on one hand or of ‘continuity’ on the other”, and expand on her argument that Leland’s efforts instead represent “a work of translation” that makes “the old world legible and meaningful to a new one.” Summit focuses primarily on the fluidity that Leland creates for a seemingly historical and stable landscape, looking at his discussion of place-names and rivers. Through this fluidity, she argues, the landscape can be translated into something new, bending the British understanding of the landscape rather than having to break it. I would like to extend her discussion to argue that, throughout Leland’s writings, he not only rewrites and translates the British landscape, but also uses the same antiquarian methods in order to bring the Arthurian story into this new age. In both cases, he demonstrates an antiquarian methodology that renders British history palatable, safe, and easily understood in a new era.

In some ways this is much in keeping with earlier Arthurian writers, for surely there were historical and archeological discussions in medieval works and religious content was not simply excised by the Renaissance. The shift is instead one of focus in which archeological elements that have always existed in the Arthurian story were now highlighted and rendered more important and the language in which they were discussed was modified. Similarly, continuity also exists in the idea that objects are key to

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unlocking historical and nationalistic meaning, as well as in the object-oriented philosophy that argues for a multitude of meaning and fluidity to that meaning. Indeed, Leland’s very task relies heavily on this fluidity and the hope that he could highlight new meaning in already much-discussed objects. Moreover, his project was quite similar on a basic level to that of previous Arthurian writers such as a Gerald of Wales and Geoffrey of Monmouth. Like their predecessors, Leland and the other antiquarian writers of his age were attempting to use objects to frame a coherent version of the Arthurian past that, despite being lost and distant, could still bolster belief in the contemporary British present. The primary difference was simply the qualities and meaning in these objects, of the many various meanings available, that Leland and his peers found most suitable to their needs.

Indeed, the focus on objects, while quite medieval itself, was also a primary principle of the antiquarian movement. The antiquarian movement as a whole was very much interested in object-based inquiry and in finding physical elements of the past – artifacts that they could both preserve and learn from. Daniel Woolf notes that early Tudor antiquarians were concerned both with the linguistic reconstruction of the past via documentation and with an object-based methodology, which was primarily grounded in peripatetic wandering “in search of scattered monuments, buried artefacts, and features of the landscape.”217 Indeed, Woolf’s definition of antiquarianism specifically separates them from historians based on the fact that their scholarship focused on “actual physical

remains of the past” and that their writings “dealt with things rather than men.” This includes a focus on both map-making and written chorography, as well as the physical gathering of the past via the collection of objects, assembly of libraries, and the visceral experience of traveling through the landscape. Additionally, while later antiquarians often were purely just collectors in search of novelty and rare items, the antiquarianism of this era, and specifically Leland, Bale, and the other famous antiquarian writers, were defined first by their scholarship and the ways in which these objects of the past coincided with their desire for knowledge. Further, Richard Helgerson has demonstrated that the antiquarian focus on physical objects from the past and the mapping of the country also created strong nationalistic ties. Antiquarians, he argues, felt a loyalty to the land itself, as well as to the nation as a physical entity. While the antiquarian movement did not come fully into its own until the seventeenth century, these key elements of the movement were already evident in the works of early Tudor-era antiquarians like Leland, his friend John Bale, and, later, William Camden.

As such, it makes sense that Leland would figure out how to rewrite the Arthurian past via an object-based archeological approach. He takes the very same Arthurian stories that Gerald of Wales framed through relic-based spirituality, and instead creates a version that relies on an archeological physicality – seeing and touching objects from the past in order to verify their authenticity, which in turn encourages the reader to replicate


219 Richard Helgerson, *The Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 126. Note that Helgerson also argues that by the time of Camden the antiquarians were so dedicated to the land itself that the crown was concerned that they were no longer loyal to any one king specifically.
the experience for themselves. Moreover, in Leland’s accounts, the most critical
distinction is that these objects are understood as artifacts rather than as relics. The relics
of Gerald’s writing had religious authority to back their veracity and power, and their
unblemished physical appearances were merely signifiers for greater spiritual meaning.
Alternatively, Leland’s artifacts are given their legitimacy via their connection to the
landscape around them, rendering their physical appearances exactly that: physical
markers of where they had originated, and of the decay that they had endured. While the
provenance of one of Gerald’s relics could be verified via a holy vision, Leland’s artifacts
were trustworthy because they had been found at a certain depth of an earthen wall,
corresponding to a specific historical period. Leland’s approach eventually allows for
both his own recuperation of not just the Arthurian story, but also of the British landscape
as a whole, providing a model that other antiquarians, as well as Henry VIII himself,
would utilize to reframe the Arthurian legend to translate it into this new era.

Henry VIII came to the English throne in April of 1509 and, after famously
divorcing his wife Catherine to marry Anne Boleyn in 1533, separated from the Roman
church in 1534 with the Acts of Supremacy, naming himself head of the Church in
England. While much can be and has been said about the various political and religious
aspects of the turmoil generated by the resulting English Reformation, my interest here is
specifically in how the Arthurian story played into this propaganda, and how Arthurian
objects in particular mattered to Henry’s cause.

The Arthurian legend was particularly difficult for Henry, in that it represented an
element of the medieval past that was, as I discussed in Chapter Two, tied in deeply with
saintly, religious, and reliquary language. While much of the Reformation, particularly in
England, still maintained close ties to Catholic belief, saints and particularly relics were seen as Roman and dangerous. Yet at the same time the Arthurian story was one that had otherwise great propagandist power, especially with regards to the tradition of English kings having ultimate supremacy over both their own kingdom and Rome itself. Arthur, of course, had defied Rome in the canonical tradition and won, setting a critical precedent for Henry. Moreover, the Tudor line was the first in generations that supposedly had direct ties to Arthur as an ancestor. Henry’s deceased older brother had been named Arthur, quite possibly as a result of Henry VII’s own understanding of his family’s powerful connection to the legend. Henry VII had even fought at Bosworth under a banner displaying the dragon of Cadwalader in order to demonstrate his wholly Welsh bloodlines.\(^{220}\) These ties, alongside the precedent of defying Rome, ensured that no matter how outdated and superstitious the legend seemed, Arthur would remain a critical and legendary inspiration to Henry VIII. Henry’s conflicts, setting his need for old medieval things at odds with his own movement’s iconoclastic impulses, extended even beyond Arthur as well. Henry notably had to spare the shrine of Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey since, as John Phillips notes, it was as much a symbol of royal power as it was religious. In the end, Henry only scattered its relics rather than destroying the shrine itself.\(^ {221}\)

However, unlike the various shrines and churches that Henry spared due to sentimentality or nationalistic sensibilities, the Arthurian story proved more difficult to


deploy properly during the Reformation era. While Henry could simply tolerate the more traditionally medieval and Roman elements of the church – ones that he still needed politically – the driving force behind the dismissal of the Arthurian story extended beyond the Reformation and on to the wider cultural shifts of the era, becoming just as much tied up in the classicist and scholarship focused aspects of the humanist and antiquarian movements.

A key example of Henry’s difficulty in properly using the Arthurian story is demonstrated by Henry’s utter failure to use the Round Table to his political advantage in the 1520s, even before the Reformation was fully developing in England – this despite his extensive effort in attempting to do so. The Round Table at Winchester had originally been commissioned in what scholars currently believe was most likely the range of 1250-1350, possibly for a large tournament or other celebratory event. Despite its late date relative to the timeline of any theoretically historical Arthur, the table was, from the time of its construction, discussed and used as if it were the genuine article.

The table had originally been unpainted solid wood and had a cloth draped across it in order to mark the names of the Round Table knights and where they would have sat. Henry, attempting to capitalize on his Arthurian connection, updated and restored the table around 1520. In doing so, he had the table painted with a dart-board style pattern of green and white, the Tudor livery colors, with a white rose set inside a red rose painted at the center of the table. The names of Round Table knights were painted around the edge marking where they would have sat. At the top of the table is a portrait of Arthur himself in red and ermine, holding Excalibur as well as an orb and wearing the English crown.

The portrait bears a striking resemblance to Henry himself and certainly would have been done to highlight the supposedly familial connection.

It is clear based on the symbolism of the image, including a Henry-like Arthur and the roses at the center of the table, that the updated painting was meant to be a political gesture. The table itself was already out of use as an actual piece of furniture and instead hung on the wall of the Great Hall purely as art and propaganda. However, the table seems to have had little benefit to Henry’s relations with his visitors. Paolo Giovio, historian and antiquarian, gives his reaction to the newly painted Round Table and is less than impressed. He would have not seen the table in person, but had close associates who would have accompanied Charles V in his visit to Winchester in 1522.\textsuperscript{223}

Presumably based on their accounts, Giovio writes in his 1548 \textit{Description of Britain}:

\begin{quote}
Custoditur religiosely adhub ea mensa admirandae uirtutis testimonio memorabilis, ostentaturque Claris hospitibus, uti nuper Carolo Cesari apud Vintoniam urbem, sed exesis multa carie circa margines Procerum nominibus, quae dum ab imperitis inficta maiestatis uetustatis inuaria insulso iudicio reponenteretur, pene effectum est, ut ueluti suspecta fide, magnam partem dignitatis amiserit.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
[That table is still reverently preserved in the town of Winchester, a notable witness of admirable valour, and is shown to distinguished visitors, as recently to the Emperor Charles. But the names of the knights around the edge, which had been badly eaten away by decay, were then renewed by unskilled hands so insensitively and with such damage to its ancient grandeur, that the table looks like a fake and has lost much of its credibility.\textsuperscript{224}]
\end{quote}

The major issue that Giovio takes with the Round Table has nothing to do with the actual political propaganda employed, and instead is wholly focused on the antiquarian concerns

\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., 405.

of the table. The fact that the table looks like a fake is more of a concern to him than any amount of ruin or decay that had previously been eating away at it. In many ways, he seems to echo a present day collector or curator who laments a poor restoration over the preservation of an old ruinous object. Thus, while the propagandist elements of the restoration are all well done, the table fails because Henry did not take into account the standard by which the table would be judged. While a relic may have been appreciated because of its splendor and improbable level of resistance to decay, the artifact that the Round Table was judged as did not match those same standards. Henry created a table that played into the pageantry of Arthurian romance and the medieval past, when instead visitors viewed it through the lens of antiquarianism, and a desire for true ancient artifacts – ones that displayed the ravages of time and had proper historical markers.

This problem also extended to Henry’s attempts to use Arthur as a basis for his superiority over the pope once the Reformation did occur. In January 1531, Anne Boleyn’s uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, attempted to use the power of Arthurian lore to sway the imperial ambassador Eustace Chapuys on Henry marital issues. Chapuys documented the discussion in a report on the issue saying:

He further went on to say that kings were before popes; the king was absolute master in his own kingdom … That an Englishman, that is Brennius, had once reduced Rome under his obedience. That Constantine had reigned in England, and that Helen, the mother of Constantine, was English by birth, and several other things as little pertinent to the matter in question as the above… After the above arguments … the Duke went on to say that some days ago he had had occasion to show the French ambassador a copy of the inscription on the tomb of King Arthur (I could not understand at the time to which of the Arthurs he alluded), which inscription he produced on a parchment roll out of his pouch and handed over to me adding that he had caused it to be transcribed for my use. I looked at it and only saw these words written in large letters: ARCTVRVS BRITANNIE,
Chapuys was clearly not remotely persuaded by the argument since, as Philip Schwyzer puts it, he then “scathingly professed himself ‘sorry he was not also called emperor of Asia.’”

While Chapuys was clearly not receptive to this argument from the start, I would argue here that the form in which Norfolk attempted to actually persuade him did not help his case. While actual historical precedent or a physical object demonstrating Arthur’s power over Rome may have had some more useful effect, Norfolk simply showed the ambassador a parchment on which the words were transcribed. Charles T. Wood argues that “this inscription and its remarkable claims came not from the tomb at Glastonbury but only from William Caxton’s introduction to Malory” in which even Caxton had reported not having seen the seal itself, but instead only a wax rubbing of it. While it is hard to say what, if anything, would have potentially changed Chapuys’s mind, certainly an inscription copied on parchment from Caxton’s introduction to a medieval romance in which he mentions that he once saw a wax rubbing does not inspire much confidence.

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However, while the very cause of Henry’s problems were, in addition to those of his own making, based in the antiquarian movement, the answer to this problem of how to save Arthur for the new era would be found in the antiquarian movement as well – and it would be most clearly demonstrated by the work of royal librarian, writer, antiquarian, and professional itinerant John Leland.

John Leland, born approximately 1503, first studied at Oxford and was, according to John Chandler, frustrated with the “reactionary teaching” there which drove him to move to Paris to seek out more “dynamic … Renaissance scholarship.”228 There he found a love of antiquarianism, still in its infancy, as well as manuscript studies. When Leland returned to England in 1529, he was taken in at court and was offered a librarian position at one of the royal libraries the following year. However, it was in 1533 that Leland’s fully political career began, in conjunction with Henry VIII’s break from the Roman church and marriage to Anne Boleyn.

Leland was, it appears, a true believer in Henry’s cause, at least insofar as that he was a humanist and had readily taken up Protestantism, as many intellectuals and scholars did at the time. While Leland does not seem to have been possessed by any deep religious fervor, James Simpson has shown that both his support of humanism and of Henry were sufficiently ardent, even writing poems to celebrate Anne at her coronation.229 He shortly after received his commission from Henry to “search after

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England’s antiquities” in the soon-to-be demolished religious libraries of abbeys, priories, and churches throughout Britain. The result was that Leland spent the next decade—until 1545—traveling Britain documenting the contents of the religious libraries, as well as the towns and landscapes that he traveled through, resulting in his two seminal works: the *Itinerary* and *De uiris illustribus*.

Neither the *Itinerary* nor *De uiris illustribus* were published in Leland’s own lifetime. Instead, both were edited by John Bale, his friend and fellow antiquarian, and are based on all of his notes that were compiled from his travels, with the *Itinerary* documenting the landscape and *De uiris illustribus* recording the great British authors whose works he came across in his travels. Leland’s notes both for the *Itinerary* and *De uiris illustribus* reveal goals that are strikingly in line with Henry’s own objectives: primarily what Simpson calls “a heroic yet doomed attempt to seal off the ‘medieval’ past.”

Indeed, Simpson argues that Leland is one of the earliest English writers to specifically view the past in terms of distinct ‘ages,’ and that he eagerly assigns his own time to be the start of a new and modern age that is separate from the medieval period.

For Leland, this desire for a separation from the past was a result of his humanism, as well as his desire to glorify what he considered modern and enlightened reasoning and rhetoric. As Simpson points out, Leland considered Gower, writing as recently as the late fourteenth century, to be a product of a “semi-barbarous period [in

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232 Ibid., 214.
semi barbaro seculo]” and Richard Rolle a product of the “massive barbarity [ingles barbaries] of [his] time.” Both were from a mere two centuries earlier, yet Leland seems surprised, though impressed, that they managed to comprehend the written word at all, especially when compared to the scholars of his own era.

However, this type of rhetoric also was the start of a solution to Henry’s problems, since this goal of a separation from the medieval past was a fundamental basis of the Reformation, allowing him to separate himself and England from anything that he, as quoted in his parliamentary statute deemed “superstition and Errors.” Indeed, much of Leland’s work is distinctly nationalistic, which is in line both with his royal appointment and with his humanist background. Despite a long academic tradition of venerating Leland’s scholarship as being for the sake of scholarship itself, Summit convincingly argues that Leland’s travels were in fact directly “supporting and upholding the interests of the state” and that he “self-consciously advanced, rather than subverted, many of the same aims of the Reformation that resulted in the dissolution.”

Yet Leland was also an antiquarian, and is even often thought of as the father of antiquarianism, leaving him in a fraught position. Just as Henry still needed the medieval past, so too did Leland understand its value and, unlike Henry, Leland seems to have understood from the start that certain historical figures of the past had to be recuperated,

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233 Ibid., 348.


along with the physical books containing their stories and the reputations of the writers who committed them to the page, both for the sake of nationalism and antiquarianism. Moreover, the very type of nationalistic discourse that Leland was writing to begin with – records of his travels through the British countryside – meant that he had to rescue the landscape itself not only from the medieval past that it had experienced, but from the medieval architecture and objects that still littered it as well.236

As it turns out, Leland’s solution to the problem of recuperating the British landscape – reframing the type of rhetoric and methodology used to study and record it – also provided a model for remaking Arthur for the current age. In both cases, the most critical elements of antiquarianism – the use of objects as proof, archeological inquiry, and a desire for facts – are what initially condemn Arthur and the medieval past, but are also what ultimately allow for its reimagining.

To demonstrate the ways in which antiquarianism could rescue the Arthurian story, I first examine the ways in which this methodology also allows Leland to recuperate the British landscape for Henry’s nationalistic and Reformation goals. In describing Leland’s nationalistic purposes, Simpson describes his mission as seeking “to enlarge national glory by gathering all that is ‘British.’”237 Simpson here is describing Leland’s goals in collecting the writing of English scholars and poets, as well as collecting the books that belong on English soil. However, I would also argue that this phrase extends to the soil itself; in other words, that Leland also sought to glorify Britain

236 Simpson notes that there is an additional “the peculiarity of this situation” in that is was “Leland’s own patron … providing the ruins.” Simpson, “Ageism,” 221.

by collecting the whole of the British landscape in his writing. This is, of course, not an uncommon means of writing a nationalistic text; Bede, for example, expends a large amount of ink on the physical landscape of the island, in addition to the exploits that took place on it. Moreover, the term ‘itinerary’ essentially marks out a genre unto itself that deals with both physical travel as well as nationalistic goals. The *Itinerary* of Gerald of Wales, of course, has both of these foundational properties as well.

The problem for Leland was that Bede, Gerald, and others of their ilk had marked the landscape of Britain as not simply a physical land that united the British, but as one that did so in a distinctly religious and sacred way. Even the title ‘itinerary’ has religious connotations, as the OED notes that an itinerant is traditionally a traveling preacher, and that the word ‘itinerary’ itself is sometimes synonymous with a written prayer. For Gerald, the connection between his work and his religious belief is obvious: his British landscape was a world of wonders. He constantly records the stories of local miracles, a concept that echoes that of many local saints’ lives, in which the land itself offers up proof of religious power. Instead, in writing about his travels Leland would have to write the Anglican, humanist version of an itinerary, and translate the genre itself into one that still had underlying religious goals, but could also reclaim the British landscape from the sacred medieval past. In doing so, as Summit puts it, Leland had to “produce a landscape without miracles” in which “the medieval past is not erased but rather absorbed into a desanctified landscape.” Leland accomplishes this, I argue, by using what is

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essentially the trademark of antiquarian methodology: a focus on observing and collecting physical objects as a method of studying the past.

Leland’s perhaps most obvious methodological difference from Gerald is that he relies on what he sees as factual evidence, rather than leaning on anecdotes – Leland’s evidence is based primarily on physical objects, buildings, and the landscape that he encounters. The *Itinerary* even contains what Chandler argues “could be regarded [as] the oldest English archeological fieldwork report” when Leland encounters a Roman wall in Leicestershire.\(^{240}\) Leland describes the experience saying

> at first I assumed that it was a hillfort, but then I clearly saw that a stone wall had been built around it. To make sure I pulled out some stones at its entrance, where there had been a large gate, and there I found lime between the stones. I am still not sure whether there had been any more than one gate, but I conjecture that there had. Very often Roman coins of gold, silver, and bronze, as well as pieces of foundations, have been found there during ploughing.\(^{241}\)

This description is indicative of Leland’s approach throughout the text. He is specifically concerned with the physicality of his proof and is willing to investigate and find evidence himself, rather than rely on local anecdotes and legends, listening normally to only firsthand witnesses. Leland is also quite precise throughout his text, though he is also willing to admit doubt or confusion when his evidence is not entirely clear. In other words, he is indeed quite archeological in the modern sense in his approach to his travels and his record taking. At one point in his “New Year’s Gift,” a work in which he promises Henry future texts based on his notes, Leland claims that there is

> almost neyther cape nor baye, hauen, creke or pere, ryuer or confluence of ryuers, breches, washes, lakes, meres, fenny waters, mountaynes, valleys, mores, hethes,


forestes, woodes, cyties, burges, castels, pryncypall manor places, monasteryes, and colleges, but I haue seane them, and noted in so doyne a whole world of thynges verye memorable. 242

Simpson sees this list as “obsessive,” and it arguably is, but while he sees it as symptomatic of the enormity and impossibility of Leland’s task, I would argue that it is also indicative of the physical nature of Leland’s understanding of the island, as well as of his desire to render that physicality into something rhetorical. 243

Leland is also meticulous throughout his text, noting mundane aspects of the landscape, and the mileage and compass directions between them. For example, he mentions that “from Higham Ferrers to Bedford is ten miles beside pasture and arable land. About four miles from Higham Ferrers the road crosses the boundary between Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire. A mile downstream from Bedford is Newnham, a house of canons. There are many small islands, or holmes, in the river between Bedford and Newnham.” 244 He later notes that in Berkshire “an almshouse for the poor sisters lay WNW of St Laurence’s Church” while the Hallowed Brook “leaves the main stream of the Kennet upstream from Reading to the WSW.” 245 This type of dispassionate note-taking on the landscape marks the majority of Leland’s text, and while it is perhaps less exciting than the human-animal hybrids that inhabited Gerald’s landscape, Leland’s description is just as powerful in its ability to remove such creatures from its setting.


244 Leland, Itinerary, 19.

245 Ibid., 28.
Instead, Leland’s landscape is one that is practical from the point of view of a traveler, but also precise and believable even by current standards; twenty-first-century locals still use his text as a factual source material for researching the history of their county.\textsuperscript{246}

Leland’s landscape is also surprisingly unified. He gives a fairly exhaustive description of most of England, venturing as far north as Northumberland and as far west as Shropshire. Even in these more distant locations, Leland does not ever reference them as being alien or non-English in any way.\textsuperscript{247} He refers to the small town of Stretton in Shropshire, for example, as “remote” but “pleasant” and only mentions that a bridge nearby is named the “Welsh Bridge” because it leads towards Wales.\textsuperscript{248} Similarly, there is nothing alienating about the landscape of Northumberland. Instead, it is described favorably; Newcastle, for example, is said to have walls that “far exceed all the city walls of England” in “strength and magnificence.”\textsuperscript{249} In neither case is there any reference to any wildness of the land, nor of the people, nor of any uncertain border status. All of this landscape is unifying, safe, contained, and English.


\textsuperscript{247} Compare this with Robert W. Barrett’s work on Chester and the prevalence of regional and distinct border identities. Despite clear evidence that many of these areas were considered to have a border status and very distinct identities, Leland does his best to ignore such issues. See Barrett, \textit{Against All England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195-1656} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

\textsuperscript{248} Leland, \textit{Itinerary}, 389.

\textsuperscript{249} Ibid., 341.
In addition to the overall methods and scope of Leland’s work, his constant use of precise place names in his description is also critical. Victor Watts demonstrates that Leland and the antiquarians are responsible for many current British place names, as a result of their “need to establish affective relationships with places by locating them in feelings about history, social context, or status.” More importantly, these ‘feelings’ about history were ones that specifically fit Leland’s agenda since, as Summit demonstrates, he would often absorb problematic locations into his landscape by giving them “a new identity as a popular place name” rather than having them “forcibly suppressed.” Likewise, when discussing the Arthurian story, Leland grafts his historical version of the story onto the landscape by noting that new names have overridden more famous Arthurian ones, but he still claims to know the proper older names.

In Cornwall, for example, Leland argues that a local river is called Dunmere in the vernacular – or Alan, by those who are royal – but “in some histories it is called Cablan. It was beside this river that Arthur fought his last battle.” Leland continues by giving his physical proof that this etymological connection is actually true, by noting that the “evidence of this, in the form of bones and harness, is uncovered when the site is ploughed.” In other words, the artifacts that are found in the area are proof of his linguistic knowledge, the one method of antiquarianism backing up the other. Similarly,


251 Summit, “Leland’s Itinerary and the remains of the medieval past,” 165.

252 Leland, Itinerary, 83.
Leland notes that the River Cadbury is actually called the Cam and, as such, it is the location of the historical Camelot. Leland defends this position again with proof from the landscape and from archeological evidence – artifacts, that is – saying that

roman coins of gold, silver, and copper have been turned up during ploughing there, and also in the fields at the foot of the hill, especially on the east side. Many other antiquities have also been found, including at Camelot, within living memory, a silver horseshoe.\textsuperscript{253}

The result here is that, while Leland has a clearly nationalistic discussion via his use of place names and Arthurian connections, he does so in way such that bases such knowledge on archeological evidence.

Indeed, while Leland does include genealogies and histories of the people of the various regions that he travels to, Leland’s methodology is still overwhelmingly concerned with such archeological evidence and the physical nature of the world that he encounters. The inhabitants are there not to be the spectacles of the landscape, as one would expect in a previous itinerary, such as that of Gerald of Wales, but instead to help explain the material world that they occupy. When Leland discusses a castle in Bedfordshire, for example, he notes that it belonged “to Lord Fanhope, a man of great renown during the reigns of Henry V and Henry VI. It was he who built the castle in its present noble state, on a hill, with four or five stone towers in the inner ward, as well as a lower courtyard.” Leland then notes that “according to the east window of the castle chapel, it appears that he married into noble blood – his wife, as I recall, was the Duchess of Exeter – so it may be that this marriage was largely responsible for the sumptuous

\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 417.
building.

This type of description is highly indicative of Leland’s writing, in that it is primarily focused on the actual landscape and buildings and takes its evidence – like the chapel windows – from the buildings themselves and only as an afterthought discusses information about the local landowners to fill in gaps in the history.

Even in the case of local saints who by necessity must be discussed in order to fully describe an area, Leland negates their sacred influence as much as possible. For example, in mentioning St. Aiden, he merely notes that “one of the holy men called Aiden is buried there, along with other holy men.” Similarly, he calls St. Buriana “a holy woman from Ireland, who at one time lived there.” Leland only goes into any detail on a local saint a few times and in each case negates their sacred influence. For example, in his discussion of St. Algar, he says that “in [a] forest is a chapel containing the buried bones of St. Algar, which not long ago were foolishly searched for by the common people out of superstition.” He then immediately gives more detail on the surrounding Selwood Forest rather than anything about Algar. As such, the local saint becomes an object of scorn rather than praise. In another case, Leland notes that “it is eight miles across open country from Cambridge to Eltisley village. At one time there was a nunnery at Eltisley, where the Scottish virgin Pandonia was buried. I was told that when Eltisley nunnery was destroyed a new one was built at Hichingbrook near Huntingdon.” Despite Pandonia being a local saint, Leland calls her instead just a

\[^{254}\text{Ibid., 22.}\]

\[^{255}\text{Ibid., 342.}\]

\[^{256}\text{Ibid., 68.}\]

\[^{257}\text{Ibid., 431.}\]
Scottish virgin and makes her simply a historical figure, rather than a religious one. Even in his secondary notes he merely elaborates by saying:

according to the legend of St. Pandonia it seems that she was the daughter of a king of Scotland, who fled from those intent on deflowering her, and came to one of her relatives, the prioress of the nunnery at Eltisley in Cambridgeshire, four miles from St. Neots. After her death she was buried at Eltisley next to a well which is called St. Pandonia’s Well.\textsuperscript{258}

As Summit notes, even in this more thorough description Pandonia is a “source not of miraculous water but of place names, those of the well and the former nunnery destroyed in the Reformation” and as a result “in Leland’s world, saints are history.”\textsuperscript{259} Much as he does with the Arthurian story, Leland transforms the saintly into the mundane.

In fact, the most common reference to actual people throughout Leland’s \textit{Itinerary} is to those who occupy the tombs that he passes and are, like Pandonia, nothing but history. In discussing the Grey Friars, Bedford, Leland notes:

The first foundress of the Grey Friars at Bedford was Lady Mabel Pattishall of Beltsoe (where Sir John St John now lives) and, according to some, also of Stoke, Lincolnshire, four miles this side of Grantham (which is now also St John property). This Mabel is buried under a flat stone at the south side of the high altar under an arch. … One of the Lords Mowbray is also buried on the north side of the high altar under a plain stone. Right in front of the high altar lies Queen Eleanor, under a flat marble stone with a plain brass plate portraying a crowned figure.

Leland goes on to describe the tombs of two more people of local importance, and much like the description above, he spends his time focusing almost entirely on the physical location and construction of their tombs, rather than any description of their importance in life. As such, the primary two ways in which people inhabit Leland’s \textit{Itinerary} are

\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 47.

\textsuperscript{259} Summit, “Leland’s \textit{Itinerary} and the remains of the medieval past,” 163.
either as owners of objects and buildings, or as basically objects themselves, merely bodies in their tombs. This discussion of tombs makes up the entirety of Leland’s discussion of the Grey Friars, and he discusses no other impact or importance of the friary.

In this way, Leland accomplishes his goal of desanctifying the landscape twice over. He not only renders the inhabitants of England into primarily window dressing for its landscape, thus keeping his methods archeologically based, but so too does he also nullify any spiritual power that the various religious buildings he encounters may have had in connection to the Roman church. The friary becomes nothing more than another monument to the dead, its inhabitants safely in the past.

This model serves Leland well throughout the text whenever he encounters a religious – or formerly religious – building, which he does frequently. Buildings, as much as the landscape itself, had to be reimagined as something non-sacred and harmless. For example, Leland notes that “The Especs founded Warden Abbey in Bedfordshire, and this was a portion of the Abbey lands. Both Castle Mills and the castle bailey belonged to Warden Abbey at the time of its recent suppression, and were sold by the king to Mr Gostwick, their present owner.”260 Leland then moves directly on to discussing a nearby stream and its course. The abbey is given no more importance than the local stream, nor is the dissolution of the abbey mentioned with any more passion or importance than any other local real estate transaction. The abbey, like the Bedford Friary, becomes nothing more than another piece of the English landscape, transforming its religious power into a nationalistic one.

While Leland’s writing style and methodology demonstrate a specifically antiquarian response to the problem’s of his era, the ways in which the buildings that he mentions transformed from sacred to non-sacred spaces are indicative of how this desire for the repurposing of objects, rather than their total destruction, was more widespread. John Philips argues that with “buildings being images” they were just as dangerous as the painted or sculpted images that were targeted by iconoclasm. This is because, he continues, “monastic buildings were not only havens for the ‘superstitious’ accouterments of the medieval fabric but were in themselves directly related to the experiences of men who saw monastic life as instrumental for salvation.” The result was that, in an era of Reformation iconoclasm, such buildings “could be used as quarries, transformed into parish churches, but they could not be left to remind Englishmen of their former purpose.”

As such, the more mundane a purpose that such buildings ended up having, the better it was for their survival. Henry, having far more success in this endeavor than in his attempted use of the Round Table, was often responsible for the reuse of these buildings, either directly or through the gifting of it to local nobility for their own purposes. While some of the nobility did, in fact, actually destroy the buildings by breaking them down into raw materials, many who were granted such property remodeled the monastic buildings into lavish estates. In other cases, the buildings were left as is, but transformed in purpose by becoming utilitarian storage facilities. Phillips notes, for example, that “at Austin Friars, Sir William Paulet used the steeple and choir for the storage of corn, coal and other things” while “the King’s hunting nets, tents, and

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261 Philips, The Reformation of Images, 63.
other equipment were stored in the churches at the Charterhouse and at St. John’s, London.262 In other cases, these monastic buildings were given to those of more modest social standing, with St. Edmund Bury and Egglestone Abbey being used as tenements for the poor, while the Grey Friars at Reading became a town hall.263

Another key option for the repurposing rather than full destruction of monastic buildings was through the founding of Anglican cathedral schools. Henry was directly involved in this process when he founded primary schools that replaced the closed monasteries. These schools include the seven “King’s Schools” – all named after Henry and his signing of their charters – located in Canterbury, Rochester, Chester, Ely, Gloucester, Worcester, and Petersborough. While in most cases there was a cathedral school already located in these cities, Henry’s program gave the schools special prominence and specifically expanded the schools to take over the use of the monastery’s other buildings, including chapels and cloisters.264

The King’s School in Canterbury, for example, was founded on the site of St. Augustine’s monastery, and many of the buildings original to the site, including the cloisters, became part of the school grounds.265 In the case of the Ely school, a chapel on

262 Ibid., 69.

263 Ibid., 67-8.

264 This is a similar scheme, in fact, to many later libraries that were founded during or after the Reformation, as well as opposed to ones that were simply re-established. For example, the Chetham Library, the oldest public library in Britain, was founded in 1653 and took over a complex of buildings constructed in 1421 to house a college of priests. See: “A Brief History of Chetham’s,” Chetham’s Library, http://www.chethams.org.uk/history.html

265 “A Brief History of the King’s School, Canterbury,” The King’s School, Canterbury, http://www.kings-school.co.uk/about/history/a-brief-history/
the site dating from 1324 is still used to this day for Anglican services, despite the retention of its original décor. The Ely school further uses the other monastic buildings for classrooms and housing. In Chester, the new King’s School was founded in 1541 following the dissolution of St. Werburgh’s Abbey. As there had been no previous cathedral in Chester, the dissolved monastic buildings were appropriated to become the Anglican Chester Cathedral and the boy’s school was subsequently housed there thenceforth. The same scheme is true for each of the seven schools, in terms of use of the abbey’s buildings as school grounds, and the frequent incorporation of the cathedrals themselves into the school’s daily functions, including those that are non-religious. After the success of these first seven schools, Henry founded or chartered a variety of other cathedral schools over the course of the next ten years to continue this project, including the Christ Church Cathedral School in Oxford and the Bristol Cathedral School. By filling these buildings with school children and scholars, rather than monks, the sacred nature of the space and its position in the English landscape is rendered harmless and redirected towards specifically Reformation and Anglican goals.

266 The King’s Ely, http://www.kingsely.org/.

267 “A rich, royal history,” The King’s School, Chester, http://www.kingschester.co.uk/history.

268 While objects are my main concern here, it is important to note that the people associated with these schools were often ‘appropriated’ as well – in the case of the Worcester school, the last prior of the monastery, Henry Holbeach, became the school’s first dean. See Michael Craze, King’s School, Worcester: 1541–1971 (Worcester: Ebenezer Baylis and Son, 1972).

In each case, whether they became noble estates, housing for the poor, farm storage, or new schools, buildings that would otherwise haunt the English landscape with reminders of its sacred past were rendered safe, and in each case it follows the same pattern that Leland demonstrates in his *Itinerary*: replace the sacred with the mundane and the superstitious with that which is Anglican, educational, or humanist.

While the British landscape was relatively easy for Leland to desacralize, rescuing Arthur from the superstitious fog of British history was more of a challenge. Leland attempted to meet the challenge by using the same method of reframing the narrative surrounding Arthur in archeological terms, focusing on depicting Arthur as an historical figure rather than a legendary one. This was particularly critical for Leland, as not only did Henry’s rhetorical claims over the pope rest partially on Arthur, but Leland’s nationalistic pride as a scholar was also dependent on the collective understanding of British history being deemed accurate and British scholars as knowledgeable.

This nationalistic pride also drove Leland to increasingly attempt to rescue and preserve as many historical and educational documents, books, and records as he could, sending them back to the private libraries of England, including the royal library. This was especially critical to Leland’s nationalistic goals, given that many of the manuscripts were otherwise being sent abroad to foreign scholars and away from England. Chandler agrees that “Leland’s anger … was directed not at the wanton destruction going on all around, so much as at the effrontery of foreign scholars who purloined monuments of English history, and claimed them as their own.”270 Indeed, Leland asked Thomas Cromwell for more time to continue his retrieval of manuscripts for the royal library,

specifically with the urging that these manuscripts would “be a great profit to students
and honour to this realm; whereas, now the Germans that spoileth them, and cutteth them
out of libraries, returning home and putting them abroad as monuments of their own
country.”

Thus, Leland’s defense against foreign scholars attacking British pride and history
extended beyond simply his *Itinerary* and peripatetic task of repurposing the British
landscape, and it culminates when Leland writes a direct responses against the Italian
humanist Polydore Vergil and his 1534 tract *Anglica Historia*, which fervently argued
against the existence of an historical Arthur. In doing so, Leland combines his
nationalistic goals, his antiquarian methods, and his fervor to defend British knowledge
against foreign scholars. Leland wrote multiple texts responding to Vergil and defending
the truth behind the Arthurian myth, including his unpublished notes that eventually
became the *De uiris illustribus* after being edited and published by John Bale, and his
completed text the *Assertio inclytissimi Arturii regis Britannia*, which was published in
his own lifetime in 1544.

I would first like to look at Polydore Vergil’s *Anglica Historia*, and the disbelief
in the Arthurian legend that Leland would be arguing against. Vergil first mentions the
Arthur legend in his opening section of the text during his discussion of the founding of
Britain. In this passage he aruges that Gildas’ version of events, including the legendary
Brutus’ coming to Britain, were “illa quamvis ex poeticis magis fabulis quam ex
incruptis rerum gestarum monimentis constarent, pro veris tamen habita sunt” [taken
from poetic fictions rather than incorrupt records of things done, yet nonetheless been

taken for the truth.]²⁷² He continues, saying that others have then taken Gildas’ history and simply elaborated upon it with more untruths, including Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Vergil argues that  

Gaufredus hic est dictus, cognomine Arthurus, pro eo quod multa de Arthuro ex priscis Britonum pigmentis sumpta, et ab se aucta, per superductum Latini sermonis colorem honesto historiae nomine obtexit. Quinetiam maiore ausu cuiusdam Merlini divinationes falsissimas, quibus utique de suo plurimum addidit dum eas in Latinum transferret, tanquam approbatas et immobili veritate subnixas prophetias vulgavit.

[this man is named Geoffrey, having the surname of Arthur because he writes much about Arthur taken from the fables of the ancient Britons and embroidered by himself, and passing it off as honest history by giving it the coloration of the Latin language. Indeed with a greater boldness he has published very spurious prophecies of Merlin, supplying additions of his own invention when translating them into Latin, and passing them off as genuine and guaranteed by unshakable truth.]²⁷³

Vergil continues by saying that he personally, on the other hand, will, like the Roman historian Sallust, instead write the truth “quia lex iubet ut scriptor ne quid falsi dicere audeat, ne quid veri non audeat.” [because the historians’ law is that a writer should neither dare to say a falsehood, nor shrink from telling a truth.]²⁷⁴ The implication being that, like Sallust who he says was condemned among Romans for speaking ugly truths, Vergil will be condemned by the British for revealing the truth about their legendary past.

When he then arrives at the Arthurian section of his history in Book 3, Vergil devotes a section to Arthur so brief that I now include it in its entirety both to


²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.
demonstrate its truly insignificant length and for the utterly dry and unenthusiastic portrayal of Arthur:

Utherius per idem tempus e vita migravit, cui successit filius Arthurus, vir profecto talis qui, si diutius vixisset, rem prope perditam suis omnino Britannis tandem aliquando restituisset. De hoc propter ingentes pariter corporis vires atque animi virtutes posteritas ea ferme praedicavit quae de Rolando Caroli Magni ex sorore nepote memoria nostra apud Italos decantatur, tametsi ille in flore iuventutis perit. Quippe etiam nunc vulgus mirandis fert ad coelum laudibus Arthurum, quod tres bello superasset Saxonum duces, quod Scotiam cum vicinis insulis in suam potestatem redegisset, quod Romanos in agro Parisiorum cum quodam Lucio eorum duce delevisset, Galliamque devastasset, ac demum gigantes homines valentes pugnando occidisset. Hic ad extremum tot bellorum victor fertur, dum vellet urbem Romam bello petere, domesticis seditionibus ab incoepo itinere revocatus, Morderedum nepotem, qui regnum per tyranndem in eius absentia occupaverat, interfecisse, et in eo certamine ipse vulneratus cecidisse. Abhinc item paucos annos positum fuit Arthuro in Glasconensi coenobium opere magnificum, quo posteri intelligerent illum omnibus ornamentis dignum fuisse, quando Arthuri tempore coenobium illud nondum erat conditum.

[At this time Uther departed this life, and was succeeded by his son Arthur, who was indeed such a man that, had he lived longer, he would have finally restored the British state, which was all but ruined. Because of the powers of his body and the virtues of his mind, posterity has published the same kind of things about him as are in our days still recounted among the Italians about Roland, the nephew of Charlemagne by his sister. For even now the common folk raise Arthur to the skies, for thrice he overwhelmed Saxon captains in war, gained possession over Scotland and the neighboring islands, defeated the Romans with their general (a certain Lucius) in the territory of Paris, laid waste to Gaul, and finally bested some giants in a fight. It is related that in the end, while he was wanting to visit Rome, he was recalled from this journey by domestic seditions, that he killed his nephew Mordred, who in his absence had gained control of the kingdom as a tyrant, but that he himself received a wound in this fight and died. A few years ago a magnificent tomb for Arthur was erected in the monastery of Glastonbury, that posterity might understand that he was worthy of all ornaments, since in Arthur’s day that monastery had not yet been founded.]

Of note, Vergil’s version excises all talk of foreign conquest, other than Gaul, and all legendary type behaviors other than the besting of giants. He specifically removes the conquest of Rome itself as well, along with the standard chronicle discussion of how Arthur had been a patron of Glastonbury, instead saying that it did not exist in his time at
all. Vergil also frames the entire passage as his recounting of what other people have told in the past – particularly, “the common folk” who he implies are overly enthusiastic in their praises. He leaves Arthur, then, as barely a side note in history – someone who could have done great things had he the chance, but did not; as someone who is now praised by commoners who do not know better, and someone who certainly did not perform legendary feats of heavenly-sanctioned conquest.

All of this, of course, struck Leland as being a blow against British pride. As Vergil’s text would have been circulating just as Leland was starting his monastic tour, it would have also coincided with his sudden nationalistic outrage at the thievery of British history in the form of manuscripts taken by foreign scholars. Leland first argued against Vergil’s claims in his unpublished notes. While the notes, which originally survived in only his autograph copy, were eventually edited by John Bale and published, Leland’s notes are clearly written for a limited audience, as they are far more bold and direct in his attack on Vergil than in his later published Assertio. Indeed, these portions were first included by John Bale, but later edited out of subsequent editions as well.275

I will be looking at both the Arthurian portions of the De uiris illustribus as well as the Assertio, using primarily the Assertio, but also examining some of Leland’s more uncensored language from the notes for De uiris illustribus. In these notes, Leland attacks Vergil and his arguments against Arthur on a few different levels. The most direct is against the prose itself, which he says is an embarrassing attempt at Ciceronian style, and as a result he calls Vergil “Codrus” – the Roman poet Virgil’s comically bad poet from his Eclogues – as an alias throughout the text, saying that

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nec alio nomine Britannis pro imperio insultat quam quod, nescio cuius Pytagorae dogma secutus, certo sibi persuasit facundī Ciceronis animam post tot secula in suum scilicet pectus recta migrasse, atque hoc munere aureum, illud torrentis eloquentiae flumen ita assecutum ut illa fretus ex muscis elephantos, rursus ex elephantis muscas, facile faciat.

[he insults the British imperiously for no other reason than, following the doctrine of some Pythagorean or other, he has firmly persuaded himself that the soul of eloquent Cicero has migrated directly into his own breast after so many centuries and that with its help he has so thoroughly mastered the golden river of flowing eloquence that, relying on it alone, he can easily turn flies into elephants and elephants back into flies.]\(^{276}\)

This argument comes from a portion of the text specifically about Geoffrey of Monmouth, whom Vergil is most dismissive of. However, Leland argues that Vergil’s attack is not truly against Geoffrey, but against “the British” as a whole and, most specifically, Arthur himself.

In many ways, Leland conflates Arthur and Britishness itself, and his other main attack against Vergil is based simply upon the very fact that he is not British. Leland argues that

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\text{est peregrinus et hospes, gloriosus simul ac curiosus, ut qui sua iactet, nostra autem, audita potius quam intellecto, pro arbitrio tractet.}
\]

[he is a foreigner and a guest, both conceited and inquisitive, one who brags of his own history, yet treats ours as he pleases, even though he has merely heard and not understood it.]\(^{277}\)

He highlights Vergil’s outsider status by repeatedly calling him “hospes” and “peregrinus” throughout the text. Leland later notes in a discussion of William of


\(^{277}\) Ibid.
Malmesbury that Vergil “conceived a history of British antiquity without having travelled the land, or understood the language, or examined the records of ancient libraries with sufficient diligence – or rather any diligence at all.”

Leland makes this an obvious and direct contrast to himself and his own travels across the British landscape, which establishes himself as the far superior judge of veritable British history. However, this critique also demonstrates Leland’s belief in the amount of knowledge one can gain from the landscape itself, and that native knowledge matters in a way that Vergil can neither imitate nor comprehend.

Leland finally concludes this introductory argument by saying that, while it is easy for him to prove that Arthur existed – as easily even “as Codrus can that Caesar existed” – that he will “deal with this matter in a little more depth, for the benefit of antiquaries,” implying that it is this more elevated audience, requiring a more convincing standard of evidence, that he is writing for.

When Leland censors himself slightly in the Assertio he does change certain aspects of the text to be published – mostly an attempt to show more respect to Vergil, who he now called “Polidorus, the Judge.” However, his attention to material evidence

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278 Ibid., 331: “…concepit de antiquitate Britannica historiam, nec regione peragrata, nec lingua intellect, nec ueterum bibliothecarum monimentis satis diligenter – immo ne diligenter quidem – excussis…”

279 Ibid., 313: “At ego tam certis, claris, ueris argumentis, non dicam tam multis, probare possum Arturium fuisse quam Codrus Caesarem. Lubet itaque, in gratiam antiquariorium, subtilius hanc rem tractare.”

is still present, and is largely the same in content and language as the Arthurian portions of the *De uiris illustribus*. As such, Leland spends the *Assertio* chronicling the deeds and reign of Arthur, but does so through the lens of precisely where he is finding his evidence for each piece of material along the way. While a good deal of the evidence is citations of various other authorities, much of it comes down to his personal knowledge of places and the physical objects that he is himself able to locate.

Leland begins both arguments describing what is, in reality, another written text. However, the text that he describes is not a manuscript but

antiquissimis tabulis, quas ego nuper in Cambria vidi columnis templorum adfixas, haec cadem una cum Giraldo Cambrensi, viro post hominem memoriam Britannicae antiquitatis longe peritissimo, testantibus. Possem hic et illorum testimonia de Arturio fatis illustria adferre, qui vias sanctissimorum episcoporum et monachorum Britanniae editis Latinis libris posteritati consecraverunt, nisi ad certiora properarem.

[ancient tablets that I recently saw in Wales fastened to church pillars, which attest to the same thing. So too does Gerald of Wales, by far the most learned man in British antiquity in the memory of mankind. If I were not rushing on to still more certain evidence, I could also cite illustrious testimonies concerning Arthur by those who wrote Latin Lives of the most holy bishops and monks of Britain.]

These written tablets, the same mentioned by Gerald of Wales during his discussion of the exhumation of Arthur, are discussed primarily as physical objects here. Leland only mentions the writing itself about Arthur in passing, because it is distracting from even more convincing proof that comes by way of archeological evidence and found artifacts.

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In any case where I do not specify that there is one, the assumption should be that the text from the *De uiris illustribus* and the *Assertio* are functionally identical as they are both based on the same notes.
Even more convincing evidence is found in the seal of Arthur housed at Winchester, which Leland discusses next. I find this most interesting because the following discussion demonstrates what Leland deems good evidence and believable proof, as opposed to the type of evidence regarding the same seal that Henry and Norfolk had tried to use to persuade Chapuys of Henry’s supremacy. Leland, too, admits that he first read of the seal in Caxton, and only there discovered that Arthur’s seal existed at Westminster. However, unlike Henry and Norfolk, Leland’s response to the Caxton preface was to actually investigate the matter himself in person. Leland says that he then “went vnto Westminster, to the end that what so as an eare witnesse I had heard, I might at length also as an eye witnesse beholde the same. Pondering well that sayinge of Plautus, in my minde. Pluris valet oculatus testis vnus quam Auriti decem: Of more force standes eye witnesse one, Then ten eare witnesses among.” This passage makes a clear distinction between and eye-witness and ear-witness, the latter being what Leland sees a reader to be, rather than someone who has experienced the physical world first hand – in other words, the distinction between himself and Norfolk. Leland thus favors this material evidence over written accounts that, in this wording, are little better than an oral transmission or even gossip.

He then describes the physical properties of the seal itself. In *De uiris illustribus*, he describes the seal, noting that it indeed has the inscription that Norfolk had cited of “Patricius Arturus Britanniae Galliae Germaniae Dacae Imperator” as well as “a truly

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282 This discussion of Caxton and ear- versus eye-witness only occurs in the *Assertio*, it is left out of the *De uiris* which only discusses his actual experience seeing the seal itself.
heroic effigy of Arthur himself” on the other side. Leland describes the portrait in detail along with the overall shape and condition of the seal, concluding that he was “captivated by [the] majesty” of the portrait and that “if you did not long to have seen them, reader, I give up. By what clearer argument than this, then, could I prove that Arthur existed?”

However, he expands on this in the Assertio and describes his seeing the seal as a nearly transcendent experience. Leland writes that the very “sight of the Antiquitie pleased me at full, and for a long time the Maiestie thereof not onely drewe away but also detayned myne eyes from me to the beholding thereof. Of such force it is for a man aptly to chaunce vpon a thing with greate care desired.” He then continues on to describe the seal in detail – listing the same inscription that he had in De uiris and again discussing the size, shape, and physical condition of the seal. The last element has a very archeological tinge to it, as he describes “fragments or little peeces” that had been “crazed” together. He also again urges his reader to desire to see “the same, such and so greate is both the antiquitie and also the maiesty of the thing.” He concludes his discussion of the seal by saying that “neither surely is there any thing apparant, (that I doe knowe of) which more euidently approueth that Arthure was liuing, then the same

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283 Leland, De uiris illustribus, 315: “Altera effigiem refert ipsius Arturii plane heroicam.”

284 Ibid., 315: “Dispeream, lector, nisi uidisse uoles. Quod nunc certius argumentum quam hoc quo modo probauimus Arturium fuisse? Nos tamen non prius anchoram figemus quam alia non minus certa ostenderiurns.”


286 Ibid.
Seale doth. Which thing, if God so would, some persons (leaning rather to their opinion, selfe will, and finally rashnesse, then vnto any vpright reason) doubt not to deny.\textsuperscript{287}

Despite the seal certainly having been a fake, Leland seems to have a genuinely moving experience when coming in contact with the seal, and clearly believes in its being genuine. It is a moment of touching the past that Leland finds moving and revelatory. For Leland, he is finding evidence, but also having a near-religious experience. Yet he puts this experience into very non-religious terms, unlike many of his predecessors, who did the very opposite by discussing ruins in terms of relics. Here, Leland, the archeologist, is having a moment of revelation with this piece of the past, but he still frames the language of discussing this object in words such as ‘antiquity’ ‘fragment’ and ‘eye-witness.’ Much like the landscape of his Itinerary, Leland desacralizes the experience of touching the past through a material object, even if it is an object found at Westminster Abbey that produces a transcendent experience.

Just as important as Leland’s own emotional reaction is his desire for his reader to share his experiences – not even necessarily to take his word as proof alone. Again, unlike the type of proof that Norfolk offers which depends on multiple levels of hearsay, Leland urges his readers instead to follow in his footsteps and physically to see and handle this antiquity. It is a revelatory experience for Leland, but it is one that can be shared and passed on, again, because it is framed in the language of evidence, artifact, and archeological proof rather than personal, and therefore privileged, religious revelation.

\textsuperscript{287} Ibid.
Leland then goes on to discuss the tomb and body of Arthur. Leland first spends quite a bit of time giving the history of Avalon and, similar to Gerald, specifically highlights the etymological connections between Avalon and Glastonbury. He notes that Avalon means ‘orchard,’ but that it has also been called Inisvitrin, meaning ‘island of glass.’ Leland then describes the Saxon shift to the Germanic word Glesseney, and then the West Saxon shift to Glesseneybury, and finally to the present day Glastonbury. The discussion is fairly exhaustive, but seems necessary for Leland to clearly demonstrate via the landscape and the language (the two things that he most accused Vergil of not understanding and that are also, not coincidentally, the two foundations of sixteenth-century antiquarianism) that this was easily proven to be the resting place of Arthur.

However, when Leland moves beyond this etymology to the actual discussion of Arthur’s tomb, he does so in a very different rhetorical vein than Gerald of Wales, transforming the revelations that came to religious men from God into archeological exploration and evidence. While Gerald’s text moves from the proof of Avalon’s connection to Glastonbury directly into the religious revelations of finding Arthur’s tomb, Leland’s text reads in a much more systematic and archeological way.

After Leland’s discussion of Avalon, he moves on to the various archeological objects that were found in addition to Arthur’s body. He first addresses a large metal cross, which he says “was made of a leaden plate, one foote long more or lesse, which I

288 Leland, De uiris illustribus, 317.

289 The following material exists in the De uiris illustribus as well but is more detailed in the Assertio so I quote from there.
haue beholden with most curiouse eyes, and handled with feareful ioyntes in each part, being moued both with the Antiquitie and worthinesse of the thing. ” Leland again makes his experience mundane in the sense of it being an earthly experience - still a moving one, but one based in the power of history rather than in a religious moment of handling a cross. Leland then describes the inscription upon the cross (HIC IACET SEPVLTVS INCLITVS REX ARTHVRIVS, IN INSVLA AVALONIAE), saying that a “curiouse person would search out for what purpose the inscription was commended to our memory vpon the leaden plates.” Leland then explains to his reader in some detail that this was actually the “vsual manner in that age, and endured euen vntill latter times.” He then continues by explaining that such a leaden plate is typical of the region, because “the myne hilles where leade groweth much, are scarce fiue miles distant from Aualonia.” Thus Leland’s physical encounter with this funereal inscription again marks proof that he has personally seen and held an object, rather than just having heard of it. Leland’s interpretation, too, demonstrates his attempts to desacralize the experience, and he spends the majority of the passage not harping upon the religious value of the object, but rather explaining both the physicality of it and also why this object makes sense to have been there in context, educating the reader on the history of the object and the physical land that produced it.

290 Leland, “The Assertion of Arthur,” XII.
291 Ibid.
292 Ibid.
293 Ibid.
Similarly, when Leland moves onto his next passage – a discussion of the two pyramids that are found at the site – it is framed in a distinctly archeological way, as opposed to the mysterious, religious way of Gerald who had described the pyramids as a miraculous sign or wonder marking a sacred tomb. Leland describes the pyramids instead as being “of most auncient building, bearing a shew of figures & letters, but the windes, stormes, and time which consumeth all thinges, finally enuy of man from time to time haue so defaced the notable figures and inscription of auncient works, that they can scarce be discerned by any neuer so sharpe sight of the eye.” Leland then mentions that Gerald and others have written in great detail on these pyramids, but that the reader should look to those texts for answers on them, because Leland himself is unable to truly prove what they mean, saying only that he will “annex” what others have written, repeating from his sources a purely physical description of the pyramids, giving measurements and the like. As such, Leland avoids all mystical elements of the pyramids and essentially refuses to engage with an object that he cannot properly reconstitute as an artifact from an archeological perspective.

Leland’s description of the finding of Guinevere’s body again moves from the realm of the religious and revelatory, to that of archeological proof and fact. He actually quotes Gerald’s entire description of the incident, including that Guinevere’s body was found with her hair still intact, and that an overly zealous monk touched and destroyed the otherwise relic-like hair. Leland is diplomatic in his assessment of the situation, saying that Gerald “doubtlesse might wel with some authority speake concerning this geare, for so much as, euen then he … came the very same time that the Sepulchre was

294 Ibid., XIII.
found at Glastenbury, and as an eye witness … learned full and whole all thinges which vnto Arthure appertained.” Yet he immediately prevaricates on this statement by saying that “if it were lawfull for me heere to speake all thinges which I thinke, I would surely affirme that those thinges are of farre better credite, which are deleyuered vs of Arthures buryall, then of Guenheras. And yet woulde I not doe any inuirie vnto the Authorytie of Auncyent wryters, that euen the posteritie in time to come myght not handle mine Authoritie or allegation in a worse manner.”

Thus, Leland essentially argues that the one element of the entire story that he is willing to give credence to is the fact that Gerald would be an eye witness, again favoring proof that comes directly from having seen or touched physical objects – or at least the accounts of such direct witnesses. Yet, Leland here is also clearly skeptical and has a different sensibility than Gerald in his world-view of physical objects. Where, for Gerald, an object like Guinevere’s hair could certainly have mystical properties in the same way that a relic could have religious ones – disintegrating into atoms at the slightest touch – Leland sees the world through a non-religious (or at least Anglican), archeological lens, where this sort of mystical behavior simply does not make sense and must further, for the sake of his desacralizing the Arthurian myth, be rewritten and contained. Unlike the leaden plate cross that he himself is able to touch and explain in the context of the world that he has personally experienced, the hair of Guinevere just does not fit into Leland’s method of understanding and rewriting the past.

In finally moving onto the description of Arthur’s tomb and body, Leland makes one major change to his sources almost immediately. While he says that he is quoting

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295 Ibid.
Gerald as well as an anonymous monk, Leland moves away from Gerald as a source in his description of the discovery of the tomb itself. Gerald had claimed that the location of the body was found because of the “revelations of religious men,” while Leland says that the location of the tomb was something simply well known amongst historians and that the “King had often times heard this out of the actes of the Brittaines & of their historicall singers, that Arthure was buried neare vnto the old Church in the religiouse place betweene two Pyramedes in times past, nobly engrauen, and erected as it is reported for the memory of him.”

Again, the foundation of Leland’s project means that, while he agrees with Gerald in that objects are important to understanding the past, it is still historical knowledge rather than religious revelations that, to Leland, allows for this proof.

Indeed, Leland does not simply favor historical knowledge, but instead eye-witness experience over all else – and in the case of Arthur’s body, he is not able to experience anything personally. He further has clear problems with Gerald’s mystical account of the situation. Leland remedies this issue for his reader by in fact admitting that, while they personally can go read Gerald’s book, he is “doubtfull” on certain elements, even going so far as to explain why the type of tree described in Gerald’s description of the grave does not make sense in the context of this particular area of the country. However, Leland still, in the end, needs to prove that this element of Arthur’s story is true, and therefore does so through a great many sources all confirming each other, in

296 Ibid, XV.
297 Again, Leland relies on his local and regional native knowledge of the landscape from a scientific point of view, rather than a mystical one.
addition to the potentially erroneous Gerald. Leland assures his reader that “I should not only by the testimonie of two, whom I haue aboue named, but also by a full number of writers, confirme, establish, and persuade as it were ratified, Arthures Tombe founde.” He then goes on to cite Matthew of Paris and Higden of Chester and their descriptions of the tomb, which he finds to be much more trustworthy sources able to confirm the account.

Leland concludes his text with a description first of the translation of Arthur’s body, and then a discussion of the various differing accounts as to when Arthur actually lived. This final section is, again, essentially Leland’s diplomatic attempt to say that many of his previous sources were wrong, but that the truth can be discerned through enough actual historical understanding. Indeed, I find it most interesting in this final section that he begins it by calling himself as “historiographer” in framing his view of this debate. He again positions himself in a very different light than previous writers who looked to material objects to find truth. Where Gerald was looking perhaps more for an emotional truth that could be revealed, much in the way of relics, through revelations and mystical, empowered objects, Leland positions himself as someone who looks only at archeological finds, and objects that make sense in the context of historical fact. Of course, like Gerald, Leland is only motivated to share his archeological mode of materialism with the greater public specifically for the sake of nationalism, and as part of

298 Ibid.
299 Ibid., XVII.
a greater project, along with his *Itinerary*, to rewrite and reclaim the superstitious past in a non-sacred, Anglican, antiquarian mode.

By turning now in conclusion to the reception and result of Leland’s Arthurian writing, I argue that his methods for rendering Arthur into a historical, acceptable king were both indicative of wider spread antiquarian and Reformation trends of the era, and also the very model for the continuation and reinforcement of those trends. Specifically, I argue that this is the demonstrably true when looking at the library contents of Henry VIII earlier in his life and, subsequently, at the time of his death.

Summit argues that the founding of the libraries is a key moment in understanding the post-Reformation attempts at nation building, specifically using a material-based methodology in doing so. She notes that “the library was an institutional symbol of both the nation’s self-conscious break from its past and its efforts to rebuild a new national identity.” Summit demonstrates that it was not simply the way that libraries were theorized in this era, but rather how they were physically put together that allows us to see the Reformation and nationalistic goals behind them. In doing so, she documents the organizational structures of these new libraries and, further, the choices of books that were now included in them, as a method of uncovering the ways in which the compilers were theorizing their past.

Notably, in discussing the end of the Reformation era, Summit also finds books that themselves have been altered on a basic level - rebound, recompiled, and edited - in order to “strengthen the king’s supremacy and to support the cause of religious

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300 Summit, *Memory’s Library*, 3.
The ways in which these books were contained within the libraries also contributes to the user’s conceptualization of their information. Summit notes that “libraries do not ‘invent’ the objects that they contain, but they do produce what cognitive theorists call ‘standards of coherence’ by which these objects are used and understood.” In other words, Summit explains that knowing whether or not something like a “saint’s life was catalogued as a work of fiction or of history” does not fundamentally change the actual text of the manuscript, but it does change the way in which the reader would consume the text.

Using this same methodology to examine the libraries of Henry, both from early in his life and at the time of his death, it becomes clear that even Henry, who had had such poor luck in his use of the “fake” Round Table earlier in life, was eventually affected by Leland’s writing, or at least the trends and methods that it demonstrates and propagates. From the two sets of Henry’s library lists, it is clear that the types of writing that he had an interest in had evolved to match Leland’s methodology and because of that methodology itself, given that Leland himself had helped, as James Carley puts it, “[contribute] to the shape of the royal library.” The Richmond Palace book list was recorded in February 1535 by a French visitor and reflects a ten-year period in which the Richmond Palace was under Henry’s control. The library there would have been

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301 Ibid.
302 Ibid.
303 Ibid.
inherited from Henry VII, and Henry VIII did not spend much time there later in life. As a result, Starkey argues that the contents of the library were probably rather stagnated and reflect the early life of Henry, pre-coronation. Though Carley notes that the list is probably incomplete, it does give an overall impression of the types of works included in the library. The texts include many classical and biblical works, though for my purposes I am concerned primarily with the nationalistic and Arthurian items. There are a variety of chronicles listed as being in the library both in Latin and French, including, for example, Jehan de Wavrin’s *Anciennes et nouvelles chroniques d’Angleterre*. However, there is a noticeable absence of some of the more canonical Arthurian chronicles, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth or Gerald of Wales. Instead, there are numerous Arthurian romances, including *Lancelot en troys volumes*, *Merlin en deux volumes*, *Propheties Merlin*, *Lancelot du Lac*, and *Le Saint Graal* which Carley notes also contained *Queste del Saint Graal* and an abridged *Mort Artu*. In each case, the Arthurian text is a romance rather than a historical or chronicle version of the story. This reflects a younger Henry’s desire for Arthurian pageantry and the tropes of romance.

Compare that to the list of texts recorded at Westminster at the time of Henry’s death in 1547. This list is much more extensive, and reflects both a more complete record and a larger, more frequently used library. This library of an older Henry includes relatively few romances, and not a single Arthurian one. Yet there are many Arthurian texts included, which demonstrates that, while Arthur was a concern for Henry, it was the

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historical Arthur rather than the romance Arthur that he had finally come to realize merited his attention.

The list of texts here includes both Polydore Vergil’s *Anglica historia* and Leland’s response in his *Assertio inclytissimi Arthurii regis Britanniae*. Also included in the library was a compilation volume that included Ranulf Higden’s *Polychronicon*, Nicholas Trivet’s *Annales sex regum Anglicae*, a list of Anglo-Saxon kings, ‘Narratio Thomae archiepiscopi Canuariensis de ampulla olei sancti’, and Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*, and Turpinus’ *Historia Caroli magni et Rolandi*. The book list also contains a second compendium in which Geoffrey of Monmouth is included, this time along with *Historia Britonum*, *Visio Thurkilli*, William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta regum Anglorum* and *Gesta pontificum Anglorum*, and Aelred of Rievaulx’s *De genealogia regum Anglorum*. In both cases, Geoffrey of Monmouth is compiled with historical texts and, as such, the context for the Arthurian story exists as a historically true, accurate text.

Notably, it is also what is absent from the library that is striking. No copy of Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* is included, despite its widespread popularity at the time. Additionally, while the library does include a copy of Gerald of Wales’ *Cambrensis de description Hibernie*, there are no copies of his other two famous works, *De Principis Instructione* and *Speculum Ecclesiae*, both of which contain the more mystical version of the Arthurian exhumation.

Even more notable is a manuscript that is now split up and labeled as BL MS Royal 13 A and Cotton Vespasian B. Carley demonstrates that the original text was a compilation that included Honorius Augustodunensis’ *Imago mundi*, Wace’s *Roman de
Brut, Geffrei Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis*, and *Cronica regum Anglie*. However, the book list notes the text as only “a Imago mundi cum chronica Anglie” and Carley notes that the Wace portion was actually removed from the compilation.\(^{307}\) Again, this hints at a specific and concerted effort to ignore the earlier version of Arthur that Henry had rejected. Instead, it is the two copies of Geoffrey of Monmouth, both compiled in historical volumes, that Henry keeps, along with the texts of Leland and Vergil debating the issue.

Thus, while Henry VIII in his youth – and even as late as the early 1530s – believed that there was propagandist stock in the Arthur of romance, it is clear that both his failure to impress a rapidly changing antiquarian audience, as well as his own Reformation efforts, drove him to seek out something different. It is Leland’s method of reimagining Arthur that allows his legend to survive this shift and remain so significant that Henry, by the time of his death, still took an interest in him. Yet this very methodology also meant that Henry’s choice of Arthurian texts included Leland’s own defense of Arthur, along with the very type of books that Leland would have recommended himself.

CHAPTER 5

DEE, SPENSER, AND THE LIMITS OF ARTHURIAN IMPERIALISM

Having addressed in the previous chapter the transition in how Arthurian objects were being theorized and judged, I would now like to examine the emergence of a new way in which this antiquarian style of proof was being utilized. Specifically, I examine how during the Elizabethan period Arthurian objects were deployed to bolster British imperialism and claims to the New World. While the antiquarian solution of relying on physical, archeological, and cartographic methods continues during this era, namely the 1560s-1600s, what I am now more concerned with are how the differing international stakes of these efforts affected both their implementation and their results. Whereas during the earlier Tudor period the claims to Arthur were primarily nationalistic in nature, for Elizabeth, Arthur becomes one of her best claims to the New World, largely due to the British belief that Arthur had conquered all of these locales back in his own age. Set against a backdrop of licensed piracy and the exploits of Sir Francis Drake, the Arthurian discourse of the era justified Elizabeth’s international policy, souring relations with Spain, and attempts at colonization of the New World. In looking at Elizabeth’s imperial claims, my interest is now not only in investigating the importance of Arthurian objects and the methods used in analyzing them, but also more specifically in their reception both at home and abroad. While Arthurian objects and Arthurian lore in general continued to be widely accepted in the Elizabethan court as proof positive of a glorious British past – and as justification for an expanding contemporary British empire – this is not necessarily true when pushed beyond British borders. While France had adopted their own brand of Arthurian lore during the Angevin and Plantagenet periods, the Arthurian story held little
impact in Spain, Portugal, or Rome, the three places where Elizabeth’s New World rights were most treated as suspect. Arthurian claims that seemed strong and based in hard proof to the Elizabethan court ultimately would prove ineffective when confronted by non-believers from these different nations.

England did have reasonable claims to North American territories given that, under Henry VII and Henry VIII, John and Sebastian Cabot had reached Newfoundland and the Northwest Passage. Additionally, under Elizabeth, Martin Frobisher had reached the northern regions of Greenland and Baffin Island. However, after the papal bull Inter Cetera, issued in 1493 by Pope Alexander VI, which along with the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494, divided the New World between Spain and Portugal along a meridian line, the whole of the Catholic European world seems to have been relatively dismissive of English claims to the Americas, particular once the island became Anglican. Given that the meridian ran the entire way north, Spain and Portugal saw the treaty as giving them rights to North America in addition to central and South America. The result was that the British believed that they had to establish a claim that predated both the Spanish and Portuguese expeditions. In doing so they looked further back to more legendary claims of exploration and colonization, which included Arthur amongst others.

That Arthur had been a conqueror of the New World was actually in keeping with the widely held British belief in a long line of supposed British explorers of the Americas. In addition to stories of the Arthurian conquests in the northern islands of the Americas, which had circulated for as long as the chronicles included mention of Iceland in his conquests, there were also legendary stories of New World discoveries by both the Irish St. Brendan in the 560s and later, and more importantly, by the Welsh Prince
Madoc, a supposed ancestor of Elizabeth, around 1170. The story goes that Madoc, son of Owen Gwynedd, made a voyage that eventually landed in Mobile Bay, and after returning to Wales for more ships and men, returned to establish a colony there. Though there was no further contact from Madoc, the legend of his discovery and possible colony was not forgotten and gained more credence in the eyes of the British once the race for conquest and settlement of the New World began three centuries later. Gwyn Williams notes that the Welsh — and the British as a whole — indeed became increasingly convinced of the veracity of the legend when certain Native American dialects sounded somewhat like Welsh, and at the appearance of any Native Americans who appeared remotely fairer of skin or hair color than average, believing them to be mixed-ethnicity descendants of Madoc’s colony.

Yet while these claims seemed strong to the British, stories of these legendary explorers did little to persuade outsiders nor did claims for Arthurian conquest specifically. In order to explore the intersection of Arthurian objects, the arguments for Arthurian New World conquest, and the issue of Arthur’s lack of cultural capital internationally, I will be looking at two surprisingly similar men of Elizabeth’s court who both had a hand in using Arthur for British imperial propaganda: John Dee and Edmund

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310 Ibid. Note also that the legend held sway beyond the Renaissance as Robert Southey would write his poem “Madoc” in 1805, using the Welsh prince’s conquests as justification for his own colonial agenda. Similarly the town of Madoc, Canada currently credits its name as being in honor of the prince, despite some linguistic signs that it may have been named after an unrelated place.
Spenser. Dee, best known for being Elizabeth’s court astrologer and alchemist, was also a sometime maritime mapmaker, navigator, mathematician, and Arthurian propagandist. Dee is often neglected by current scholarship beyond the realms of astrology and pseudo-science where his attempts to commune with angels make for entertaining fodder. However, there has been a recent push by critics such as Andrew Escobedo, William Sherman, and Ken MacMillan to think of Dee in more political and legal terms instead. Indeed, Dee, beyond his mystical ties, was really a scholar and an antiquarian as well. He owned one of the largest libraries in the British world at the time, was friendly with John Stowe, and had a scholarly interest in cartography, navigation, and geological survey. This background combined with his strong belief that Arthur, along with other Welshmen such as Prince Madoc, had found and conquered the New World hundreds of years before anyone else, made Dee’s work central to many of Elizabeth’s imperial claims.

In discussing Dee, I will be looking at his many attempts at supporting Elizabeth’s imperial policy through the use of Arthurian objects. Dee, being somewhat of an antiquarian, relied heavily on their same practices and argued his case almost entirely through connections to physical things. Starting in the early 1570s, Dee created a variety of Arthurian documents to demonstrate these connections. He drew up family trees – ones that included Arthur, Elizabeth, and indeed himself – as well as maps that

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demonstrated Arthur’s holdings in the New World. In his most famous Arthurian tract, the *Brytanici Imperii Limites*, written 1577-8, he also made claims regarding the colonization of these New World holdings based on what he asserted was archeological evidence of Arthurian colonialism, despite its obvious fabrication in retrospect. However, my main concern with Dee is not just the objects that he chose to use in proving Elizabeth’s imperial claims, but also the reception of these arguments and objects. While Dee seems to have believed that his work was succeeding, instead evidence shows that while the court itself may have been enthusiastic about his efforts, they did not translate beyond that particular audience. Those foreigners who he attempted to convince ultimately never believed and the papal decree supporting Spain and Portugal in the New World was certainly never amended to consider Arthur or Britain. Where the fluidity of objects and their multitude of meanings may have helped antiquarians such as Leland to rewrite the medieval past of the Tudor era, the inability for an object to clearly and universally signal a single truth to all readers now became a problem. For Dee, his Arthurian objects were clear signifiers of British imperial power, but those same objects meant something quite different to his foreign audience. It is with this concern in mind that I would also like to look at Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* as a second test case of the use of Arthurian objects in Elizabethan imperial propaganda. Of course, when speaking of Arthurian British propaganda, *The

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313 In retrospect, to say any pope would have reconsidered anything based on any amount of evidence seems a bit farfetched. However, MacMillan argues that Dee did in fact write in response to the papal bull that awarded New World land to Spain and Portugal, and was specifically trying to address others who had taken the decree seriously, if not the Pope himself.
Faerie Queene is a necessary point of analysis and arguably the seminal example of such during the Early Modern period and particularly the Elizabethan era. A planned twelve books, The Faerie Queene only made it as far as six, published in two sets of three, the first in 1590 and the second in 1596. The epic poem is allegorical in nature and employs a different knight to represent a virtue in each book of the poem. While some characters make brief appearances in multiple books, the one character that ties all of the books together is Prince Arthur, Spenser’s presumed choice to represent the twelfth and most critical virtue of Magnificence and who would also encapsulates the previous eleven as well.

While The Faerie Queene has certainly not been neglected by previous scholarship, the majority of it has looked at The Faerie Queene as a piece of nationalistic propaganda. Some critics have also looked at the poem via the lens of colonialism, but there has been little analysis on the topic of imperialism itself, and that which exists has done little to connect that imperialism to Arthur or to Arthurian ‘things.’ Therefore, I would like to take this different approach to The Faerie Queene and instead of seeing it as a nationalistic poem, per se, to read it through the lens of being an imperial poem at its heart, and to examine how Arthur and Arthurian objects intersect with that concern. My method of doing so is to frame the poem as essentially taking place in a foreign country. Faerieland may not be a real nation, but it is also not truly Britain. As such, the handful of British, human, Arthurian characters that show up in Faerieland are essentially outsiders – visitors to a foreign land.

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Arguably, there could have been twenty-four books. It is a bit unclear as to whether Spenser planned twelve on the private virtues and a second twelve on the public or if there were simply twelve total.
It is in this context that I argue that the poem’s overwhelming concern with misunderstood and misglossed objects and identities stems from an inability of this foreign setting to provide correct interpreters for these objects. In other words, I would claim that just as Dee’s Arthurian proof did not extend beyond the Elizabethan court in any meaningful way, despite its adherence to the antiquarian standards of the era, so too was the power of Prince Arthur and the other British characters of *The Faerie Queene* unfulfilled in a non-British land. The inhabitants of Faerieland, much like those in real life foreign nations, simply did not have the background knowledge that was necessary to understand – or even simply care about – the assumed cultural capital of Arthurian objects and the Arthurian past. I would further argue that this arrangement is not accidental on Spenser’s part – surely far less in *The Faerie Queene* is left to chance than in many works – and that Spenser is actually demonstrating his concern with this very issue. While Spenser may have clear moments of Elizabethan propaganda and Arthurian lore throughout the poem, he also includes many more moments of his characters displaying confusion and a lack of understanding when it comes to British history and the correct glossing of Arthurian objects. As such in looking at Spenser’s Arthurian objects I again return to Bill Brown’s thing theory to argue that there is specifically a multitude of possible meanings for each Arthurian ‘thing’ in *The Faerie Queene* in order to demonstrate the instability of objects and history, and their dependence on a specific reader in order to generate any one specific meaning.

In looking at both Dee and Spenser in concert, then, I put forth that both were in a position to advance Elizabeth’s imperial agenda and that both relied on the Arthurian past – and specifically Arthurian objects – in order to do so. Both Spenser and Dee employ
similar antiquarian methods in attempting to use Arthurian objects for imperial goals, despite the fact that one is in a literary setting and one in a real world court setting. Further, I claim that both Spenser and Dee encounter similar problems in attempting to do so because, of course, in the end they were both trying to verify a past that not only did not exist, but which had been increasingly cast into doubt, particularly by those who were outsiders to the Elizabethan court or to Britain as a whole. The problem with using Arthur for imperialistic purposes goes beyond simply the veracity of his history, but speaks more to the lack of cultural capital that he has outside the boundaries of Britain, particularly in Spain, Portugal, and Rome.

    What separates Dee and Spenser, I conclude, is their level of awareness as to the problems that they face, or at least the level of such problems that they were willing to admit to. Though it is hard to tell exactly how much he believed in his own claims, Dee at least made a good show of remaining steadfast in his conviction in the Arthurian past of the New World. There are clear moments in Dee’s work of fabrication or, minimally, compensation for a lack of information, that speak to a not totally guileless author. However, Dee shows far less doubt and confusion than most other Arthurian writers. Moreover, Dee, even in his own personal diaries, records his efforts with a surprising optimism regarding their acceptance and impact, this despite the increasing lack of response from his audience, particularly that of the international and imperialistic scene. On the other hand, I would argue Spenser was all too aware of the exact problems that Dee was facing, and demonstrates his concern with this issue throughout The Faerie Queene. Spenser uses Arthur and objects in order to demonstrate his belief in the power of the British claim to empire as well as Elizabeth’s claim to Britain, but he also
overwhelms his poem with objects that are misunderstood and misglossed, as well as with history – particularly Arthurian history – that is muddled, confused, and unable to translate to different times and spaces and to incorrect readers. As such, Spenser does not simply mimic the Arthurian imperial narrative of the court, but also exposes the inherent problems within it.

John Dee’s legacy is that of an astrologer and magician, who dabbled in contacting angels and learning the angelic Enochian language. Dee as magician is an image that has even survived into twentieth- and twenty-first-century pop culture: he has been included as a character in multiple books, plays, and even video games, with his reputation – because of his seemingly occult ties – often leaving him the villain of these works.315 Scholarship, too, has often been almost exclusively concerned with Dee’s later life, where he did indeed become increasingly obsessed with angels and other ethereal concerns. As of late, however, scholarship has started to also recognize Dee for his contributions earlier in life, where it becomes more evident that the Early Modern astrologer was also by necessity an astronomer and mathematician. While science and the occult may have been beginning to split into distinct fields during this period, they were far from entirely separated, and despite whatever occult leanings Dee is currently associated with, in his own age he was just as much renowned as a great scholar and scientist. He studied in Brussels and Leuven in the late 1540s and lectured in Paris on 

315 Such references includes Dee’s appearance in DC Comics as Doctor Destiny, along with his being a character in Patricia Wrede’s 1989 novel Snow White and Rose Red, Phil Rickman’s Bones of Avalon, Michael Scott’s The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel, and Renaissance scholar Deborah Harkness’s novel Shadow of Night. Conversely, the recent FOX television series Sleepy Hollow included Dee for once as a good occultist whose journals help the heroes battle against evil.
Euclid before being offered a position in mathematics at Oxford in 1554.\textsuperscript{316} Dee turned down this position, however, and eventually became Elizabeth’s chief astrologer and scientific advisor when she took the throne in 1558. Dee had already been an advisor to Mary and previously had cast horoscopes for both Mary and Elizabeth – an act that had seen him arrested for anti-Catholic sorcery, but that had endeared him to Elizabeth. In the early 1570s, Dee, now a member of Elizabeth’s court, found himself an advisor on Elizabeth’s goal of creating a British empire.\textsuperscript{317}

Dee was a perfect fit for this role, as he had an astronomical and scholarly background that gave him the necessary skills to advise the queen on the navigational aspects of expansion. Further, Dee was known to be friends with antiquarians like John Stowe, and his interest in navigation extended to a general interest in old maps and the history of cartography. Beyond that, Dee was an antiquarian in the sense that he was interested in knowledge in general, and particularly knowledge of the past. Dee had possibly the largest library in England at the time, and when it came to advising on the expansion of Britain into an empire, Dee was able to provide guidance as to the historical and ideological implications as well.\textsuperscript{318} Ken MacMillan claims that Dee was the first to have ever used to the term “British Empire” and that he was steadfast in his belief that he could prove Elizabeth’s claims to the New World via an historical Arthur.\textsuperscript{319}

\textsuperscript{316} French, John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus, 5.

\textsuperscript{317} Ibid., 189.

\textsuperscript{318} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{319} Ken MacMillan, introduction to John Dee and the Limits of the British Empire, 9.
For the purposes of this study, Dee’s Arthurian interests are of course paramount, as is his use of Arthurian objects in attempting to prove his claims of Arthur’s imperial conquests and the importance that they had to the new British Empire. Whereas Dee’s primary professions of alchemy and astrology may seem ethereal and lacking in ‘things,’ in reality, they were believed at the time to be hard science, and thus were actually grounded in physical objects - seals, touchstones, and the like – that were believed to be physical proof of ethereal concerns. As such, Dee’s alchemical background when combined with his antiquarian one would have lead him to the belief, as discussed in Chapter Four, that the only way to prove that Arthur had been not only real, but also the conqueror of the New World was through empirical proof.

Indeed, as Andrew Escobedo argues, Dee’s drive to find empirical evidence for Arthur may go beyond any of the other Early Modern antiquarians. Escobedo claims that Dee was ultimately the only “Tudor antiquary who actually claims to have seen the ancient Welsh book that Geoffrey supposedly translated.”\(^{320}\) Dee says that he has seen it “sundry times,” which Escobedo says, with an understatement, “is hard to believe.”\(^{321}\) Escobedo sees Dee’s desire for the true, physical book to be demonstrative of an evolution in Tudor antiquarianism that demands physical proof even when such proof simply cannot exist, and that rejects the inherent loss associated with the very physicality that it requires.\(^{322}\) This one example that Escobedo gives is actually quite demonstrative

\(^{320}\) Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England*, 60.


\(^{322}\) Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England*, 60.
of Dee’s entire body of Arthurian work: it is a corpus that is heavily reliant upon physical objects, specifically ones that Dee cannot possibly have access to, and yet, despite the anxiety that this lack of access should produce, is written with more confidence and seeming conviction than most previous incarnations of the genre. In reality Dee’s Arthurian objects were all simply maps and texts of his own making, lacking any true physical counterparts. However, his insistence on the existence of these true physical objects that he discusses is extreme. While it is impossible to say to what extent Dee bought into his own fiction, he certainly puts on a good show.

This supposedly physical proof, non-existent as it was, went a long way toward convincing other members of Elizabeth’s court that the Arthurian claim was valid. The problem for Dee instead lay with the inability of the Arthurian story to have the same cultural capital for outsider audiences. As useful as Dee’s imagined physical proof was for the court, his project was never able convince anyone beyond that limited audience. When looking at Dee’s multiple works arguing for the British Empire, along with the actual maps and other physical objects that he referenced as proof, it becomes clear that Dee’s physical evidence was only convincing to the British audience to whom Arthur was already valued as a cultural symbol.

As mentioned in Chapter Four, Norfolk, under Henry VIII, had attempted to persuade the imperial ambassador Eustace Chapuys to side with Henry on his marital problems based on the inscription from a seal of King Arthur. While, as I previously argued, the physical evidence itself – merely a copy of the inscription – was far from convincing, the other issue faced by Norfolk was the ambassador’s dismissal of Arthur as
an international figure. This same issue of international reception was to haunt Dee and the Elizabethan imperial cause a generation later.

Two of the best extant resources for examining Dee’s imperial cause are his ideological and propagandist tract Brytanici Imperii Limites, written 1577-8, and his extensive diaries documenting his day-to-day efforts for the cause. The Limites is composed of a series of four documents written by Dee over the course of two years, all pertaining to imperial expansion and the British claims to such. While Dee had written a variety of other works that had navigational and propagandist contents, the Limites represents the only documents that would have potentially had real true impact on the Elizabethan court, or which would have even been read by that audience. MacMillan believes that his other works were never presented at court and were all either unpublished, or published with little success. Even Dee’s most famous published text, the General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfecte Arte of Navigation, had a run of only one hundred copies and, as MacMillan notes, Dee ended up keeping sixty of those. Yet MacMillan, in his edition of the Limites, argues that there is what he calls “strong evidence” that all of the documents on which the Limites was based were presented to Elizabeth and her advisors. The evidence for this claim includes diaries dating specific meetings with the queen that correspond to dates in the Limites along with specific language in these documents which refers to the queen as its addressee. There

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323 This is not quite as depressing as it sounds; MacMillan posits that Elizabeth had actually purposely suppressed the document in order to keep Dee’s valuable insights out of foreign hands.

324 MacMillan, intro to John Dee: The Limits of the British Empire, 5.
are also notes by Dee stating that the final document in the set, named also the “Bryanici Imperii Limites,” was written “at her majesty’s commandment.”

Based on this evidence, there is a current scholarly consensus that while much or even all of Dee’s other writing was essentially inconsequential in its contributions to the imperial conversation of the Elizabethan court, the Limites documents would have had an impact. Not only were they presented to Elizabeth and her advisors, but most likely, William Sherman argues, they were also circulated more widely amongst the political elite due to the culture of “private manuscript circulation” that existed in both literary and political circles. It becomes clear in this context that while Dee’s audience was certainly limited it did exist and was made up of those whose opinions mattered when it came to imperial policy. Critically, his audience was also limited in the sense that it was made up of specifically the British elite who would have not only had the bias and desire to believe in, and politically invest in, Dee’s claims but who, on a more basic level, simply had the fundamental knowledge necessary of the British past to be able to follow his arguments.

While the first two of Dee’s documents in the Limites were not inherently tied to the Arthurian past, they both certainly do have the shared quality of being quite antiquarian in their methodology, as each is an argument for a new take on North American geography and relies heavily on Dee’s cartographic background and his

\[\text{\textsuperscript{325} Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{326} Sherman, John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance, 116-7. I would further note in addition to Sherman’s argument, the fact that Dee had a well documented association with Sidney bolsters the theory that he would have been involved in the private circulation of manuscripts given the Sidney Circle’s own noted practice in doing so with literary texts.}\]
understanding of the landscape and the physical world. The third and fourth documents are the legal and historical justifications for the expansion of the British Empire and for Dee’s belief that Britain could claim all of North America. In both cases these claims are based partially on the Arthurian past. Beyond Arthur, both documents rely on British history in general and play specifically into the antiquarian trend of historical documents and objects being treated as the most crucial and credible evidence.

The third document is titled “Unto your Majesties Tytle Royall to these Forene Regions & Ilandes do appertayne 4 poyntes” and lays out Dee’s four points as to Elizabeth’s claim to North America. He begins the text by giving the fundamental claim that these “sondrye foreyne regions [were] discovered, inhabited, and partlie conquered by the subiectes of this Brytish Monarchie” and that therefore Elizabeth has a “dewe clayme [for the] iust recovery of the same disclosed.”327 Dee first lays claim to the region through the Welsh prince Madoc, who he argues in his first point arrived in Florida in 1170. Dee then details both St. Brendan’s early discoveries of North America and the 1490s voyages of Sebastian Caboto, before moving on to an extensive discussion of Arthur’s conquests.

Dee first describes the more accepted of Arthur’s conquests – Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, and Friseland - in a manner that is comparable to other historical texts such as Geoffrey of Monmouth.328 He also interestingly includes the “North Poll” however,

327 Dee, *Limites*, 43. All citations for the *Limites* come from MacMillan’s edition using his page numbers.

328 Friseland is also not a “real place” in the sense that it seems to have been linked to multiple different places depending on the era. It was the same as Iceland on maps from earlier eras, but by Dee’s era (and on his own map) it appears as its own island which
which is pushing the boundaries of the more accepted ‘historical’ Arthur. At that point, Dee has to become more creative in how to connect the Arthurian empire to North America, and so concerns himself with the semi-fictional island of Estotiland. MacMillan demonstrates that the Spanish, basing their cartographic knowledge on the maps of Gerard Mercator and Abraham Ortelius, believed Estotiland to be attached directly to North America. However, Dee, basing his own maps on the Zeno map of 1558, believed that Estotiland was instead approximately where Baffin Island truly is. However, MacMillan notes that the Zeno map upon which Dee based all of his North American knowledge “contains a number of major flaws.” Indeed, Estotiland, though at least potentially being synonymous with Baffin Island, appears to be a fictional place, at least insomuch as the culture that supposedly lived there was a fabrication. The Zeno narrative tells of a culture that had advanced agriculture, brewed beer, could speak many languages, and had a large collection of Latin books. While there is not much else said of this culture in the Zeno text, much like the lack of a true historical Arthur, this lack of detail also leaves Dee a space into which he can insert whatever truths he so chooses and does so by connecting Arthur himself to the Estotiland culture via specifically these physical objects.

MacMillan notes could be linked to the Faroe Islands. See MacMillan, intro to John Dee: The Limits of the British Empire, 16.

329 MacMillan, intro to John Dee: The Limits of the British Empire, 10. Note that this Zeno map was published by the Venetian Nicolo Zeno, a descendant of brothers Nicolo and Antonio Zeno who had original traveled in the fourteenth century – the map was based on their travels.

330 Ibid.
Dee’s justification for the Arthurian – and therefore British – claim to Estotiland is strongly antiquarian and relies on essentially circumstantial historical evidence. He first places Arthur in the general area by discussing his being “over all the Northern Isles vnto the pole in manner” and that Arthur was therefore “nere vnto that faire” island. He continues by saying that the linguistics of the word Estotiland must either be Germanic or Swedish because of the “land” ending. Yet his most extended argument comes down to the physical artifacts that he claims are tied to the island. Dee trades on the antiquarian belief here that physical objects are indisputable archeological proof and makes a seemingly compelling case. The objects in question are the contents of the library of the King of Estotiland, which Dee, harking back to the Zeno text, claims is made up of “a number of Latin bookes” that were “so longe before brought thether that none of the ile could either tell how they cam thether first, or yet did then vnderstand the Latin tonnge.” The books themselves were thus unreadable to the inhabitants of Estotiland, but are instead rendered by Dee into purely physical monuments of Arthur’s previous involvement.

The books, Dee continues, were “of Christian religion” and he concludes that they must have been “thither directlie sent by Kinge Arthurs commandement, or from Groeland imparted and transported for setlinge and mayntaninge of the Christian religion in those partes, wherin by sondrie recordes Kinge Arthur is commended to have bin merveilous zealous.” Dee then finishes this argument by concluding that it must have been Arthur and only Arthur who was responsible for these books because “no other man

331 Dee, *Limits*, 46.

332 Ibid.
by any other means or in any other thing else could have done so.\textsuperscript{333} Dee then goes on to list a handful of other kings in the succession who continued to be involved in North America as well as other explorers of Elizabeth’s age. While the document does contain other forms of evidence and argumentation beyond simply that of an antiquarian origin – MacMillan focuses on the judicial aspects of the text, for example – the largest portions of the text are devoted to antiquarian discourse in general and object based discourse specifically.\textsuperscript{334} In the face of no real evidence for Arthur’s conquest of Estotiland, Dee instead devotes the largest portion of the entire document to the books that supposedly remained behind. Such object based evidence was for the antiquarian Dee, it seems, the most convincing type that he could give despite the fact that these books were, much like Geoffrey’s Welsh book that Dee insisted that he personally saw, more fabrications than truly objects.

Although the four documents of the \textit{Limites} compilation were evidently assembled in 1593, this third document was originally written in 1578 and would have been presented to Queen Elizabeth at that time. This individual treatise shows up again in abbreviated form on the reverse side of a map, dated 1580, which was drawn in Dee’s hand and which bears his name in large letters across the top, along with the date upon which it was presented to the queen.\textsuperscript{335} Perhaps this is evidence that this third treatise

\textsuperscript{333} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{334} The general antiquarian tone comes up in other moments beyond the Arthurian passages including the repeated use of the term Albion instead of England or Britain. Even in referencing English law Dee specifically describes it as “the ancient law records of England” (49).

\textsuperscript{335} John Dee (BL: Cotton MS Augustus I I 1, 1580).
was particularly well received previously, or perhaps Dee simply wished to press its claims especially forcefully. The map, which is approximately 680mm x 1040mm in size, itself acts as another material object of Arthurian proof, combining a visual, physical aid with a description of further physical evidence for the claim. The map depicts the coastlines of North America as well as the west coasts of Europe and Africa. The contents of the map are notable, though problematic, for several reasons. At first glance, however, the map appears surprisingly accurate to the twenty-first century eye. While the scale of various land-masses are skewed to some extent and an errant mountain range sits in the area currently occupied by Ohio, the map still overall is generally sound and contains a good level of detail. California and Florida are both recognizable by shape and label; the Caribbean region, while drawn far too large, otherwise matches up fairly well with correct geography. Similarly, Britain, France, and Spain – the only visible regions of Europe on the map – look approximately correct in modern terms, as does the northern and western coasts of northern Africa.

However, as far as Dee’s claims about Arthur are concerned, the key elements of the map are the islands off the northern coasts of North America and Europe that essentially connect the two continents via the North Pole – namely the islands that Dee claims that Arthur conquered, including Estotiland. It is here where his map becomes both vaguely drawn and geographically somewhat fictional. While many of the other areas of the map are drawn in excruciating detail, these islands are vague at best with attempts at randomly squiggling lines through their middles to give the suggestion of detail, but with no actual labels or precision. Estotiland in particular, while large and prominent, sitting directly north along the same longitude as Florida and indeed
occupying an area where Baffin Island should be, reads as a sketch at best compared to the rest of the map. Its label takes up the majority of the landmass, obscuring a lack of detail underneath it. This hints at Dee’s clear lack of comfort with his vague rendering of the island.

Yet the orientation of the map suggests that this vague object should yet be the center of attention for the viewer, and that despite any discomfort Dee felt, he still meant to highlight Estotiland. The map is skewed away from the traditional Early Modern map orientation options that generally favored Jerusalem or Rome as a center point. The inclusion of the New World did not necessarily motivate a move away from this medieval form. Indeed, Kathy Lavezzo demonstrates that England in particular was quite “backwards” in its mapmaking, with the first map including the New World not even getting published in England until 1576. It was not until the eighteenth century that the “English [came] into their own with respect to modern mapmaking”. Lavezzo highlights this “backwardness” of English maps by noting that William Caxton’s 1481 edition of *The Mirrour of the Worlde* even still included a tripartite T-O map with similar styles being used in England until the mid-1500s. Other English maps did orient themselves in the familiar way that a twenty-first century map would, with the Western and Eastern hemispheres being essentially equal halves of a map, but those were rarer compared to those still skewed to emphasize Europe in its center. While there were

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337 Ibid.
certainly maps that focused solely on the New World and the Western Hemisphere, the average Early Modern map that also included Europe and Africa would not.\textsuperscript{338}

Yet in the case of Dee’s map, it is North America that sits at the center of the map; Britain and Europe instead are tucked into the upper right hand corner. Indeed, the longitude that is drawn down the center of the map is the one occupied by both Florida and Estotiland, both places mentioned specifically by Dee on the map’s reverse as areas of British conquest. Despite the lack of precision that Dee affords Estotiland, it, along with Florida, represent the key concerns on this map and are oriented so that they, for this brief moment of time, are the center of the British world, or at least the center of British claims to empire.

The back of the map, as previously stated, reproduces an abridged version of the \textit{Limites’} third document and includes the entirety of its opening statement declaring the four points of Dee’s argument for a British claim. It is then followed with twelve pieces of proof for the claim, a number reduced down from seventeen in the original document, with truncated arguments for the twelve that do remain. Interestingly, Dee, in the process of editing his document down to size, excises many of the claims that may have legitimately been valid in the sense of having actually happened and having been somewhat contemporary. For example, while the full-length document has four points dedicated to the 1490s exploration of Sebastian Caboto, including one extremely long point, the map only has one brief reference to him. Yet I would note that while the Arthurian material is edited down a bit, the majority of it survives the editing process. The evidence of Estotiland’s library is included at nearly full length, for example.

\textsuperscript{338} Ibid., 119.
Ultimately, of the twelve points that survive, four of them are related to Arthur, compared to the original’s five out of seventeen. It is clear that the material that remained on the map was that which Dee deemed most important and convincing to his arguments: Arthur, his ties to Estotiland, and the supposed objects that proved this connection remain key.

Finally, in moving back to the *Limites* itself, the fourth and final document follows the reverse of this editing process and is instead a massive expansion on these arguments. Where the third document is a mere nine pages, Dee devotes an entire seventy pages to the fourth document of the *Limites* which is also titled “Brytanici Imperii Limites” and which focuses entirely on the history and conquests of Arthur and the argument for his claim to North America. Dee begins the text by performing the extremely common move of arguing that while earlier writings on the Arthurian story have been wrong and as such “by sundrie their undiscre meanes both confounded the truth with their vntruthes, and also have made the truth yt selfe to be doubted of or the les regarded for the aboundance of their fables, glosinges, vntruthes, and impoosibilities incerted in the true historie of Kinge Arthure his life and actes.”\(^{339}\) Dee then goes on to instead say that he will rely on worthwhile historians such as Leland and Rhese to educate the public and that he will not bother to copy down what they have already written so well. Dee continues by then glossing over the entire Arthurian story in about a page in such a haphazard way that nobody could possibly understand the story who did not already know it in detail. Most interesting in Dee’s version of events are his footnotes marked with asterisks. One for example is marked next to the phrase “Arthur,

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\(^{339}\) Dee, *Limites* 53.
of whose most extensive empire... things are told” that then goes to a footnote that reiterates somewhat unnecessarily “the empire of Arthur was very extensive.”

It is only these types of details that Dee concerns himself with. His audience was so narrow and his goals so specific that to describe the Arthurian story in any meaningful way was unnecessary; to highlight his empire and the veracity of the story remained crucial.

Similarly, after saying that he will rely on Leland and Rhese, Dee pauses only briefly to note a few moments of proof of Arthur’s existence and the truth of the story and in each case it is again a moment connected to a physical artifact that he highlights. He first mentions the moment earlier discussed in Chapter Two when “of [Arthur’s] carkas sene, of his carkas translated, of his crowne by Kinge Edward (the first after the conquest) received from the Welsh Brytans, [and] of his seale with the inscription imperiall.”

While he recounts these moments from Gerald of Wales and from the other early kings who treated Arthurian objects as relics, Dee of course treats them as artifacts, objects that are now historical evidence and proof of his existence. Similarly, he quotes one of the only passages directly from another source when he quotes Roger Hovedon with a passage that states “in the year 1191, at the beginning of the month of March, Richard King of England gave to King Tancred that greatest of swords which the Britons call Caliburn, which was the sword of Arthur the noble king of time past.”

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341 Ibid.

342 Dee, *Limites* 55.
It is at this point that Dee then moves on to discuss his actual goals of imperial claims. As noted above, he mentions only the issue of Arthur’s veracity, relying entirely upon his audience’s background knowledge to understand the story of Arthur and his importance. Further, the veracity of Arthur comes down essentially to ignoring potentially untrue and unverified writings and instead relying upon hard physical proof of objects. That the objects that Dee discusses at this point are also fabrications and invention speak to Dee’s place in the long line of Arthurian writers who had to have felt at least partially uncomfortable with the material that even they were presenting. Indeed, in Dee’s copy of John Hardyng’s *Chronicle* from 1574 his marginalia includes the underlining of a passage relating to forgery and an annotation in Dee’s hand, written in large letters, saying “Note forging of chronicles.” The fervor that this note is written with is demonstrated by Dee’s handwriting which is normally a clear delicate secretary but here is quite oversized – taking up a large portion of a wide margin and in a font far larger than the text itself – slightly messy, and written with a harsh stroke. His seemingly emotional reaction to the idea of forged material in a chronicle gives some credence perhaps to the idea that he believed in his own writing more than one would otherwise suspect. Yet on the other hand, when Dee, having previously claimed to have seen Geoffrey of Monmouth’s ancient book, says that he is sure that Estotiland and its library exists, he is hard to take totally seriously in his sincerity. Perhaps any incredulity that a modern reader has in Dee’s beliefs here are merely a mirror of his own doubts and confusion.

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Dee’s discussion of the British Empire is framed entirely as one of “recovery” rather than conquest – a tactic similar to his setup in the third *Limites* document. He lists the various kingdoms that Arthur was said to have conquered and gives specific boundaries and locations for the limits of that earlier empire. At this point Dee is willing to quote from a variety of other sources at length, but does so in a limited capacity, quoting only those passages that confirm the conquests of Arthur. He does so essentially to prove the point that, although some texts may disagree with each other on certain issues, an overwhelming number do agree on the conquest aspect. When faced with uncertainty, Dee compensates with quantity.

Having at this point examined the majority of Dee’s project, I turn to the issue of reception both at court domestically but also abroad. As I previously stated, the separation between the two responses marks a shift in the propagandist value of the Arthurian story. While previously foreigners such as Polydore Vergil may have disbelieved the Arthurian claims, the previous stakes of such doubt went only so far as reaffirming British acceptance of the legend. Now that the issue was charged with imperial significance, the stakes had changed.

In some ways, Dee did take his larger audience into consideration in the sense that he was aware of the papal bull that split the New World between Spain and Portugal based on the right of first discovery. As MacMillan notes, Dee could have argued from an entirely different standpoint and simply ignored the Pope as an authority in the matter at all. Dee instead did at least try to argue for British rights of first discovery and

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344 Dee, *Limites* 56.
therefore to provide a counter-argument directly against the papal bull.\textsuperscript{345} However, Dee still based a majority of his proof of this first discovery on Arthur as conqueror and discoverer; beyond that, he did so in a way that, as mentioned in regards to the fourth document, was essentially incomprehensible to someone who did not already know the story of Arthur quite well. As Sherman describes it, Dee’s texts “were directed inward, to an extremely restricted circle; they informed policies more than they spread doctrines.”\textsuperscript{346}

In looking first, then, at the domestic reception of Dee’s claims, Sherman argues that they were generally well regarded at court. There is record of some initial doubt at court for Dee’s project, specifically from Lord Burghley, though over time it appears that Dee’s arguments were generally well accepted.\textsuperscript{347} Dee writes in his diary for June 30, 1578 that “I told Mr. Daniel Rogers, Mr. Hackluyt of the Middle Temple being by, that Kyng Arthur and King Maty, both of them, did conquer Gelindia, lately called Friseland, which he so noted presently in his written copy of Monumethensis, for he had no printed boke therof.”\textsuperscript{348} Hackluyt indeed seems to have taken Dee’s arguments to heart as he cited many of Dee’s examples in his own propagandist work \textit{Discourses of Western Planting} in 1584. Similarly, two years earlier in 1582, Sir George Peckham references material that he got from Dee in his own “Advantages of Colonization.” Sherman also

\textsuperscript{345} MacMillan, 24.

\textsuperscript{346} Sherman, 149.

\textsuperscript{347} Ibid, 22-4.

notes that the English diplomat Charles Merbury cites Dee in bolstering his belief in both Elizabeth’s claim and in English pride. Merbury writes that

it is no small comforte vnto an English Gentlman, finding him selfe in a farre countrey, when he may boldly shew his face, and his forehead vnto any forren Nation: sit side by side with the proudest Spagnaird: Cheek by cheeke with the stoutest Germane: set foote to foote with the forewardest Frenchman: knowing that this most Royall Prince (her Maisties highnesse) is no whitte suiecte, nor inferior vnto any of theirs. But that shee may also (if shee plaiese) chalenge the superiorite both ouer some of them, and ouer many other kinges, and Princes more. As Maister Dee hath very learnedly of late (in sundry tables by him collected out of sundry auncient and approued writers) shewed vnto her Maiestie, that she may iustly call her selfe LADY and EMPRES of all the Northe Ilandes.\textsuperscript{349}

While this passage not only fulfills Sherman’s purpose of demonstrating Dee’s prominence and acceptance at court, I would also notes that it is specifically Dee’s physical evidence, “sundry tables” – i.e. maps – that are from “auncient” sources that Merbury is taken by. Thus, arguably, when dealing with a domestic audience, Dee does seem to know how to appeal to them, and does so through the use of antiquarian methods. However, these methods were clearly not enough for an international audience and the most telling moment of the split between the court’s opinion of Dee’s work and the lack of international acceptance of his arguments may be in the presentation of the 1580 map previously discussed. The map and abbreviated document were part of Dee’s intercession at court during what MacMillan calls a “diplomatic crisis.”\textsuperscript{350} The crisis in question was after Sir Francis Drake returned from his trip around the New World having claimed California – what he called Nova Albion – for Elizabeth. In response Count Bernadino de Mendoza, the Spanish ambassador at Elizabeth’s court immediately made a

\textsuperscript{349} Sherman, \textit{John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance}, 150.

\textsuperscript{350} MacMillan, in the intro to \textit{John Dee and the Limits of the British Empire}, 28.
complaint saying that those lands belonged to Spain based on the papal bull. Given the previous acceptance of Dee’s arguments at court, Elizabeth immediately called upon him to help settle the crisis. Dee’s diaries tell us that on September 17, 1580, Elizabeth herself cam from Rychemond in her coach, the higher way of Mortlak felde, and when she cam right against the church she turned down toward my howse: and when she was against my garden in the felde she stode there a good while, and than cam ynto the street at the great gate of the felde, where she espied me at my doore making 9 obeysains to her Majestie; she beckend her hand for me; I cam to her coach side, she very speedily pulled off her glove and gave me her hand to kiss; and to be short, asked me to resort to her court, and to give her to wete when I cam ther.\(^{351}\)

Dee follows this up by explaining that he was well received when he presented his “rolls” of Arthurian proof to Elizabeth and that even Burghley as Lord Treasurer eventually applauded his treatises:

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\text{at 11 of the clok before none, I delivered my two rolls of the Quene’s Majesties title unto herself in the garden at Richemond, who appointed after dynner to heare furder of the matter. Therfore betwene one and two afternone, I was sent for into her highnes Pryvy Chamber, where the Lord Threasurer allso was, who, having the matter slightly then in consultation, did seme to dowt much that I had or could make the argument probable for her highnes’ title so as I pretended. Wheruppon I was to declare to his honor more playnely, and at his leyser, what I had sayd and could say therin, which I did on Tuesday and Wensday following, at his chamber, where he used me very honorably on his behalf. Oct. 7th, on Fryday I cam to my Lord Threasor, and he being told of my being without, and allso I standing before him at his comming furth, did not or would not speak to me, I dowt not of some new greif conceyved. Oct. 10th, the Quene’s Majestie, to my great cumfort (hora quinta), cam with her trayn from the court and at my dore graciously calling me to her, on horsbak, exhorted me briefly to take my mother’s death patiently, and withall told me that the Lord Threasor had gretly commended my doings for her title, which he had to examyn, which title in two rolls he had browght home two howrs before.}^{352}\]

\(^{351}\) John Dee *The Private Diary of John Dee*, 16.

\(^{352}\) Ibid., 17.
In essence, we thus find out that Dee was asked to bring his “two rolls” – one containing the map and document and the other containing an abridged version of document four – to court in order to help aid in the claim for “her highness’ title.” While Dee is well aware here that Burghley, the Lord Treasurer, doubted some of his evidence at first, the diary passage concludes with Dee feeling vindicated at Burghley’s having “gretly commended” him.

Yet, while Elizabeth and even Burghley seem to have been pleased with Dee’s work and to have believed the strength of his claims, the international response was clearly not as positive. On a most basic level, his arguments were not able to actually help Elizabeth claim the lands that she sought or to override the papal bull. California in the end did become a Spanish land rather than being renamed Nova Albion. And while it is unlikely that the Pope would have acted favorably towards Protestant Britain no matter the strength of evidence, there is no record outside of Britain of anyone else siding with the claim, either. Indeed, the only person to take Britain’s side was Dee’s friend William Camden in his “Annals.”

To reiterate then, I argue that while Dee’s evidence in each of his documents and through his maps would have indeed been persuasive to a British audience, it was evidence that would have only made sense to those who already understood the cultural capital that Arthur possessed in Britain and who in fact already knew his story in detail. Dee’s evidence, while suitably antiquarian and object based and while extremely detailed when it comes to Arthur’s connection to the New World and to the physical evidence of such, is also haphazard at best in discussing Arthur himself and

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353 MacMillan, 29.
proving the veracity of Arthur’s story. Dee leaves that to those previous writers who would have already convinced a British audience of its truth and importance.

John Dee and his imperial project make an excellent test case in the use of Arthur for imperial propaganda. In looking at the results of his work, one can see that the court itself did believe in the efficacy of the work that he was doing – so much, in fact, that it was he who was called in during an emergency or time of crisis. Yet his work in the end had no actual effect on British imperial goals, and the name Arthur simply did not translate beyond the British borders as one that conferred any power or authority on to their claims. While Dee may have believed in the power of his work, and while his work arguably did have an affect on the ways that other British imperialists discussed their own projects, it had no actual impact on the expansion of the British Empire in his own era.

Years later, Dee was disheartened, yet seemed still confused as to the lack of success resulting from his works. As Sherman notes, Dee laments in a 1597 letter that he cannot “as yet, vnderstand, [why] … (for these 21 years last past) … the said Lands, nor yet the Seas Iurisdiction, (duly & dutifully, declared & manifested) hath byn, or owgh to haue been made so little accownt of: And so my labors (after a sort) vaynely employed.”

Sherman reads this as Dee being not merely frustrated by his fall in fortunes – stemming from the obsession in his later life with the occult – but more that Dee despaired specifically at a lack of understanding of why his work on the imperial project essentially came to naught.

\[354\] Quoted from Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance*, 200 – editorial marks are his.
That being said, there is an argument to be made that Dee and his belief in Arthur did in fact inspire not only later British imperialists and their works, as Sherman claims, but also inspired the British love of Arthurian literature that sprang up in the following decades as well. Indeed, Peter French argues that it was Dee and his association with the Sidney Circle that by extension drove Edmund Spenser to include Prince Arthur in *The Faerie Queene*, the work to which I now turn.\(^ {355}\) In moving on to discuss *The Faerie Queene*, I would like to reiterate and expand on a few basic points regarding my reading of the poem. Firstly, I take the allegorical nature of the poem to be expressly concerned with objects as signs and the correct reading of those signs. Whereas the average allegory may only require the reader of the text to work out the allegorical nature of these objects and signs, *The Faerie Queene* also requires the characters themselves to correctly gloss the world around them in order to succeed both literally and morally. The symbolic nature of these objects does subsume some of their physicality, making them feel more like signs rather than true physical objects. Yet the very nature of such allegorical glossing and, more importantly, many of Faerieland’s inhabitants’ consistent inability to do so correctly, conversely highlights the objects’ ‘thingness.’ As previously noted, Bill Brown defines an object becoming a ‘thing’ by when it is most confusing or inaccessible to its user.\(^ {356}\) Throughout *The Faerie Queene*, objects become things by being constantly

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\(^{355}\) French, *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus*, 198. See also Charles Bowie Millican, *Spenser and the Table Round* (New York: Octagon Book, 1967), 45. Millican demonstrates through letters between Spenser and his friend Gabriel Harvey that Spenser was well aware of Dee and his writings, and may have also been in contact with Daniel Rogers, who was previously mentioned in Dee’s diaries as one of the men with whom he met regarding his project.

baffling to their owners and those around them, and thus while these objects lack some physicality they make up for it in nearly always being ‘things.’

Secondly, while *The Faerie Queene* is widely regarded as a piece of Elizabethan propaganda, as I will address shortly, it is less frequently thought of in an imperial context. Instead it is normally read as a nationalistic piece, concerned with Elizabeth’s very claim to the throne itself, as well as with domestic issues such as the Catholic and Protestant split. Further, when the poem is addressed in regards to the Americas, it is generally read as being concerned specifically with the colonial aspects of imperialism, particular given Spenser’s well-known colonial stance on Ireland.\(^{357}\) However, I would argue that the poem can be read entirely as an imperial experiment as well. To elaborate: Spenser has taken an allegorical world that is filled with objects as signs and characters who must gloss them correctly. These characters often need to gain specific knowledge in order to correctly understand these objects and to succeed in their quests. The

experiment, I argue, is to see what happens when these characters must interpret essentially British ‘things’ and clues, using British knowledge, but must do so on foreign soil.

This only partly parallels other critic’s views. Whereas Andrew King argues that Faerieland acts as a “mirror” that shows what Britain would be like if it were “providentially fulfilled,” I would instead ask what happens if it is read as the very opposite. 358 Faerieland itself, despite being ruled over by Gloriana, the allegorical Elizabeth, could instead be understood as specifically being a non-British land that is being only visited by British characters. Arthur, Artegall, Britomart, and Redcrosse amongst others are revealed to be British humans rather than Elfin, and while all of them have grand histories and destinies in a British context, they are all lost, confused, and misunderstood in the context of a foreign land. It is not until any of them are made an “insider” to British knowledge that they are able to gloss the world around them correctly. 359

If anything, my reading here follows Robert Barrett’s claim on the inaccessibility of information as it crosses regional boundaries in Gawain and the Green Knight. Barrett argues that, for Gawain, the pentacle on his shield is able to be read correctly as demonstrative of his identity only when he is in Camelot because the inhabitants of


359 As noted above, there is strong current of colonial discourse throughout The Faerie Queene and many moments where the more ‘wild’ natives of Faerieland are clearly meant to be connected to Native Americans, Irish, or others who are under colonial influence. However, my reading here is to view Faerieland as at least partially an allegorical stand in for non-British Europe and its inhabitants to be those Europeans who are outsiders to British lore and identity.
Camelot have the correct background information necessary to understand what the pentacle means. However, the pentacle “fails to signify across regional boundaries – its Camelot meaning does not carry over into the wilds of the Wirral.” Barrett establishes that the without the correct readers of this symbol, Gawain’s identity itself starts to “unravel.”

Similarly, my claim here is that *The Faerie Queene* is demonstrative of an imperial test case, rather than a regional one, of the power of shared British lore to extend beyond its borders – a test case that proves that while crossing regional boundaries renders the ability to interpret signs difficult, crossing international borders renders it nearly impossible. Spenser, understanding the problems that Dee failed to address, is concerned with the ability of foreigners to interpret the national signs of Britain. Indeed, given that the entire tale is a fundamentally Arthurian one, I would further argue that the entire theme of misglossed objects and the fact that objects can only be correctly understood by those with shared British background knowledge is indicative of the problems that the Arthurian story faces when confronted by outsiders. It is in this sense that I argue that *The Faerie Queene* as a whole can essentially be read as a experiment to examines what happens when one unleashes Arthur and the British past into the great unknown of foreign and imperialistic spaces. The result, Spenser finds, is not necessarily encouraging. Like Gawain’s struggles as he ventures beyond Camelot, Arthurian knowledge and identities start to unravel as they confront a non-British landscape. As I

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360 Robert W. Barrett, Jr., *Against All England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195-1656*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 158.
will demonstrate, Spenser renders a world in which even Arthur himself, cast out into the
great wide non-British world, cannot understand his own story.

In moving to look at the poem itself now, I would like to begin with a brief
eexamination of Spenser’s “Letter to Raleigh” in which he frames his goals of *The Faerie
Queene* for Raleigh as a preface of sorts for his poem. The letter serves to demonstrate
the goals that Spenser is willing to commit to on paper, but also serves to highlight the
many false boundaries that he sets for himself and then ignores in the poem. Spenser is
clear in explaining the ways in which he is celebrating Queen Elizabeth, stating that

> in that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I
conceiue the most excellent and glorious person of our soueraine the Queene, and
her kingdome in Faery land. And yet in some places els, I doe otherwise shadow
her. For considering she beareth two persons, the one of a most royall Queene or
Empresse, the other of a most vertuous and beautiful Lady, this latter part in some
places I doe expresse in Belphoebe.\(^{361}\)

To this extent, Spenser is clear that he is writing his poem partially to glorify Elizabeth
and to demonstrate the positive qualities that he sees in her. While the poem remains
incomplete, and therefore there is no direct interaction with Gloriana, the Faery Queene,
Spenser’s positive and propagandist view of Elizabeth is clear and unapologetic in his
depiction of Belphoebe as well as in Britomart, the female knight of Chastity who is also
written as an ancestor of Elizabeth.\(^{362}\)

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(London: Longman, 2001), 716. I will use only book, canto and stanza numbers for all
future references to the poem itself but page numbers from this edition for the letter to
Raleigh.

\(^{362}\) For more on Spenser’s goals in domestic propaganda regarding Elizabeth, of which
there has been much written, see: Andrew King, “Lines of Authority: The Genealogical
“The Nationalist Drive of Spenserian Hermaphrodim in *The Faerie Queene*,” *Spenser
Yet interestingly, Spenser is coy about his other moments of propagandist elements in the poem, even his inclusion of Arthur. In the “Letter to Raleigh,” Spenser addresses his use of Arthur by saying that Arthur fits his needs by being “most fitte for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many mens former works, and also furthest from the danger of envy, and suspicion of present time.”363 While Spenser is clear that he chooses to glorify Arthur, later saying that he would have represented “magnificence in particular,” Spenser is also noticeably hesitant to admit his political reasons for employing Arthur.364 By claiming that Arthur is indeed removed from the envy and suspicion of the current age, Spenser actively is claiming that Arthur has no political capital in his time, and that he therefore can be utilized without political consequences. This is an almost shocking fiction, since Arthur clearly has political implications ranging from imperialistic claims down to even Elizabeth’s right to the throne.

Spenser then makes another claim about his use of Arthur and the past that breaks down almost instantly upon reading the actual poem – namely its historical value. Spenser argues in his letter that he is approaching the British past as a “Poet” rather than “as a Historiographer” who would “discourseth of affayres orderly as they were done.

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364 Ibid., 716.
accounting as well the times as the actions.” Instead Spenser says that he, as a Poet, “thrusteth into the middest, euen where it most concerneth him, and there recoursing to the thinges forepasted, and diuining of thinges to come, maketh a pleasing Analysis of all.”

As such, Spenser is claiming the right to tell his story in the manner that he sees fit, rather than having to stick to specific facts and timelines, arguing for the right to free himself of writing anything with real historical value. Spenser again sets up the claim that he is writing here for the purpose of his moral guidance and poetry rather than for anything approaching historical or political value. This moment demonstrates what Charlotte Artese claims when she says that Spenser, like Dee, “simultaneously insist[s] on the distinction between fiction and history and exploit[s] the lack of distinction between them” in order to “authorize his own project.” Spenser routinely mixes the purely poetical with that which he believes is historical, or at least propagandist. Essentially, by claiming that his poem is purely for the sake of poetics and morals, Spenser can get away with including history that is not necessarily true or cannot be proven – history that he can then claim is merely poetry. Similarly, Dee claims that his work is entirely historical and yet mixes in ‘facts’ that are literary at best, if not entirely manufactured for his own purposes.

Artese argues that both Dee and Spenser are able to further break down this distinction by finding ‘gaps’ in knowledge and then claiming those spaces for

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themselves, further authorizing the material that they fill into these gaps. Dee, she claims, finds a ‘gap’ in knowledge regarding the New World – the issue of its past and earlier settlements – and therefore is able to exploit it by filling in what he hopes are historical truths. So too can Spenser do the same with Arthurian history, specifically with the gap in the canon between Arthur’s birth and his rise to power. By having *The Faerie Queene* include Prince Arthur as a character, Spenser is able to write whatever ‘history’ he wants for this unclaimed piece of the Arthurian timeline. In doing so, Spenser does not conflict with or compete with any ‘truly’ historical piece, which allows him to write something seemingly literary that can also fit into the historical narrative. Of course, just as it becomes clear upon actually reading the poem that Spenser had political goals in mind – so too it becomes obvious that there are historical moments in the poem as well that have propagandist value, if not actual historical power, particularly when Arthur reads of his own past and the Elizabethan future.

In moving on now to the poem itself, I would like to begin by framing one way in which to examine the ‘glossability’ of its allegorical objects. As previously stated, *The Faerie Queene* demands that not only the reader but also the characters themselves correctly gloss the world around them. Objects in the poem are signs, but they are ones that are often purposely misleading, though frequently more deliberately to the characters of the poem than to the reader. The characters indeed often wildly misjudge the objects and people that they come into contact with, and then run into moral and physical dangers as a result.

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367 Ibid.
The poem proceeds to set up what Carol Kaske termed an *in malo* and *in bono* comparison between “bad” objects and their good moral corrections, with Spenser constantly aware of the symbolic and moral value of objects as signs. In this way, objects certainly can be demonstrative of truths, but can also lead their readers astray when the reader is not armed with the correct background knowledge or moral standing to correctly judge them. As such, Faerieland, like the world of Malory’s knights, is one in which there is an overabundance of objects, all of which are signifiers of specific meanings and symbolic values that must be matched by correct readers. In Book I these objects often signify biblical truths, but throughout the work they also demonstrate moral and, most significantly for this study, political and nationalistic truths as well.

I would like to begin by focusing on Book I, both in order to address briefly the first introduction of Arthur into the poem as well as to examine the shield of Redcrosse Knight. Redcrosse, who has Arthurian connections in both his chivalric nature and his carrying of Galahad’s shield, is – unlike the rest of the characters in the poem – known only by a name literally based upon the object that he carries, his red-crossed shield. The symbol also appears on his breastplate. Much like in the discussion of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Arthur in Chapter Two, Barrett’s argument on the connection between a knight’s identity and his armor holds true here as well. In each case, the character’s identity is entirely conflated with the object that he bears. The reader is told almost

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369 The word “seem” and its variants are used repeatedly throughout Book I to highlight this issue. Things only “seem” to be one way, but are actually something else.

immediately in the second stanza of the poem that “on his brest a bloodie Crosse he
bore,/The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,/For whose sweete sake that glorious
badge he wore,/And dead as liuing euer him ador’d:/Vpon his shield the like was also
scor’d.”371

This knowledge would immediately, from the cross’s symbolic value, tell the reader that the knight is Christian. Further, the red cross was by Spenser’s time a symbol specifically of English crusaders and was, as mentioned in connection with Galahad (who previously bore the same shield) in Chapter Three, already in use as a flag of England. As such, while this knight has only just been introduced, the reader already knows just from the objects that he carries that he is Christian and, at least symbolically, tied to England. Beyond that, it would be hard for any contemporary reader not to be able to fill in the last gap of information and realize that this character is most likely Saint George himself, since the shield and the red cross were typically and specifically emblematic of him as a character. Just as an English reader of Malory would have known why Galahad having this same shield was symbolically important, so too would they be able to guess almost immediately that this “anonymous” knight was actually their patron saint.

Interestingly, the only woodcut in either the original 1590 or 1596 printings of The Faerie Queene is of Redcrosse. It appears on the verso side of the last page of the first book, facing the opening page of Book II and fills the entire page by itself. The woodcut depicts St. George, set upon a horse with a red cross on his shield and his saddle blanket, killing the dragon. A. C. Hamilton notes in his edition that this woodcut was previously used by the printer John Wolfe in other materials, and again later used to

371 FQ I.i.2.
illustrate a news pamphlet. While this certainly means that the woodcut was used out of convenience, it is easy to assume that it was not the only woodcut with a generically chivalric theme that Wolfe possessed. Many of the other knights in the poem – Britomart being the exception - could have been depicted with any generic knightly image. Yet Wolfe chose only to include Redcrosse. I think it likely that the instinct to do so was based on two concerns. One is that Redcrosse is, in the end, Saint George, and as such has more importance as an English patron and hero than the other knights of the poem. Secondly, the inherently visual nature of Redcrosse as a character seems likely to lead to the readers’ desire to see him visually depicted. His name is based on his visual features and he spends the majority of his book dealing with issues of visual representation, against which the glossing of people and objects presents a constant and sometimes nearly insuperable challenge.

Indeed, I would further argue that the visual nature of Redcrosse and the fact that his shield doubles as his identity is no random act in this particular book. The challenges to his faith that Redcrosse faces throughout the book are based almost entirely on visual tricks, particularly by objects and people who seem to be something other than what they actually are. He is first separated from Una thanks to a dream brought on by the villainous Archimago – a dream being a false visual moment not only because it is not a true physical experience, but also because it is in this case an illusion. Redcrosse is


373 Interestingly, Redcrosse is indeed called Saint George a few times early in the book but only when he is absent and his false double is doing the action of the scene. The absent knight, the true Redcrosse, is then called by his true name, Saint George. See I.ii.11. However, when Redcrosse himself is back in the scene he is then again referred to as Redcrosse so long as he himself does not know his real identity.
also led astray by Duessa/Fidessa, who is one of the ultimate examples in Book I of objects being misglossed. In the case of Duessa, her appearance as Fidessa seems to be that of a goodly woman who is richly dressed. While Duessa is later revealed to be physically hideously unattractive and therefore, in such an allegory at least, obviously evil, even Fidessa’s appearance should have been demonstrative of her deceptive nature. Indeed, it is not her physical beauty that should have given her away, but instead it is the things with which Fidessa adorns herself that label her as false.\footnote{Beauty itself throughout \textit{The Faerie Queene} is surprisingly one of the few physical outward signs that is not particularly meaningful. Fidessa and Una are both beautiful after all. It is the physical objects that adorn that beauty that have allegorical meaning.} She is dressed in “scarlet red./Purfled with gold and pearle of rich assay./And like a Persian mitre on her hed/Shee wore, with crowns and owches garnished.” Further her horse is said to be a “wanton palfrey” who is “ouerspred/With tinsell trappings, wouen like a waue,/Whose bridle rung with golden bels and bosses braue.”\footnote{\textit{FQ} I.ii.13.} While this might be perfectly reasonable dress for a real noblewoman in the real world, in the world of a biblical allegory, Redcrosse should have been able to correctly gloss the clothing and objects that Fidessa wears and figure out that she is dressed literally as the whore of Babylon, who is “araied in purple and skarlat, and guilded with golde, and precious ston\textipa{es}, and pearles.”\footnote{Revelations 17.4.} Further, she is also marked as the Pope thanks to her ‘Persian mitre’, which is essentially meant to be the papal tiara. If Redcrosse, who lives in a world of biblical allegory, had correctly interpreted these objects, he would have immediately recognized Fidessa as truly being the duplicitous Duessa. Yet Redcrosse is not yet far enough on his
journey to have the correct information necessary to gloss the things around him and instead sees only a beautiful woman.377

I use this example of Redcrosse and Duessa to demonstrate the fact that objects always signify meaning throughout *The Faerie Queene*, and that even in the case of false doubles – of which there are many throughout the entire work – there are still allegorical signs that allow a correct reader of the object to understand the truth of that object and the larger truths of the moral world. As such, even though the allegorical nature of the poem is complicated by the fact that objects are easily misglossed and misunderstood by the characters of the tale, in the end, all objects in *The Faerie Queene* are still understandable to the correct glosser. The confusion in understanding these ‘things’ is really the very point, as it allows the book’s reader to also better comprehend the character as well as the object involved.

Thus, objects not only tell the reader something of their own nature but something of the nature of those around them. Spenser’s characters often are not the correct glossers and as a result are often more confused by the ‘things’ around them than they should be. Redcrosse is both tricked by Fidessa/Duessa and is unaware of his own identity, each being issues that are, from a broader perspective, directly tied up in correct British and English nationalism. Redcrosse is unaware that he is actually Saint George, England’s patron saint. He is unaware that Duessa represents a popish whore of Babylon or, more succinctly, the Catholic threat to England. These are critical issues that should be

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377 Compare this to Una, who Redcrosse knows for a fact is a noblewoman, but who is said to be incredibly simple and plain in her dress. It is this lack of adornment, rather than her beauty that demonstrates her good and holy nature.
obvious to him based on the objective evidence, and yet Redcrosse is oblivious for almost the entirety of his own tale.

Notably, it is when Arthur himself appears for the first time in the poem that Redcrosse finally begins to find his way, both literally by being rescued from the perils resulting from his earlier poor decisions, but also in being redirected morally, which eventually leads him to the house of Holiness. There, Redcrosse is schooled in matters of faith and correct moral behavior. Afterwards, Redcrosse is also finally told his true identity when Contemplation reveals that Redcrosse was actually “sprong out from English race.” He goes on to tell Redcrosse that there “is for thee ordaind a blessed end:/For thou emongst those Saints, whom thou doest see,/Shalt be a Saint and thine owne nations frend/And Patrone: thou Saint George shalt called bee,/Saint George of mery England, the signe of victoree.”378 Once armed with this information, Redcrosse is able to go defeat the dragon as he is meant to, and finish his book heroically. As a reader of objects and signs, Redcrosse is finally able to correctly gloss himself and the world around him in order to know which objects to use throughout his battle in order to succeed. This all suggests that allegorical objects not only signify greater truths, but that specifically the glory of Britain can be demonstrated through such signs – but only when the reader of those signs has correct British knowledge.

Yet Spenser still problematizes this issue and counter-intuitively continues to demonstrate that, even in an allegory, objects are not necessarily clear proof of anything. This is not only because of the lack of clarity for Redcrosse throughout the majority of his tale, but more critically because this knowledge does not translate across boundaries.

378 *FQ* I.x.61.
Redcrosse completes Book I successfully, well aware of his own identity, his victory, and his importance to England. However, even as Book I transitions into Book II with a woodcutting of Redcrosse’s victory, a literal visual sign of his identity and success, by the start of Book II’s text, this knowledge is already again murky.

Canto I of Book II begins with a crossing of boundaries and national lines. Redcrosse is said to “beene departed out of Eden lands” almost immediately.379 The reader is then introduced to the hero of the second book, Sir Guyon. Guyon is actually of Elfin blood and therefore, I would argue, is representative for the purposes of this canto of a non-English, non-British foreigner. Guyon is, through the tricks of Archimago, lead to nearly attack Redcrosse. The two reach the point of both raising their spears and being ready to charge before Guyon sees the red cross on his opponent’s shield and stops himself, begging pardon.380 What I find interesting here is that Guyon is in fact, even as a foreigner, able to read the cross as a “sacred badge of my Redeemers death” and to therefore choose not to attack.381 However, Guyon is not privy to the knowledge that Redcrosse, who continues to be referred to by that name, is indeed the hero of Una’s land, nor that he is Saint George and therefore the hero of England. Guyon does not choose to avoid fighting Redcrosse because the shield correctly labels him as an English hero, but only because it labels him as Christian. Guyon thus is able to partially understand the symbol that he is shown; he understands the more universal Christian value of the symbol that is. However, as an outsider to specifically British knowledge,

379 FQ II.i.1.
380 FQ II.i.26-7.
381 Ibid.
Guyon is unable to understand the full implications of the thing or person that he is encountering.

In looking at Arthur now in the context of Faerieland as a foreign, non-British space, it becomes clear that Arthur himself is barely glossable to those in Faerieland, despite being clearly the hero for the British reader of *The Faerie Queene*. When first introduced to Arthur in Book I, the reader is given a glut of physical descriptions of him—though specifically of the objects that he wears and carries rather than of his own body. The first objects that the reader encounters on Arthur are elaborately wrought, but not necessarily indicative of Arthur’s identity. His “yuory sheath, ycaru’d with curious slights;/Whose hilt was burnish gold, and handle strong/Of mother perl, and buckled with golden tong” is clearly precious and ornate but not able to be glossed beyond indicating wealth and importance.\(^{382}\)

In the following stanza, however, the reader is given the necessary clue as to who this mysterious knight is, owing to an elaborate description of his helmet, which is “horrid all with gold./Both glorious brightnesse, and great terror bredd./For all the crest a Dragon did enfold/With greedi pawes, and ouer all did spredd/His golden winges.”\(^{383}\) A gold dragon helm would have been synonymous with Arthur and any knowledgeable reader would know that Pendragon (as in Uther Pendragon, Arthur’s father) literally means “head dragon-standard” since, as Kaske explains, there was a tradition of British

\(^{382}\) *FQ* I.vii.30. Hamilton notes that the sheath being carved with “curious slights” may be indicative of a magical inscription meant to evoke the power of Excalibur’s sheath in Malory without necessarily giving it any magical power (n. to same stanza). Perhaps this is an allusion, then, but not glossable on its own.

\(^{383}\) *FQ* I.vii.31.
or Welsh battle standards being topped with golden dragons.\textsuperscript{384} Further, Hamilton notes that Geoffrey of Monmouth also gives Arthur a golden dragon helm and thus would have established such a tradition early on.\textsuperscript{385} Kaske argues that this dragon on Arthur’s helm is one of the few \textit{in bono} dragons in all of \textit{The Faerie Queene} and that it would potentially read as a villainous dragon without the reader’s outside knowledge. She claims that “taken out of context, this helm could be that of a villain; but it bears favorable political connotations because it hints at Arthur’s lineage and destiny, as yet unknown to him.”\textsuperscript{386}

In other words, much like Dee’s problems in having the objects and symbols of Britain not understood beyond its borders, Arthur’s helm – the object that signals his entire identity at this point - only makes sense on a basic level and thus signifies positive political power to someone who can correctly interpret its meaning. For a British reader the helm signifies Arthur Pendragon and all the good and glory that is associated with him. To an uninformed or non-British reader, this character is wearing the helm of an evil creature and would potentially seem like a threat. At the very least this uninformed reader would not be able to guess at his true identity based on his helm alone. It is not until five stanzas later that the reader is told that this new knight is associated with Merlin and is thus given a more direct clue to his identity. Though of course, even then, someone not familiar with the basics of the Arthurian story might still not understand this character’s importance based on knowing only Merlin’s name. The name Arthur itself is not said at any point in the canto and is essentially an afterthought, brought up at last in

\textsuperscript{384} Kaske, \textit{Biblical Poetics}, 38.

\textsuperscript{385} Hamilton, 98, note to \textit{FQ} I.vii.31.

\textsuperscript{386} Kaske, \textit{Biblial Poetics}, 38.
the following canto’s argument. In essence, then, the most essential character to *The Faerie Queene* and arguably to all of British history is left to be identified primarily by the physical objects that he is associated with. The complexity of this scheme speaks to both Spenser’s style and the poem’s allegorical nature, but yet further to the underlying problem of *The Faerie Queene*, in which the often clear but complicated themes of the poem only make sense to someone who is already aware of vast amounts of background material on what they are reading.

In the same way that the average modern reader or typical undergraduate student might struggle through *The Faerie Queene* today, reliant on footnotes every other line in order to understand the necessary background needed to gloss the poem, I would argue that Spenser’s characters and indeed the uninformed Early Modern reader would similarly have problems and that this is one of Spenser’s very goals – to demonstrate how difficult object based evaluation is, particularly when objects do have a multitude of meanings and even more so when there is an improper reader. Much like Brown’s explanation of ‘thing theory,’ which posits that children of the current or future generations inherently cannot understand typewriters and that their signified value becomes lost as soon as the viewer of the object no longer can understand it, similarly *The Faerie Queene* is an extended struggle between a poem that celebrates allegory, and the knowledge that the reading of objects as signs is limited by the abilities and background knowledge of its reader.⁵⁸⁷ Indeed, I argue that Spenser is truly extending this complaint to not just allegorical objects, but to all physical but incomplete historical proof. In other words, physical proof, such as that connected with Arthur’s identity and

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importance, is clear to his British readers, but not to the “foreigners” of Faerieland or to the uninformed reader.

I now turn briefly to Book III in order to examine a moment when Spenser breaks from the allegorical mode otherwise entirely governing the poem. To be sure, Book III as a whole is still overwhelmingly allegorical and, much like Book I, contains an abundance of not just objects and allegory but also misglossed and confused readings. Indeed the in bono/in malo scheme also continues as even the characters themselves have false doubles throughout the third book. However, what I find most interesting in Book III is the canto containing some of the least allegorical lines of the whole poem. In the third canto, Spenser gives an extended description of Elizabeth’s heritage, starting with Artegall and Britomart, the female knight of Chastity, and actually breaks away from any attempt at using allegory in order to explain this propagandist family tree. Instead, it is Merlin who simply describes the entire future of her family to Britomart. After only a brief single-stanza attempt at describing the family in comparison to an allegorical tree, Merlin simply tells her in straight forward terms that “renowmed kings, and sacred Emperours,/Thy fruitfull Ofspring, shall from thee descend.”

He goes on to tell her of the various legendary kings of Britain starting with Gorlois, including the tragic overthrow of the British people, and then ending with the restoration of the British with Elizabeth whom he describes as the “royall Virgin” who brings about a “sacred Peace.”

In setting up this succession, Spenser still is able to claim Arthur as being part of the Tudor line through having the ‘fairy’ Artegall actually, like Redcrosse, be a human, the

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388 FQ III.iii.23.

389 FQ III.iii.49.
legendarily historical Artegaill, son of Gorlois and Igraine and therefore Arthur’s half
brother. Therefore, Spenser is able to make Britomart’s line be via Arthur’s nephew and
his descendants.

What is particularly curious about this entire passage is that it is arguably one of
the most straightforward and non-allegorical moments in the entire poem. Further, while
Redcrosse and the various other knights, even Arthur included, have to wait through the
majority of their tales in order to have their true identities revealed to them, Britomart is
told all of this about herself and her future line by the end of the third canto to make
everything particularly clear. While Britomart is allowed extensively detailed knowledge
about her future line shortly after coming in contact with Merlin, Arthur himself,
arguably the much more important character, is denied this knowledge. Indeed, the one
critical element of Merlin’s prophecy to Britomart that is lacking is how Arthur actually
fits into any of this. Once again, only a proper reader who knows the connection between
Gorlois and Igraine and Arthur can understand how Artegaill and Arthur would therefore
be related. Merlin at no point attempts to directly explain this matter to either Britomart
or the reader. Thus, despite the extreme clarity with which Spenser appears to conduct
this passage, Arthur is somehow still left out.

It is pertinent to parallel this with a similar moment of Arthur’s confusion and
lack of knowledge in Book II, as he attempts and fails to understand knowledge similar to
that to which Britomart is granted. Much like the third canto of Book III, Spenser sets up
the entire tenth canto of Book II to be entirely a history of British kings. Whereas Book
III’s description is a ‘future’ history moving from Arthur and Artegaill onward until
Elizabeth, Book II’s history starts with Brutus and moves up until Arthur. As Arthur
himself reads through this history, he does gain knowledge of the whole past of Britain, but is denied the fundamental piece of information that he needs, which is to place himself at the end of the list. Instead, the text reaches Uther and then:

    abruptly it did end,
    Without full point, or other Cesure right,
    As if the rest some wicked hand did rend,
    Or th’Author selfe could not at least attend
    To finish it: that so vntimely breach
    The Prince him selfe halfe seemed to offend,
    Yet secret pleasure did offence empeach,
    And wonder of antiquity long stopt his speech.390

This is a bizarre and oft-remarked upon passage, since Arthur confronts his own past colliding with his actual present. The text cannot continue in this mode, for it runs into the present that Arthur is still living in, the ‘gap’ that Spenser is filling between the canonical moments of Uther’s reign and Arthur’s ascension. Yet the description of the history’s conclusion seems to gesture at something more violent in Spenser’s intentions. The book is described as not just ending abruptly but really ending midsentence (without a caesura) and with the remaining text rent away by an “evil hand.” This is not simply the end of a chapter, waiting for time to catch up and new entries to be added. This is history being torn apart and violated in some way. D. L. Miller sees this as a challenge to the character of Arthur to step up and complete history as it is meant to be.391 David Baker argues instead that this is a sign of a gap in contemporary British history between the glory of the past and the future glory of a returned transcendent Britain and that this

390 FQ II.x.68.

missing piece is indicative of the wait for a return to glory. Yet I would read this passage more along the lines of Escobedo, who sees it instead as a failure of physical proof, arguing that the book’s ending demonstrates “how vulnerable historical knowledge is to material decay in time” and the frustration of antiquarians with the “archival unavailability of England’s Arthurian heritage.”

Building on his argument, I would further claim that the failure of the chronicle is indicative of Arthur’s place in the historical and political narrative of the Elizabethan age. Having been removed violently from the physical pages of this text, Arthur is left in the same position as he would be by many of the Elizabethan age: denied a position in British history. At the very least he is left unsure of how he fits in, if at all – half offended and half secretly delighted – an apt description if ever there was one of the position of the Arthurian past in the Elizabethan period. While the other legendary kings of the Arthurian era may be just as much in doubt or surrounded by uncertainty as Arthur, none fill as remotely an important role and, as such, their veracity is not nearly as critical. It is not merely that Arthur’s story has not yet happened within the poem that makes the recording of it difficult. Instead, it is the very nature of Arthurian history, even when it is firmly in the past, that makes its veracity both impossible to legitimize and also impossible to ignore. The catch-22, as Escobedo puts it, is that Arthur’s “selfhood is both enabled and blocked by the precariousness of material remains.” Arthur’s ability to

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394 Ibid., 73.
exist, despite being only a legend, is tied to the very physical loss that Spenser finds so frustrating to begin with: a loss that is replicated by the physical rending of a material book.

Similarly, when Britomart is given the future history of the Arthurian line in Book III, it is done through oral, prophetic transmission, as opposed to even reading from a text. But yet again this is not enough to truly understand and verify Arthur’s existence when it comes down to actual royal lines. As such, in the two histories of British kings given in the course of *The Faerie Queene*, Arthur is somehow absent from both, despite his fundamental centrality. When it comes down to it, even Arthur himself, when placed in an imperial non-British land, cannot understand who he is or how important he is to the British past – both because of and in spite of the physical books with which he is presented.

Indeed, I would claim that the only person who is capable of understanding who Arthur truly is – and his very real importance to Britain – is the reader of the poem. Only the reader is in the privileged position of having the correct British background knowledge to figure out who Arthur is. Only the reader is an insider enough to understand what is happening and to be able to gloss objects such as Arthur’s helm accurately. While objects throughout *The Faerie Queene* may be abundant and can be read as constant signs, only the reader can encounter and interpret them correctly throughout.

What I argue, then, is that Spenser is grappling with the same problem that haunted Dee in his own attempts to prove Arthur’s imperialistic value; Spenser is aware that texts alone are not enough maintain the illusion of the veracity of the Arthurian past.
The abundance of written and oral texts within *The Faerie Queene* that - in that face of Arthur himself - manage to leave out his place in history demonstrates this anxiety. Yet, Spenser is also aware that while physical objects cannot be left out or rent from a book, these objects are imperfect, flawed methods of demonstrating truths since, in the end, they still need to be glossed and ‘read’ as much as any text, provided that they exist at all. These objects and texts, Spenser demonstrates, are only convincing in the hands of those who are already convinced. When crossing national lines and moving into the mode of imperialistic rather than nationalistic discourse, the propaganda surrounding Arthur in both text and object becomes even more flawed and difficult to understand.
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