



THE BRISTOL MERLIN

REVEALING THE SECRETS OF A MEDIEVAL FRAGMENT

by **LEAH TETHER,**
LAURA CHUHAN CAMPBELL,
and **BENJAMIN POHL**

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with the assistance of
Michael Richardson

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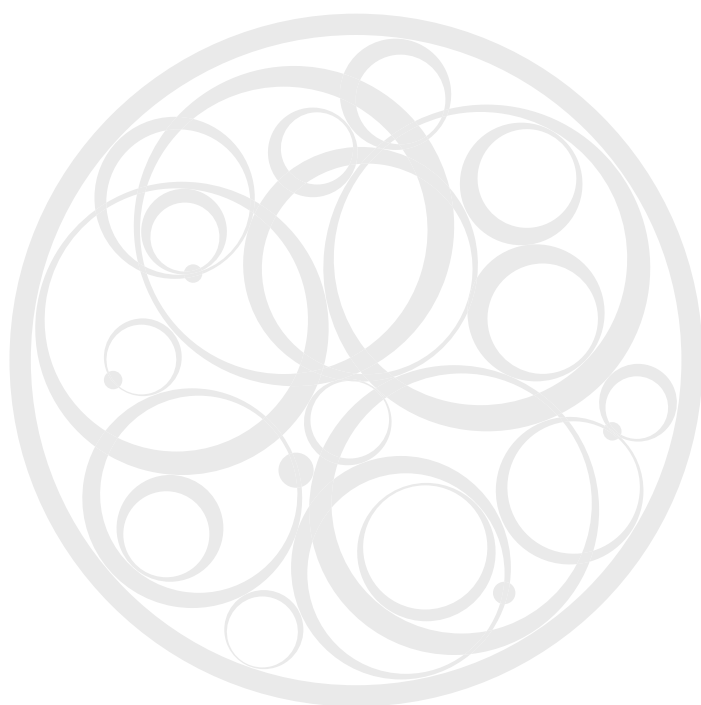
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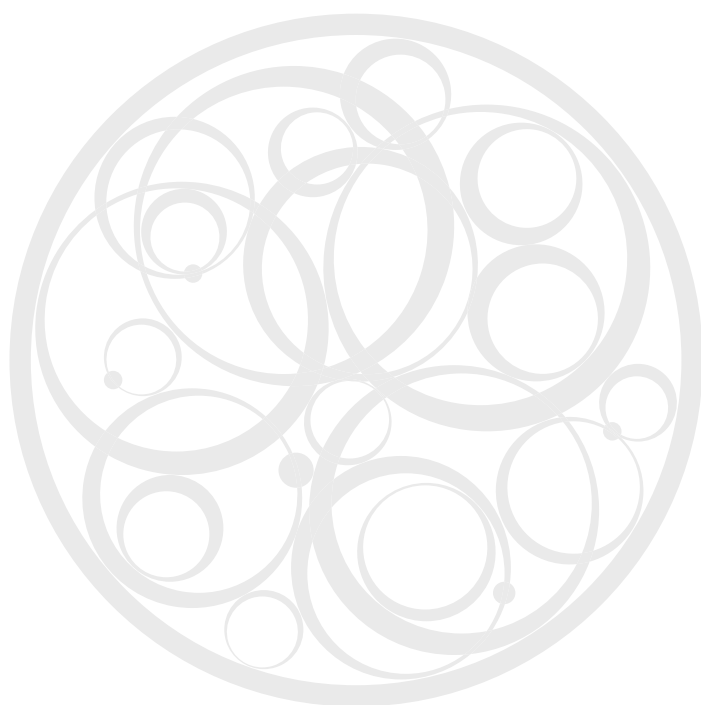
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INTRODUCTION

IN JANUARY 2019, the convenor of a “History of the Book” module on the University of Bristol’s new MA Medieval Studies programme discussed with Bristol’s Special Collections Librarian, Michael Richardson, the provision of medieval manuscripts for teaching timetabled to take place in Special Collections. Reasoning that the programme would be well served by adding unknown manuscript fragments to existing inventories of medieval codices and fragments, Richardson asked Jane Bradley, Local Studies Librarian at Bristol Central Library, the city’s historic municipal library, about the prevalence of manuscript pastedowns in its rare book collection. Richardson arranged to view a selection of the relevant volumes and recruited his wife, Vassiliki Frangeskou, to assist in photographing them for later consultation. Richardson was especially intrigued by two folios bound as flyleaves in the front and rear of the first tome of a four-volume edition of the complete works of the medieval French reformer, Jean Gerson (1363–1429). These were exceptional in being written in French, rather than in Latin, as is more common for manuscript fragments recycled into bindings. His attention was drawn by the emergence of proper names from Arthurian literary texts. He sent some photographs to Leah Tether, a University of Bristol academic working on French Arthuriana, who identified the passage represented in the two fragments as extracts from the continuation of the *Estoire de Merlin* that forms part of the *Vulgate Cycle* (more often referred to nowadays as the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*).

This continuation is known as the *Suite Vulgate du Merlin*,¹ usually thought to have been composed ca. 1220–1225,² and not to be confused with the *Suite du Merlin*, which is the continuation of the Merlin story contained in the *Post-Vulgate Cycle*. Tether confirmed this identification with Laura Chuhan Campbell, a specialist of Old French and Italian *Merlin* narratives at Durham University. As excitement grew, Tether convened a meeting at the Central Library with Campbell, Richardson, and Benjamin Pohl, a medieval book historian and palaeographer from Bristol’s Department of History. It soon transpired that there were in fact more than just the two fragments originally identified; in both the front and rear of each of the remaining three volumes of Gerson’s *Opera* was a further folio from the same manuscript bound as a flyleaf (except the fourth tome, where there was no front flyleaf).³ In total, therefore, there were seven fragments of the

1 The only modern editions of the text currently available are those by Poirion and Freire-Nunes (published under the title of “Les premiers faits du roi Arthur,” in *Le livre du Graal I*, 807–1662) and Sommer (published in *The Vulgate Version II*, 88–466). Trachsler is currently preparing a new edition of the *Suite Vulgate* and has published a study setting out the editorial principles for it: Trachsler, “Pour une nouvelle édition,” 128–48. The text is also available in an English translation by Pickens in *Lancelot-Grail II*, 98–495.

2 Middleton, “The Manuscripts,” 50; Kennedy et al., “Lancelot with and without the Grail,” 277.

3 The first three host volumes are incunables under the title of *Prima/Secunda/Tercia pars operum Johannis Gerson* (Strasbourg [Argentina]: Martin Flach [*Simus Martinus*], 1494), which is listed in Hain, *Repertorium bibliographicum*, 1:462–63 as item *7625 (ISTC ig00189000; USTC 745208).

narrative. These fragments, though no longer in the correct order, contained an unbroken, consecutive section of the narrative, albeit one perhaps unfamiliar to most readers since it did not align perfectly with the version of the narrative present in any modern edition.

The discovery of medieval book fragments inside early printed volumes (or other newer books) is, of course, not unusual. The value of parchment, a robust and durable material, remained high throughout the late-medieval and early-modern periods, and medieval manuscripts deemed no longer of use or out-of-date were often broken down into quires and recycled into bindings for the purposes of economy.⁴ The books subjected to this destructive practice, though, were more typically liturgical and/or working books (such as registers or accounts volumes), precisely because they had a kind of “shelf-life”;⁵ it is far rarer to find manuscripts containing medieval vernacular narratives re-used in the bindings of newer books. Still, the practice is not entirely unknown. For instance, two fragments from a single folio of Chrétien de Troyes’s *Perceval* (privately owned, known as the “Brussels fragments,” formerly “de Lannoy”) were discovered in the guise of flyleaves in a sixteenth-century priest’s register;⁶ while fragments of twenty-six folios (known as the “Annonay fragments,” privately owned) of Chrétien’s works (all except *Lancelot*) served as wrappers for eighteenth-century registers belonging to a notary in Champagne.⁷ Fragments of the Vulgate *Estoire de Merlin* and the *Suite Vulgate*, too, have been found in not dissimilar circumstances. For instance, among the many manuscript fragments found as binding materials in administrative registers held in the State Archives of Belgium were the fragments of four folios from a manuscript containing precisely these texts, which had served as support wrappers for an otherwise unbound sixteenth-century accounting register from Namur (two of these contain excerpts from the *Estoire de Merlin*, and the other two have sections from the *Suite Vulgate*).⁸ Similarly, a fragment of the *Estoire de Merlin* now kept at Amsterdam Univer-

Bristol Central Library’s copies of these three volumes are held under the shelfmark 88–90/SR39. The fourth volume, with a similar but slightly different frontispiece (attributed to Albrecht Dürer), has the title *Quarta pars operum Johannis Gerson prius non impressa* (Strasbourg [Argen.]: Martin Flach the younger for Matthias Schürer [ex officina Martini flacci iunior. exactissima Mathie schurer], 1502) (USTC 689050), and is described in Hain under item *7622 (1:460–61), which is the entry for the 1488 edition of the first three volumes of Gerson’s *Opera omnia* printed by Johann Grüninger in Strasbourg (ISTC ig00186000). Bristol Central Library’s copy of this volume is under the shelfmark of 91/SR39.

4 See, as just two examples of studies on the pervasiveness of the practice, Pickwood, “The Use of Fragments”; Ker, *Fragments of Medieval Manuscripts*. See also the new journal (as of 2018) *Fragmentology*.

5 Pickwood, “The Use of Fragments,” 1; Duba and Flüeler, “Fragments and *Fragmentology*,” 1; Ker, *Fragments of Medieval Manuscripts*, 230–47.

6 See Nixon, “Catalogue of Manuscripts,” 46–47; see also Jodogne, “Fragments d’un manuscrit inconnu,” 1039.

7 See Nixon, “Catalogue of Manuscripts,” 20–22; see also Pauphilet, *Chrétien de Troyes*, vii.

8 Giannini, Nieuws, and Palumbo, “Un nouveau fragment de *Merlin*.”

sity Library once functioned as a sixteenth-century archive folder binding.⁹ However, despite finds of this nature not being unprecedented in mainland Europe, the discovery in Bristol of fragments of a French Arthurian text in books apparently bound in England (see below) is far more unusual.¹⁰ These fragments therefore promise to offer precious testimony of the evolution of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, the circulation of Arthurian manuscripts in the later Middle Ages and early-modern era in France and England, and also the provenance of rare books belonging to Bristol Central Library.

What follows is a comprehensive study of what we are calling the “Bristol *Merlin*.” Rather than just concentrating on the fragments themselves, we propose a more holistic approach that takes account of both text and context, and makes full use of the broad, interdisciplinary skillset of the project team, which includes book history, bibliography, palaeography and codicology, history, literary studies, philology, and translation studies. In doing so, we hope to offer an attractive model for the future study of manuscript fragments and similar finds. This book is divided into two main sections: “Context” and “Text.” The first, “Context,” is comprised of four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter offers a full palaeographic and codicological analysis of the fragments themselves and explores the possible nature of the source manuscript from which they came. This chapter also traces the journey of the fragments within the bindings of their current host volumes. The second chapter then considers the evidence of the books’ bindings, before the third chapter discusses the likely provenance of the host volumes. Together, Chapters 2 and 3 thus explore how the fragments may have found their way to Bristol, providing important new insights into the *Suite Vulgate*’s circulation in medieval and early-modern England. The fourth chapter contains a discussion of both the particular textual redaction present in the fragments (including remarks on any significant differences in content) and, based on their linguistic features, the possible localization/origin of the source manuscript. The “Context” section closes with a short overall conclusion that summarizes the key findings and identifies future avenues for research. The second section, entitled “Text,” presents a facing edition and translation of the *Merlin* text found in the fragments, prefixed by a brief introduction setting out the key editorial and translation principles.

9 This is evidenced by a note on fol. 3 noting a date of 1585 and reading: “aultres ventes et transport.” The fragment’s current shelfmark is Amsterdam, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS 450 (formerly I A 24q). See Chotzen, “Notice sur quelques fragments,” 87–89, and Clark and Field, “The Amsterdam University Fragment.”

10 In Ker’s *Fragments of Medieval Manuscripts*, 230–47, there are no Arthurian manuscript fragments and only a handful of French-language fragments listed as having been found in Oxford bindings. Pearson, in his supplement to Ker’s work on Oxford pastedowns, adds just one set of two fourteenth-century folios of *La Mort le roi Artu* found in a copy of M. Ficino’s *Epistolae* (Venice, 1495) that was bound by the Thomas Bedford/Dragon Binder group, and which is now kept in the library of Corpus Christi College, Oxford (the fragments are now MS 491, nos. 15, 16); Pearson, *Oxford Bookbinding*, 149.