



**History, hagiography, romance... A Middle English prose
Brut's layered portrayal of Athelstan**

**História, hagiografia, romance...O retrato estratificado de
Athelsan num *Brut* em prosa, em inglês medieval**

Lisa M. Ruch

Bay Path University
Liberal Studies Department
01106, Longmeadow, Massachusetts; USA

lruch@baypath.edu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2501-1462>

Data recepção do artigo / Received for publication: 26 de Setembro de 2022

Data aceitação do artigo / Accepted in revised form: 3 de Abril de 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/medievalista.6924>

ABSTRACT

Athelstan's reputation and accomplishments as the king credited with being the first to rule over all of England led to his being celebrated in the Middle Ages in art, coinage, romance, travel narratives, and chronicles. In the prose *Brut* tradition, his depiction is, for the most part, focused on his military accomplishments, with little elaboration. However, the abbreviated Middle English prose *Brut* preserved in Edinburgh University Library MS 184 and two other manuscripts is unusual in its blending of narrative elements from historical accounts, hagiography, and romance to portray Athelstan as an English hero, and in its telling its 15-century audience where they could still see physical relics of Athelstan's reign in their own day, giving them the opportunity to be vicariously connected to the storied history of their nation. This article traces sources and traditions this *Brut's* compiler most likely drew from and considers what implications this may have for our understanding of this particular manuscript and of the evolution and adaptation of *Brut* chronicles in the late Middle Ages.

Keywords: Athelstan; chronicle; *Brut*; legend; narrative

RESUMO

A fama e os feitos de Athelstan, considerado como o primeiro rei a governar toda a Inglaterra, levaram a que, durante a Idade Média, fosse exaltado na arte, na numismática, no romance, em narrativas de viagem e em crônicas. Na tradição do *Brut* em prosa, o seu retrato foca-se, maioritariamente, nas suas vitórias militares, de forma pouco elaborada. No entanto, o *Brut* em prosa abreviado, em inglês medieval, preservado na Biblioteca da Universidade de Edimburgo, MS. 184, e dois outros manuscritos, afastam-se desta linha na medida em que misturam elementos narrativos oriundos de relatos históricos, hagiografia e romance, a fim de retratar Athelstan como um herói inglês, e de o transmitir ao seu público do século XV, que, na altura, ainda podia ver relíquias concretas do reinado de Athelstan, dando-lhe assim uma oportunidade de ligação indireta à história romanceada da sua nação. O presente artigo identifica fontes e tradições nas quais o compilador deste *Brut* muito provavelmente se baseou e reflete sobre as suas implicações quanto à nossa compreensão deste manuscrito específico e à evolução e adaptação das crônicas de *Brut*, no final da Idade Média.

Palavras-chave: Athelstan; crônica; *Brut*; lenda; narrativa.



In November of 2021, the London *Daily Mail* published an article showing the results of a podcast poll that asked listeners to name England's greatest monarch¹. While the pollsters, historians Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook, surmised that the choice would be Elizabeth I, Victoria, or perhaps Edward III or William the Conqueror, they were surprised by the winner: Athelstan, a medieval king they thought was largely forgotten by today's public. In truth, the 924/5-939 reign of Athelstan, son of Edward the Elder, was significant for his consolidation of regional kingdoms and for his military successes, most notably his victory over the rulers of Dublin, Strathclyde, and the Scots at Brunanburh. Additionally, he undertook alliances with foreign kingdoms through the marriages of some of his many sisters. Athelstan also founded religious houses, granted lands to those already in existence, and amassed religious manuscripts and relics in his personal collection. He reigned 15 or 16 years (depending on the mode of computation), never married and was buried at Malmesbury². Athelstan's deeds were well remembered beyond the Anglo-Saxon era; as a recent biographer notes, "While neither great nor saint, Æthelstan nonetheless continued to have a high profile in Latin and vernacular literature written in England in the later middle ages, proving a far from forgotten monarch"³.

Varying depictions of Athelstan in chronicle accounts

This all seems fairly straightforward. However, there were other historical figures named Athelstan who appeared in medieval accounts. One Athelstan was a lesser king of Sussex, sometime in the early 700s. In 714, he and his queen Aethelfryth witnessed a charter that granted land to the monastery at Selsey. Another Athelstan was a ruler in East Anglia, sometime in the early 800s. And yet another Athelstan was the son or son-in-law of Aethelred II, "the Unready." He was killed in battle in

¹ MULLIGAN, Elliot - "King who? Poll's shock winner as little-known Athelstan is named our top monarch". *Daily Mail*, Daily UK news. 18 Nov. 2021. <https://dailyuknews.com/uk-news/king-who-polls-shock-winner-as-little-known-athelstan-is-named-our-top-monarch/>

² FOOT, Sarah - "Æthelstan (893/4-939)". *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. Oxford: OUP, 2004. Online ed., Sept. 2011. Accessed 19 December 2023. Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/833>.

³ FOOT, Sarah - *Æthelstan: The first king of England*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2011, p. 231.

1010. So, it appears that there were at least four Athelstans of note in the span of three centuries. It is no wonder that chroniclers struggled with the placement of King Athelstan in their accounts.

Henry of Huntingdon's mid-12th century *Historia Anglorum* notes that Athelstan overpowered "the perfidious nation of the Danes and the treacherous nation of the Scots"⁴ and fought mightily at Brunanburh. Henry says that he was succeeded by Edmund, whom he incorrectly identifies as Athelstan's son, rather than brother. William of Malmesbury, also writing in the 12th century, devotes a significant amount of attention to Athelstan. As the king was buried at Malmesbury, this is not particularly surprising. In William's account, Athelstan is a truly admirable ruler: "there was scarcely any ancient house in all England that he did not adorn with buildings or ornaments, books or estates"⁵. William claims to have found much of his information on Athelstan in "an ancient volume." The biography that William creates depicts Athelstan as strong and heroic. His sister married Hugh, the king of the Franks, and was provided with a marriage gift of jewels, arms, and splendid horses. William also quotes a series of poems in his account, admitting that he has not verified the truth of everything he has included.

Some subsequent Latin chroniclers diverted from the account composed by William of Malmesbury. Matthew Paris, writing in the early 13th century, notes that Athelstan was the illegitimate son of Æthelwulfus⁶. The *Eulogium Historiarum* correctly identifies Athelstan as the son of Edward the Elder, while one surviving manuscript of the *Eulogium* features a second Athelstan, who was the son of Aethelred and Elgiva⁷. Walter of Coventry, whose late 13th-century chronicle opens with a *Brut*⁸-style summary of his nation's history, claims that Athelstan was the first of the Saxon kings, ruling immediately after Cadwalader. According to this account, he made the grant of Almunderness to York. Coventry quotes from this charter;

⁴ HENRY OF HUNTINGDON - *Historia Anglorum*. Ed. and trans. Diana Greenway. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996, p. 311.

⁵ WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY - *Gesta regum Anglorum*. Vol. I. Ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, & M. Winterbottom. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998, pp. 208-209.

⁶ LUARD, Henry Richards (ed.) - *Flores historiarum*. Vol. 1. London: Rolls Series n. 95, 1890, p. 377.

⁷ HAYDON, Frank Scott - *Eulogium historiarum*. 3 Vols. Rolls Series n. 9. London, 1857. Vol. 3, p. 25.

⁸ STUBBS, William - *Memoriale fratris Walteri de Coventria: The historical collections of Walter of Coventry*. 2 Vols. London, 1872-1873. Vol. 1, p. 13.

however, what he cites is in actuality a charter dated to 930. Later in his chronicle Walter discusses the reign of Edward the Elder, whose eldest son, Athelstan, reigned after him for 25 years, during which time he conquered Scotland.

These accounts are only a small sampling of chronicle treatments of Athelstan's reign. With such a wide variety of Athelstans appearing in the chronicle tradition, it is no surprise that subsequent historians had difficulties reconciling their accounts. Adding to the confusion were the legendary and fictional depictions circulating in the Middle Ages. The life of Athelstan that William of Malmesbury utilized is now lost. Other accounts still survive. Aelred of Rievaulx's *Genealogia Regum Anglorum*⁹ preserves a legend in which Athelstan encounters a group of pilgrims in Lincoln, who are returning from the shrine of Saint John of Beverley, where they have just been blessed with cures. Impressed by their stories, Athelstan detours to Beverley to perform a vigil to the saint, leaving his dagger as a pledge. Athelstan then proceeds on his journey northward, to do battle. The eve of the battle, the saint appears to Athelstan in a vision, foretelling his victory over the Scots.

This mix of historical accounts and overstated depictions of Athelstan left the compilers of *Brut* chronicles with an embarrassment of riches from which to draw. The author of the Anglo-Norman prose *Brut* opted for concision, tersely relating that Athelstan vanquished King Gaufride and the Danes, fought the Scots and Picts, and reigned 15 years¹⁰. The Common Version of the Middle English prose *Brut* follows the Anglo-Norman *Brut*, stating that Athelstan was slew so many foes in battle “þat no man coupe telle þe nombre of ham”. The sole variation in the Middle English account is that Athelstan reigned for 25 years rather than 15¹¹.

The *Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*, also called the *Abridged English Metrical Brut*, depicts a variety of Athelstans in a variety of ways from manuscript to

⁹ AELRED OF RIEVAULX - *Genealogia regum Anglorum*, In MIGNE, J. P. (ed.) - *Patrologiæ cursus completus*. Series Latina, 122 Vols. (Paris: 1844-1864), xcv (1855), cols. 724-725.

¹⁰ MARVIN, Julia - *The oldest Anglo-Norman prose Brut chronicle: An edition and translation*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006, pp. 206 and 207.

¹¹ BRIE, Friedrich W. D. (ed.) - *The Brut or The chronicles of England*. 2 Vols. Oxford: EETS, O.S. 131, 136, 1906-1908. Vols. 1 and 2 reprinted together, 1999, p. 112

manuscript. The version preserved in British Library MS Royal 12.c.xii¹² states that an Athelstan was the eldest of the five sons of Ethelwulf, but that he did not rule as king. The Athelstan who was the son of Edward the Elder did reign, however, subduing the Welsh and the Scots. Early in his account is a mention of Guy of Warwick, who lived at the same time. The chronicler notes that Athelstan's sister married Hugh, King of France, and details the wedding gifts, paralleling those mentioned by William of Malmesbury. Athelstan was buried at Malmesbury and succeeded by his son Edmond. The compiler of the short metrical *Brut* found in British Library Additional MS 19677, edited by Zettl¹³, omits any mention of the first Athelstan. The great king Athelstan, son of Edward the Elder, is given a good deal of attention; the chronicle mentions the tributes paid to him by the Welsh and the Scots, and his beautiful sister Hilde, who married Hugh of France. This account, like the Royal manuscript just discussed, observes that Guy of Warwick was a contemporary of Athelstan, and battled the giant Cobrand during his reign. Again, this Athelstan was buried at Malmesbury and succeeded by Edmund, his son. The version of the short metrical *Brut* found in the Auchinleck manuscript, like the Royal version, includes the Athelstan who was the eldest son of Ethelwulf, as well as King Athelstan, son of Edward the Elder. This account is similar in whole to the Royal manuscript. The fragmentary version found in Bodley MS Rawlinson Poet 145 preserves a portion of the tale of Hugh of France and the wedding gifts as well as the exploits of Guy of Warwick. The only substantive difference in this account is that Athelstan was followed as king by his brother Edmund. The compiler of this text seems to have known that the historical Athelstan was childless.

Another Middle English chronicle, *Castleford's Chronicle*¹⁴, perhaps contemporaneous with the short metrical *Brut*, depicts Athelstan in a notably different way. The first Athelstan in Castleford's account appears during the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy. These seven kingdoms, however, were unified by a king Athelstan "Pat was Edwardes son bastarde." Chosen by election, he ruled over the seven

¹² O'FARRELL-TATE, Una (ed.) - *The abridged English metrical Brut*. Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2002, p. 84.

¹³ ZETTL, Edward (ed.) - *An anonymous short metrical chronicle*. London: EETS, O.S. 196, 1935, p. 23.

¹⁴ ECKHARDT, Caroline D. (ed.) - *Castleford's chronicle or The boke of Brut*. Vols. 1 and 2. Oxford: EETS, O.S. 305 and 306, 1996.

regional, and nameless, sub-rulers. He established a parliament and laws, punishing misdoers and collecting taxes. As in the short Latin *Bruts*, he granted Almunderness to York, and, as in the short Middle English *Bruts*, ruled during the days of Guy of Warwick. He reigned for 16 years and was succeeded by his son Adelbert. This depiction sounds quite like that of Athelstan of Wessex. When his history reaches that king's place, the Castleford chronicler is faced with a quandary. At the end of the account of Edward the Elder's reign, a new chapter is introduced by a rubric reading "Kyng Adelstone þe secund her / Was maid a kyng aftre his fader"¹⁵. Thus, this ruler is literally styled Athelstan II. This king, learning of the ravages in the north by the Scots, heads off to battle, encountering the pilgrims of the legend along the way. Hearing their tale, he makes the pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint John of Beverley, who then appears to him in a vision to foretell his success in battle. After this victory, he vanquishes the Welsh and sees his sister married to the nameless king of France. At the end of his 26-year reign he is buried at Malmesbury and succeeded by his brother Edmund.

Achieving widespread popularity at the same time as the assorted *Brut* texts was Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon*, an epic work which sets out to chronicle the history of England and its place within universal history¹⁶. With such an ambitious goal, Higden clearly worked from an array of sources. He mentions three Athelstans. The first, linked with Northumbria, lived during the Danish attacks in 877. This is the same Athelstan placed by Matthew Paris in 1010. The second is called "Ethelstanus rex Angliae," dated to 924, but for some reason identified as a monk. The third and final Athelstan is identified as the brother of Edmund Ironside.

An expanded life of Athelstan in an abbreviated Middle English *Brut*

It was the brief account of Athelstan's reign found in the Anglo-Norman Prose *Brut* that proliferated through the majority of Middle English *Bruts*. However, three surviving copies, categorized by Lister Matheson as the Peculiar Version to 1427¹⁷,

¹⁵ ECKHARDT - *Castleford's chronicle*. Vol. 2, p. 798.

¹⁶ HIGDEN, Ranulf - *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, monachi Cestrensis; together with the English translation of John of Trevisa and of an unknown writer in the 15th century*. Ed. by C. Babington (Vols. 1-2) and J. R. Lumby (Vols. 3-9), vol. 9. London, 1865-1866, Vol. 6.

¹⁷ MATHESON, Lister M. - *The prose Brut: The development of a Middle English chronicle*. Tempe, AZ: U of Arizona P, 1998, pp. 316-318.

include a significantly different portrayal of Athelstan. These unpublished texts, preserved in Edinburgh University Library MS 184 and British Library MS Harley 63, both of which I have consulted, as well as Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS fonds anglais 30, are much shorter abbreviations of the Common Version of the Middle English prose *Brut*. Their retelling of Athelstan's reign, however, is comparatively lengthy, adding vivid details¹⁸.

The account begins with Athelstan's victory over Gaufride of Denmark. The Scots then rose up against Athelstan. On route to do battle, he stopped at Beverley, where he asked Saint John of Beverley to pray for a sign of forthcoming victory. Meeting with the Scottish emissaries, Athelstan knelt down and prayed aloud to God, and then struck his sword into a large stone, cutting a slice the length of an ell into it. Undeterred, the Scots engaged in battle and were defeated. Returning to Beverley, Athelstan gave thanks to Saint John and then placed his sword in the royal treasury at the Tower of London, where, the chronicle adds, it still remains. Not long afterward, Gaufride and the Danes returned, bringing the giant Colbrand with them to Winchester. There they challenged Athelstan to battle, citing their historical right to the kingdom of Northumbria through the title of Havelok and his wife Goldeburgh. Finding no one willing to fight Colbrand, Athelstan sought God's help, and, while he was sleeping, was visited by an angel, who directed him to the north gate of Winchester, where he would find a palmer willing to take on the challenge. The palmer and the giant then met on a small island beside Winchester called the abbey of Hyde, where the palmer killed Colbrand. Athelstan asked the victor for his name and learned that he was Guy of Warwick. Guy asked that his identity be kept secret for a year and left on pilgrimage. Gaufride and the Danish forces withdrew to Denmark in shame, and Athelstan married the daughter of the emperor of Rome. The wedding gifts included 100 white horses adorned in golden cloths and a gold cup set with precious gems called the Royal of England; the chronicle notes that the cup can be found at Westminster Abbey, where it is used solely for coronations. Athelstan reigned for 25 years and was buried at Malmesbury.

¹⁸ A transcription of the Athelstan section of the Edinburgh *Brut* is appended below. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to this abbreviated chronicle as the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut*.

Possible sources and inspirations for the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut's* depiction of Athelstan

Clearly, this account of Athelstan's life and deeds is hyperbolic and less than historical, mixing in elements from a range of traditions. The tale of the miraculous slicing of the stone, evocative of King Arthur and his heroic tradition¹⁹, was included in a collection of miracle stories compiled in Beverley in the late 12th century and featured in the 14th-century *Beverley Cartulary*²⁰. It was also invoked by Edward I in 1301 in his letter to Pope Boniface VIII seeking to justify his right to the realm of Scotland²¹. A few chronicles—those of Robert Mannyng of Brunne, the *Eulogium Historiarum*, and Hyde Abbey—also integrate the story of Athelstan's slicing the stone as a portent of his victory.

Athelstan, of course, features in the popular romance of Guy of Warwick²². The Anglo-Norman version dates to the end of the 13th century and the Middle English translations to the 14th and 15th centuries. In addition, John Lydgate wrote his own version, which A. S. G. Edwards dates to 1425²³. The episode of Guy's battle with Colbrand appears to have been of especial interest to medieval audiences; one record notes that, in 1338, "a certain minstrel sang the song of Colbrand"²⁴. This song, presumed lost, may be related to the ballad "Guy and Colebrande," dated by its language to the 15th century and preserved in Bishop Percy's Folio²⁵. Chronicle texts began incorporating the tale of Guy's combat with the giant in the early 14th century. Pierre de Langtoft is usually credited with the earliest surviving use of the Guy and Colbrand story. The tale was also incorporated into the *Short English Metrical*

¹⁹ See COLLINGWOOD, W. G. - "Arthur and Athelstan". *Saga-Book* 10 (1928), pp. 132-144 for a discussion of parallels between depictions of Arthur and Athelstan.

²⁰ WILSON, Susan E. - *The life and after-life of St. John of Beverley*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 10-11, 180.

²¹ STONES, E. L. G. (ed. and trans.) - *Anglo-Scottish relations 1174-1328: Some selected documents*. Oxford: OUP, 1965, pp. 198-99.

²² For versions of the Guy of Warwick tale, see ZUPITZA, Julius (ed.) - *The romance of Guy of Warwick: Edited from the Auchinleck MS in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh and from MS 107 in Caius College, Cambridge*. Oxford, EETS, E.S. 42, 49, and 59, published in 1966 as one volume; and ZUPITZA, Julius (ed.) - *The romance of Guy of Warwick: The second or 15th-century version*. Oxford, EETS, E.S. 25 and 26, published in 1966 as one volume.

²³ EDWARDS, A. S. G. - "The *Speculum Guy de Warwick* and Lydgate's *Guy of Warwick*: The non-romance Middle English tradition". In WIGGINS, Alison; FIELD, Rosalind (eds.) - *Guy of Warwick: Icon and ancestor*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007, pp. 81-93, p. 88.

²⁴ WILSON, R. M. - *The lost literature of medieval England*. London: Methuen, 1952, p. 62.

²⁵ HALES, John W.; FURNIVALL, Frederick J. (eds.) - *Bishop Percy's folio manuscript*. Vol. II, Part II. London: N. Trübner, 1868, pp. 509-549.

Chronicle, Rauf de Boun's *Petit Bruit*, Mannyng's *Brut*, Henry Knighton's chronicle, and the chronicle of Hyde Abbey. Additionally, one manuscript of the *Anonimale Chronicle* contains a marginal note which summarizes Athelstan's message from the angel and Guy's agreeing to fight the hideous giant brought by the king of Denmark²⁶.

Just as there are variations in the versions of Guy's romance, so too are there variations in the chronicle accounts of his aiding Athelstan. The Edinburgh and Harley *Brut* makes mention of certain details that can be used as comparative test points: specifically, Athelstan and Guy's meeting at Winchester's north gate, the combat being held on an island, that island's being known as the abbey of Hyde, and Guy's condition that his identity be kept secret for a year. Both Langtoft and Mannyng place Athelstan and Guy's meeting at the south gate and omit Guy's condition about his identity. The *Short English Metrical Chronicle* makes only a very terse mention of Guy and Colbrand's battle. The *Petit Bruit*²⁷ places their meeting in Winchester at Medeway, while the Hyde chronicle explains that they fought at a place known in English as The Hyde Mede. Overall, however, none of the chronicle accounts is a close match to the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut*'s. However, one 15th-century version of *Guy of Warwick* features the meeting at the north gate, the battle on an island, and the injunction of a year's secrecy for Guy's identification. Also promising is Lydgate's treatment of the romance, which puts the meeting at the north gate and the battle at Hyde Mede, as well as mentioning Guy's preference for anonymity²⁸.

Notable, too, in the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut* is the Danish king's citation of Havelok as proof of his claim to Northumbria²⁹. The chronicle discusses Havelok

²⁶ SPENCE, John - *Reimagining history in Anglo-Norman prose chronicles*. York: York Medieval P, 2013, p. 87. Another useful source for the contextualization of Athelstan and other Anglo-Saxon rulers by later writers is ROUSE, Robert Allen - *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), especially pp. 129-132.

²⁷ RALF DE BOUN - *Le petit Bruit*. Ed. Diana B. Tyson. London: ANTS, 1986, p. 17.

²⁸ RICHMOND, Velma Bourgeois - *The legend of Guy of Warwick*. New York: Garland, 1996 provides an in-depth study of the many versions of the Guy of Warwick narrative.

²⁹ See MOLL, Richard J. - "'Nest pas autentik, mais apocrophum': Haveloks and their reception in medieval England". *Studies in philology* 105 (2008), pp. 165-206 for a discussion of Havelok in the chronicles.

more in length at an earlier stage in its chronology, mentioning his marriage to Goldeburgh, Havelok's three-year reign as king, and his burial at Stonehenge. The *Petit Bruit* includes accounts of both Havelok and Guy but does not mention them together. Henry Knighton's chronicle does place them together in its narrative³⁰. In addition, one manuscript of the poetic "Guy and Colebrande" calls the king of Denmark, Athelstan's foe, Auelocke, rather than Anlaf. One scholar has observed that in medieval accounts, "The combination of Guy and Haveloc is unusual. Putting together two great romance heroes, both with shadowy 'historical' validity but strong associations at Grimsby and Warwick, lends credence"³¹. Another means of lending credence is, of course, the citation of earlier authorities. Both the Hyde chronicle and Lydgate cite Gerard of Cornwall's *De Gestis Regum Westsaxonum* as their source for the events of Athelstan's life. Gerard's chronicle is now lost; it is tempting to wonder what direct influence it may have had on the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut* chronicler's text.

Returning to look at more test points to use as comparisons to potential sources, next is the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut*'s account of Athelstan's marriage to the Roman emperor's daughter. As the historical Athelstan never married, the chronicle's account is of course wholly erroneous. While a few chronicles mislabel Athelstan's successor, his brother Edmund, as his son, none that I have found mentions a marriage ceremony. In this case, a compiler or abbreviator may have garbled an account of the marriage of one of Athelstan's numerous sisters. William of Malmesbury's inventory of the gifts associated with the wedding of Aethelswyth and the king of the Franks includes "many swift horses, with their trappings" and an exquisite onyx cup³². William's inventory was carried into later chronicles, so the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut*'s description of 100 white steeds trapped in gold and a bejeweled golden cup may be an echo of this. Additionally, some chronicles, including the *Flores Historiarum*, mention the marriage of one of Athelstan's sisters to Otto of Rome, while the *Abridged English Metrical Brut* says that among the gifts

³⁰ KNIGHTON, Henry - *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*. Ed. J. R. Lumby. London: Rolls Series 92, 1889-1895, p. 21.

³¹ RICHMOND - *The legend of Guy of Warwick*, p. 73. Notably, the romance *Athelston* (edited by Trounce, EETS O.S. 224, 1951) leverages Athelstan in name more than in action, unrelated to his inclusions in the romance traditions of Guy and Havelock.

³² WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY - *Gesta regum Anglorum*, pp. 218-219.

at the marriage of another sister to Hugh of France were 300 milk white horses with bridles adorned with gems³³. Another cause for confusion in accounts of Athelstan's reign was its length, which historically was 15 or 16 years, depending on the mode of computation. However, numerous chroniclers state that it was 25 or 26 years. Whether this originally arose as a mistake on the part of one scribe or is an indication of another source is not clearly traceable.

A final enticing detail in the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut* is the statements that relics—Athelstan's sword and the marriage cup—can be seen by its 15th-century audience in London: the sword at the Tower and the cup at Westminster Abbey. In his chronicle, William of Malmesbury recounts a different legend of Athelstan's sword than the one in the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut*, adding that in his day, the sword is “preserved among the royal treasures as evidence of the miracle.”³⁴ Similarly, the Hyde chronicle states that the axe that Colbrand wielded in his battle with Guy of Warwick is preserved at Winchester Cathedral³⁵. There is historical precedent for the treasuring of the swords of famous heroes: “Swords still retained all of their old semi-magical prestige in the eyes of medieval kings, nobles and knights, and were the first ancient objects to be prized and collected for romantic reasons”³⁶. The Edinburgh and Harley *Brut*'s mention of the marriage cup and its use in coronations can also be linked to documented practice. Finely-wrought cups were used as part of the coronation ceremony in medieval England. Details for the service of Richard II in 1377 read,

And be it remembered, that the Mayor and Citizens of London, appearing before the said lord steward by the recorder of the same city, claimed by word of mouth according to the liberty and custom of the city aforesaid, that the same mayor, by reason of his office of mayoralty, in his own person may serve our lord the king on the day of his coronation, as well in the hall at his banquet as

³³ O'Farrell-Tate, Una - *Abridged English metrical Brut*, p. 85.

³⁴ WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY - *Gesta regum Anglorum*, pp. 208, 209. Archivists at the Tower of London are not aware of a tradition that a sword of Athelstan, however anachronistic, was said to have been held at the Tower (personal email correspondence with Bridget Clifford, Keeper of Tower Armouries, 10 Dec. 2013).

³⁵ EDWARDS, Edward (ed.) - *Liber Monasterii de Hyda*. London: Rolls Series 45, 1866, p. 121.

³⁶ BLAIR, Claude (ed.) - *The crown jewels*. London: HMSO, 1998, Vol. 1, p. 30.

after the banquet in the chamber to his spices, from a cup of gold of the same king³⁷.

The Edinburgh and Harley *Brut*'s claims of relics are romanticized and, in the case of Athelstan's sword placed in the Tower, anachronistic, but they may be indicative of a London audience for the text, or of a late-medieval desire for connection to a heroic past. As Thorlac Turville-Petre has noted, "chronicles frequently draw attention to the present witnesses of past events, the ancient castles, abbeys, and tombs that authenticate or commemorate the historical record"³⁸. The tradition of Guy of Warwick and Colbrand's battle was part of Winchester lore well into the Victorian era³⁹. Simply put, it is human nature to want to feel a material link to a culture's shared history.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the depiction of the historical reign of Athelstan in chronicles across the Middle Ages is complex, confusing, and changeable. One recent critic has opined that "The deterioration of Athelstan's portrayal seems initially to stem from details included in the 12-century medieval chronicles such as William of Malmesbury's, details which were then adapted and expanded in poems such as *Lazamon's Brut* and *Guy of Warwick*"⁴⁰. It is, on one hand, possible to argue that the account of Athelstan in the Edinburgh and Harley *Brut* is so garbled and anomalous as to be worthless. Clearly, no one surviving text ticks all of the boxes as a source, and the *Brut*'s narrative, as history, is essentially worthless. However, this does not necessarily mean that it deteriorated as a narrative. Julia Marvin reminds us "just how misleading and unhelpful can be the idea of shared or normative versions of even famous stories in medieval England"⁴¹. The story of Athelstan and his deeds is a prime case in point. The Edinburgh and Harley *Brut*'s intermingling of

³⁷ Quoted in BLAIR, Claude - "A drawing of an English medieval royal gold cup". *The Burlington magazine* 121.915 (Jun. 1979), pp. 370, 372-373, p. 370.

³⁸ TURVILLE-PETRE, Thorlac - *England the nation: Language, literature, and national identity, 1290-1340*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996, p. 146.

³⁹ L'ESTRANGE, A. G. - *Royal Winchester: Wanderings in and about the ancient capital of England*. London: Spencer Blackett, 1889, pp. 87 and 147.

⁴⁰ TREHARNE, Elaine M. - "Romanticizing the past in the Middle English *Athelstan*". *Review of English studies* 50:197 (1999), pp. 1-21, p. 9.

⁴¹ MARVIN, Julia - "Havelok in the prose 'Brut' tradition". *Studies in philology* 102 (2005), pp. 280-306, p. 305.

hagiographical, romance, and, for the lack of a better term, tourism, elements into the accepted historical account of Athelstan—elements that modern readers label “fiction”—can be seen as a rhetorical move to increase rather than decrease the text’s validity. Laura Ashe has argued for the “supreme cultural utility” of the “ahistorical use of history”⁴², and recent psychological studies have observed the tendency of audiences to embrace fiction as truth. One group of researchers noted that “Human culture strongly depends on people passing on information. Although the believability of information has been identified as a factor determining whether it is propagated, people seem to mainly pass on information that will evoke an emotional response in the recipient, irrespective of the information’s truth value”⁴³. The vivid details added to the life of Athelstan in this otherwise heavily abbreviated Middle English *Brut* show the admiration the compiler must have felt for the king. Like the podcast listeners surveyed by Holland and Sandbrook in 2021, medieval audiences viewed Athelstan as a great monarch whose reign should be remembered and celebrated. As we look at the varying treatments of the historical figure of Athelstan across time, we can reflect on both the medieval writers and their audiences and on our own crafting and reception of historical narrative as well.

Appendix: Transcription of Edinburgh University Library MS 184, fols. 13ra-13rb⁴⁴

[fol. 13ra] Off king Adelstone

And aftir him regned his sonne Adelstone that gaffe batell to the Danes and droffe Gawfride king of Denmark and his oste oute of this lande. And anone aftir the Scottes maked warre agane him and King Adelstone assembled moche people and came to Beuerley and besought Saint John to pray to God to schowe for him some miracle that the Scottis schuld obey him. And whenne he mette with the oste of the Scottys ther come many bischopes and heraldes to trete for pese and emong hem all King Adelstone kneled donne and besought God to gyffe him grace to smyte depe in to a grete stone that stode beside him yf so were that the Scottes aught to obey him. And

⁴² ASHE, Laura - *Fiction and history in England, 1066-1300*. Cambridge, CUP, 2007, p. 33.

⁴³ LEWANDOWSKY, Stephan, *et al.* - “Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing”. *Psychological science in the public interest* 13/3 (2012), pp. 106-131, p. 108.

⁴⁴ Punctuation and capitalization have been added to this transcription to aid in readability.

with his suerde he smote an elle in to the stone. And yet notwithstanding the grete miracle the Scottys wolde notte obey him but faught with him but then were doscomfite and many of hem slane. And thenne returned king Adelstone to Beuerley agane and thanked Saint John and after the same sworde was put in to the Toure of London and ther is keped in the kinges tresoure. And aftir the saide Gawfride king of Denmark come agane in to this lande the iii yere of the regne of King Adelstone the yere of oure lorde ix and xxvii with moche people and landed beside Wynchester and brought with him a geaunt that was called Colbrand and he was so grete and so long þat he loked ouer the walles of Wynchester fro the gyrdell vpward. And Adelstone lay at Wynchester. [fol. 13rb] And the king of Denmark sent unto hym a herold of armes to witte wheder he wolde finde a man to fight with Colbrand for the right of the kingdome of Northumbre that the Danes had clamed by fors by the tyle of Hauloke that wedded Goldesburght the kinges doughter of Northumbre and Adelstone sent him worde that he wolde finde one to fight with Colbrande but yt was so that no man wolde take the batell on hande. Wherefor Adelstone was full sory and besoght God of his helpen. And at nyght whan he was on slepe ther come an angell to him from Heuen and bad him go on the morow to the north gate of Wynchester. And there schuld he mete with a palmer that schulde take the batell on hand and so he dide and mette with the palmer and he toke vpon him the batell and there thei were putte togeder in a lytell island beside Winchester that now is called the Abbey of Hide and there the palmer slew Colbrande. And thenne the king Adelstone asked of the palmer what was his name and he told him in connwyll that he was Guy of Warwyck and prayed him that he wolde not tell his name of a tuelmonth aftir. And the king wold haue had him to duell with him but he wolde not but went forth on his pilgrimage. And thenne returned Gawfride and the Danes in to Denmark with moche schame and after King Adelstone wedded the emporis doghter of Rome and had with hire an C white stedes trapped in cloth of golde and a cuppe of golde sette with precious stones the whiche ys called the Royale of England and is in the Abbey of Westmynster in kepyng and at tymes of coronacions kinges drink thereof and no tyme ellys. And whenne Adelstone had regned xxv yere he died and lyeth at Malmesbury.

Bibliographical references

Manuscript Sources

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Library, MS 184.

London, British Library, MS Harley 63.

Printed Sources

AELRED OF RIEVAULX – *Genealogia regum Anglorum*. In MIGNE, J. P. Migne (ed.) – *Patrologiæ cursus completus*, series Latina, 122 Vols. (Paris: 1844-1864), xcv (1855), cols. 724-725.

BRIE, Friedrich W. D. (ed.) – *The Brut or The chronicles of England*. 2 Vols. Oxford: EETS, O.S. 131 and 136, 1906-08. Vols. 1 and 2 reprinted together, 1999.

EDWARDS, Edward (ed.) – *Liber Monasterii de Hyda*. London: Rolls Series 45, 1866.

HALES, John W.; Frederick J. Furnivall (eds.) – *Bishop Percy's folio manuscript*, Vol. II, Part II. London: N. Trübner, 1868.

HAYDON, Frank Scott (ed.) – *Eulogium historiarum*. Vol. 2. Rolls Series 9: London, 1857.

HENRY OF HUNTINGDON – *Historia Anglorum*. Ed. and trans. Diana Greenway, Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996.

HIGDEN, Ranulf – *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, monachi Cestrensis; together with the English translation of John of Trevisa and of an unknown writer in the 15th century*. Ed. Vols. 1-2, C. Babington; ed. Vols. 3-9, J. R. Lumby, vol. 9. London, 1865-1866.

KNIGHTON, Henry – *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*. Ed. J. R. Lumby. Rolls Series 92: London, 1889-1895.

LUARD, Henry Richards (ed.) – *Flores historiarum*. Vol. 1. London: Rolls Series 95, 1890.

LYDGATE, John – *The minor poems of John Lydgate*. Part II. Ed. Henry Noble Maccracken. Oxford: EETS, O.S. 192, 1934.

MARVIN, Julia – *The oldest Anglo-Norman prose Brut chronicle: An edition and translation*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006.

O'FARRELL-TATE, Una (ed.) – *The abridged English metrical Brut*. Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2002.

RALF DE BOUN – *Le petit Bruit*. Ed. Diana B. Tyson. London: ANTS, 1986.

STONES, E. L. G. (ed. and trans.) – *Anglo-Scottish relations 1174-1328: Some selected documents*. Oxford: OUP, 1965.

STUBBS, William – *Memoriale fratris Walteri de Coventria: The historical collections of Walter of Coventry*. 2 vols. London, 1872-1873.

TROUNCE, A. Mcl. (ed.) – *Athelston: A Middle English romance*. EETS, O.S. 224, 1951.

WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY – *Gesta regum Anglorum*. Vol. I. Ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, & M. Winterbottom. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1998.

ZETTL, Edward (ed.) – *An anonymous short metrical chronicle*. London: EETS, O.S. 196, 1935.

ZUPITZA, Julius (ed.) – *The romance of Guy of Warwick: Edited from the Auchinleck MS in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh and from MS 107 in Caius College, Cambridge*. Oxford: EETS, E.S. 42, 49 and 59, published in 1966 as one volume.

ZUPITZA, Julius (ed.) – *The romance of Guy of Warwick: The second or 15th-century version*. Oxford: EETS, E.S. 25 and 26, published in 1966 as one volume.

Studies

ASHE, Laura – *Fiction and history in England, 1066-1300*. Cambridge: CUP, 2007.

BLAIR, Claude (ed.) – *The crown jewels*. London: HMSO, 1998.

BLAIR, Claude – “A drawing of an English medieval royal gold cup”. *The Burlington magazine* 121.915 (Jun. 1979), pp. 370+372-373.

COLLINGWOOD, W. G. – “Arthur and Athelstan”. *Saga-Book* 10 (1928), pp. 132-144.

EDWARDS, A. S. G. – “The *Speculum Guy de Warwick* and Lydgate's *Guy of Warwick*: The non-romance Middle English tradition”. In WIGGINS, Alison; FIELD, Rosalind (eds.) – *Guy of Warwick: Icon and ancestor*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007, pp. 81-93.

L'ESTRANGE, A. G. – *Royal Winchester: Wanderings in and about the ancient capital of England*. London: Spencer Blackett, 1889.

FOOT, Sarah – “Æthelstan (893/4-939)”. *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. Oxford: OUP, 2004. Online ed., Sept. 2011. Accessed on 19 December 2023. Available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/833>

FOOT, Sarah – *Æthelstan: The First King of England*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2011.

LEWANDOWSKY, Stephan, *et al.* – “Misinformation and its correction: Continued influence and successful debiasing”. *Psychological science in the public interest* 13/3 (2012), pp. 106-131.

MARVIN, Julia - "Havelok in the prose 'Brut' tradition". *Studies in philology* 102 (2005), pp. 280-306.

MATHESON, Lister M. - *The prose Brut: The development of a Middle English chronicle*. Tempe - AZ: University of Arizona P, 1998.

MOLL, Richard J. - "'Nest pas autentik, mais apocrophum': Haveloks and their reception in medieval England." *Studies in philology* 105 (2008), pp. 165-206.

MULLIGAN, Elliot - "King who? Poll's shock winner as little-known Athelstan is named our top monarch". *Daily Mail*, Daily UK news. 18 November 2021. <https://dailyuknews.com/uk-news/king-who-polls-shock-winner-as-little-known-athelstan-is-named-our-top-monarch/>

RICHMOND, Velma Bourgeois -- *The legend of Guy of Warwick*. New York: Garland, 1996.

ROUSE, Robert Allen - *The idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English romance*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005.

SPENCE, John - *Reimagining history in Anglo-Norman prose chronicles*. York: York Medieval P, 2013.

TREHARNE, Elaine M. - "Romanticizing the past in the Middle English *Athelstan*". *Review of English studies* 50:197 (1999), pp. 1-21.

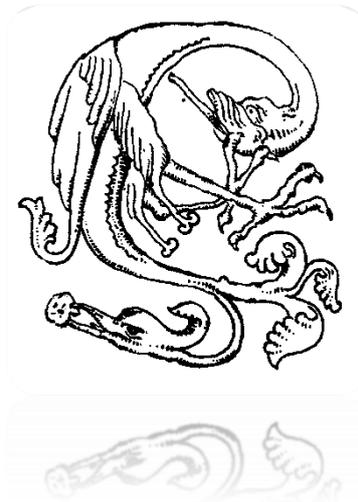
TURVILLE-PETRE, Thorlac - *England the nation: Language, literature, and national identity, 1290-1340*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.

WILSON, R. M. - *The lost literature of medieval England*. London: Methuen, 1952.

WILSON, Susan E. - *The life and after-life of St. John of Beverley*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006.

COMO CITAR ESTE ARTIGO | HOW TO QUOTE THIS ARTICLE:

RUCH, Lisa M. – “History, hagiography, romance... A Middle English prose *Brut*'s layered portrayal of Athelstan”. *Medievalista* 34 (Julho – Dezembro 2023), pp. 209-227. Disponível em <https://medievalista.iem.fcs.unl.pt>.



Esta revista tem uma Licença [Creative Commons - Atribuição-NãoComercial 4.0 Internacional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).