A MEDIEVAL DRAWING
OF LEICESTER

Julian M. Luxford

A late-medieval drawing of Leicester, which occurs in a margin in BL, MS Royal 13 A. III, is introduced and discussed in the context of the manuscript’s text and illustrations broadly. Further illustrations in the same manuscript represent other British cities and structures: that of Leicester is thus part of a programme. While these illustrations are remarkably detailed and evocative in certain respects, it is concluded that they cannot be considered accurate by modern standards. In reaching this conclusion, and pointing out the virtues of the drawings, that of Leicester is examined in detail.

This short article discusses a medieval drawing which represents the city of Leicester (Figs 1, 2). It is located in the lower margin of a page in a copy of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia regum Britanniae, now BL, MS Royal 13 A. III, datable palaeographically to the end of the thirteenth century or the first quarter of the fourteenth. The drawing is one of a number of similar marginal compositions, executed in a combination of plummet and silverpoint, illustrating passages in the text relating to the foundation of cities or prominent buildings. Although these were clearly added after the text was written, by someone other than the scribe, they are probably not significantly later. It is impossible to date them accurately but the detailed representation of Geometrical and Decorated Gothic architecture in some of them, the complete absence of the Perpendicular style, and the Anglicana script in which the names of some of the cities were originally written, makes execution in the early to mid-fourteenth century likely. A number of the drawings are known to scholars: two depicting London, in particular, have been reproduced several times. To date, however, that of Leicester has apparently not been


Fig. 1. Medieval drawing which represents the City of Leicester.
published. This is possibly because the only publication devoted to the drawings—a short article now over a century old—does not mention it, and, in pretending to comprehensive coverage, tends to imply that it does not exist. In any case, the drawing deserves recognition as a more sophisticated and dignified illustration of the city than, for example, the ‘Legrecestre’ of Matthew Paris’s map of Britain (BL, MS Cotton Claudius D.VI, fol. 12r), or the contemporary but inelegant pictograph of ‘Leyrecestria’ in BL, MS Cotton Nero D. II, fol. 22v. Unlike the generic architecture found in most medieval English maps, this is a detailed articulation of urban topography designed to communicate the aura bestowed by the ancient and royal origins explained in the text above it.

THE MANUSCRIPT AND ITS DRAWINGS

BL, MS Royal 13. A. III is one of over 200 surviving copies of the Historia regum Britannie, the largely mythical twelfth-century history of Britain from the supposed origins of human settlement until the death of the last king of the Britons, Cadwallader (based on the king of Gwynedd, Cadwaladr ap Cadwallon, who died in 682). The manuscript’s origin is completely obscure: Ludovico da Ponte (1467–1520), an Italian scholar who wrote commentaries on works by Homer, Seneca, Lucian and Ovid, as well as an abridgement of the Historia itself, is its only recorded pre-Reformation possessor. Laymen and ecclesiastics alike owned and read Geoffrey of Monmouth’s text for its combination of historical information, patriotic sentiment, swashbuckling action, and prophecy (it incorporates the cryptic and influential Prophecia Merlini). Two copies are listed, for example, in the late-medieval library catalogue of Leicester Abbey although these particular manuscripts are not known to survive. People of all social categories were also interested in cities, coats of arms, battles and the other things represented by the marginal artist: there is thus nothing to indicate the status or gender of the person to whom the book belonged at the time it was illustrated. Similarly, it is impossible to say whether the drawings are the result of

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3 Caine, as n. 2.
4 The Cotton Nero D. II drawing, in pen, is simply an oblong box with 14 smaller, coped boxes in it, each with a round-headed arch in the side. The four at the top have chimney-like projections, apparently meant to suggest church spires. There is no sense whatever that the artist cared about individualising the city.
5 J. C. Crick, The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth IV: Dissemination and Reception in the Later Middle Ages, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991, p. 9, cites 215 surviving copies, and more have been recorded since she wrote.
a commission or whether they were added by an owner who was also a skilled draughtsman.

The manuscript measures approximately 185mm × 115mm, contains 136 leaves, and is written in a standard Gothic miniscule, 28 lines to the page. There are some red and blue capitals with decorative flourishing, and, occasionally (e.g. fol. 14r), line-fillers. Three hymns, in praise of the Virgin Mary and St Peter, were added at the end of the manuscript at an early stage (133v–136v). There is little else to distinguish the book: were it not for its illustrations, it would be in all ways an unremarkable copy of the text it contains. Only a small number of copies of the Historia carry any illustration at all, and these manuscripts usually have only a single miniature. However, Royal 13. A. III has two distinct series of drawings. One series depicts people and places mentioned in the text, the other a succession of 22 heraldic shields. The shields are located in the lower margins, like the heraldry found in contemporary prayer-books, and occur predominantly towards the end of the manuscript. The late John A. Goodall was of the opinion that they were copied from a thirteenth-century roll of arms. None of them is tricked, but the charges are for the most part clearly represented, and it may yet be possible to identify them with a surviving roll (Fig. 2). Like the shields, a number of the images illustrating the text seem clearly to have been copied or adapted from other sources. For example, the scroll-holding figure of Maddan, grandson of Brutus (first king of the Britons), on fol. 16v, seems to be based on a painting or sculpture on a larger scale; the elaborate architectural frame containing and dignifying the shield of Julius Caesar (fol. 40r) looks like a work of Gothic micro-architecture known to the artist; and the mitred figures on fols 119v and 122r resemble (mutatis mutandis) sculpted effigies. Additionally, the energetic and well-understood drawing of the battle between Nennius (son of Heli, and brother of kings Lud and Cassivelaunus) and Julius Caesar at the base of fol. 34v is dependent upon similar scenes in contemporary illuminated manuscripts. Whether or not the images of cities have been adopted from another source is an intractable question: while nothing quite like them survives elsewhere, the artist's obvious use of extraneous models for other drawings raises the possibility.

In all, 13 cities are represented, two of them consisting only of single structures. A few are identified by name: 'civitas bathoniensis' still appears in plummet above one of them, while in the cases of Leicester ('leycestre') and York ('ebrauc') a plummet caption in the same Anglicana hand has been reinforced in ink in a later hand, probably of the early fifteenth century. Collectively, the

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8 See Crick, as n. 6, cat. nos 22, 30, 76, 92, 99, 109, 114, 118, 131, 147, 150, 207.
9 Fols 40r, 60v (bis), 95r, 108v, 120v (bis), 123r, 124v, 125r, 126v, 127r, 128v (bis), 130v (bis), 131r (bis), 132r (bis), 132v (ter). A few romance manuscripts also have such shields: see e.g. F. Avril and P. D. Stirnemann, Manuscrits enluminés d'origine insulaire VIIe-XXe siècle, Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1987, cat. no. 171, p. 137.
10 Personal communication.
11 The idea of adding such drawings to a chronicle was not unique. BL, MS Cotton Nero D. II, the first part of which reproduces the Historia Regum Britannie, also contains a series of illustrations of cities and towns, in ink and wash. As indicated, these are mostly unimaginative pictographs.
grandeur and architectural variety of these cities encapsulates Geoffrey of Monmouth’s enthusiasm for Britain, which he refers to as insularum optima, ‘the best of all islands’, in the opening sentence of his Historia. From an historiographical and artistic point of view, the representation of these places corresponds to trends in descriptive writing and art which reflect interest in realistic observation. A prominent aspect of this realism, emphasised in a classic study by Antonia Gransden, was an enthusiasm for describing the topography of cities and towns. Gransden was chiefly concerned with the twelfth century, but the drawings of Royal 13. A. III also relate to the trends she analyses. This is not to say that the illustrations are accurate panoramas of the places they represent. The inaccuracy of the drawing of Leicester in particular will be pointed out below. Rather, their realism is expressed in the careful individualisation of buildings and cityscapes, and the application to each of the sort of architecture actually found in late medieval England. Clearly, this topographical detail had little to do with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s text, which rarely does more than mention individual buildings or places. Rather, it arose from a lively appreciation on the artist’s part (or, just possibly, that of his source) of the architectural uniqueness of the centres represented, and the fact that this uniqueness imparted much of their distinctive character and reputation.

Comparison of these images with more generic cityscapes of roughly similar date, such as the bas-de-page miniature of ‘Constantinus Nobilis’ in the Luttrell Psalter (BL, MS Additional 42130, fol. 162v: c. 1340), the near-contemporary city in the Douai Psalter (fol. 64v), the pen-and-wash drawings in London in BL, MS Cotton Nero D. II (early to mid-fourteenth century), and the collection of

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buildings, recently also identified as London, in the Holkham Bible Picture Book (BL, MS Additional 47682, fol. 19v: c. 1320–30), reinforces the impression of a draughtsman with a particular interest in current architectural ideas. Gothic churches, rather than fortifications or domestic structures, were the main vehicles for expression of this interest. In the case of York, for example, the façade of the largest church, presumably intended for the Minster, has been given a traceried arcade of Decorated Gothic arches. The cusping, crocket ornament and finials, each element minute in itself, have been executed with an eye and a concern for architectural detail rare in non-technical drawings of the later middle ages. Elsewhere, the Gothic great churches in the drawings of Bath, Canterbury, Colchester, Gloucester, London, Rome (sic!) and Winchester have large windows with distinctive Geometrical or Decorated tracery. The artist’s understanding of contemporary Gothic style was not obviously better than that of skilled contemporary illuminators, who used architectural motifs as it suited them. What is unusual is his intelligent application of these motifs to the sorts of contexts in which they were most publicly displayed.

In some respects the drawings are conventional. This is clearest in the fact that, like almost all medieval topographers, the artist privileged churches and castles over less physically and symbolically impressive structures. On fol. 17v, where he was pressed for space by an ambition to include drawings of Carlisle, Canterbury, Winchester and Bath, he represented Canterbury by a single great church. However, where space permitted, he devoted most or all of the lower margin to a cityscape dense with churches and fortified structures, sometimes girded by a huddle of smaller domestic and civic buildings. This is the case with London (shown twice, on fols 14r and 28v), York (fol. 16v), the ‘Castle of the Maidens’ on the ‘Dolorous Mountain’ (probably intended for Edinburgh castle and Castle Rock: fol. 17r), the continuous drawings of Winchester and Bath (fol. 17v), Leicester (fol. 18r), Rome (fol. 21v), Gloucester (fol. 41v) and Colchester (fol. 47v). Less conventional is the fact that, in all but one case, the perspective employed for these drawings is lower and more physically possible than the elevated ‘God’s-eye’ viewpoint familiar from most medieval maps. Only the second drawing of London, which shows the walled city with St Paul’s cathedral at the centre and Billingsgate on the left-hand side, is presented in aerial perspective.

A further distinctive aspect of these drawings is the addition of heraldic banners. In the second illustration of London pennants are also represented. The banners are mostly attached to city walls or castles, presumably reflecting medieval practice rather than (as has been suggested) knowledge of the early


thirteenth-century seal of the barons of London, which included a representation of one such banner.\textsuperscript{16} They are oblong in form and greatly oversized in relation to the architecture. As with the marginal shields, the charges are usually identifiable. In most cases they do not bear an obvious relation to the cities they embellish, although it is possible that detailed research into both the arms and the responsibilities for the maintenance of fortification at given times in the fourteenth century could modify this perspective. As things stand, only the banner with three chevronnels in the image of Gloucester is obviously identifiable as a reference to the Clare earls of Gloucester, a dynasty extinguished at Bannockburn in 1314, but whose name and arms retained a connection with the city until the end of the middle ages. Further, in the drawing of Rome on fol. 21v, a banner positioned over a drum-shaped building meant to represent either the Coliseum or the Mausoleum of Hadrian has a black, single-headed eagle upon it. This can reasonably be interpreted as a reference to the Holy Roman Emperor.

THE DRAWING OF LEICESTER

Geoffrey of Monmouth's tale of King Leir and his daughters, which was ultimately to supply grist to Shakespeare's mill, begins with a terse account of the foundation of Leicester: 'Leir ... edificauit autem super Soram fluuium ciuitatem que Britannice de nomine Kaer Leir, Saxonice autem Lerechestria nuncupatur.'\textsuperscript{17} ('Leir built, on the river Soar, that city which in British parlance is named Kaer Leir, but in Saxon is called Leicester.') It is beneath this that the city is drawn. Here no military architecture is represented. The only clearly-depicted buildings are churches, although a faint line of gables drawn across the bottom of the scene in plummet represents a dense complex of houses. As with the images of Colchester, Gloucester and London, one large transeptal church, here placed near the centre of the composition, constitutes the dominant motif. This has been sketched in a combination of plummet and silverpoint, the latter now discoloured to a dull brown. Silverpoint has been applied to some of the other buildings, and was also used for the two banners, one of which, to the left, shows a cross cercelée over an eagle displayed, the other three fusils.\textsuperscript{18} In all, 10 towers and spires are represented, each suggesting a church or chapel of smaller size than the central church. Those to the left of the transeptal church are outlined in plummet alone, and, never very robustly drawn, now appear only as faint, atmospheric suggestions of architecture. The spires are of different types: some are mere pinnacles; one, at the right of the drawing, is a tall needle spire capping a square tower, while another has parapet angle turrets. Closely-spaced diagonal lines on

\textsuperscript{16} Wheatley, as in no 1, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{17} Historia, as in no 12, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{18} I have been unable to link this heraldry to Leicester at any given period in the fourteenth century, though the problem is not necessarily intractable for that. The difficulties of identification are exacerbated, of course, by the absence of tricking. None of the arms are found in the roll engraved for J. Nichols, \textit{The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester}, 4 vols in 8, London: John Nichols, 1795–1815, I:2, pls XXIV, XXV, XXXI, XXXIV, XXXIX, XLIII, XLV.
the second spire from the right, which feature in other drawings in the manuscript, apparently indicate a lead-covered timber structure.

Despite what has been said about the inaccuracy of the drawings as a group, it is tempting to try to identify these churches with buildings known to have existed in Leicester during the later middle ages. Besides the great Augustinian abbey, fourteenth-century Leicester contained nine parish churches, the venerable collegiate church of St Mary de Castro, and a selection of friars’ churches and chapels. Additionally, the collegiate church of St Mary in the Newarke was built at the south-east corner of the city during the later fourteenth and early fifteenth century. 19 The general form of some of the towers and spires is reflected in engravings made for Nichols’s *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*. The closest match is between Nichols’s illustration of St Mary’s church, which has a needle spire but no corner turrets, and the steeple on the left-hand side of the drawing. A stone broach spire shown in the engraving of the church of St Nicholas is also generically similar to the spire second from the left, although, as noted, the medieval artist seems to have intended his building to suggest construction out of timber and lead. 20 Realistically speaking, however, it is futile to draw such parallels. Like the other drawings in Royal 13. A. III, the panorama is clearly an idealised one, which seems very unlikely to be based upon any first-hand knowledge of Leicester. As in most of the other topographical drawings in the manuscript the position of the church towers and façades indicates that the viewpoint is from the west, at a distance of about a mile. The arrangement and relative proximity of church towers and spires is impossible from this or indeed any other perspective. Although it has occasionally been claimed that churches represented in Royal 13. A. III are accurate reflections of medieval buildings, this is based on a confusion between the artist’s interest in architectural detail and the evocative potential of topographical drawing on the one hand and his tendency to invention on the other. 21

Although there are no precise architectural ‘portraits’ here, some of the drawings nevertheless contain buildings intended to be recognisable. Old St Paul’s cathedral, habitually shown by medieval topographers at the heart of the city, is the centrepiece of the image of London on fol. 28v. Here, too, the inclusion of a large crenellated gate stands next to and obviously illustrates Geoffrey’s reference to ‘an entrance (*ianuam*) of remarkable workmanship which the citizens in his [i.e. King Belinus’s] time called “Belinesgata”’. 22 As noted, the drawing of Rome includes a distinctive building, and the great church which stands for Canterbury must be intended for the corresponding building at the cathedral priory. Without


20 Nichols, as in n. 18, f.2, pls XLV, XLVII.

21 For example, Dukinfield Astley, as in no 1, p. 119: ‘Our artist … was depicting what he had seen.’

22 Historia, as in no 12, p. 30.
overlooking the fact that a large church was typically considered an essential attribute of a city by medieval topographers, it also seems reasonable to identify the great churches shown in some of the other drawings with actual structures: Bath cathedral priory church, the abbey church of St John at Colchester, the cathedral priory church at Carlisle. Where a city contained more than one great church, for example at Winchester, the fact that the structures represented in the manuscript are inventions makes the question of identification unanswerable. In such cases, it is probably safe to assume that the most famous ecclesiastical institution in a given city is that represented in the drawing. Thus, the large church to the left of the drawing of Winchester can be said to have been intended for the cathedral priory church, even though it looks nothing like it. One would need some more specific evidence relating to the provenance of the artist, or his patron, to identify it with Hyde abbey or St Mary’s abbey instead. The same assumption applies to the drawing of York, where the large, centrally located church can be taken for the cathedral rather than St Mary’s abbey church.

Leicester had two nationally renowned churches in the later middle ages, both completely destroyed and inadequately illustrated in known antiquarian sources. The appearance of the abbey church of St Mary has been reconstructed on the basis of its ground plan, while the collegiate church of the Annunciation of St Mary in the Newarke was economically but usefully described by the pre-Reformation antiquary John Leland. Both of these churches were transeptal. As noted, it would almost certainly be misguided to think that the draughtsman had an image of one of these buildings in mind when placing a transeptal church at the heart of his drawing. However, if the motif was inspired by the reputation at least of one of Leicester’s religious buildings, then it seems worth asking which this was, even if the answer will not provide new information about the city’s medieval appearance. In fact it must be the abbey church: that of the Lancastrian college in the Newarke, which was not structurally complete until after 1414, can be discounted on the basis that the drawings predate it. With this in mind, the draughtsman’s inventiveness is more conspicuous. He has represented a gabled west façade flanked by tall towers capped with spires or pinnacles. There is an indistinct suggestion of a crossing tower, but this is clearly not a substantial structure. The two-bay transepts, each of two storeys, have pinnacled façades of their own. Suggestions of style here are less distinct than in some of the other drawings. It is clear the building is Gothic, but no tracery is recognisable in the windows. Throughout, the elevation seems to be of two storeys, but the viewer is entitled to imagine a third below the level of the surrounding rooftops.

The surviving evidence for the appearance of Leicester abbey church, presented with some conjectural detail in a reconstruction by John Finnie, is out of step with

the drawing of Royal 13. A. III in one significant respect. It is clear that the abbey church had a single tower façade of the sort which still exists on a presumably comparable scale at St Wulfram at Grantham (Lincolnshire), and, more modestly, in many Leicestershire parish churches. While the drawing of the large transeptal church is indistinct in some of its details due to the layering of plummet and silverpoint, and the deterioration caused by repeated exposure (all of the drawings in the manuscript are affected by the same problem), it contains nothing which can be interpreted as such a tower. This point is only worth making for the support it gives a larger conclusion already sufficiently stressed above. If it is a little disappointing, it should nevertheless come as no surprise. Medieval artists were not usually concerned with the level of verisimilitude established and maintained by photographic reproduction. Exactness in reproduction – the generation of facsimiles – was reserved for particular, usually forensic, contexts. The fact that the artist of Royal 13. A. III was unusually interested in the style and iconography of buildings is a matter of considerable interest, but it does not remove his work from its broader artistic and intellectual contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Richard Buckley for inviting me to contribute this article to the Transactions, and for obtaining the image from BL, MS Royal 13. A. III. I also thank Jill Bourne for her willingness to extend the deadline; a boon of which I took ample but grateful advantage.