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Merlin and the Pendragon: King Arthur's *Draconarius*

LINDA A. MALCOR

Some scholars have argued that Merlin exhibits druid-like characteristics, but the medieval tradition of Merlin as the bearer of Arthur's dragonhead standard casts the prophet-turned-wizard in a very warlike role. (LAM)



Figure One: Detail of Merlin from the Vulgate *Estoire del Saint Graal*/Merlin (MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale f. fr. 95, fol. 327v); Drawn by Linda A. Malcor.

Merlin is one of the best-known figures of Arthurian tradition, but modern readers are generally more familiar with his various incarnations in contemporary Arthurian novels than they are with his original legends (see Fig. 1). There are two primary medieval traditions of Merlin: that created by Geoffrey of Monmouth and that spawned by Robert de Boron through his interpolations of Geoffrey's tale.¹ Medieval authors tended to follow one or the other of these two main traditions, rarely combining both in one story (Littleton and Malcor 1995, 88).

The earliest accounts of Merlin as a figure associated with King Arthur were probably related in tenth-century Welsh poems (Tolstoy 1985, 21–86; Barber 1961, 49),² but the full-blown story of Merlin was originally developed by Geoffrey of Monmouth, ca. 1135–1150 (Stewart 1987, 188). Geoffrey's *Prophetiae Merlini* (ca. 1135) predates the rest of his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1136; Stewart 1987, 188; cf. Kibler 1996, 320) with his *Vita Merlini* (ca. 1150) further developing the legend of the prophet-magician of Arthur's court.³ John of Cornwall drew on Geoffrey's text for his *Prophecies of Merlin* (1155),

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and Geoffrey of Viterbo seems to be doing the same in his *Merlin* (1200). The Icelandic *Merlínússpá* (ca. 1200)⁴ is a verse translation of Geoffrey's *Prophetiae Merlini*.⁵

Robert de Boron's *Joseph and Merlin* (also known as the Old French verse *Merlin*, ca. 1200) spawned the tradition of Merlin's association with the Grail and with the 'Sword in the Stone.'⁶ The Vulgate *L'Estoire de Merlin* (ca. 1215) and *Suite du Merlin* (ca. 1272; also known as the Huth *Merlin*; part of the Post-Vulgate Cycle) are thought to be prose redactions of Robert's poem (Kibler 1996, 320). Between these two, Jacob van Maerlant wrote *Boec van Merline* (ca. 1261), basing his text on Robert's work. *La Estoria de Merlin* (ca. 1380) drew its content from the Post-Vulgate *Suite du Merlin*. *Arthur and Merlin* (ca. 1395) and Henry Lovelich's *Merlin* (ca. 1410) also followed Robert. The medieval tradition of Merlin as created by Robert ended with Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1469), who took his tales of Arthur's tutor from the Huth *Merlin* rather than from the Vulgate *Merlin* (Barber 1961, 118).⁷

Whether functioning as a prophet or a magician, Merlin is usually cast in the non-combatant role of Arthur's advisor (Nickel 1987, 29).⁸ Because of this, some scholars have argued that Merlin is a reflection of the ancient druids, the priest-magicians who figured strongly in pre-Christian Celtic religion (Jung and von Franz 1986, 359–60; Littleton and Malcor 1995, 89). Merlin was abundant with his advice about what Arthur should do on the battlefield, but taking part in the actual battle just was not part of Merlin's style. Or was it?

There is a surprising amount of military imagery in several of Merlin's legends (Ashe in Stewart 1987, 43–44).⁹ Merlin is doing more than just standing around, watching from hilltops and giving advice. He is often in the thick of battle and sometimes carries a sword.¹⁰ There are several stories that connect Merlin with swords, most notably the 'Sword in the Stone.' In Malory, when Arthur breaks Excalibur while fighting against Pellinore, Merlin is close enough to put Pellinore to sleep and then whisk Arthur to safety. That is the battle position and function for a *draconarius* (the bearer of the dragonhead standard in a cavalry unit), not for a druid.

Throughout the legends there is a sense that Merlin is more than simply a magician (Knight in Stewart 1987, 57). In a previous article, C. Scott Littleton and I discussed the religious overtones of Merlin's garb.¹¹ Merlin's attire consists of a robe and a hat, the latter of which is often said to be associated either with the Welsh or with witches (Knight in Stewart 1987, 55–56). Another possibility arises, however, if one considers the garb of the Sarmatian *draconarius* as depicted on a relief found ca. 1640 at Chester: pointed steppe-style felt hat and cloak (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 19, plate 3; Richmond 1945, 17; Sulimirski 1970, 175–76; see Fig. 2).¹²



Figure Two: Mounted Sarmatian (Chester); Drawn by Linda A. Malcor after Littleton and Malcor 1994, 14, plate 3.

Position during battle and garb are not the only things that mark Merlin as Arthur's *draconarius*. There was a tradition in the Middle Ages that a very special standard belonged in Merlin's hand. This was Arthur's standard, the famous 'Pendragon'.

THE PENDRAGON STANDARD

Merlin is probably best associated with the legend of 'The Sword in the Stone,' but medieval tradition also associated Arthur's mentor with another piece of military equipment: the dragonhead standard. The conventional etymology of the name Pendragon is that it is a bastardized construction from Welsh *pen* ('head') plus Latin *draco* ('dragon'; see Nickel 1975, 1–8). In addition to serving as both Arthur's and Uther's patronymic in the medieval legends, 'Pendragon' was used by medieval authors to designate Arthur's standard as well.

There were various types of standards used by the Roman legions, auxiliary units and numeri. These included the Eagle and the Maniple (Phillips and Clark 1944, 46, 50, 57; see Fig. 3) as well as the Dragon (Phillips and Clark 1944, 50).¹³ Vegetius depicted the eagle-bearer for a legion as wearing a bear-skin over his helmet and added the note that the soldier was usually of the Equestrian class (Phillips and Clark 1944, 50). The standard bearer was supposed to be a preeminent soldier, usually cavalry, but possibly infantry, depending on the military unit. So what was Merlin rather than Lancelot or Gawain doing as Arthur's standard-bearer? Perhaps the answer lies in the type of standard Merlin carries: the dragonhead standard.



Figure Three: A Roman Standard-Bearer with a Maniple; Redrawn by Linda A. Malcor after Vegetius in Clark 1944, 46.

The bearer of a dragonhead standard was called a *draconarius*, an elite rank in the Roman army.¹⁴ A picture of one bearer was found carved on a tombstone at Chester (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 14 [plate 1], 101).¹⁵ The standard consisted of an iron piece shaped like a dragon's head with a long windsock attachment trailing behind (Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.4; Hamilton 1986, 100; Dixon and Southern 1997, 61). Recent archeological finds have turned up the head of such a standard at a Roman fort at Niederbieber, Germany (Dixon and Southern, 1997, 61, pl. 10; Garbsch 1978, 88, Taf. 48.3; see Fig. 4). These standards were originally carried by Sarmatian cavalry units (Nickel 1983, 19), who introduced this particular type of standard into the Roman army¹⁶ and, from there, into the medieval army.¹⁷ The dragonhead standard came into use in the second century, concurrent with the induction of 8,000 Sarmatians into the Roman army (cf. Ashburner N.d.; Crampton 1995). The transfer of 5,500 of these Sarmatians to Bremetennacum (near modern Ribchester in Lancashire) in 175 introduced the standard to Britain. Lucius Artorius Castus subsequently led these Sarmatians to victory beneath this standard in his campaign against the Caledonii (ca. 184–85; Malcor 1999). In this campaign, the pattern of battles closely resembled the pattern given by Nennius and later authors for Arthur, including one in Cat Coit Celidon, the Caledonian Woods (Malcor 1999), a place that tenth-century poets associated with Merlin.

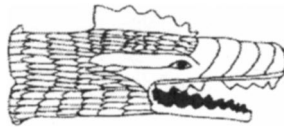


Figure Four. The Dragonhead; Drawn by Linda A. Malcor after the dragonhead in the Koblenz Museum, Germany.

In one manuscript of the Vulgate *Estoire del Saint Graal/Merlin* (MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale f. fr. 95, fol. 327v), Merlin appears as Arthur's *draconarius* (see Fig. 1; Loomis and Loomis 1938, 95–97, fig. 224).¹⁸ The artist for this manuscript was obsessed with the dragonhead standard and repeated the motif in several illuminations, including ff. 162v, 190, 191v, 230v, and 327v (Loomis and Loomis 1939, 96). Loomis and Loomis (1939, 95) thought that scribes in Picardy produced this manuscript and that the artist worked in the same region. The rendering of the dragonhead standard, however, bears a strong resemblance to an image of Moses's brazen serpent on a chased silver with enamel cross reliquary that was produced by the Meuse school ca. 1170 (Schiller 1972, 128, fig. 430). The brazen serpent in Christian iconography

had a dual interpretation. In reference to Exodus 21.1–9, the serpent was thought to protect anyone who looked upon it from the poisonous bite of a snake (Schiller 1972, 125). As a symbol that prefigured the Crucifixion, the brazen serpent stood for Christ, the new serpent, who vanquished the ancient brass serpent (Mâle 1984, 148). Arthurian artists sometimes copied iconography from Christian art, adding that layer of meaning to the texts and illuminations (Loomis and Loomis 1939, 106; Malcor 1991, 70, 175). Although a serpent usually stands for Satan in medieval iconography (Malcor 1991, 70; Fergusson 1961, 16–17), when that serpent appears on a pole and is carried by Moses, the iconography represents Christ, as detailed by Isidore of Seville in his *Glossa odrinaria* (Mâle 1984, 148, 163).

In the Middle Ages, ‘serpent’ and ‘dragon’ were usually synonymous. This was particularly true in the early period before the dragon acquired its wings and legs in iconography (Crampton 1995; Fox Davies 1969, 164). Sims-Williams (Lapidge and Dumville 1984, 186) discusses Gildas’s use of *draco* (‘dragon’) and *serpens* (‘serpent’) to designate warriors and kings. In Sims-Williams’s discussion of serpents and bulls as images in Gildas (Lapidge and Dumville 1984, 188), intent on finding as many Celtic origins as possible for the animals, he fails to mention that the emblem of the VI Victrix was a bull. He does, however, allude briefly to the notion that the presence of the dragonhead standards in Britain led to the introduction into the native tongues of *dracones* and *serpentes* as words connected with warriors (Sims-Williams in Lapidge and Dumville 1984, 191). Not only does Merlin occupy the position of a *draconarius*, dress like a *draconarius*, and carry the standard of a *draconarius*, but also he is firmly attached to the warrior image of the dragon.

MERLIN AND DRAGONS

Merlin’s connection with dragons actually begins with a tale that is attached to Merlin’s legend by Geoffrey of Monmouth (6.19; Thorpe 1966, 168–69).¹⁹ In the *Historia Brittonum* (Nennius 42; Giles 1986, 25) Ambrosius, not Merlin, is the boy who explains to Vortigern why a tower will not stand. Two dragons, one red and one white, fight in a subterranean pool. Ambrosius tells Vortigern, ‘The red serpent is your dragon, but the white serpent is the dragon of the people who occupy several provinces and districts of Britain, even almost from sea to sea.’ Nennius then has Ambrosius identify the people represented by the ‘white serpent’ as Saxons.²⁰ In later medieval tradition, the ‘White Serpent’ is the name given to the Dame du Lac (Paton 1926, 1, 169, 171; Littleton and Malcor 1994, 154). The Dame du Lac, in turn, probably derived from the Alano-Sarmatian goddess of the hearth, the Mother of the Narts, who in later

legends became known as Satana (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 154–78). Littleton and Malcor (1994, 195) suggested that the dragon standard might represent the totem of the Iazyges who were sent to Britain. It is possible that what the standard actually represented was the Sarmatian version of this goddess. In an earlier paper (Littleton and Malcor 1995, 87–995), Littleton and I suggested that Merlin and the Dame du Lac may have both derived from a common, probably female, prototype. Merlin's connection with the dragonhead standard, which was likely connected with the Alano-Sarmatian goddess of the hearth as well as with the god of war. So just as Geoffrey changed the name 'Ambrosius' to 'Merlin,' in this story, Nennius or his source may have identified the people represented by the 'white serpent' as Saxons because the Sarmatians and their dragonhead standard were no longer known as a foreign entity ca. 800.²¹

Originally related by Robert de Boron in his *Merlin*, the story of the 'Sword in the Stone' reached its most elaborate form in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (Malory 1969, 1, 15–16).²² The core of this legend probably derived from the worship of the Scythian/Alano-Sarmatian god of war (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 181–93). According to Herodotus (4.59–62; de Sélincourt 1972, 290–91), the worshipers made a pile of wood and plunged a sword into it.²³ The worshipers then slit the throat of every hundredth prisoner of war, collected the blood in a bowl, and poured the blood over the sword. The nomads then severed the right hand and arm from the bodies and threw these into the air. This ceremony includes motifs from both the 'Sword in the Stone' and the Grail legends. So not only is Merlin himself but also the sword associated with Merlin is connected with dragons from the earliest tales in the Arthurian tradition. In 'The Dream of Rhonabwy,' Arthur's sword is described as being decorated with two dragons (Gantz 1976, 184), which may reflect Arthur's dragonhead standard and the dragon on his helm as well as a connection between Geoffrey's tale about Merlin's dragon prophecy and Robert's tale about Merlin and the 'Sword in the Stone' (Nickel 1987, 31).

CONCLUSION

The casting of Merlin as Arthur's *draconarius* results in part from the integral connections of Merlin with both swords and dragons. This imagery is pervasive in Merlin's legends and probably can be attributed to a very early form of the tales, possibly one that was part of an oral tradition that is now lost. The imagery surrounding Merlin implies that he was originally a warrior rather than either a prophet or a magician. The dragonhead standard itself can be firmly traced to a Sarmatian origin, and Merlin's early appearance as the *draconarius* of the Round Table suggests that his warrior roots might be hidden in Sarmatian tradition as well.

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NOTES

- 1 Albrecht von Scharfenburg told of the prophet-seer in *Der Theure Mörilin* (ca. 1290). The work has not survived, however, so we cannot say whether Albrecht followed Geoffrey or Robert or some other tradition. Likewise, Merlin's role in the *Seven Sages of Rome* (ca. 1350) is so brief that it is impossible to say which branch of the tradition inspired the author's use of Merlin. It is also unclear which branch the *Mörilin* (ca. 1473) followed.
- 2 At least one of the stories that is later associated with Merlin was told about a boy named Ambrosius in the *Historia Brittonum* (ca. 800). I discuss this passage in more depth below.
- 3 See Ashe in Lacy et al. (1986, 209–14). Geoffrey composed the *Vita Merlini* (Clarke 1973) after the completion of the *Historia* (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1925). The story of a boy named Ambrosius in the *Historia Brittonum*, which has been attributed to Nennius, served as one of Geoffrey's sources (Barber 1961, 49; Ashe in Stewart 1987, 25). See also Goodrich 1987, 4.
- 4 This text is found in the Icelandic manuscript of the *Breta sogur* by Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218 or 1219), an Icelandic monk of the Benedictine monastery of Thingeyrar (Jónsson 1892–96, 271–83).
- 5 Attributed to Gunnlag Liefson. Stewart suggests a date closer to 1250. The French *Les Prophécies de Merlin* (ca. 1272; Stewart 1987, 188) was ostensibly translated from Latin by Richart d'Irlande and is unrelated to Geoffrey's account of Merlin's prophecies (cf. Paton 1966).
- 6 The Huth *Merlin* (1191–1202) is thought to be a prose redaction of Robert de Boron's *Merlin* (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 111). Paolino Peri's *La Storia di Merlin* (ca. 1320) probably drew on Robert's version of the tale. Robert also added the close relationship between Merlin and Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon (Barber 1961, 71–72).
- 7 The stories of Merlin found in the Huth *Merlin* and the Vulgate *Merlin* do not contradict each other in their details yet cover different parts of Merlin's biography (Barber 1961, 118). Heldris de Cornualle's *Roman de Silence* (ca. 1390) drew on both Geoffrey's and Robert's versions as well.
- 8 Robert de Boron was the first author to cast Merlin in the role of Arthur's childhood tutor as well as his later advisor (Rutledge 1987, 24).
- 9 Merlin is also associated with the Sword of Balin, which Galahad later draws from a stone (Nickel 1987, 30).
- 10 Robert intended to have Merlin break his sword at the battle of Solway Firth,

- shortly before fleeing into the forest (Guerber 1985, 274), and to conclude the tale with a story of how Merlin withdrew from the world (Barber 1961, 72).
- 11 Littleton and Malcor 1995, 87–95; cf. Jung and von Franz 1986, 359–60; Piggott 1968, 98–99; Gougaud 1923, xviii–xix.
 - 12 The relief is eroded, so it is possible that the *draconarius* is wearing a conical helm rather than a felt hat (Nickel 1983, 20–21). The Sarmatian helms, however, were modeled off the felt hats, the Scythian version of which can be seen in friezes on electrum vases from the third and fourth century B.C., found just north of the Black Sea and currently in the Hermitage collection (Newark 1985, 14).
 - 13 There were two types of dragon standards used by Roman troops. One simply had a figure of a dragon atop the pole; this was used by cohorts (Phillips 1944, 50) as a result of a decree by Trajan, ca. 104 C.E. (Ashburner n.d.). The second type was the dragonhead, windsock-type standard that was carried by cavalry units and that was introduced into the Roman army by the Sarmatians (Nickel 1983, 19).
 - 14 By the fourth century, Flavius Vegetius Renatus's *Epitoma Rei Militaris* attests that all standard-bearers were called 'Draconarii' (Phillips 1944, 44). Vegetius says elsewhere that 'Each cohort has also its own peculiar ensign, such as the Dragon, carried by the Draconarius' (Phillips 1944, 50). Vegetius seems to be unaware that the dragonhead standards were originally used exclusively by the Sarmatian cavalry.
 - 15 For the identification of the Sarmatian at Chester as a *draconarius*, see Dixon and Southern 1997, 61.
 - 16 Dixon and Southern 1997, 61. See Vegetius 2.13 (Clark 1944, 50).
 - 17 For instance, the mounted horsemen from the Golden Psalter (Codex 22, fol. 140, Zumbül-Album, St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek) are depicted as carrying such a standard (Littleton and Malcor 1994, 196).
 - 18 In this illumination, Merlin is depicted wearing clerical robes instead of armor. Later in the same MS, a knight, rather than Merlin, is depicted as the *draconarius* (ca. 1290; B.N. fr. 95, fol. 173v; Loomis and Loomis 1938, 95–97, fig. 236).
 - 19 Stewart (1986, 140) points out that, instead of dragons, Merlin's early imagery associates him with a wolf for a companion and a stag for a mount as he leads a herd of deer and she-goats. Stewart suggests that these animals might represent either a totem or heraldic symbol connected to Merlin. Just as the wolf-mark of the swordsmiths of Passau derived from the city arms, which, in turn, took their wolf-image from the Roman fort that originally occupied the location where the city was built (Nickel 1987, 33), it is possible that Merlin's wolf-imagery traces back to Roman times as well.
 - 20 Some scholars have claimed that the royal standard of the Saxons was a white dragon (Mariboe 1994). Judging by the banner used by troops from Wessex at the Battle of Hastings, however, the Saxons used either a silver, gold or silver and gold dragon on a white, red or white and red banner (Siddorn 1995). This is a banner with a dragon on it, not a dragonhead standard, and the dragon was most likely not white. (A distinction is made in heraldry between a banner, which displays a heraldic device, and a standard, which does not; Fox-Davies 1985, 362). The probability thus arises that in the *Historia Britonnum* we are looking at a later

interpolation of an earlier legend that talked about people who actually did carry a white dragon as a standard rather than a banner with a white dragon embroidered on it. Also, according to legend, the Saxon banner was not a white dragon but a white horse (Nickel 1983, 20).

- 21 When carried by troops in the presence of the emperor, the standards were purple (Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.4; Hamilton 1986, 100), but it is possible that when the emperor was not present the standard was another color, possibly white.
- 22 Geoffrey, Gildas, Bede, Nennius, William of Malmesbury, and the anonymous authors of the Welsh Arthurian tradition did not use the story of 'The Sword in the Stone' (Brenge 1964; Littleton and Malcor 1994, 181–93; Littleton and Malcor 1995, 89).
- 23 By the time Ammianus Marcellinus (30.2.22–23; Rolfe 1936, 3, 392–95; Bachrach 1973, 21–22) recorded this ritual among the Alans, the nomads simply plunged the sword directly into the ground.

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