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*The Brut Chronicle*

In Middle English, illuminated manuscript on parchment  
[England, c. 1425-50]

*121 folios, on parchment (collation: i<sup>r</sup> [of 6, i canceled blank], ii-xv<sup>s</sup>, xvi<sup>t</sup> [of 78, lacking iii-vi], and lacking one leaf of text at the end), written on 36 long lines in brown ink in a semi-cursive anglicana between two pairs of verticals scored or faintly ruled, justification (c. 195 x 125 mm), marginal paraphs and rubrics in red, 3-line initials alternately of blue or red with flourishing usually of the contrasting color although the red initials are sometimes flourished in brown, illuminated border, opening folio defective and shriveled with loss of text and illuminated border, one further leaf with outer third of folio lacking, four further leaves with sections of lower or outer margin excised or torn away not affecting text, vellum darkened and spotted throughout, a few tears or nibbles, condition rarely affecting legibility. Bound in mid-sixteenth-century brown leather wallet binding, paneled with triple fillets and rolled in blind (roll not in Oldham), three bands attached with white leather strips cross-laced on covers and twisted and knotted on spine, strap with stamped and engraved brass clasp (lacking catch, worn and restored, boxed (worn). Dimensions 293 x 203 mm.*

Containing the standard account of English history in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the present copy of *The Brut* was long unknown and remained unrecorded; its important early binding, impressive format, and many early notes enhance its inherent interest as a rare Middle English text.

PROVENANCE

1. There are many marginal inscriptions in English in fifteenth and sixteenth century hands. Most are annotations to the text but many name early owners including: "William Ewre of Bushopp Midleham Esqr oweth this Booke T Clement Barnes" (below the end of the index), "Thomas Wykyng of Cowden" (below the middle of the index) and, again, "in the name of god Amen thomas wykyng god be thy spede wheresomevare thow go ar ryde (below Chapter clxxxiii), "Richard syyth of quodington" (beside Chapter ccxiii) and, again, "Theis is my good Brian Lupton Richard smythe, ad me ?nicelan hill bothe curteous and kinde a vinculo dolores the lord doe him bringe ad vitam aeternam, to life everlastinge, Salutam ab authora salutis" is written beside Chapter cliii. Several other notes include names, without it being clear that they owned the book: "Right trusty and bylbeloved broder ?haresby" (below Chapter ii),

"Wyll[ia]m hewyt the baylogh, thomas methon the yeoman" (below Chapter clxxxiii), "Amen quod" wylliam harper (below Chapter ccvi) and "Rtynnard Russel" (below Chapter ccxxxviii).

2. J. Murrell of Durham: inscription in a nineteenth-century hand on front endleaf.
3. E. F. Bosanquet, bibliophile and scholar of almanachs, astrology, etc., his bookplate on front endleaf and letter addressed to him concerning the binding from S. Gibson of the Bodleian Library of 3 July 1922. Sold Sotheby's 24 January 1944, lot 126.
4. William Foyle (1885-1963), Beeleigh Abbey, England, his sale, London, Christie's, 11 July 2000, lot 75 (his bookplate in the clamshell box).
5. Private Collection.

## TEXT

ff. 1v-5, Table of Contents, in a slightly later hand, "The contente of this booke by chapiturs," followed by "Furste the prologue of the present booke";

ff. 6-121v, Chronicle of England, lacking five leaves with the end of Chapter ccxlii, the beginning of ccxliii and the end of Chapter ccxliii;

In addition to the names and ownership inscriptions there are several rhymes or sayings added to margins. These include "yf S Paul day be sear and clear then shal be tide An happe year And yf yt chanc to snaw o[r] rayn the [n] shalbe dear all kind of grayn And yf the clouds make dark the ...," "whear as I would my love purchase for to be bound I lake the grase for feare I dare not for shame I may not for bycuse I have not Wele let yt pase" (in Chapter cc), the rather plaintive "It ys to harde for mylernyng" (below Chapter ccxx), and what appears to be a riddle "in paule mier is, in myer eill is, in oke tymber is, in ferne non is" (beside Chapter ccxxvii).

The earliest prose chronicle in English, this history is known as "The Brut" or "The Brut Chronicle," because it starts with the legend of the hero Brutus, his conquest of Albion and the naming of the land Britain after him. It was composed in Anglo-Norman sometime after 1272, then extended to 1333, and, finally, in about 1400 translated into English. It was intended for reading aloud to a knightly audience.. Showing a concern throughout for the noble and the heroic and in the early sections mixing fact and fiction, *The Brut* includes much material in the later sections reflecting the political and practical concerns of wealthy merchants and civic leaders.

There are three major continuations, taking the text beyond the events of 1333. The present manuscript is an unrecorded copy of the version with the second continuation, believed to have been written around 1430, that picks up after the death of Edward III in 1377 and continues to 1419 and Henry V's siege of Rouen. The final folio ends, defectively, with the preparations for the siege, but it is clear from the table of contents that no more than a single folio is lacking.

*The Brut* recounts both the fabulous—including a long history of King Arthur—and authentic history of Britain. It becomes increasingly detailed and factual as it moves closer to

contemporary events. Occasionally there are interjections of feeling, as in the account of the fall of Richard II in Chapter ccxlii: "and thus was King Richard brought doune and distroied and stode allone withoute conforte or consaille of anye man. Allas that slyke a kinge sholde be so alone and desolate."

The most popular secular prose work in Middle England, *The Brut* exists in 181 manuscripts and 13 early printed versions (see Kennedy; Matheson). Indeed, it was the second most popular Middle English prose text. Only the Wycliffe Bibles exist in more manuscripts. The textual edition cited below is based on roughly two dozen manuscripts among the nearly 170 extant copies, now increased to 181 in Matheson's important study. Indeed, partly because of the large number of manuscripts and the many textual variations among them, the manuscript history remains incomplete. The recent comprehensive and definitive study by Matheson takes into account the complex relationships between versions and traces the cultural and historical influence of the Brut. The present manuscript is not recorded.

A major repository of manuscripts of *The Brut* is the John Rylands Library in Manchester which houses six copies (Tyson, 1929). Relative to the number of the manuscripts and the importance of the text, there are few copies in American collections. The Huntington Library has four copies, each preserving slightly different continuations (HM 113, 131, 133, and 136); the Folger Shakespeare Library has one copy, ending in 1418 (MS 725.2); University of Chicago has one copy (MS 254), and Harvard University Library has one copy, ending in 1418 (MS Eng. 587).

## LITERATURE

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Grandsen, Antonia. *Historical Writing in England, II, c. 1307 to the Early 16<sup>th</sup> Century* (1982), pp. 73-76 and 222-227.

Kennedy, Edward Donald. *Chronicles and Other Historical Writing*. Vol. 8 of *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, ed. Albert E. Hartnung, Hamden, CT, Archon Books, 1989, 2629-37, 2818-33.

Matheson, Lister M. *The Prose Brut: The Development of an English Chronicle* (MRTS), Tempe, Arizona, 1998.

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## Online Resources

The Brut Chronicle of University of Michigan Library, MS 225  
<http://images.umdl.umich.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?c=brut&page=index>