

BRITISH KING LUCIUS AND THE SHROUD

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PART I of a series

The name Lucius pervades the writings of early chroniclers of British history from Venerable Bede (ca. 673-735) through Pseudo- Nennius (9th c.), William of Malmesbury (ca. 1125), and Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing about 1136. It is important to note that Gildas (6th c.), the earliest British source we have about Britain in the Dark Ages, seems not to know of a British Lucius. Somewhere, therefore, between Gildas and Bede must be sought a source intruding this Lucius into the early history of Britain. I believe I have happened upon this source, and it has led to an hypothesis by which this name Lucius may be a key linking the Edessa Mandylion to the Western legends of the Holy Grail. The Mandylion has been almost universally acknowledged since 1978 as identical to the Turin Shroud.(1)

Scholars, including and especially those who specialize in the history of Arthurian England, are at a loss as to the identity of this person. For example, the entry "Lucius" by Geoffrey Ashe in Norris Lacy's authoritative Arthurian Encyclopedia notes that:

"Geoffrey [of Monmouth] hesitates over his [Lucius's] status. He introduces him as Procurator of the Republic ... Later, Geoffrey calls him an emperor ... Where he found Lucius is not so clear. No such emperor ever existed."

The entry suggests further that Geoffrey could have garbled Sigebert of Gembloux's "Lucerius" (error for Roman Emperor Glycerias) into "Lucius." Ashe could find no certainty about the name.(2)

The *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth makes Lucius to be a Roman Emperor Lucius Hiberus ("the Spaniard"), whose associates were sometimes drawn from the Near East.(3) Geoffrey's Lucius was Arthur's antagonist in his great Gallic war against imperial Rome. Geoffrey may have known only that there was a rather significant Lucius who had had a role in early British history and that he resided at some distance from Britain. The role of Geoffrey's Lucius was invented, even as Geoffrey reinvented King Arthur out of Pseudo-Nennius's Arthur the warlord.

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In contrast, R. G. Collingwood and other historians of early Britain have known the tradition that a British King Lucius introduced Christianity into his lands in the second century. They find him in the pages of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of Britain* and in the *Historia Brittanorum* of Pseudo-Nennius. Such was the early confusion about a King Lucius that we may safely say that Bede's Lucius was not Geoffrey of Monmouth's Lucius.

This sort of guesswork among established scholars of Arthurian England has opened the way to an interpretation largely unanticipated. No writer, from Gildas to Geoffrey Ashe, really knows precisely who this Lucius might be.

Here is R. G. Collingwood on the origins of the Faith in Britain. His words may be applied to the nature of many legends, and are germane here:

How Christianity first came to Britain we do not know ... A story grew up, based on a confusion between the name of Britain and that of *Britium* in Mesopotamia, that in the year 167 king Lucius sent to the pope for missionaries ... Later it was said that the first seeds of the faith had been brought by St. Peter, or by an emissary of St. Paul, or by Joseph of Arimathea ... Taken literally, these stories are pious inventions. But they were invented in order to explain a fact: the fact that Christianity did reach Britain at an early date ... (Emphasis added).(4)

Collingwood was absolutely correct about the spuriousness of such stories--as applied to Britain. On the other hand, Lucius of *Britium* was, I would contend, a historical person who did engineer the arrival of the faith in his country in the second century. But *Britium* was not Britain. The path from here on is treacherous, but will, I hope, be rewarding to those who persevere with me.

Bede's remarks about a King Lucius (I.4) hold great weight since Bede was read by practically every subsequent Medieval British writer.

Anno ab incarnatione Domini CLXVI, M. Antoninus Verus, decimus quartus ab Augusto, regnum cum Aur. Commodo fratre decinius quartus ab Augusto, regnum cum Aur. Commodo fratre suscepit; quorum temporibus cum Eleutherus vir sanctus Romanae ecclesiae praeesset, misit ad eum Lucius, Britanniarum rex, epistolam, obsecrans ut per eius mandatum christianus efficeretur; et mox effectum piae postulationis consecutus est; susceptamque fidem Britanni usque in tempora Diocletiani principis inviolatam integramque quietam in pace servabant.

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In 166 CE, M. Antonius Verus, 14th from Augustus, began to rule with his brother Aur. Commodus; at that time Lucius, king of the Britons, sent a letter to Eleutherus, the head of the Roman church, asking that he might be made .a Christian through his agency. This was soon effected. And the Britons observed their new faith inviolate and whole, quietly in peace, until the rule of Diocletian.(5)

Pseudo-Nennius certainly drew from Bede:

Anno Dom. inc. CLXIV Lucius, Britannicus rex, cum universis regulis totius Britanniae baptismum susceperunt, missa legatione ab imperatoribus Romanorum et a papa Romano Evaristo [sic]; Lucius agnomine Levermaur, id est magni splendoris, propter fidem quae in eius tempore venit.

(Nennius has not written a good Latin sentence; also he has wrongly named Pope Evaristus (96-108) in the context of the year 164.)

In 164 CE Lucius [was the] British king, when they [the Britons] accepted Baptism as the universal law in all Britain, a delegation having been sent from the emperors of Rome and the Roman Pope Evaristus [sic]; Lucius is derived from *Lever maur*, that is "of great splendor," for the faith which arrived in his time.(6)

Fortunately, it may be possible to trace the confusion which produced a "King Lucius" in Roman Britain. An anonymous sixth- century copyist seems to be the unwitting culprit. The work he was transcribing, about 530, was the *Liber Pontificalis*, a chronicle of the popes listing salient events during each reign. Under the reign of Pope Eleutherus (170-185 CE), the copyist inserted the statement that *Hic (Eleutherus) accepit epistulam a Lucio. Britannio rege ut christianus efficeretur per eius mandatum*: "This pope received a letter from Briton king Lucius asking that he might be made a Christian through his agency." The Abbé Louis Duchesne, premier editor of the *Liber Pontificalis*, was at a total loss as to where the copyist might have found an actual letter from King Lucius to Pope Eleutherus. To my knowledge, no such letter has ever been found. But this insertion has had the most extraordinary and enduring result. The interpolated note was later used and expanded by Bede (8th c.) and by Pseudo-Nennius (9th c.).(7)

Gildas, 6th c. author of *The Ruin of Britain (De Excidio Britanniae)*, made no reference to negotiations between any British king and a Roman bishop.(8) Since Gildas was a major source used by Bede, the latter must necessarily have been using the anonymous interpolation in the *Liber*

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Pontificalis for his account of King Lucius. We know Bede had a research assistant, Nothelm, in Rome.

Though many Arthurian scholars have overlooked this King Lucius, others have either accepted him,(9) or found him out, as Collingwood, since there would not have been a British King Lucius in the second century, when Britannia was yet a Roman province. Pseudo-Nennius also wondered about it. He wished, logically, to identify him with one *Lever-maur* or *Lleuver Mawr*, perhaps a Welsh tribal king, presumably on the basis of a common meaning of the two names, "Enlightened."

My research builds upon this interpolated Lucius, who does not belong in England and two other documents. The second is a Georgian MS of the eighth century, thought by its editor to be a copy of a fifth-century text. A salient point of this text is that it joins St. Philip and Joseph of Arimathea in the construction of a church in honor of the Virgin in Lydda, due west of Jerusalem. Adolf Harnack translated the text into German.(10)

The third is an ambiguous statement by Freculphus, ninth-century Bishop of Lisieux (d. 853), which could give the false impression that St. Philip preached in Gaul (France), from which he could easily have sent missionaries to evangelize Britain. The Lydda account had made Joseph of Arimathea a colleague of Philip, but, properly, in the Holy Land, and not in France. Joseph's reputed presence in the West, then, is dependent on his early apocryphal association with St. Philip, thought to have preached Christianity in the West. But St. Philip's presence in the West is absolutely refuted by his career as found in the Book of Acts and, for what it is worth, in the apocrypha.

Freculph's Latin opened the floodgates:

Philippus a Bethsaida civitate, unde et Petrus, de quo in Evangeliiis atque in Actis apostolorum digna laudis memoria saepius facta est, cujus etiam filiae prophetissae extiterunt, et mirae sanctitatis ac perpetuae virginitatis, ut Ecclesiastica narrat historia, Gallis praedicavit Christum Barbarasque gentes vicinasque tenebris et tumentis Oceano conjunctas ad scientiae lucem fideique portum deducit. Deinde in Hierapoli Phrygiae provinciae urbe crucifixus, lapidatusque obiit, rectoque sepultus cadavere, simul cum filiabus suis ibidem requiescit.(11)

Philip, whose praiseworthy activities are rather often mentioned in Gospels and Acts, came from Bethsaida, as had Peter. He had daughters with the gift of prophecy, of wonderful sanctity and perpetual virginity. As ecclesiastical

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history relates, he preached Christ among the Gauls (Gallis) and led barbarian tribes and nearby tribes and those adjoining the swelling ocean from darkness to the light of knowledge and the gateway of faith. Then he was stoned and crucified in Hierapolis, city of the province of Phrygia, and was buried and rests there along with his daughters.

Joseph, member of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin or town councillor (*Bouleutes/decurialis*) of Arimathea would not seem to be at home in Gaul, preaching in Latin or in the early Germanic tongue of the region, as a member of the missionary team of Philip. (Joseph as tin merchant making regular business trips to Britain, dates only from the Reformation.)

In fact two Philips are possible candidates as carrying out the Great Commission to preach to all nations. They are Philip the Apostle, often named in the New Testament among the Twelve, and Philip the deacon or evangelist, defined in Acts 6:5-8:40 and 21:8, as the father of four gifted, virginal daughters who were reported to have died in Hierapolis. The two Philips were already confused in second-century Christian accounts as to where they preached and, more specifically, which of them had the four daughters. Whether the reference is to Philip the Apostle or to Philip the Evangelist/Deacon, his milieu is in the Middle East. Both were reported to have died in Hierapolis. In Acts, Philip the Deacon preached along the Palestinian coast and in Samaria, and settled in Caesarea. Tradition says that at some time he was Bishop of Tralles in Lydia and that he preached in Phrygia, neighboring on Galatia, all located in modern Turkey. But neither of the Philips can be found in the West in ancient Biblical or apocryphal sources.

Freculphus was guilty of no error, but only of ambiguity: his Gallis surely meant the Galatians of Turkey and not the Gauls of France.

It is even possible from the N.T. that the two Philips are one and the same person. Herbert Lockyear noted that Philip the Apostle essentially disappeared after Pentecost, while Philip the deacon only has a role after Pentecost.(12)

Confusion notwithstanding, Philip's absence in the West attaches to Joseph as well. If no Philip preached Christianity in France, then neither was Joseph in France.

These elements: Bede's King Lucius and Freculph's ambiguity about Philip's supposed missionary work in the West, were read and

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used by William of Malmesbury, writing about 1125 his small treatise *On the Antiquity of the Church of Glastonbury* (*De antiquitate Glastonie ecclesie*). William's original account drew from Bede the notion that the little wattle church dedicated to the Virgin at Glastonbury had been built by missionaries sent by the pope at the request of King Lucius in 166. He said that if St. Philip had preached in Gaul as Freculphus declared, he probably sent the missionaries into Britain. But, said William, this may only be pious opinion. And following Bede and Freculphus, William made no mention of Joseph of Arimathea.

It is well known since J. A. Robinson's classic work on Glastonbury that, in their efforts to enhance the stature of their Glastonbury Abbey, the monastic editors of William used not only Bede's "letter from Briton King Lucius" but crystallized Philip in France and had Philip send Joseph at the head of a missionary team to Glastonbury, where he built the wattle church.

Robinson showed that crucial changes were added to William's book, notably by two Glastonbury monks, Adam of Domesday in his *History of Glastonbury* about 1247 and John of Glastonbury, at the end of the 14th c., who carried the *History* to 1342. It was only in the spurious embellishment of William's original book in 1247 that Joseph of Arimathea was first brought to England.(13)

It was Adolf Harnack who discovered that the interpolated British King Lucius in the *Liber Pontificalis* and in Bede and others, was really King Lucius Aelius Septimius Megas Abgarus IX (read VIII; 177-212), contemporary of Pope Eleutherus, first Christian king of the southern Turkish city of Edessa, and the only King Lucius who espoused Christianity in the late 2nd. c. Harnack also discovered that another name for Edessa in Syriac was *Birtha*, in Latin, *Britium*. Harnack noticed that *Britannio* as an adjective is a strange form and ought to be *Britannico*(14) When Bede read *Lucio Britannio rege* in the *Liber Pontificalis*, he naturally thought it was a reference to the conversion of Britain. William of Malmesbury and his redactors borrowed this from Bede and took Philip and Gallis from Freculphus. Hence missionaries would most likely have been sent from Gaul or France. They needed to add only the character of Joseph with the motive of placing him and two phials containing Jesus's blood and sweat--but not a Grail--in Glastonbury.

The new interpretation of Harnack has impressive documentary support from other quarters. As J. B. Segal describes it, in 194 occurred a pro-Parthian uprising in Mesopotamia. Abgar VIII, the Great, of Osroene

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joined the ruler of Adiabene in laying siege to Nisibis, hoping to regain independence from Rome. Emperor Septimius Severus defeated "Abgar, King of the Persians," and appointed a procurator for Osrhoene. Soon after, Severus gave the throne back to Abgar, who helped him defeat the invading Parthians in 197. Segal renders Abgar's adopted Roman names as Lucius Aelius Aurelius Septimius. Abgar further identified himself with the Roman cause by sending his sons as hostages to Rome. On Severus' invitation, Abgar visited Rome. Segal, historian of Edessan history, writes "The reception there of the king of Edessa was ... the most lavish accorded to a foreign potentate since Nero welcomed Tiridates of Armenia in A.D.66."(15)

Harnack had said that, in taking the name Lucius, Abgar was honoring both the emperors Lucius Aelius Commodus (180-192) and Lucius Septimius Severus (193-211). Eusebius notes (*H. E.* V.iii.4 and xxiii.4) that the church leaders in Phrygia communicated with Roman Pope Eleutherus and those at Osrhoene (of which Edessa was the capital) and the towns around sent a letter to Rome somewhat later, about 190. So Abgar may have discussed in Rome his contemplated conversion and corresponded with the pope via Roman missionaries in his region.(16) The sixth century Chronicle of Edessa announces, that "in the year 205 Abgar built the *Birtha* (castle)."(17) The tomb of St. Jude-Thaddeus was known in *Britio Edessenorum*, the castle--*Britium* or *Birtha*--of Abgar, certainly from the 2nd c., attributed to the Hypotyposes of Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-216).(18)

The history of this citadel castle is well known. Ian Wilson, personal communication, says the prominence is unmistakable. Hallier says,

"In the south-west, on the spur of the mountains of Edessa, stood the citadel, containing the winter palace of King Abgar IX, which is reached by the high road known as Beth Sahréyà.

Christianity in Edessa is, in fact, indisputable at the turn of the third century--Lucius Abgar's time. Palut, Edessa's first bishop, was consecrated by Bishop Serapion of Antioch in the time of Pope Zephyrinus (200-217), successor of Eleutherus. In its most extensive entry, the Chronicle of Edessa mentions, under the year 201. CE, the destruction by flooding of "the sanctuary of the Christian church."(19)

Joseph of Arimathea is associated in antiquity only with the shroud of Good Friday. Ian Wilson has virtually proved the shroud of Jesus--Joseph's

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New Testament shroud--sojourned in Edessa, folded as the Mandyllion and thought to be a miraculous portrait of Jesus's face only. Whatever the Grail was thought to be--dish holding a Mass wafer (Body of Christ), or cup of the transubstantiated blood of the Last Supper, cup which also contained Jesus's actual blood from Golgotha, or dish holding a bleeding head--it was known to be linked to Joseph of Arimathea. But the only object in Joseph's New Testament biography is the shroud. Now the erroneous presence of Joseph in the West and his new association there with the Holy Grail suggests that the Grail has somehow gotten confused with the shroud.

As the elusive name of Lucius in Britain, so too the Holy Grail itself eluded definition. In fact, the Byzantine texts documenting the shroud of Jesus in Edessa and Constantinople are confused about its precise identity--whether a cloth icon of Jesus's bloodstained face in a frame or shroud with the image of the entire body of the Crucified. The rituals of this relic, both in Edessa and in the capital, were rare, highly secretive and deliberately deceptive, and designed to inspire awe in the faithful. Confusion in the East about just what this icon was came to the West as rumor and is reflected in the confusion among medieval Grail authors about just what the Grail was.

The best etymology of the word "Grail" is that it derives from Latin *gradalis*, "gradual," "in stages." (20) The Grail's secret was that in it the Perfect Knight saw the infant Jesus changed into the crucified Jesus. The rituals of the Edessa cloth icon featured its mysterious display first as the child Jesus and finally, by gradual stages, as the crucified Jesus as may be seen on the Turin Shroud. All points to the Edessa/Constantinople icon/shroud as the real object which inspired the romances of the Holy Grail.

NOTES

1 Ian Wilson, *The Turin Shroud* (London: Victor Gollancz 1978).

2 Norris Lacy, ed., *Arthurian Encyclopedia* (NY: Peter Bedrick Books 1986).

3 Roger Sherman Loomis, *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Clarendon 1959) 85f.

4 R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (Oxford: Clarendon 1937). 270.

5 B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (Oxford 1969), 1.4.

6 John Morris, ed. and tr., *British History and Welsh Annals* (Chichester: Phillimore 1980), vol. 8. Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, ch. 18.

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7 L'Abbé L. Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis, Texte, Introduction et Commentaire*. Paris: Ernest Thorin 1886.

8 Michael Winterbottom, ed. and tr., *The Ruin of Britain* (Chichester: Phillimore 1978). vol. 7.

9 Julia Crick, "The Marshalling of Antiquity: Glastonbury's Historical Dossier," in Abrams, Lesley and James E. Carley, eds., *The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey*, (Woodbridge, UK and Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press 1991) 218. Felicity Riddy, "Glastonbury, Joseph of Arimathea and the Grail in John Hardyng's Chronicle," 317-331, did not know Bede's source for Lucius, thinking it was Gildas, who did not mention a King Lucius.

10 Theodor Kluge, "Die apokryphe Erzählung des Joseph von Arimathäa über den Bau der ersten christlichen Kirche in Lydda, Oriens Christianus," N.S. iv, 1904, pp. 24-38. Adolph Hamack, "Ein in georgischer Sprache Aberliefertes Apokryphon des Josef von Aramathia," in *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 1901, 920-931. See too A. N. Wesselofsky, "Zur Frage Aber die Heimath der Legende vom heiligen Gral," *Archiv für slavische philologie*, vol. 23, 1901, 321-325.

11 Freculphus Lexoviensis (Lisieux) Episcopus Chronicon, vol. II, Bk. ii, ch. 4 in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, Paris: 1864, vol. 106, cols. 917ff., esp. col. 1148. He wrote a chronicle from Genesis to Gregory I and the Lombards, using Josephus, Eusebius, Orosius, Bede, and many others. He seems to have considered the two Philips as the same person.

12 Herbert Lockyear, "All the Men of the Bible" (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1958) under "Philip."

13 J. A. Robinson, "Two Glastonbury Legends: King Arthur and St Joseph of Arimathea" (Cambridge: Univ. Pr. 1926). Julia Crick (above, n. 9) accepts Lucius as a historical figure in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. She does not seem to know William's reliance on Freculph's ambiguity.

14 Adolf Harnack, "Der Brief des britischen Königs Lucius an den Papst Eleutherus," *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, xxvi 1904, pp. 909-916, p. 911.

15 J. B. Segal, "Edessa, The Blessed City." (Oxford: Clarendon 1970) 14. His note I argues that Abgar VIII (177-212) is wrongly called IX, as A.R. Bellinger and C.B. Welles prove (below, n. 16, p. 150). Abgar IX (212-214) did, however, take the name Severus. See Dio, Epitome of book LXXV, 1-2, on Septimius Severus's campaign of 195. See Script. Hist. Aug. under "Severus" 18 for Severus defeating Abgarus. Then Herodian (111.9.2) says Abgar accompanied Severus on campaign in 197-8. Abgar later visited Rome as per Dio LXXIX, 16.

16 On the possible correspondence, see Harnack, *Sitzungsberichte*, (above, n. 14) 911. The key article for the Roman names of Abgar is E. Babelon, *Melanges Numismatiques*, 2 Ser., 1893, 209-296, discussed in detail in Alfred R. Bellinger and C. Bradford Welles, "A Third-Century Contract of Sale from Edessa in Osrhoene," *Yale Classical Studies*, 5, 1935, 93-154, 149-151. The evidence for Abgar VIII consists of bronze coins struck with Commodus, Septimius Severus, and Caracalla (Babelon 247-258, pls. IV, 2-14, V, 1-7). They date from 177-211. These coins of Abgar VIII testify to his close relations with Rome;

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emphasized by his assumption of the names Lucius Aelius Aurelius Septimius, which appear on the coins themselves. Ian Wilson, personal communication, has suggested that the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius's adoptive brother (and co-emperor) was Lucius Verus, who died in 169, after having conducted a successful campaign against the Parthians, during which Edessa was taken (in 166), and Abgar VIII's father Ma'nu VIII installed as a pro-Roman client king. So Abgar VIII's name Lucius may well have been in honour of Lucius Verus.

17 Chronicle of Edessa, in L. Hallier, "Untersuchungen Aber die Edessensiche Chronik," Vol. IX, Pt. I, 91. See his discussion pp. 48-53 and 84-91. Entries I and IX of the Chronicle (Hallier 84 and 91), though authored by a Christian (see entry IV: "In the year 309 [of Alexander] Our Lord was born."), are unargumentative and apparently unbiased on the issue of when Christianity appeared in Edessa. The account of the great flood of 201 in Edessa includes unobtrusively, among the buildings destroyed, "the sanctuary of the Christian church." On the question of Christianity's establishment in Edessa, see Segal, Edessa, "The Blessed City" and his bibliogr.

18 Harnack cited a text listing apostles' burial places, attributed to the *Hypotyposes* of Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-216), in which we read "*Petrus et Paulus Romae sepulti sunt; Andreas Patrae civitate Acaiae; Jacobus Zebedaei in arce Marmarica; Johannes in Epheso; Philippus cum filiabis suis in Hierapoli Asiae; ... Thaddaeus et Judas [Thomas] in Britio Edessenorum. ... Clemens in quinto libro hypotyposeon id est informationum.*"

19 See Hallier (above, n. 17).

20 See Richard O'Gorman's entry "Grail" in Lacy, "Arthurian Encyclopedia" (above, n. 2).

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