CHAPTER 11

ARTHUR, EMPERORS, AND ANTICHRISTS:
THE FORMATION OF THE ARTHURIAN BIOGRAPHY

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The Arthurian “biography” was concocted by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his Historia Regum Britanniae in the late 1130s. For the first time, some of the scattered legends about Arthur, which we nowadays encounter in Welsh histories, literature and saints’ lives, were used and embroidered into a coherent whole, which recast the king as an international figure when he moves beyond the bounds of his own land to confront and defeat the emperor of Rome and appropriate his empire. This and other elements of the biography invented by Geoffrey can, I believe, be significantly linked to certain historical and cultural attitudes and beliefs current in the twelfth century: views on empire and imperial pretensions on the one hand, and beliefs conditioned by prophetic and eschatological writing on the other. Such attitudes and beliefs are, of course, not confined to the twelfth century: they continue well beyond it and so also influence Geoffrey’s chronicler successors. I describe these in this chapter after a brief recall of some of the most striking elements Geoffrey added to the Arthurian legend.¹

It is the Historia Regum Britanniae that first supplies us with Arthur’s parentage—Uther Pendragon and the wife of Gorlois of Cornwall, Ygerna—and a birth story, which, in its portrayal of regal lust and coercion, and supernatural interference, is a dubious start to the tale of a great king, and, though it has distinct similarities to earlier pagan stories about the birth of heroes such as Perseus and Alexander, might even be seen...
faintly parodic of the origins of Christ. Geoffrey may also have been influenced by the story of Merlin’s supernatural conception in the ninth-century *Historia Britonum*.

He depicts Arthur, and indeed his whole line, as appearing at a time of national crisis. The British are in turmoil again, as they so often are in Geoffrey’s *Historia*: Britain is depleted of young men; the Romans have withdrawn their legions; there is no one on the throne and the country is under attack from Picts, Scots, Norwegians, and Danes. Armorica sends Constantine and his children to the rescue. But this provides only a temporary respite: along comes Vortigern, the Saxon invaders and settlers, and the Pictish poisoners of Aurelius and Uther. It is only after Arthur is born that peace and prosperity gradually arrive. Geoffrey may have remembered Gildas’s sixth-century account of a general collapse of the kingdom after the retreat of the Romans: vice flourishes, the land is devastated by fire, and the Saxon invaders pollute sanctuaries and altars. In inventing the dynasty that produces Arthur, he certainly would have been aware of the resonances attached to the name of Constantine.

Arthur defeats the Saxons, the Scots, the Picts, and the Irish and conquers Iceland, securing a state of peace for twelve years, during which he marries Guinevere. Then he extends his conquests to Norway, Denmark, and Gaul. This last provokes the might of Rome, which sends him a demand for tribute, which in turn provokes Arthur’s invasion of the Continent and the ultimate defeat of the Roman Empire. Geoffrey, earlier in the *Historia*, had invented the British brothers Belinus and Brennius who triumph over the Romans; Brennius for a time rules Rome. Arthur can then invoke such predecessors when he defeats the emperor Lucius and appropriates his empire. One of his vassals also refers to a Sibylline prophecy (actually invented by Geoffrey) that for the third time a Briton will seize the Roman empire. Arthur proceeds to defeat the Burgundians and, having earlier had ideas of conquering all of Europe, wants to go on to Rome; he is only checked by news of trouble at home and returns to fight his last battle. Here, in all probability using Welsh prophecies of the return of heroes like Cynan and Cadwallader, Geoffrey famously invents the story of the wounded Arthur’s retreat to Avalon and his probable return.

In investigating these elements added to Arthur’s career, I was first struck by Arthur’s confrontation with, and victory over, a Roman emperor, nominally Christian but with heathen allies. He seemed an unexpected adversary by comparison with, say, Charlemagne’s Saracens: the emperor Baligant in *La Chanson de Roland* unequivocally represents the forces of evil. It seems certain that this unexpected development of Arthur’s career must, in part, reflect the contradictory and ambivalent