

GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH

THE HISTORY OF THE
KINGS OF BRITAIN

TRANSLATED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY LEWIS THORPE

PENGUIN BOOKS

In this you can see the hidden treachery of a secret enemy. Vortigern was advising this, not in order to ensure the safety of Conans, but because he knew that the Picts were a shifty people, ready for any mean trick. When they were drunk, or when something had made them angry, they could easily be stirred up against the King and so murder him out of hand. If this were to happen, then Vortigern would have the opportunity of making himself King, as he had so often planned to do. He therefore sent messengers to Scotland to invite a hundred Pictish soldiers to come; and these he introduced into the King's retinue. Once they had arrived, he honoured them above all the other men and enriched them with all sorts of bribes. He fattened them up so much on food and drink that they accepted him as their King. They used to wander through the streets shouting his praises and bellowing: 'It is Vortigern who ought to be King! Vortigern is worthy of the sceptre of Britain! Conans is not worthy of it!' At this Vortigern would try to give them more and more, so that he might seem even more attractive to them.

When he had won the Picts over completely, Vortigern made them drunk, and then pretended that he wanted to leave Britain, so that he could acquire greater wealth. He gave it out that the little he had would not possibly suffice for him to pay the wages of even fifty soldiers. Then he went home, apparently greatly downcast, and left them drinking in the hall. When they saw this, the Picts were more depressed than one can imagine, for they thought that what he had said was true. They grumbled among themselves. 'Why do we let this man go on living?' they asked. 'Why don't we kill him, so that Vortigern can take over the royal throne? Who else in the kingdom could possibly succeed Conans? Vortigern is the man who ought to rule! He ought to be honoured and be granted every dignity, for there is no limit to the rewards which he gives us!'

^[vi:51] Without more ado they burst into the King's bedroom, and there they attacked Conans and killed him. They carried his

head to Vortigern. When he saw it he burst into tears, as if the sight had saddened him, although he had really never been so happy in his life before. He called the citizens of London together, for it was in that city that this had happened. He ordered the traitors to be bound and then to have their heads cut off while they were still tied up: this for having dared to commit so dastardly a crime. There were some who thought that this treasonable act had really been planned by Vortigern, in that the Picts would never have undertaken such a deed without his consent. Others, however, had no hesitation in acquitting him of such a crime. The matter was never cleared up. However, those in charge of the upbringing of the two brothers Aurelius Ambrosius and Utherpendragon fled with their charges to Little Britain, just in case the two should be murdered by Vortigern. King Budiccius received them there and brought them up with due honour.

As soon as Vortigern realized that there was now no one at all in the realm who was his equal, he set the kingly crown upon his own head and assumed precedence over his fellow princes. Some time later his treason became known. The peoples of the neighbouring islands, whom the Picts had brought over into Albany, revolted against him. The Picts themselves were incensed because their comrades-in-arms had been executed on account of Conans, and they kept doing their utmost to take revenge on Vortigern. As day followed day, the King was therefore much concerned to see the casualties of his army in battle. What is more, he was haunted by the fear of Aurelius Ambrosius and his brother Utherpendragon, who, as explained already, had fled to Little Britain because of him. His ears were filled with a constantly repeated description of how they had come to man's estate and were planning to launch an enormous fleet against the kingdom which really belonged to them.

⌈ About this time there landed in certain parts of Kent three vessels ^[vi:10] of the type which we call longships. They were full of armed warriors and there were two brothers named Hengist and Horsa

in command of them. At that moment Vortigern was at Durobernia, which is now called Canterbury, for it was his custom to visit that city very frequently. When messengers reported to him that unknown men, and, what is more, men of huge stature, had landed in enormous ships, Vortigern made peaceful overtures to them and ordered them to be led into his presence. As soon as they were brought in, he fixed his eyes on the two brothers, for they stood out among the others because of their noble bearing and their good looks. Vortigern examined all the others and then asked what country they had travelled from and why they had come to the land over which he ruled. Hengist started to reply for the others, for his greater maturity and his good sense made him their natural leader. 'Most noble of all Kings,' he said, 'Saxony is our homeland, one of the provinces of Germany. The cause of our coming is that we wish to offer our services to you, or to some other prince. We have been banished from our own country on the simple pretext that the tradition of that kingdom demanded such action: for in our homeland it is the custom that, whenever there occurs a surplus population of men, the leaders of the different provinces meet together and order the young men of the entire realm to gather before them. They then cast lots and so pick out the most able and the strongest, who must journey off to foreign lands and seek a living for themselves. This is done so that the country in which they have been born may be freed of its surplus manpower. It has happened recently that in our own country the supply of men has become too great. Our leaders met to cast lots. They chose these young men whom you see in your presence and ordered them to obey the tradition handed down from ancient time. They elected us two brothers as their leaders, simply because we come from the ruling family: myself, who bear the name Hengist, and this man who is called Horsa. We duly obeyed the decrees, whose authority is sanctioned by their antiquity. We put to sea and with only Mercury to guide us we journeyed to your kingdom.'

When he heard the name Mercury mentioned, the King looked

them full in the face and asked them what their religion was. 'We worship the gods of our own country,' replied Hengist: 'Saturn, Jove and the others who rule over this world, and more especially Mercury, whom in our language we call Woden. Our ancestors dedicated the fourth day of the week to him, and down to our time that day is called Wednesday from his name. Next after him we worship the goddess who is the most powerful of them all, Frisca by name, to whom they dedicated the sixth day, which after her we call Friday.' 'I am greatly grieved,' replied Vortigern, 'by your belief, which, indeed, can better be called unbelief; but all the same I am delighted that you have come, for either God Himself, or someone else, has brought you here to help me at a most convenient moment. My enemies harass me on every side; and if you share with me the hardship of my battles, then I will welcome you in all honour to my kingdom and enrich you with gifts of all sorts and with grants of land.' The barbarians agreed to this without more ado. A treaty was made between them and they took up residence in the palace itself.

Soon afterwards the Picts assembled a huge army, crossed the borders from Albany, and began to ravage the northern parts of the island. As soon as this was announced to Vortigern, he collected his own soldiers together and crossed the Humber to meet the Picts. When the two sides came together, the Britons and their enemies fought bitterly with each other, first on one flank and then on the other. In the end, however, the Britons did not have much battling to do, for the Saxons who were present fought so manfully that the enemy, used until now to being on the winning side, were forced to retreat almost immediately.

Once he had won this victory with the help of the Saxons, Vortigern increased his gifts to them. To their leader Hengist he gave many lands in the neighbourhood of Lindsey, so that he could maintain himself and his fellow-soldiers. Hengist was a clever man and an astute one. When he came to understand the friendship which the King bore him, he went to him and made the following request