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Victor and victim: a view of the Anglo-Saxon past in Laȝamon’s Brut

CAROLE WEINBERG

The purpose of Laȝamon, parish priest of Areley-Kings towards the end of the twelfth and/or beginning of the thirteenth century, in writing the Brut was – as he tells us himself – to recount what beo iboten weoren and wonene beo comen, / ða Englene londe ærest ahten ‘what they were called and whence they came who first possessed the land of England’ (8–9).¹ And while his engagement with the past history of the English is evident, his creative imagination was clearly fired by the content of his main source, Wace’s Roman de Brut, a mid-twelfth-century verse history which slotted the Anglo-Saxons into an even earlier period of insular history, a reading of the past in which the Britons held sovereignty over the land before it passed to the Anglo-Saxons.

Following Wace, Laȝamon recounts in the latter part of his narrative how, during the reign of the post-Arthurian British king, Carric, the Saxons in Britain banded together with a conqueror from Africa called Gurmund, seized the land and besieged Carric at Cirencester. But Carric proved a stubborn defender:

Wel ofte Kariches men comen ut of burhžen
and ræsden an Gurmundæ mid ræʒere strenðe,  
and sloʒen of his folke feole þuʒende,
and sende heom to helle, heðene hundes alle.
Karic wes swiðe goud cniht and swiðe wel he heold his fiht,

¹ All citations are from the Cotton Caligula text of Laȝamon’s Brut and all translations of this text are from Laȝamon’s ‘Brut’, ed. and trans. W. R. J. Barron and S. C. Weinberg (Harlow, 1995). References to Wace are from Le Roman de Brut de Wace, ed. I. Arnold, 2 vols. (Paris, 1938–1940), while references to Geoffrey of Monmouth are from The ‘Historia Regum Britanniae’ of Geoffrey of Monmouth, I, or II (The Variant Version), ed. N. Wright (Cambridge, 1984 and 1988).
The stratagem used by Gurmund to defeat Carric was to set fire to Cirencester by having sparrows return to their roosts in the city carrying lit pieces of tinder in nutshells attached to their feet. Laşamon paints a graphic picture of a town ablaze, the wind fanning the flames, the inhabitants trapped and engulfed by fire (14,614–28). Laşamon’s contemporaries may have been unfamiliar with the story of Gurmund, but the graphic description of a town burning would have struck home. The town of Worcester, only some ten miles downstream from Areley-Kings, suffered at least four devastating fires between 1113 and 1202, memorable not only for the damage they caused, but also for the part they played in the campaign for the canonization of an Anglo-Saxon bishop. In 1113 a major fire broke out in Worcester, the flames spreading throughout the town and setting the roof of Worcester Cathedral alight. While the interior of the church was destroyed, amazingly, it seemed, the tomb of Wulfstan, the last Anglo-Saxon bishop of Worcester (1062–1095) survived unscathed. In 1147 fire once again engulfed Worcester and the cathedral was badly damaged. Bernard, bishop of St David’s, in Worcester at the time, testified to the miraculous fact that, while the fire consumed all in its path, the tapestry spread over Wulfstan’s tomb remained untouched by the flames. In 1189 yet another devastating fire set Worcester ablaze, and again in 1202, when the cathedral suffered damage once more. It was after this fire, coinciding with the growing...

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2 ‘Carric’s men repeatedly sallied out from the town and attacked Gurmund with furious might, and slew many thousands of his followers, despatching them, all heathen dogs, to hell. Carric was a very skilful warrior and conducted his defence very successfully, and stoutly defended Cirencester to the utmost of his power so that at no time was Gurmund able to defeat his forces until, by a trick, he caused them to be destroyed from within.’

3 For reference to the fire of 1189, see H. R. Luard, Annales Prioratus de Wigornia AD 1–1377, Annales Monastici, 4 vols., RS 36 (London, 1869), IV, p. 386. The fires of
interest in the cult of Wulfstan, that Mauger, the Norman bishop of
Worcester, after consultation with the chapter, petitioned Pope Innocent
III for Wulfstan’s canonization. Pope Innocent had a commission of
distinguished English clerics appointed to investigate the claims of
sainthood. The commission’s report, attesting to the miracles worked
through Wulfstan’s mediation, was conveyed to Rome in person by a
delegation of Worcester monks. In April 1203 Wulfstan was canonized,
and on 14 May a papal bull declared publicly the circumstances of
Wulfstan’s elevation, including testimony produced by the citizens of
Worcester attesting to the many miracles performed at his tomb.4

Given the proximity of Areley-Kings to Worcester, local interest
generated by the canonization of Wulfstan may have been the spur for
Laȝamon’s decision to record the Anglo-Saxon past for his contempor-
aries.5 Furthermore he may very possibly have seen the now lost
biography of Wulfstan, written in English sometime between 1095 and
1113 by Coleman, Wulfstan’s chaplain for the last fifteen years of the
bishop’s life. Coleman, it has been argued, chose to write in English at a
time when Latin was the commonly used and accepted linguistic medium
for hagiographical biography, ‘as a piece of conscious revivalism to
emphasize the merits of Anglo-Saxon England’,6 and he could have
provided Laȝamon with an important precedent for the use of English at a
time when Latin and Anglo-Norman were the recognized languages of
historical narrative. Regarding Laȝamon’s ability to read Coleman’s
eleventh-century English, Laȝamon himself used what has been described
as an ‘archaic’ form of English harking back to Old English models as his
linguistic medium for narrating the early history of this island, and we
know that in the early thirteenth century the ‘Tremulous Scribe’ was at
work in Worcester Cathedral Library, annotating Old English texts.7

1133, 1147 and 1202 are discussed by E. Mason, St Wulfstan of Worcester c. 1008–1095
4 Mason, St Wulfstan, pp. 279–80.
5 I discussed Laȝamon’s interest in and knowledge of local topography and history as
reflected in the Brut in ‘“By a noble church on the bank of the Severn”: a Regional View
7 See C. Fransen, The Tremulous Hand of Worcester: a Study of Old English in the Thirteenth
Century (Oxford, 1991), and W. Collier, “Englishness” and the Worcester Tremulous

24
Laşamon, like Coleman before him, made a deliberate choice to use English as his literary medium. What statement was Laşamon making in the Brut about the Anglo-Saxon past, and what relevance, if any, did it have to Laşamon's Anglo-Norman present?

Laşamon's poetic history is, paradoxically, very largely a record, not of the earliest Anglo-Saxon kings, but of the earliest kings of the Britons, beginning with Brutus, Aeneas’s great-grandson, and concluding with the reign of Cadwallader. It is only in the last two thousand lines or so of the poem (over sixteen thousand lines in all), that Laşamon focuses the narrative more directly and in detail on the early Anglo-Saxon kings of Northumbria in the struggle between the Britons and the Anglo-Saxons for sovereignty over the island. The poem ends with the Britons dispossessed of their land and driven into Wales, and the Anglo-Saxon kings politically supreme:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{And Ænglisse kinges} & \quad \text{walden þas londes,} \\
\text{And Bruttes hit loseden,} & \quad \text{his lond and þas leoden,} \\
\text{þat næure seoddan mære} & \quad \text{kinges neoren here.} \\
\text{Þa get ne com þes ilke dæi,} & \quad \text{beo heonneuorð alse hit mæi;} \\
\text{iwwurðe þet iwwurðe,} & \quad \text{iwwurðe Godes wille.} & (16,091–5)\end{align*}
\]

To see the shape of the past in Laşamon’s Brut as ‘a recurrent pattern of land and people subject to continual conquest’, and to describe it as a history ‘not of the Britons but of the land of Britain’, may be one way of accommodating the presence of both Britons and Anglo-Saxons in Laşamon’s narrative. But while this view of the poem as a history of the land does not sit oddly with the presence in it of the Britons, the first settlers and rulers of this island, it is more difficult to account for his lengthy and largely sympathetic portrayal of their struggles against the treacherous Saxon would-be invaders, forerunners of the Anglo-Saxons who settled the island, the eventual successors of the Britons in ruling it, and who changed its name from Britain to England. But not only does Laşamon express anti-Saxon sentiments in his poem; he deliberately

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8 ‘And English kings gained sovereignty over these lands, and the Britons lost it, lost this land and the sovereignty of this nation so that never since that time have they been kings here. Such a day has not yet come, whatever may come to pass hereafter; come what may, let God’s will be done.’

deepens the anti-Saxon perspective he found in Wace. Laȝamon's antipathy towards the Saxons in the Brut has troubled critics of the poem. They have found it a matter of some perplexity that an English poet, writing in English when Latin and Anglo-Norman were the more usual languages of historical record, should sympathize with the Britons and hold up the Saxons to execration.

One way of defending Laȝamon from the accusation that he vilified his Saxon ancestors is to claim that he made a deliberate distinction between the treacherous Saxons and the Angles, a term used almost exclusively towards the end of the poem for those who, 'untouched by Saxon guilt', were the true ancestors of the English, and gave their name to the land of England. Under detailed examination, however, this hypothesis fails; Neil Wright points out that in the Brut, Hengest, the treacherous invading Saxon leader, describes his homeland as Angles (6,910–12), in direct contradiction to the equivalent passage in Wace (6,729–32), where Hengest states that he and his men come from Saixone. Wright argues, convincingly, that the distinction in usage between Saxons and Angles as titles for the ancestors of the English is not judgemental, but significant only in that Laȝamon uses the term Angles to identify the geographical origin of those Saxons who settled the land and to explain the etymology of the term 'England' (14,668–73).

An alternative explanation for Laȝamon's hostile treatment of the Saxon ancestors of the English is offered by James Noble. He also sees a difference between Laȝamon's attitude towards the Saxon invaders who appear in the Arthurian section of the narrative and his attitude towards the post-Arthurian Saxons who settled the land, but argues that it is due to a 'distinction in the poet's mind between the would-be Saxon usurpers who were ultimately banished from Britain during Arthur's reign and ‡a ilke ‡a weorn icorne ['those chosen'] (14,677) – i.e. the Germanic

immigrants who, some years later, are invited to assume stewardship of the island in the wake of Gurmund's invasion. Thus 'the apparent distinction in Lažamon's mind between these two groups of Saxons who appear in his poem must be acknowledged as the source of the fact that the Brut qualifies as both a pro-English and an anti-Saxon statement'. This second group, especially once converted to Christianity by St Augustine, 'gradually displace the Britons as heroes of Lažamon's chronicle, the Britons demonstrating in each successive episode the degeneracy to which they have become prone without an Arthur to lead them'.

It is certainly true to say that, as in Wace, the historical moment at which the name 'Britain' is replaced by 'England' occurs in Lažamon's poem when Gurmund invades the country with his Saxon allies, devastates Britain, and the Saxons gain possession of the island. But this moment of transference of dominion is anticipated much earlier in both poems, at the point in the narrative when the Britons, having

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14 Noble, 'Lažamon's “Ambivalence” Reconsidered', pp. 171–82, at p. 181. Lines 14,668–75 are central to Noble's argument (I have cited both text and translation in this instance from Noble, p.180):

Bisiden Allemaine is a lond Angles ihaten.
‡er weoren iborne ‡a ilke ‡e weorn icorne.
‡a Gurmund an hond bitahte a ‡is kinelond
alse he heom a forward hædde 3if he hit biwunne.
Al his biheste he heom bilaste.
Of Englen heo comen and ‡er-of heo nomen nomen.
and letten heom cleopien ful iwis ‡at folc ‡at wes Ænglis.
& ‡is lond heo cleopeden Ængle-lond for hit wes al on heore hond.

'Near to Alemaine is a land called Angle where were born those chosen to inherit this land should Gurmund succeed in winning it; he had promised it to them and he fulfilled his promise. From Angle-land they hailed and derived their name. They called themselves English, and, since it had been given into their possession, they called this land England.'

15 Ibid., p.181.

16 Ibid. Noble concurs here with the view of F. Le Saux, Lažamon's Brut: the Poem and its Sources (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 174–5. Wright holds a similar view, commenting that 'at the end of the narrative we find it is the English who serve as a model of unity and civilization' ('Angles and Saxons', pp. 169–70).

17 Wace follows the First Variant Version of Geoffrey's Historia in placing the transference of political power from the Britons to the English at this chronological point in his narrative (13,635–58). The Vulgate Version defers the passage of dominion until late in the seventh century. See Wright, 'Angles and Saxons', pp. 162–4.
vanquished the giants, take possession of Albion. Having explained the change of the island's name from Albion to Britain, the latter name devised for it by its conqueror Brutus *after himseluan* ‘in keeping with his own’ (977), Laȝamon, following Wace, anticipates the later change from Britain to England:

> Gurmund draf out þe Brutuns; and his folc wes ihaten Sexuns, of ane ende of Alemaine, Angles wes ihaten. Of Angles comen Englisc men, and Englelond heo hit clepeden. Þe Engliscæ ouercomen þe Brutuns and brouhten heom her neofere þat neofet seobōn heo ne arisen ne her ræden funden. (989–93)\(^\text{18}\)

The wording in Laȝamon at this point in the narrative does not refer to the granting of sovereignty to the Saxons by Gurmund. Instead it sets up a parallel between the occupation of Albion by the Trojan exiles under Brutus and that of Britain by the Anglo-Saxons under Gurmund, two transfers of power, each in turn bringing changes to the cultural identity of the land. These two conquests are paradigmatic of a history of settlement characterized by conquest and cultural change, a pattern specifically referred to by Laȝamon early on in the poem when the history of King Lud is narrated, whose successor, Cassibellaunus, was king of the Britons at the time of the Roman invasion under Julius Caesar:

> Swa is al þis lond iuaren for uncuðe leoden þeo þis londe hæbbeð biwunnen and eft beoð idriuen hennene; and eft hit biȝetten œðre þe uncuðe weoren and falden þene œlden nomen æfter heore wille of gode þe burgen and wenden heore nomen, swa þat nis her burh nan in þissere Bruttene þat habbe hire nome œld þe me arst hire onstalde. (3,549–55)\(^\text{19}\)

However lengthy and glorious the rule of the Britons is, it does not save

\(^{18}\) ‘Gurmund drove out the Britons, and his people were called Saxons, from a region of Germany which was called Angles. The English came from Angles, and they called the land England. The English overcame the Britons and brought them into subjection so that they never rose again nor prospered here.’

\(^{19}\) ‘So this whole country has suffered because of the foreigners who have conquered this land and then been driven out again; and then other foreigners have got possession of it and, in accordance with their wishes, have suppressed the old names of the major towns and changed their names, so that here in this island of Britain there is no town which retains the old name which was originally conferred upon it.’

28
them from domination by the Romans at one stage in their history and, ultimately, from displacement by the Anglo-Saxons. The fate of the Anglo-Saxon rulers, although beyond the narrative framework of the Brut, is parallel to that of the Britons; domination by the Danes at one stage in their history and, ultimately, displacement by the Normans. Those who are victorious at one historical moment become victims at another.

As to the more sympathetic treatment of the Anglo-Saxons compared with the Britons in the latter part of the poem, this is to simplify Laȝamon’s narrative approach. Ælfric, an early pagan Northumbrian king responsible for the massacre of British clerics, is referred to as forcehet alre kinge ‘the most wicked of kings’ (14,878, repeated at 14,903). Yet not much further on in the narrative Ælfric and the British king Cadwan, previously at war, are reconciled, and Laȝamon now praises both kings for putting the interests of the country and people above their own territorial claims:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Per iwurðen sahte þa kinges beie tweien,} \\
&\text{sæhte and some; heo custen wel ilome.} \\
&\text{Pas kinges wel ilomen mid luue heom icusten;} \\
&\text{eorl custe ðeðer swulc hit weore his broðer,} \\
&\text{swineþ þer ploþend - blisse wes mid þeinen.} \\
&\text{Æluric wes king on londe bi norðen þere Humbre;} \\
&\text{and Cadwan wes king sele a suð half þere Humbre;} \\
&\text{blisse wes on hireden mid balden þat kingen.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

It is not surprising, given Laȝamon’s English ancestry – the proem gives his father’s name as Leouena (2) – and his priesthood, that the treatment of Oswald, Anglo-Saxon ruler of Northumbria, martyred in the Brut at the hands of Penda, the pagan Anglo-Saxon ruler of Mercia, is

20 L. Johnson, ‘Reading the Past in Laȝamon’s Brut’, The Text and Tradition of Laȝamon’s Brut’, pp. 141–59, argues for a more complex attitude towards the Anglo-Saxons than simply a reversal of sympathies once they have been converted to Christianity. In what follows, my observations support her view.

21 ‘There reconciliation was effected between the two kings who kissed repeatedly; amity and concord were brought about. Again and again the kings kissed each other lovingly; noblemen embraced each other like brothers, warriors made merry there – the leaders were content. Ælfric was ruler of the land to the north of the Humber, and Cadwan was an excellent ruler south of the Humber; there was contentment among the followers of both those valiant kings.’
noticeably more sympathetic than that found in Wace. While Wace sees Oswald as noble and a man of courage (14,437), Lažamon describes him twice as one of God’s chosen elect (15,635 and 15,665). As Penda cuts him down, Lažamon points out that *his we Saint Oswald be a murde wes aquald* ‘this was Saint Oswald who was murderously done to death’ (15,688), the title *Seint*, as pointed out by Françoise Le Saux, not accorded Oswald in Wace, but repeated by Lažamon at line 15,694.22 Lažamon portrays Oswald as a man spiritually inspired but naively trusting, whose trust is betrayed. Surprisingly however, Lažamon paraphrases a prayer to the Cross which is in Wace, though he adds a pious element not in his source: Oswald has his men pray that should Penda prove treacherous God will avenge the wrong (15,671). This is, however, a somewhat odd sentiment in view of what happens subsequently to Penda: in a version which contradicts both history and Wace, Lažamon has Oswald’s successor, Oswy, killed in battle against Penda – the reverse of Wace – while Penda, badly wounded, flees and is heard of no more (15,834–47). This same Penda who, captured in battle by the British king Cadwalan, becomes his ally and a betrayer of fellow Anglo-Saxon kings, and is depicted consistently as a cruel and most treacherous king, is never specifically referred to in the poem as a pagan/heathen. And he is the same Penda who Lažamon reminds us, in a comment not in Wace, *we Mærwales fader, Mildburge alde-uader* ‘was the father of Mærwal, the grandfather of Mildburge’ (15,478). Mildburge is the female saint, descended from the Mercian royal family, who founded, in the late seventh century, the religious house of Much Wenlock in Shropshire, some twenty miles from Areley-Kings.23

The account of King Edwin of Northumbria, Oswald’s predecessor, makes no mention of his Christianity although he was a devout Christian for the latter part of his seventeen-year reign, and his name in the Caligula manuscript of the poem has the contemporary Latin gloss *Sanctus Edwinus*. The focus, rather, is on his closeness to the British king Cadwalan in their youth and their later conflict over the sovereignty of the land. In speaking of the ravaging of the country by Edwin when he and the British king Cadwalan fall out (*his here wrohte on londe / harms vninoxe* ‘his army wrought great havoc in the land’, 15,204), Lažamon’s

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elaboration of Wace turns Edwin’s abduction of a British woman into an abduction and rape, making Edwin’s conduct in this instance seem more heinous.

In contrast, Cadwalan, a Christian king but at enmity with both Oswald and his predecessor, Edwin, is repeatedly described in such terms as *æn gode* ‘the good’ (15,301) and *æ kene* ‘the valiant’ (15,438, 15,505 and 15,585). At Whitsuntide Cadwalan holds court in London (as did his predecessors Uther and Arthur), and the description of the assembly is reminiscent of that held by earlier kings of the Britons. In contrast, Cadwalan, a Christian king but at enmity with both Oswald and his predecessor, Edwin, is repeatedly described in such terms as *æn gode* ‘the good’ (15,301) and *æ kene* ‘the valiant’ (15,438, 15,505 and 15,585). At Whitsuntide Cadwalan holds court in London (as did his predecessors Uther and Arthur), and the description of the assembly is reminiscent of that held by earlier kings of the Britons. We are told that there was great rejoicing at this assembly among those who came to honour the valiant Cadwalan, for *æ king wes sw conceive – his true wel be thowold* ‘for the king was a man of great integrity – he held faithfully to his word’ (15,746). Following the death in battle of Oswy, brother of the martyred King Oswald, Oswy’s son, Osric, who had been lovingly reared in Cadwalan’s household, successfully petitions Cadwalan, his liege-lord, for his father’s land. At this point in the narrative Lāzamon adds an approving note:

\[
\text{God king wes Cadw\text{"a}lan, swa him wes icunden; he wes king hire seouen and feouwerti \text{"ere}. (15,856–7)}
\]

To describe Cadwalan as a good king does not entail praising a pagan since at this chronological point in the narrative the Britons, like the Anglo-Saxons, are Christian. Yet, as has been seen in the case of the Anglo-Saxon king Ælfric, a pagan king can be condemned at one moment for a dastardly act and recognized the next as acting in the best interests of the country. Equally, a Christian king is not immune to criticism. Cadwalan, described as a good king and ruler of the country, is also responsible, early in his reign, for bringing misery to the land when he and Edwin, childhood friends but subsequently enemies, go to war:

\[
\text{Ædwine wes kempe; his men weoren kene. Cadw\text{"a}lan wes cn\text{"i}ht god and he hafde muchel mod. Edwine wende ouer Humbre and Cadw\text{"a}lan to Lundene; \text{"as kinges weoren wra\text{"e} – \text{"a ar\text{"e}s \text{"a weore. (15,736–46 with lines 9,229–41, 9,962–4, 11,085–9 and 12,130–5).}
\]

\]
What is significant here is the lack of differentiation between Anglo-Saxons and Britons; the emphasis is rather on the harmful effects of regnal strife on the inhabitants of the country.27

It is understandable that Laȝamon, a parish priest, should highlight any moral shortcomings, and the heathen Saxon invaders of the Arthurian section of the narrative, seeking more often by foul than fair means to gain control of the land, are roundly condemned, even though they are ethnically at one with the Anglo-Saxons and thus the English. But Laȝamon’s moral disdain is also clearly visible in the lengthy episode covering the treachery of Vortiger, British usurper of the British throne, responsible for inviting the Saxons, along with their chief, Hengest, to settle, and through marriage to Hengest’s daughter, Rouwenne, plunging the country back into paganism.28 Vortiger is described as *of vfele swi…e iwaer* ‘well-practised in wrong-doing’ (6,669 and 6,691), *swike ful deorne* ‘a most subtle deceiver’ (6,805), and, most frequently, *of elchen vuele . . . war* ‘skilled in every evil practice’ (6,899, 6,929, 6,956, 7,063, etc.). Laȝamon emphasizes, in over a thousand lines, Vortiger’s treacherous deeds both before and after seizing the throne (6,487–8,101), and when Vortimer leads the Britons in an uprising against Vortiger, war between son and father is legitimized by the righteousness of the cause and the devout Christianity of Vortimer. In this instance warfare is seen as necessary to rid the country of a traitor and to restore the Christian faith.

As I have tried to show, any statement Laȝamon is making about the past cannot but be influenced by his background and outlook as a priest, and he often brings a moral/Christian dimension into his account of both

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26 ‘Edwin was a noted warrior; his followers were bold men. Cadwalan was a brave warrior and he had great courage. Edwin crossed the Humber, and Cadwalan returned to London; both kings were enraged – war followed. They rode and galloped, they harried and burned; they slaughtered and seized all they came upon; the farmers, for whom the land was their livelihood, suffered misery.’

27 The importance of firm regnal control in fostering unity within a kingdom, irrespective of the ethnic origins of the inhabitants, is discussed by S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford, 1984), ch. 8.

28 The spelling of the names used here (Vortiger and Rouwenne) conforms to that used by Laȝamon.
Victor and victim

British and early Anglo-Saxon kings. But one needs also to acknowledge another Laȝamon, the historian who records that Julius Caesar, the first conqueror of the Britons and a pagan, was at the same time the man who made the calendar which orders the months and the years, and made many laws still in force in Rome (3,599–600), facts not stated in Wace. Although Caesar is a ruthless adversary, Laȝamon at the same time admits that he is wis and swi…e iwar 'wise and very shrewd' (3,619, 3,653, 3,848, etc.). While acknowledging Caesar's inevitable damnation as a pagan, it is nevertheless a matter of some concern for Laȝamon that such a man, the wisest man on earth in his time, into helle 'should ever go to hell' (3,601).

This observation concerning Caesar is symptomatic of a narrative stance which runs through much of the Brut and which promotes a more detached and less partisan view of the historical process as it affects the different racial and cultural entities vying for dominion. Right from the beginning of his poem Laȝamon seems to have conceived it as an account of the different peoples who shaped the history of England. The choice of an archaized form of English may have more to do with the need for an appropriate literary medium 'to mediate the history of the past' than with

29 The Christian dimension within which the past operates is marked in the prologue by Laȝamon's description of the first inhabitants of the island as those who occupied the land

after þan flode þe from Drihtene com,
þe al her aqelde þat he funde,
buten Noe and Sem, Japhet and Cham,
and heore four wiues þe mid heom were on archen. (10–13)

'after the Flood sent by God, which destroyed all living creatures here on earth, save Noah and Shem, Japhet and Ham, and their four wives who were with them in the ark'.

References to the Flood were widespread, since the period from the Creation to the Flood and from the Flood to Abraham counted as two of the seven ages into which biblical history was divisible, and history for medieval annalists and historians was a continuum, going back ultimately to the Creation. In a twelfth-century manuscript of the Worcester Chronicle (Oxford, Corpus Christi College 157), thought to have belonged to John of Worcester and localized, therefore, at Worcester Cathedral Priory in the early twelfth century, there is, among other introductory diagrammatic genealogies of Anglo-Saxon kings and bishops, one which draws a direct line of descent from Adam, the four sons of Noah, and Abraham (fol. 47).
a desire to focus specifically on the historical identity of the Anglo-Saxons through their language.³⁰

Laşamon accepts it as a fact of history that the Anglo-Saxons succeeded the British as conquerors of the land. But interest in the English past is expressed within a context of historical continuity between British and English, based on their dual and successive occupation of the land. Laşamon uses linguistic detail to both differentiate between and link the two groups of inhabitants. He shows an awareness of the different languages spoken by the British and the English respectively, explaining, for example, that Uther's cognomen, *Pendragon an Brutisc* 'Pendragon in the British language', is *Draken-hefd an Englisc* 'Dragon's-head in English' (9,097). At the same time, however, there is linguistic overlap. While the name of Arthur's shield *wes on Bruttisc Pridwen ibaten* 'was Pridwen in the British tongue' (10,554), Arthur's helmet, which had belonged to his father, Uther, was called *Goswight* (10,552) – the English term 'goose-white' – a name omitted in Wace. Likewise, the occasional references to Arthur as 'King of England' and the similarity of his cognomen 'Britain's darling' to that given to Alfred the Great, 'England's darling', in early Middle English,³¹ indicates a mode of thought which elides the ethnic distinction between Britons and Anglo-Saxons, and constructs a common heritage for the English.

What the unfolding historical record also reveals, however, is that the transfer of political power can obliterate the identities of the conquered. Twice in the narrative Laşamon comments on the changing names of the country's capital city, called *Troye ñe Newe* and later *Trinouant* by Brutus, then changed to *Lundene* by *Englisce men* and, bringing the historical record up to date, *Londres* by the *Frensca* (1,016–31 and 3,529–48). Laşamon's emphasis throughout the narrative on the origin of placenames may be one way of recording the past, while simultaneously testifying to the suppression of this past through linguistic change.³²

³¹ Middle English Dictionary, s.v. *dereling 1(c).*
³² Laşamon’s Brut is not the only poem to comment on the way language operates to obfuscate the past. The Anglo-Norman *Le Roman de Waldof*, written c. 1200–1210, acknowledges the linguistic displacement of the English past as a result of the Norman conquest and the change in language, but is confident that this past can be recovered through translation:
Laȝamon's account of the changing populations brings the historical record up to date by including a reference, as we have seen, to the most recent conquerors of the country, the Normans. In the only two references within the text to these people, Laȝamon refers to them once as Frensca and once as Normans, seeming not to differentiate between the two terms. The reference to the Frensca describes them as gaining control of London through conquest (1,030–1) while the Normans are seen as coming with heore wið-craefen 'their evil ways' and harming the country (3,547–8). Noble regards these two negative comments as signalling Laȝamon's antagonism towards the Normans, 'the monstrous Normans who had all-too-recently deprived the English of their rightful heritage'. For Lesley Johnson, however, there needs to be more evidence if a case is to be made for an anti-Norman stance. Both Noble and Johnson, however, agree that the way events are narrated in the Brut would have encouraged those who formed the original audience for the poem to recognize or seek 'connections between earlier and later historical epochs and to exercise their historical imaginations in using a narrative about the political formations of the past to meditate upon those of the present'. A view of the past in which both Britons and Anglo-Saxons held and then lost

'When the Normans seized the land, the great histories that had been made by the English and recounted by them were left behind, on account of the peoples shifting and the languages changing. Since then much has been translated, and greatly enjoyed by many, such as the Brut, such as Tristan' (39–47).

The poem has been edited by A. J. Holden (Cologny-Genèvre, 1984), and the translation of lines 39–47 is from S. Crane, ‘Social Aspects of Bilingualism in the Thirteenth Century’, Thirteenth Century England 6, ed. M. Prestwich, R. H. Britnell and R. Frame (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 103–15, at p. 105. In Crane’s view ‘it is unlikely that Waldef and the many Bruts and Tristans translate from English estoires, but such an assertion is itself a way of linking Anglo-Norman to English culture’ (p. 105).


35 Ibid., p.158.
political power could significantly affect the attitude towards a Norman presence contextualized within a historical pattern of changing populations in England.

The difficulty of making categorical statements regarding the attitude taken by Laṣamon towards the Norman present becomes apparent once we return him to his own time and locality. Wendy Collier cites a number of localized Worcestershire texts from the two centuries after the Norman Conquest in which anti-Norman/anti-French sentiments are expressed. Yet Laṣamon himself, though of English parentage on his father's side, was clearly fluent in French. Moreover, the church at Areley-Kings, where Laṣamon was parish priest, was a dependent chapel of Martley church which, together with its dependent chapels, was a possession of the Benedictine abbey of St Mary at Cormeilles in Normandy. And in the movement for the canonization of Wulfstan Laṣamon would have seen an example of the Norman present encompassing the Anglo-Saxon past. It was, after all, Mauger, a Norman, who oversaw the arrangements for Wulfstan's canonization in 1203, although it has been viewed as an act less of devotion to the Anglo-Saxon saint than of greed for the income from pilgrimage to the shrine.

Another instance of cross-cultural linkage reaches to the highest level of government. In 1207 King John, disputing the papal appointment of Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury, appealed to a particular legend circulating about St Wulfstan which John interpreted as demonstrating Wulfstan's belief in the right of the monarch alone to appoint the higher clergy of the realm. Furthermore, King John, himself a visitor to and supporter of Worcester Cathedral, adopted Wulfstan as his patron saint and insisted on being buried alongside him in Worcester Cathedral.

36 Collier, ‘"Englishness" and the Worcester Tremulous Hand’, pp. 41–3. Collier includes Laṣamon in her list of those who 'had no good opinion of the Normans' (p. 42).
37 See Weinberg, ""By a noble church on the bank of the Severn": a Regional View of Laṣamon's Brut", p. 52.
In the event, an Angevin king ended up lying between two Anglo-Saxon bishops of Worcester, St Oswald and St Wulfstan.40

A recurrent theme in Laȝamon’s account of events in the past is that of a country vulnerable to internal strife and external attack. Kings who rule firmly and peacefully are commended even though these same kings may be subjected to disapproving comments concerning other less favourable attributes. Contextualizing King John within this view of king and country leaves him falling far short of good kingship, and an early thirteenth-century audience might be less concerned with the cultural affinities of King John than with the dangers facing England caused by a king who had antagonized his barons to the point of rebellion and was, at his death, ‘struggling not to lose his kingdom to an invading foreign prince’.41

Whatever connections may have been intended or made between the view of the Anglo-Saxons in the Brut and the contemporary world of Laȝamon, the conclusion of the poem has Ænglisc kings ruling the country, the Britons having lost sovereignty and with no knowing when they will regain it. Laȝamon ends the poem with the line iwur…e þet iwur…e, iwur…e Godes wille ‘come what may, let God’s will be done’. This appears to be a proverbial saying and is extant in two other relevant texts.42 In the early Middle English Proverbs of Alfred, (proverbial material ascribed to King Alfred), the saying is quoted in the context of man’s obligation in the weakness and poverty of old age to thank God for all his goodness, ‘and wheresoever you go, say at the end, come what may, may God’s will be done’. A similar sense of putting one’s trust in God in adverse circumstances, this time political rather than personal, is implied when the saying is quoted at the end of the entry for the year 1066 in the ‘D’ version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.43 This annal concludes with William

Victor and victim

40 Ibid., pp. 282–3.
42 See Le Saux, Laȝamon’s ‘Brut’: the Poem and its Sources, pp. 219–22. The modern English translation of the proverbial saying in these two texts is my own.
43 D. Whitelock argues that the ‘D’ version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Cotton Tiberius B iv) was either brought to Worcester for use in compiling the Worcester Chronicle or, alternatively, that there was available to the compiler a manuscript very like ‘D’, but not ‘D’ itself, as the Worcester Chronicle has none of the Scottish entries of ‘D’. See The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Revised Translation, ed. D. Whitelock with D. C. Douglas and S. I. Tucker (London, 1961), p. xvi.
returning to Normandy, leaving Bishop Odo and Earl William behind, and we are told that these two ‘built castles far and wide throughout the land, oppressing the unhappy people, and things went ever from bad to worse’. At the end of the annal are the words Wurke god se ende bonne God wylle ‘may the end be good when God wills it’. Le Saux argues against any connection between these three occurrences of the proverb other than ‘the similarity of the situations described’, the context in all three instances being one of helplessness. In her view Laȝamon is expressing helplessness in the face of Norman domination. But the uncertain future facing, once again, a strife-torn England and its inhabitants might provide a more appropriate early thirteenth-century context for the closing line of Laȝamon’s Brut.

45 Le Saux, Laȝamon’s Brut: the Poem and its Sources, p. 222.
46 I wish to thank Dr Lesley Johnson and Professor Donald Scragg for reading earlier drafts of this paper and for their helpful suggestions.