

LORE

OF

ynys

PRUDAIN

Translations, Interpretations and Reflections on early Welsh texts and sources in the culture of Ancient Britain.

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Cover Picture: Ancient Trackway, Forest of Dean. Photo: Greg Hill

#### INTRODUCTION

What follows is an accumulation of writings made over many years on various blogs, websites, discussion forums and as contributions to Wikipedia pages. They all stem from my interest in early Welsh literature and lore, from the bardic inheritance of earlier Brythonic lore, and from an interest in Brythonic polytheism. So the chapter divisions reflect this diversity, dealing with, in due sequence, an affection for rivers, springs, wells and, associated with this, an interest in inundation legends and their mythological origins; then with with the specific legends embedded in early Welsh literary texts and their associated bardic significance; then, following in turn from this, bardic lore itself and the perception that the source of inspiration for the early Welsh bards and their druidic precursors is the *awen* and its ultimate source in the Cauldron of Ceridwen as articulated in the writings of these bards. Alongside all this, and persisting into the nominally christian medieval period, the mythology of the Brythonic gods. These have their own chapter here which is, of necessity, more speculative than the other chapters, dealing as it does with my own intuitions arising from a study of the surviving evidence.

Although this is by no means a scholarly work, the studies it contains are based firmly on the works of scholars working in the field of Celtic Studies and on my own readings of the primary literature both in translation and in the original Middle Welsh texts, some of which I offer in my own translations. Because of the nature of the writings I have gathered together here, making a coherent whole of pieces originally written within particular contexts for different purposes has been a challenge. Some things that I might have included couldn't easily be fitted in to the sequence. There was also much repetition as I had visited the same themes in different places and over a long timescale. I have tried to eliminate much of this repetition but it has not always been possible to delete repeated emphases without detracting from the narrative or the argument in different parts of the whole as presented here.

Alongside descriptive, analytical and narrative pieces, I have interwoven some verses of my own making which illustrate or arise from the prose. The whole is, then, an abbreviated summation of my interests in and inspirations from Brythonic lore as both an intellectual and a spiritual engagement with the inheritance from the early history of Ynys Prydain, the manylayered influences of successive generations, immigrations and coalescences that have shaped, and continue to shape, the life of this island and its neighbours who have participated in this life in different ways, at different times in our shared past.

# 1 RIVERS & WATERWORLDS

In Dedication: For Brighid

For Brighid and the silver streams
Running deep in the Earth
For the kindled fire
And the sacred well
And the hope you guard through the dearth

We'll look for you in the snow-filled dell Where the old dry leaves lie still, We'll find you in the empty woods Where the early shoots are bidden But slowly as the sunlight grows For your treasures are yet hidden.

.... or Ffraid as she is known in Wales. I first knew her as a goddess of springs and wells, but also of the hearth. She is the voice of the silver streams running deep in the earth and emerging when the ice thaws and life begins again. I most often think of her when snowdrops grace the ground.

But now that I live near a site once sacred to Ffraid, and I think more often of her as the hearth, not so much just of my home, but also of the valley and its surrounding woods. Here Brigantia emerges as a local guardian of the valley but also of the 'hearth' of the Islands of Britain.

When different people move into landscapes, perhaps displacing or absorbing those who were there before, significant features may be gradually re-named, though some names may remain in the older language, perhaps in modified form, stubbornly testifying to a continuing interaction between culture and landscape, between ancestors and those who come after. As the great antiquarian and pioneer of Celtic Studies, Edward Lhwyd, put it in 1705: "One may observe from the names of places that another people once possessed that country". The most stubborn of landscape features to resist change are rivers. So the names of rivers are most likely to signify older cultural layers. Many of the rivers of the Island of Britain still contain in their names elements of the speech of the Brythonic Celts who inhabited the Island before the Romans came and continued to inhabit it after they left. River Names

For Avon, think Afon, itself 'river' flowing from the source in Brythonic Abona For Severn, think Sæfern, and before that Sabrina or Habrena, then Hafren, today's Welsh river. Brythonic 'flowing' is heard in Thames, Tavy, Team, Tame and Tamar; Tawe, Taf and Teifi.

These speak of a common spring far back, streams of speech that still resonate in the veins of the land, sources that leak silver ore from the age of Iron, and before through the valleys of Ynys Prydain.

Dubris > dwfr > dŵr, delving through terrains of rock and soil, dark waters with names like this: Dulas, Dowlais, Douglas, Dawlish, Divelish from Dubglas, source of all Blackwater streams, the Island's diversity diverging in these names.

So the poem identifies various rivers whose name derives from 'Dubglas', meaning 'Blackwater'. There are other rivers that take this name fully translated into English. But here the diversity of the original name shifted into various forms testifies both to the persistence of the name and to the ways different generations have interpreted of pronounced it. Think too of the Dee, a river name which occurs as far apart as Wales and Scotland, with its origins in the word for 'water' (in Welsh the Dee is called 'Dyfyrdwy' meaning 'Divine Water', indicating that it was regarded, like many rivers, as a goddess). With other names indicating the term 'flowing' or, in the case of the Avon, simply being the word for river.

Another river goddess was Habrēna, who became the Roman Sabrina. The river runs from a spring beneath a peaty pool on a wild mountain also gathering waters draining through the peat from a small lake on the hill above. In a few miles it cascades over the rocks of a waterfall known as Blaenhafren. From here the stream becomes a river flowing down the forested slopes through small towns and then larger towns in Mid Wales and on into England where it turns southwards to run more or less in parallel with the border through larger towns and cities of Shrewsbury, Worcester, Gloucester, and then to the sea. The Romans called this river - and the goddess of the river - Sabrina. It was a name they took from the Brythonic, though in the earlier Welsh texts it was already in transition to its later form 'Habren'. The Saxons called it Sæfern. So the modern name of the river in Welsh is 'Hafren' and in English 'Severn'. How did this come about? There is an established pattern of sound change in early Welsh where the initial 'S' becomes 'H' (perhaps via an intermediate 'Sh') which explains how Sabrēna becomes Habrēna. Another is that the 'b' in the middle of the word softens to a 'v' sound (represented by 'f' in modern Welsh). Losing the 'a' ending indicates a loss of the feminine deity name to that of a simple river name. So it is easy to see how the Roman Sabrina became the Welsh Hafren. But what about Severn? Clearly the saxons borrowed the name before the initial 'S' shifted to 'H', but after the 'b' shifted to 'f' or 'v', which allows the adaptation to be dated to the end of the 6th century. Names here reflect historical as well as linguistic change.

So it is with the river itself, beginning in the Welsh heartland of *Elenydd*, running off the mountain of *Pumlummon* which Alwyn and Brinley Rees, in their book *Celtic Heritage* identified as the centre, comparable to *Uisnech* in Ireland, and where both the Severn and the River Wye have their source. The land between these two rivers, which run in different directions off the mountain before meeting again in their common estuary, stretches east across the Cambrian Mountains towards the borderlands. Between Severn and Wye is often an ambiguous terrain, where the lost sagas about the destruction of *Pengwern* are remembered only in fragments of verse, here from the *Canu Heledd*,

The Hall of Cynddylan is dark tonight With no fire, no bed.

I weep a while, then I am silent.

It is the land where subsequently Offa's Dyke marked the demarcation between Welsh and Mercians and later the territories of Norman 'Marcher Lords' pushed the border further west as they carved out their own domains between England and Wales; or the Forest of Dean, an enclave bounded by the two rivers on the western side of which the Romano-British Temple of Nodens looks down over the tidal Severn from the lands of *Teÿrnon Twrf Liant*.

Geoffrey of Monmouth's story about the displaced princess Habren being drowned in the river is clearly a rationalisation of the River Goddess. But his statement that "right down to our own times this river is called Habren in the British language, although by a corruption of speech is called Sabrina in the other [Latin] tongue" does record confusion about the change. It also reflects shifting dynastic changes and 'corruptions of speech' that were still being played out in Geoffrey's time. His King Arthur was a warrior in that conflict, while the earlier Welsh tales told of Arthur wrestling with the great boar *Twrch Trwyth* as he escaped into the Severn Sea.

Much later John Milton invoked her as "Sabrina Fair" and envisaged her as "sitting, under the cool translucent wave". Here she is the tutelar goddess of the Severn Valley in a masque performed at Ludlow Castle, an aery spirit who sets "... printless feet/ O'er the cowslip's velvet head/That bends not as I tread".

This is a long way - both in miles and in sentiment - from where the waters trickle from the peat of the mountains, and from the ancient conflicts which followed the departure of the Romans. But so it is with changes in landscape and river names as different peoples come and go, inheriting, adapting or replacing the old names; so often they cling on through changes of spelling and pronunciation as new generations continue to inhabit and relate to a landscape that speaks back to them of what is and what came before.

#### IN SEARCH OF SULIS

The Roman town of Aquae Sulis, now the modern city of Bath, has accumulated many layers of history since it was settled by the Romans, within 30 years of their invasion of Britain, around the hot springs sacred to Sulis and re-dedicated by them to 'Sulis-Minerva'. I went there to see what traces of Sulis I could find beneath the accumulations of successive occupations. As well as visiting the Roman baths and museum, I had also arranged to join a small group tour with one of the museum staff below the areas open to the public down to the level of Roman settlement now underneath the museum and surrounding streets. The famous Roman baths which are the main magnet for the many tourists who visit the site are in fact a nineteenth century reconstruction in the Roman style. Even in Roman times these were a public bathing area using water from the sacred springs but separate from the temple of Sulis-Minerva. The oldest part of the surviving building over the springs is in fact the so-called King's Bath, named for Henry I. The medieval builders apparently had no knowledge of the Roman levels beneath as centuries of silting from the springs had overlain what was left of them. Some traces were still visible earlier to the Anglo-Saxons as the poem from those times known as 'The Ruin' apparently testifies:

This work is wondrous; fate fashioned its fall Cement smashed; the work of giants come to grief. Roofs have tumbled, ruinous towers, Ravaged by frost; roofs fallen ....

Although it is possible for visitors to walk around the recreated 'Roman' bath, the King's Bath can only be viewed through windows and openings in the stone arches. Here the spring waters can be seen bubbling up into a pool within the derelict and empty medieval space and running off at one end towards the 'Roman' bath. This is the nearest that it is possible to get to the spring itself. On the way through to these baths, the museum has a reconstruction of the temple of Sulis-Minerva based on recovered fragments and limited excavations of the site which partly lies beneath the building which houses the museum but also extends out beneath adjoining buildings across the street and towards the medieval abbey situated next to the baths. Excavations beneath these buildings, all of which have their own protected conservation status as historically important later structures, have therefore been restricted.

The tour beneath the museum took us through cellars and along tunnels full of fragments of original Roman structures and over the bases of stone pillars now embedded in the uneven floors. Here we were standing at ground level of the temple beneath the street from where the voice of a busker singing above could be heard. As hard as I tried, it was difficult to imagine myself in the *Temenos*, the sacred precinct of the temple, before the shrine of Sulis-Minerva. That evening, when the crowds had abated, I stood in the street above where, until the early twentieth century, there was a fountain fed from the spring waters, and had more success locating myself imaginatively in that place.

Of the original Spring of Sulis we have little knowledge. The whole area around the site, in a loop of the River Avon, would have been a reedy marsh. There is evidence of Iron Age settlements on the nearby hills and the remains of a gravel-laid causeway approaching the springs have been discovered. So we do know that access to the site was ensured although no other building work has been found from this period. Perhaps the spring itself was sufficient for Iron-Age devotees visiting the site. If there are now too many layers of history over the original site for any aura of its *numen* to remain, what then of Sulis today? She remains as ambiguous as the so-called 'Gorgon's head' that adorned the apex of the temple of her coupling with Minerva. Are these the snakes of Gorgon hair associated with Minerva? And if so why is the face apparently that of a male? Or are they, instead, the swirling waters around the springs? This guardian of her site, as the site itself, remains a mystery for us to fathom in the depths of her waters and the layers beneath from which her divinity emerges.

#### **COVENTINA**

Further north, on Hadrian's Wall, which marked the northern limits of the Roman empire, beside the minor road that runs beneath the Wall at Carrawburgh, is the site of a fort. The only visible excavated feature is the remains of a Mithraeum or temple of Mithras used by soldiers stationed on the Wall. There is also an area designated the Nymphaeum, or place where devotions were made to the spirits of the place. On the edge of the fort is the site of a well. This was dug out in the nineteenth century by the land owner in a search for deposits of lead ore. But large numbers of coins were found in the well along with incense burners and votive stones with inscriptions which are now housed in the nearby museum at Chester's Fort. The inscriptions make it clear that the well was sacred to Coventina and her depiction holding the leaf of a water lily, and others where she pours water from a container makes it clear that she is a water goddess. Two of these featuring carved depictions are well-known and have been much reproduced, and are often cited as the chief evidence of the worship of Coventina. But there are other stones with inscriptions also dedicated to her and made

especially for placing by the well in her honour. They are displayed in the museum at Chester's Fort further along the Wall.



What now of her spring of sacred water? When I visited the site I knew that the well had been neglected and uncared for by comparison with the carefully excavated and preserved Mithraeum that most visitors stop here to view. But I did not expect there to be no visible trace of it. I have an area in my garden at home with a water feature as part of my nemeton, and visited her well to bring her a gift and possibly to bring back a stone or small token from the

well site for my altar. What can be done to bring such neglected deities to wider attention? They live in their own parallel world of course, and if we have no need of them they may never trouble us. But we are poorer without them and their presence in the land is never quite gone, especially as there are those of us who remember them. The site at Carrawburgh (once known as Bricolita) is the only identified site for Coventina in Britain and there are only two other possible sites in Gaul. Her neglected well, then, seems symptomatic of her liminal status. Stories of the ill-treatment of wells or their guardians, often with dire consequences, are common enough in myth and folklore to suggest that such neglect serves as an icon for the abandonment of the world of the gods and of a life lived alongside them.

I walked around the site for a couple of hours looking for the well. Eventually I decided to go to the fully excavated Chester's Fort a few miles away to view the items that had been removed from the well and to ask for the precise location. There is case full of objects there in addition to the stone inscriptions. These include clay incense burners especially made with inscription for placing by the well. There are some other pieces and I was especially attracted to these two small bronze horse figures. Many of the coins also recovered from the well were apparently later stolen.

An official there explained to me that the well site was not on land administered by them so no signs indicating its position could be displayed and there was nothing left to see as the original excavation of the site had destroyed it. But he did indicate to me more or less where it was. So I went back to the site, my gift still ungiven, to look for it again. The ground in the area indicated between the fort and the open moor beyond is fenced off and very boggy. Bright yellow king cups, a flower of very wet ground, adorned the miry place where I guessed the well must have been. But in spite of their beauty I could not feel the presence of Coventina there. A narrow brook seems to emerge from or mix with these waters and flows away from the site. In one place this piece of fenced-off bog is traversed by the long distance footpath which follows Hadrian's Wall. I climbed the stile to walk across using the large stone slabs that make this possible. Beside one of them I found a pool.

In spite of appearing to be part of the sequence of wet places fed by the waters of the brook it has the feel of a well-spring about it. The water is clear to the bottom where a number of small creatures including some fresh-water shrimps scurried around in the soft sediment. Here was Coventina! This was the place to leave my gift and the small geode with a precious stone in it sank through the water and into the sediment out of sight.

For Coventina
Who brings us otherworld water
Budding through earth and stone
Into our world of dry words:
Liquid whispers of something deeper.

I went on a quest to discover a particular place. Did I discover it? Or did I discover that it is not the one site that is important so much as the journey to find it. But she is there wherever water flows. So each time I stop at a well, a spring or a stream of rushing water I think of Coventina and the water world and the deep well of memory of the gods and the world they inhabit. When I touch a drop of water from a spring to my skin I make a dedication to that world of sacred water as I did at that pool at Brocolita where Coventina was once acknowledged as I acknowledge her now and bring the memory of that place to my own dedicated space for her and her kind.

#### **DROWNED LANDS**

Maes Gwyddno lies under the sea, west of the Cambrian Mountains and around the estuary of the River Dyfi. Some of it is still open to the air: sand dunes, salt marsh, peat bog and water meadows reclaimed from the bog and the marsh. The land of Gwyddno Garanhir ('Longshanks', or more literally 'Cranelegs') was the father of Elffin who found the infant Taliesin in a salmon weir on this land, as well as giving his name to the area better known as Cantre'r Gwaelod, the lost land under the waves. So much myth, legend and Brythonic lore implicates him in the unfolding of their stories. The intersections of legend, geology and history are enmeshed here too as this is a factually drowned land as the semi-fossilised trees uncovered on the beach at low tide confirm. Most of these can be seen near the village of Borth, originally surmised to be Porth Gwyddno. To the south and to the north of this area causeways run out into the sea and they too are uncovered at low tide like roads running into an undersea domain. At the end of one of these, known as Sarn Cynfelyn, is a rocky outcrop marked on the maps as Caer Wyddno ("Gwyddno's Fort'). According to the Taliesin story the salmon weir in which he was found by Elffin was in sight of Gwyddno's fortress and so, knowing the stretch of coast as intimately as I do, I wonder which of the rivers running into the sea across the level land between the cliffs either side is the one on which the weir was placed. Was it Eleri, as at least one re-telling in Welsh claims? Was it Clarach? - though this seems too far south. Or was it one of the other streams that run into these rivers, or like Clettwr running now into the River Dyfi estuary, but which once ran directly to the sea?

It is difficult to know as the land is submerged and the coastline is not now where it was. The well-known story is that a character called Seithennin did not close the sluice gates when the tide came in because he was drunk. But this story is a recent one. The older story, recorded in verses in *The Black Book of Carmarthen* which are thought once to have been part of a prose saga, tells of a woman called Mererid who has caused the flood. She is referred to by the title 'Machteith' which means 'maiden' but was also an official title indicating an office at court, often the attendant of the Queen. As she is also called a "fountain cup bearer" she clearly had some responsibility for a well or spring. John Rhŷs identifies a number of legends from Wales according to which lakes have their origins in the overflowing of sacred wells when

they have been neglected or because the well guardian is offended in some way. This is part of Rhŷs's general survey of the importance of water as a portal to the Otherworld <sup>1</sup>.

So the downed land was submerged because Mererid allowed the well to overflow. But who was she? We might suppose she had the office of guardian or priestess of the well. As such her story can be re-imagined. Her name is the equivalent of Margaret or 'Pearl'. John Rhŷs felt that this could hardly have been her original name and other, more recent, scholars have agreed. One analysis of the structure of the verses finds the lines containing her name to be metrically too long.<sup>2</sup> So a shorter name would be a better fit. Elsewhere John Rhŷs suggests that the name Morgan or Morgen ('sea-born') would have been attached to female water spirits who inhabited wells or springs as well as to mermaids. So was Gwyddno's land flooded in the same way that lakes like Llyn Llech Owen were created by the overflowing of a spring, and did a *Morgan*, a *nereid* or water deity, cause the land to be engulfed by water from the Otherworld?

MERERID
Water seeps up through Earth,
Pools into a well or
Streams away from the Source.
Here is the Chalice of Rosmerta
Never empty, as you cup the flow
With generous hands.
It is sweet water,
It is fragrant mead,
It is all the world's treasure
For us to taste

For only in your cup is it held.

#### **ROSMERTA**

But not to hoard

Rosmerta's emblems are the cup, ladle and bucket. Her cup an emblem of plenty, proffered at the feast; in Gaul she is associated in at least once place with a sacred spring. In her identity in the persons of cup bearers her role becomes differentiated and therefore ambiguous, particularly in later contexts when the religious significance may have been lost but the magical status still remained resonant. A cup bearer might be a maiden and hold an office as such at court but equally there might be an implied element involved in what she represents associated with fertility. Where her maiden status is associated with protection, the loss of it also implies loss of protection. But it might in other contexts be associated with fertility. Her survival into later legends, folklore and story may emphasise only one or the other of these functions exclusively and so appear to be only about a single event such as an inundation or a symbolic offering of plenty by a cup bearer, though often the portrayal of these events retains an aura of something deeper.

Inundations, not temporary floods but the permanent flowing of waters across the land; there are many stories of such flowings from springs or wells to make lakes, or rushing to meet the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> John Rhŷs Celtic Folklore (1901)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Jenny Rowland Early Welsh Saga Poetry (1990)

sea to re-shape the coastline. There are recurrent stories behind these legends, superficially of pride, arrogance, presumption, though this might mask a quest for knowledge and therefore power. Often the consequences are delayed and the flood comes after many generations (time for the otherworld deities is not our time). The legend of the drowning of *Tyno Helig* near the estuary of the River Conwy in North wales is typical of the theme where a wicked ruler is told that his descendants will be punished for his deeds and so he thinks he has nothing to worry about, but seven generations later his lands are flooded during a feast and only the harper escapes drowning. This latter detail of the harper is also a common element in the stories. John Rhŷs thought that the theme of delayed punishment for evil deeds was a later development in these stories which originally involved something happening at a sacred well which, as at Mererid's well, causes it to overflow. Consider for instance, the story of Boann who looks into Nechtan's Well of Wisdom which should only be visited by Nechtan and his cup-bearers. The well overflows and chases her all the way to the sea, thereby forming the River Boyne. In the story of the drowning of Cantre'r Gwaelod, or the lands of Gwyddno Garanhir, Mererid is herself a cup-bearer and a well-maiden, though the oblique nature of the verses which record this, lacking the original context in a prose saga, means that the background is unclear.

But no matter. For there is more to say. Both the setting for *Tyno Helig* and that for *Cantre'r Gwaelod* are also settings for different surviving versions of the story of Taliesin. Think now of that harper who survives (or is re-born from) the flood. The story of Taliesin begins at Llyn Tegid, the location of another inundation legend which explains the formation of the lake near the town of Bala. This is where Gwion stirred Ceridwen's cauldron. The River Dee (Dyfrdwy) which runs through the lake, has its own mythos naming its waters as sacred. Gwion looked into, and tasted, the waters of this cauldron and there was an inundation. He gained wisdom just as Finn gained wisdom either by tasting the salmon from the Well of Wisdom or, in another story, tasting drops of water from an otherworld well.

In Gaul a god that the Romans called Mercurius – though he may not have had that name for the Gauls before the Romans gave named him – was partnered with Rosmerta, whose name could simply mean 'The Great Provider'. They are portrayed together in a relief from Roman Gloucester:



MERCURIUS AND ROSMERTA

Rosmerta had a site of devotion at a sacred spring in Gaul and is also commemorated in Bath, the site of the sacred springs of Sulis in Britain. One of her emblems is a bucket (cauldron?) and she is represented with Fortuna on one relief where the bucket could symbolise re-birth. A spring, a cauldron, a brew of otherworld wisdom, welling into our world. A cup-bearer, a well-maiden ~/~ the keeper of the cauldron, a hag. Are these two sides of the same coin, the turning of Fortuna's wheel? When there is a flow from otherworld streams out of the well or the cauldron, who can catch the essential drops on the tongue, taste the salmon or gather the hazel nuts that have fallen into the the waters of the well?

Think of that harper, the survivor of the flood. Think of Taliesin, re-born from the waters into a weir in which salmon are caught. Think of others whose quest for knowledge transforms them into divine or inspired figures. Then consider that Mercurius, Rosmerta's partner, may have been known in the lands that overlapped Gaul as Woden, and how a god, taking a different name for a different people, might do things differently, and yet still discover sources of wisdom, of inspiration, and how the mead of poetry from the Cup or Cauldron of Inspiration might be dispensed to the poets, the *awenyddion*, the *drui*, from whom the waters of the Cauldron flow as rivers of song.

But staying with Gwyddno's realm, if we retreat from the flat land and climb to higher ground, to where the old Roman road called *Sarn Elen* runs along a ridge, we will find a Bronze Age chambered tomb known as *Bedd Taliesin* ('Taliesin's Grave') just above the ridge and below a track running off from *Sarn Elen*, to an area of higher ground called *Cae'r Arglwyddes* ('The Lady's Field') which is scattered with the remains of what look like many broken cairns. Even higher, sitting in its own rocky bowl above this, is a lake called *Moel Y Llyn*. From one side of the lake streams run off to form the River Clettwr which runs directly down the wooded slopes to join the estuary of the River Dyfi, and on the other side streams run off to form the River Ceulan which flows on into the River Eleri. But none of these streams run directly from the lake as the following piece of local folklore, translated here directly from Welsh, indicates:

"There are a number of unexplained mysteries linked with the lake. No crystal shines brighter than its waters though they are heavy with peat. No drop of water runs into it nor from it. The lake is self-sufficient and unchanging. I saw it in the Winter of 1936 and it was full, but a friend who accompanied me said he had seen it in the middle of the dry summer and it was no different and was equally full then. Summer and Winter - wet or dry - the lake is the same.

According to tradition the lake is guarded by a supernatural power. The following story was told by Mr Richard Griffiths [... references to the reliability and family connections of the source ...]. One summer when there had been no rain for several weeks the River Ceulan dried up and the owner of the water mill decided to release the waters of the lake into the river to get the mill working again. He went with others up to the lake on a clear summer's day and began digging a ditch towards the lake. As they were working heavy clouds formed and began to descend and a gloom came over the mountain above them. Thunder and lightning followed as a violent storm developed. The men fled in fear for their lives. The ditch can still be seen at the lakeside. Mr Griffiths estimated that this had happened about 120 years before." <sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Evan Isaac Coelion Cymru (1938

Imagine then if the 'supernatural power' of this lake was unleashed. Something worse than the digging of a ditch by the miller must have been involved to offend such a spirit and cause the lake to overflow. But if it did then the waters rushing down the hill would fill the narrow rivers running down to the sea and overflow onto the steep slopes to drown the flat land of Gwyddno's domain below allowing the sea to wash over them. Might this have been the original story that is reflected in the verses about Mererid? She is said to cry out from the ramparts of the fortress and from the back of a bay horse. The refrain "after presumption there is loss/after presumption there is repentance/after excess is want" seems to indicate regret. Seithennin here is addressed in the first verse and in the final verse (also contained in *Englynion y Beddau*) he is referred to as "Seithennin the presumptuous" in his grave. We can only guess at what story was told in a lost saga relating the events leading to the flood. Flood legends are common but Rachel Bromwich observed that the story was "not to be sought in the Bible tale; here we have an ancient story-theme common to the Celtic nations". <sup>4</sup>

What links, if any, can be made to the other stories about *Maes Gwyddno*? 'Taliesin's Grave' some way below the lake has been dated to the Bronze Age. There is a 'Gwion's Hill' (*Bronwion*) just over the ridge above the Einon Valley. It is said in the tale of Taliesin that the contents of Ceridwen's cauldron spilt into the river and poisoned Gwyddno's horse so its estuary was afterwards referred to "*Gwenwynfeirch Gwyddno*" (Gwyddno's Horse-poison). But any attempt to link it with the inundation would place the origins of the legend a lot further back in time than the sixth century. The common denominator in all this is Gwyddno Garanhir. Rachel Bromwich says of him that "It would seem that the historical Gwyddno of the North either took over some of the attributes of an earlier mythological character , or that there were two persons of the same name known to tradition." Either way he seems to be a key figure in the mythological, the legendary and the imaginative life of the Brythonic cultural ethos so it is hardly surprising that we also have a record of him conversing with Gwyn ap Nudd.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Rachel Bromwich 'Cantref y Gwaelod and Ker Is' chapter in The *Early Cultures of North-West Europe* eds. C Fox & B Dickens (1950)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Rachel Bromwich 'Cantref y Gwaelod and Ker Is' chapter in The Early Cultures of North-West Europe eds. C Fox & B Dickens (1950)

## 2. MYTHIC CONVERSATIONS

#### The Conversation Between Gwyn ap Nudd and Gwyddno Garanhir

First a bit of background to Gwyn and Gwyddno. One is a mythological character and the other a legendary character; what do I mean by this? Gwyn is clearly 'mythological' because he comes from the Otherworld, and so is a god. In his presentation by the bards of the later medieval period such as Dafydd ap Gwilym he is a shadowy figure who inhabits the mist, but in Welsh folklore he is the King of Annwn, as instanced in the story of St Collen on Glastonbury Tor. But in the earliest tales his mythological status as a hunter with his pack of hounds, often identified with the Cwn Annwn or dogs of the Otherworld, as a god of the Winter half of the year is more pronounced.

Gwyddo Garanhir, by contrast, is a legendary figure in that he is presented as historically inhabiting a particular landscape: 'Maes Gwyddno' which becomes a drowned land, the story of which is also contained in the same *Black Book of Carmarthen*<sup>6</sup> manuscript. Like many legendary characters the actual location of the landscape may vary in different sources, though the one that has survived is the land of *Cantre'r Gwaelod*, an area of submerged forest and bog in West Wales. In this identity Gwyddno was the father of Elffin who, in one of the locations of the Taliesin story, discovered Gwion re-born as Taliesin, in a salmon weir on his father's land. So Gwyddno's legend here overlaps with another significant legend in the Brythonic ethos.

In the poem we are going to consider it appears that Gwyddno meets Gwyn following his death in battle, and the conversation which ensues defines Gwyn's role as a psychopomp conducting Gwyddno out of Thisworld and also gives us an insight into the nature of Gwyn and the way he was regarded in the earlier medieval period. Although it is not mentioned in this poem, it is fitting that Gwyddno's territory is on the edge between land and sea, a territory that even now fluctuates between these two domains. So the conversation flows between them, but the tide cannot be resisted and Gwyddno accepts this.

These 'conversation poems', or dramatic dialogues as they might be better called, are thought to be remnants of prose narratives in which they were embedded. There the verse dialogues would have been points of tension or emphasis in the story or myth which contained them. It is possible that only the verses were ever written down and the oral tales were shaped around them by the story-tellers, who might include different elements or variations on a loosely based narrative with the verses as more tightly structured and unvarying bases for the story. This would fit with admittedly rather different examples of verse in prose narratives such as the verses spoken by Gwydion in the 4th *Mabinogi* story, where the language of the verse is more archaic than the language of the prose, suggesting an older remnant fitted into a later re-telling of the story.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> A O H Jarman (ed) *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Cardiff, 1982)

## An interpretation of the conversation between Gwyn ap Nudd and Gwyddno Garanhir.,

The conversation takes the form of series of *englynion*, each three-line englyn conforming to the syllabic and metrical requirements for the type of englyn used with apparent exceptions usually ascribed to faulty manuscript copying. The requirements of the englyn form would have determined the precise choice of words and expression and it's necessary to be sensitive to that process when deciding on possible meanings of uncertain phrases. The exchange follows a conventional format to begin with of a defeated warrior asking for protection from his attacker. But as, in this case, the conversation is between a legendary character and a mythological character it soon develops into an enquiry into the nature of Gwyn ap Nudd which implies his coming from the Otherworld as a harvester of the dead. It is likely that it was not necessary to be explicit about this for readers or hearers of the poem and the nature of these poems is anyway that they are usually elliptical rather than explicit.

We might expect a balanced exchange between the two parties and this is how this poem begins. But it then develops into a monologue from Gwyn with the occasional interjection from Gwyddno. A problem here is that the manuscript does not indicate who is speaking and although this is often obvious there are one or two places where it is not. The final section of the poem is often detached by modern scholars who profess themselves uncertain if it belongs to the exchange although there is no indication in the manuscript of a new poem beginning and as this is usually indicated by a larger coloured capital or ornamented letter. I'll discuss later another reason why I think it should be regarded as a continuation of Gwyn's monologue.

The first two englyns set up the exchange with Gwyddno speaking first and Gwyn replying

Fierce bull of battle, awesome Leader of many, slow to anger, Of trust unfailing, who will protect me?

From the man who leads the conquest Invincible lord, strong in anger, You who ask shall have protection.

Having established his safety Gwyddno begins to ask his questions:

Since you give me such protection I will ask you, Lord of Hosts Where is the land from which you come?

The answer is characteristically oblique, not so much identifying a place of origin as a function:

I come from many battles, many deaths With shields held aloft, Many heads pierced by spears. Unperturbed by the indirectness of the answer, Gwyddno tries again:

I greet you great warrior Your shield ready, Tell me, great one, of your descent.

At this point it begins to be clear that Gwyn is more than a victorious opponent who is being placated but a powerful figure with special attributes. Gwyn answers and Gwyddno replies politely also identifying himself:

My horse is Carngrwn from battle throng So I am called Gwyn ap Nudd The lover of Creiddylad, daughter of Lludd.

Since you, Gwyn, are so forthright I will not hide from you I am Gwyddno Garanhir.

At this point the contemporary audience may have been reminded of the story of Gwyn's love for Creiddylad related as an aside in the story of *Culhwch and Olwen*. It is clear, anyway, by now that he is a mythological figure and from this point on he begins a monologue making his Otherworld nature more apparent rather than responding to questions from Gwyddno. The next four verses are therefore from Gwyn:

The white horse calls this talk to an end His bridle leads us away Hurrying to battles in Tawe and Nedd.

Not the Tawe here in this land But the one far away in a distant land Where the tide ebbs fiercely on the shore.

I have a carved ring, a white horse gold-adorned And to my sorrow I saw battle at Caer Fanddwy.

At Caer Fanddwy I saw a host Shields shattered, spears broken, Violence inflicted by the honoured and fair.

His horse is clearly a kindred spirit, calling him away to battles elsewhere. So we begin to get the sense of Gwyn as one who is called to wherever battles are raging, his function as Lord of the Dead, harvester of souls, becoming apparent. 'Tawe' and 'Nedd' are both rivers in South Wales. But he says it is not to the Tawe nearby he is called but to one far away. Where this might be is made clearer in the next two verses where he refers to Caer Fanddwy a place in the Otherworld mentioned by Taliesin in the poem *Preiddeu Annwn*, one of the forts in Annwn raided by Arthur ('Save seven none returned from Caer Fanddwy'). So not only is Gwyn clearly an Otherworld character but he performs the task of Lord of the Dead, attending battles in that world too. But while he was previously portrayed as being victorious

in this role, in the Otherworld he is sorrowful.

Here Gwyddno makes a brief interjection endorsing this view of Gwyn:

Gwyn ap Nudd, helper of hosts, Armies fall before the hooves of your horse As swiftly as cut reeds to the ground.

This seems to enable a change of direction for Gwyn:

My hound is sleek and fair, The best of hounds; Dormach he is, who was with Maelgwn.

There is some uncertainty about the name Dormach. The scribe had originally written Dormarch but the second 'r' has been removed and a space left in the manuscript. It is, however interesting that he belonged to Maelgwn as he had a legendary pack of hounds referred to by later Welsh bards.

There is some confusion about who speaks the next verse, partly caused by an uncertainty about the meaning of part of the wording. It could be argued that Gwyn continues to speak but in my interpretation I suggest that Gwyddno speaks:

Dormach rednose – why stare you so? Because I cannot comprehend Your wanderings in the firmament.

The reading of the final line is difficult, but interpreting it in the way I have allows for a reference to the Wild Hunt, and an indirect reference to Gwyn's role as its leader.

Following this verse there is a complete change of tone and direction so that some scholars have doubted if it is a continuation of the same poem although there is no indication in the manuscript that it isn't. Some uncertainty has also been expressed as to who speaks the remaining verses if they are to be regarded as part of the same poem. But if we regard the reference in the verse above as being to the Wild Hunt, it does not seem to me problematic to regard them as being spoken by Gwyn and relating to his activities as a harvester of souls:

I was there when Gwenddolau was slain, Ceidio's son, a pillar of poetry, When ravens croaked on gore.

> I was there when Bran was slain, Ywerydd's son of wide fame, When battle-ravens croaked.

I was there when Llachau was slain Arthur's son, wondrous in wordcraft, When ravens croaked on gore.

I was\* there when Meurig was slain, Careian's son, honoured in praise, When rayens croaked on flesh.

I was there when Gwallog was slain, From a line of princes, Grief of the Saxons, son of Lleynog

I was there when the warriors of Britain were slain From the east to the north; I live on; they are in the grave.

I was there when the warriors of Britain were slain From the east to the south; I live on; they are dead.

\*Here the manuscript reads 'I was not there' ('Ny buum' instead of 'Mi awum') but it is likely that this is a scribe's mistake.

And so finally we may note the characterisation of Gwyn in folklore as the leader of the Cwn Annwn and so the Wild Hunt and another of the references to him in *Culhwch and Olwen* where the giant Ysbadadden tells Culhwch that he can never hunt the Boar Twrch Trwyth without Gwyn ap Nudd who "contains the nature of the devils of Annwn". This is the burden he takes upon himself. In the medieval Life of St Collen, this Welsh saint is said to be lured by Gwyn - described as King of Annwn - into his fortress, but the saint throws holy water over him. In a medieval Latin text advising the clergy how to deal with superstitions an addition was copied in by a Welsh monk referring to Gwyn ap Nudd and his "concubine" in the context of love trysts in the woods, a not uncommon theme of medieval Welsh poetry. There are various passing references to him by the medieval Welsh bards, usually in the context of being lost in the mist and encountering Gwyn or the Cwn Annwn. In the view of Idris Foster[\*] his original character was lost in some of these later references to him which simply see him as a leader of the *Tylwyth Teg*. He describes a number of "fluctuating descriptions" ranging from fairy to devil, but concludes that underlying these "there was one basic conception which was decidedly old - that of Gwyn as the magic huntsman".

#### THE CONVERSATION BETWEEEN TALIESIN AND UGNACH

One of the most intriguing of the conversation poems in early Welsh is that between Taliesin and Ugnach. Two separate manuscripts of the poem have survived, one in *The Black Book of Carmarthen* and another in a separate manuscript also kept in The National Library of Wales. The poem has been interpreted in a number of ways and a few ambiguous words in one of its englyns have given rise to much speculation about the context for the poem. I will discuss

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Idris Foster in *Duanaire Finn* quoted by Brinley Roberts in Gwyn ap Nudd *Llên CymruXIII* pp 283-289.

these matters after giving my translation. I should make it clear here that I read it as a straight-forward encounter with an Otherworld character whose identity I will also suggest below. A remarkable feature of the poem, if it is viewed in this way, is that Taliesin is reluctant to accept the invitation offered to him, given the apparently fearless forays into the Otherworld which are a feature of some of the poems attributed to him.

Who is Ugnach that Taliesin should be so deferential to him and yet refuse his offer of hospitality? In the poem he says that he is Ugnach, Son of Mydno but Taliesin claims not to know him and there are no references to this character elsewhere unless we can equate him with the Mugnach mentioned in the *Triads* as the father of Fflur who is beloved of Caswallawn. There he is named with the additional appellation Gorr which is usually presumed to be an abbreviation for Corrach (dwarf) but it might also be a scribal mistake or variant of cawr (giant). Names ending in -ach tend to signify supernatural characters such as Wrnach, a giant and Diwrnach, the Irish owner of a magical cauldron, both of whom feature in *Culhwch and Olwen*. Attaching the suffix -ach to the Welsh word gwraig (woman) gives gwrach (witch). So it might be that the name's significance is as much in its suffix as in any genealogy.

Following the conventional exchange when two horsemen meet each other, Ugnach is immediately insistent that Taliesin should accept his hospitality - "You cannot refuse" - but Taliesin, as politely as possible, does refuse. He says he is on his way to the fortress of Lleu and Gwydion (presumably Dinas Dinlleu in Gwynedd, a location which is the setting for part of the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi*?) When asked where he is coming from he says "Caer Seon", a place that has a number of possible locations.

Why will Taliesin not go with Ugnach? It may be that he really is in a hurry, but there is a certain tension in the exchange between them that suggests an evasiveness on Taliesin's part and an insistent lure on the part of Ugnach. It has something of the atmosphere of the exchanges between the boy and the crone or false knight in the folk ballad The False Knight on the Road and its variants. Here, though, Taliesin does not try to cleverly outwit Ugnach but, in accordance with convention, to politely but firmly decline his offer. Does Taliesin fear the consequences of going with Ugnach, perhaps thinking he may never return? This suggests a skilled mediator with Otherworld beings who is wary of what this one wants with him.

The poem is written in the form of a series of three-line englyns with each of the three lines featuring end-rhyme, something not achievable in the translation but which, along with the syllabic requirements of the englyn form, may have a bearing on the particular choice of words and therefore may be a factor in the issues discussed below.

#### **TALIESIN:**

Horseman who rides to the fortress With white hounds and great horns I see you but I do not know you.

#### **UGNACH:**

Horseman who rides to the estuary On a steed strong and steadfast Come with me, you cannot refuse.

#### **TALIESIN:**

I cannot go there now I have no time to delay Blessings go with you from above and below.

#### **UGNACH:**

Warrior who is not seen here often With the look of one who is fortunate Where do you go and from where do you come?

#### **TALIESIN:**

I come from Cael Seon, From contesting with strangers; I go to the fortress of Lleu and Gwydion.

#### **UGNACH:**

Come with me to my fortress For shining mead And fine gold for your spear-rest.

#### TALIFSIN:

I do not know you bold warrior Who promises mead and a bed, Your speech honeyed and fair.

#### **UGNACH:**

Come to my domain For wine flowing freely. Ugnach am I, named son of Mydno.

#### **TALIESIN:**

Ugnach, blessings to your Gorsedd, May you have favour and honour. Taliesin am I and I'll acknowledge your feast.

#### **UGNACH:**

Taliesin, greatest of men, Most accomplished in bardic contest, Stay with me until Wednesday.

#### **TALIESIN:**

Ugnach, most richly endowed, Grace to your great land; No censure on me that I cannot stay. On the face of it this seems to be an encounter with a character from the Otherworld, a character who bears a striking resemblance to Gwyn ap Nudd with his pack of white hounds. This is how I read it so this has had a bearing on how I have translated it. But other contexts have been argued for, mainly centring on the interpretation of the fifth englyn where Taliesin says he comes from Caer Seon. There are possible locations for Caer Seon on the island of Anglesey and near Conwy on the coast of North Wales. Taliesin could have been engaging in disputes or bardic contests in either of these places, though it seems unlikely. Or he could have been coming from Arthur's court at Caerleon.

Caer Seon may be taken to be the court of Maelgwn Gwynedd at Deganwy near Conwy. Or Taliesin may have journeyed from the Old North, possibly to North Wales or possibly to another destination in the Old North. But all of this is a distraction from the encounter with Ugnach. It seems clear that Taliesin is being invited to an Otherworld caer and that he refuses the invitation. If we may take Ugnach to be Gwyn ap Nudd two possibilities may be considered. One is that Taliesin's boastful expeditions to the Otherworld, such as that described in Preiddeu Annwn, are conducted as raids either for treasure or for poetic inspiration. Here he is invited to visit as a guest, or perhaps is being lured there to account for himself. Clearly he is not prepared to go on these terms. The other possibility, suggested by at least one scholar is that he is dead and that Ugnach is bidding him come to the "great land" as he acknowledges it, and that he is either not yet ready to go, or he is going elsewhere. If so Ugnach may well be Gwyn ap Nudd, in another guise. The fact that Taliesin says he journeys to the fortress of Lleu and Gwydion has been seen as a possible reference to the Milky Way (Caer Gwydion), that is, he has his sights on a higher destination. The possibility that this would mean Heaven in a christian sense, or an alternative Otherworld location of which Gwydion is the ruler - imponderable though that may be - is also worth pondering.

#### The Conversation Between Myrddin and Taliesin

As I am Merlin And again Taliesin Eternal my singing My prophecies unending.

So runs the lines of part of the 'conversation' (*Ymddidan*) between Merlin and Taliesin in *The Black Book of Carmarthen*. In what sense can two people speaking to each other be thought of as the same person? The lines have been translated as though they mean 'I Merlin, and Taliesin before me'. There is, perhaps, room for ambiguity in *'Can ys mi myrtin guydi* taliessin' and so expanding the lines to make sense of them could, indeed, yield that translation. But consider the words of Elis Gruffydd from his 16th century *Chronicle of the Ages:* 

Some people hold the opinion and maintain firmly that Merlin was a spirit in human form, who was in that shape from the time of Vortigern until the beginning of King Athur's time when he disappeared. After that, this spirit appeared again in the time of Maelgwn Gwynedd at which time he is called Taliesin, who is said to be alive yet in a place called Caer Sidia. Thence he appeared a third time in the days of Merfyn Frych son of Esyllt, whose son he was said to be, and in this period he was called Merlin

the Mad. From that day to this, he said to be resting in Caer Sidia, whence certain people believe firmly he will rise up once again before doomsday.<sup>8</sup>

The idea that Merlin and Taliesin were the same person in different guises was common enough for Elis Gruffydd to report it, and a note to this line in Jarman's edition of the Black Book indicates that the reading of 'guydi' (modern Welsh 'wedi' = 'after') is also construed as 'before', or 'in the guise of' in medieval Welsh. Patrick Ford, discussing the Taliesin legend in the Introduction to his *Ystoria Taliesin*, says that the two prophets are "aliases of a single poetic spirit" and hence the same figure appears in Irish texts such as the Senchas Torpeist bard identified as "the Spirit of Poetry".

But can we identify that "spirit" as a god? Consider this from the discussion of the evolution of the Taliesin legend from Ifor Williams<sup>9</sup>:

#### Stage 1

Taliesin was one of the old gods of the Welsh mythological tradition who developed a reputation as a bard or as an inspirer of the bardic arts.

#### Stage 2

Taliesin becomes a legendary bard (9th-10th c)

#### Stage 3

The poems, already becoming Christianised in Stage 2, become assimilated to the Christian tradition and lose much of their 'druidic' character though retaining an aura of this as part of the bardic ethos.

This legend developed separately from the poems written to Urien in the sixth century by the historical Taliesin, though they were later confused particularly when bards began to adopt the persona of Taliesin as an inspired *awenydd*.

So if he was (is) a god, which one? Perhaps the one who entered the shepherd boy in Henry Vaughan's account of bardic possession in his letter to John Aubrey discussed below in the chapter on *Awenyddion*. Is this an appearance, variously of Mabon (<Maponos) or Aengus Og (Mac ind Oc) both epithets of the Divine Child? Or is it, rather, that when the inspiration is breathed into them they become the god that breathes it. The source of the *Awen*, the divine breeze that blows through the world?

In addition to the poem in *The Black Book of Carmarthen* there is another in a medieval Latin poem by Geoffrey of Monmouth called *Vita Merlini* (Life of Merlin). Then there is *Porius* the twentieth century novel by John Cowper Powys set in North Wales in the year 499 in which the two characters do not so much have a conversation as move around each other in relation to the events in the novel. None of these conversations bear much resemblance to

 $<sup>^8\</sup>mbox{(The Death of Merlin in the Chronicle of Elis Gruffydd'. Trans and ed. P K Ford. Viator 7 <math display="inline">(1976)379\text{-}90$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>Chwedl Taliesin (O'Donnell Lecture 1955-6)

the other in terms of content, though the conversation in *The Black Book of Carmarthen*, or some other source of it, seems to have provided the occasion for later versions.

It is likely that the 38 lines of the poem in the Black Book contain two separate frames of reference, and have even been thought to be a mistaken conflation of two separate poems, though this seems unlikely. The first 22 lines (mainly in past or dramatised present tenses) appear to be about a battle resulting from a raid by Maelgwn Gwynedd from North Wales on territory in South Wales. The remaining 16 lines (in present or future tenses) refer to the Battle of Arfderydd after which, according to other sources, Myrddin became mad and retreated to the Caledonian forest, though here it simply says that 'seven score' ran mad from the battle into the forest. In the first of these scenarios Myrddin laments the slain of his side (the territory around Carmarthen) while Taliesin laments those of North Wales. The second scenario seems to be in the form of a prophecy foretelling the events of the Battle of Arfderydd in northern Britain.

This raises questions about relative time frames. Maelgwn Gwynedd (Maglocunus) was criticised by the sixth century monk Gildas who called him 'Dragon of the Island', supposedly a term of praise but used by Gildas dismissively in a denial of such terms as used by the bards about their patrons. Maelgwn ruled Gwynedd in the sixth century. The Battle of Arfderydd also took place in the latter part of that century. So from a chronological perspective it is quite possible to take the dialogue between the two bards as occurring after one battle and that they then prophesied another battle which was to follow. In this view the poem would have been written much later as a memorial of both events. *The Black Book of Carmarthen* is a thirteenth century manuscript but its contents are copies of older manuscripts. This poem has been dated on the basis of style, versification and other evidence to between 1050 and 1100.

But there is also the conflation of people and places to account for. The Myrddin who fled the Battle of Arfderydd lived in northern Britain and the battle took place there, near what is now the border between England and Scotland. But by the time the poem was written he had become associated with Carmarthen in Wales. Similarly, Taliesin was the bard of Urien of Rheged in the North, but was also associated with Maelgwn Gwynedd in Wales in the later prose tale about him. As with much of this early lore, place and time slide between northern Britain and Wales, and from the sixth century through succeeding centuries up until the twelfth and thirteenth when much of the manuscript source material that has come down to us was copied.

Geoffrey of Monmouth may have had access to some of this material, including some that has not survived. But it is thought that he had not seen the material about the northern Myrddin Wyllt when he composed his *History of the Kings of Britain* in 1136, which features a Merlin based on a character called Ambrosius in the earlier ninth century *History of the Britons* attributed to Nennius. Only later, after he had seen the story of Myrddin Wyllt, did he compose his *Vita Merlini* in about 1150. This led the slightly later commentator Giraldus Cambrensis to distinguish between 'Merlin Ambrosius' and 'Merlin Sylvestris', but it was the Merlin of Geoffrey's History that developed into the composite Merlin of later Arthurian romance. His Life of Merlin locates him in Carmarthen in spite of being based on the story of the northern Myrddin Wyllt, and so takes him north to join a battle against the Scots.

Geoffey's dialogue between Taliesin and Myrddin is more like two monologues for much of its length. Myrddin had sent Taliesin "to find out about the wind and the clouds" and much of Taliesin's speech on his return is simply a summation of medieval natural history. He then discourses on the nature of different places, including The Isle of Apples, or Avalon, where he

claims to have accompanied Arthur after the battle of Camlan. This may be parallel to the journey to Annwn in the poem 'Preiddeu Annwn' in *The Book of Taliesin* where Taliesin accompanies Arthur to the Otherworld on a raid to capture a magical cauldron. Or it may simply be another case of Taliesin boasting of his many journeys to different times and places. Geoffrey seems here either to be using material he was aware of, but had not studied in detail, or using it as a starting point for his own quite different purpose. So Taliesin, like Myrddin before him, is being appropriated by Geoffrey, into the Arthurian narrative of his earlier *History of the Kings of Britain*. As if to emphasise this, Myrddin's reply is a monologue largely based on the prophecies of Merlin in Geoffrey's History. It is only a reply to Taliesin in that it appears to validate his claim to have accompanied Arthur to Avalon.

The exchange of prophecies that ensues is the basis of some sort of dialogue but it is interrupted by messengers bringing the news that a new healing spring has arisen. Myrddin goes to drink from it and is cured of his madness. The conversation continues with Myrddin asking Taliesin what power brought the spring into being which elucidates a reply from Taliesin describing various virtuous springs, rivers and lakes, concluding with a remarkably scientific explanation of how springs arise from aquifers. We then learn that Myrddin's cure has robbed him of his prophetic powers, which are then transferred to his sister Ganieda (the 'Gwenddydd' of the Welsh poems?). Geoffrey's account, then, seems not only to rely on knowledge of the Welsh Myrddin lore but also some knowledge of the Welsh Taliesin lore. But, especially in the case of the latter, either his knowledge was not detailed or, if it was, he chose to ignore the detail and use it to create something quite different.

## 3. THE GODS:

## NATURE OR CULTURE

In Nature they are presences; In Culture they have form.

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Though we re-construct their past mystery They are ever-present, never history.

We may sense a god in the landscape, in a woodland, along a river; perhaps even catch a voice on the wind. But how will we know who (s)he is? Is there a story that matches this experience, perhaps a folk tale, a legend, a myth? – perhaps an image, a tune, a poem. Some human thing that hints at the experience, resonates with it, contains something of its numinosity, but something created with the god's help that can be shared, recognised, shaped in human terms and so belonging to our world: otherworldly, liminal, elusive and yet something we can feel, touch hear, or see. So the Otherworld and our world interleave, overlap, flow together in the stream of time while the god is with us, though that time might pass differently from our time, and when our time returns, though the human artefact that contained the god is still there, the god may not be, or will be but in that otherworld where time passes differently.

Yet we have the image, the story, the tune and may recover its significance or re-create it from the elements that compose it, or once again from direct experience if the god is with us. If not, well ... if we have made a place for the gods in our lives so they live among us, as their time passes to ours we pass the time in their presence. So those presences in nature are given form and come alive in our culture. If 'our' culture is Brythonic Polytheism, and if we live in the 21st century, we will find that they take shape for us in gods that, in the Ancient World, have names like Lugos, Vindos, Rosmerta, Maponos, Rigantona. Some of these we find present in medieval literature, here called Lleu, Gwyn, Mabon, Rhiannon where the numinosity of the gods finds form in the enchantment of story.

So the Horse Goddess (who we may also know as Epona) comes alive as Rhiannon in the imagery of tales in medieval Welsh: a woman on a horse passing a 'gorsedd' – a mound or or sitting place – at which enchantments may (and do) occur. She appears to maintain an even pace, though no-one can catch up with her however hard they ride, until the one she wishes to speak with approaches her. So she comes out of the Otherworld and her story is woven into the narrative of the tale: The Divine Mother (Matrona) gives birth to the Divine Son (Maponos) snatched away from her at just a few days old, though eventually returned to her, and to our world. The story told as the narrative of Rhiannon and Pryderi in the Mabinogi, or as Mabon in Culhwch and Olwen. Here the gods, taking different forms in the folklore tradition, have been rediscovered in literature, their names shifting but the identities remaining so they are alive for us in the narratives, in verbal imagery, in the voices of the characters in these tales.

In reading stories, in re-telling them, in making visual images, or in re-enacting the myths they embody, the gods can come alive for us not just in our private dealings with them but publicly. They can be 're-presented' in our lives and in our recognition of them, bringing the Otherworld into manifest presence in our world. So we conjure them by story telling; so they conjure us by coming alive in the stories just as they come alive as presences in the [super]natural world. What stories can we tell today and how else can we make a place for the gods in our cultural lives in our present multi-cultural age?

If we seek to recover what we can of the cultural life and the ways the peoples of the ancient world shared that world with their gods, we also need to engage with the landscapes of the modern Brythonic lands, with ways these have been imaginatively inhabited by the peoples who have lived on them through the ages and the mythic life they shared and may continue to share with us. So this is not to live in the past so much as bring the past alive in the present and ensure that it continues to have a life in the future. To do that the gods must have a mythic life; they must have identities, stories, rites and a place in our social calendar so that their natural presences can come alive for us even when they may not appear to be manifestly present. So too we must re-claim the landscape -: the wells, the mountains, the woodland glades where the gods have always been met with, where the sources of their stories are, just as they are within us, deep in our psychic DNA. We must find them too in the newer landscapes of our industrialised world, or find ways that we can relate to them in such landscapes, in their traditional forms, or in new forms for new places with perhaps different names for their different aspects. If we do these things together we may find them. And they will find us. So the Otherworld will be manifest in This world, and the two lands will be whole again.

ξ

In the Ancient World myths were stories about the gods and how things in the world came to be as they are. By now myth has a more widely embedded usage to mean anything that carries cultural significance but is not literally true, and so has the negative usage of something that it actually a lie. Avoiding this negative implication, myths are important signposts to what is meaningful for us. Many ancient myths survive as folklore which also contains a host of other material, from archetypal motifs through practical wisdom to specific cultural customs. Legends often contain elements of both of these grafted onto a record of an actual historical event, place or person which has long since been superseded by a good story. All of these can, and often have, become the stuff of literature as traditional oral tales become written tales and, in their turn, are incorporated into individually crafted narratives.

I want to look here at some examples of tales containing remnant myths, the significance having been forgotten while the form remains. This is often the case, but I think not always. When such tales contain mythic material it may be quite apparent rather than obscure. If folk tales containing elements of everyday wisdom, old social customs also more significantly contain psychological insights about our inner lives, the distinction between mythic and non-mythic may become difficult to discern.

While some of the tales that have come down to us originate in collected oral lore, many more have undergone a process of literary production and changed through a series of written adaptations. Where these are simply people recording versions of traditional tales it might be that this is no different from the changes or nuances oral tellers might introduce for particular audiences or to suit changing times. Basic story elements and motifs were often linked together to allow open-ended adaptations and tales of varying length. The practice of weaving different stories together into a longer literary production was widespread during the Middle Ages and is not entirely absent from later literature. So, even if the original tales

remain intact, their context and the effects of shaping by more sophisticated literary devices integrate and overlap what had previously been kept distinct and linked only as self-contained parts making up a single retelling of a tale.

Take, for example the medieval Welsh tales known as the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*. The character Rhiannon is regarded as a survival of an Iron Age Horse goddess. In one episode she is falsely accused of murdering her own son who has in fact been snatched away in the night. The women who were supposed to be watching him smear Rhiannon with blood from a puppy while she sleeps and leave the bones about her as evidence that she has devoured her own child. Like other episodes in these tales, this one has parallels elsewhere in folk and faërie narratives as well as in more obvious mythic material. Mabon, Son of Modron, is said to have been taken from his mother "when he was three nights old" in another tale known as Culhwch and Olwen. Reading the implications across to the closely related Mabinogi tales, this contextualises the relationship between Rhiannon and her son with that between Modron and Mabon, whose names are later versions of the Brythonic deities Matrona and Maponos. The mythic context of a divine son of a divine mother is therefore unmistakable. But the broader setting in this tale of a wife who is falsely accused of murdering her child occurs more widely in folk narratives and in the content of faërie tales even when its mythic context is less obvious. Not only does the woman lose her child, but she is maligned and has to undergo humiliation or punishment before her child is eventually returned to her.

We can construe this in mythic terms too, with an underlying symbolism of the seasonal cycle, but this is also one of the deeply embedded themes of folk narrative across many cultures which take on significance in different ways when told within particular cultural contexts. Then they take on resonance and power, as if their significance is dormant until they are enacted with other elements of universal folk narratives and the potential is realised. Like the gods they inhabit psychic space but manifest themselves in physical space in particular forms in particular places and take on identity in the stories we tell, so becoming literary characters embodying these themes in different and often more complex social settings.

As well as containing mythic themes, the universal motifs of folk narratives also contain elements of deep soul stuff, keys to personal journeys, initiatory experiences and perceptions of otherness. Sometimes they are simply agencies for other significant events in the story. So with Rhiannon's 'humiliation' at the horse block in the medieval story where she is forced to perform the penance of offering to carry visitors on her back like a horse until her eventual restoration of her son, supporting the mythic content and opening the way to it.

Consider, too, how the same theme is used incidentally in this way in Grimm's tale of the Six Swans (and its variants such as the Seven Ravens). Here six brothers have been turned into swans and the only way their sister can restore them to human form is to sew a shirt for each of them out of Star Flowers (Stitchwort?), or in some versions out of nettles. But she must also remain silent for the six years it will take her to do this. While undertaking this work she is discovered alone in the forest by a young king who marries her in spite of her unwillingness to say a word to anybody. She, too, then has her children snatched away and is falsely accused of killing them but cannot defend herself so is condemned to death. The tale concludes as follows:

When the time had elapsed, and the sentence was to be carried out, it happened that the very day had come round when her dear brothers should be set free; the six shirts were also ready, all but the last, which yet wanted the left sleeve. As she was led to the scaffold, she placed the shirts upon her arm, and just as she had mounted it, and the

fire was about to be kindled, she looked around, and saw six swans come flying through the air. Her heart leapt for joy as she perceived her deliverers approaching, and soon the Swans, flying towards her, alighted so near that she was enabled to throw over them the shirts, and as soon as she had done so, their feathers fell off and the brothers stood up alive and well; but the youngest was without his left arm, instead of which he had a swan's wing. They embraced and kissed each other, and the Queen, going to the King, who was thunderstruck, began to say, "Now may I speak, my dear husband, and prove to you that I am innocent and falsely accused;" and then she told him how the wicked woman had stolen away and hidden her three children. When she had concluded, the King was overcome with joy, and the wicked stepmother was led to the scaffold and bound to the stake and burnt to ashes.

The episode has differences of detail but a clear similarity of form with the Rhiannon story. If the mythic significance of this is less obvious it does touch something deep in its references to transformation across species and the working out of a number of folk tale motifs, including that of the falsely accused wife which is simply the last of a series of adversities which are resolved in the final scene.

So, too, with Rhiannon when her son, now named Pryderi ('care', 'anxiety') is restored to her and she is restored to her proper place in the court. But here is a difference. In the mythic tale it is necessary that the restoration is complete:

Pryderi, son of Pwyll Pen Annwn, was raised with care as was proper, until he became the most gallant youth and the handsomest and the best skilled in all worthy pursuits of any in those lands.

But in the folktale the human dimension of incomplete resolution prevails. The little touch of one unfinished shirt resulting in one brother retaining a swan's wing instead of an arm suggests that, for us, it never quite works out so neatly. As with the gods, so with us; but imperfectly so.

So we touch again the nature of the gods. In our stories about them they are like us, characters interacting as if living human lives. This must be so because we share our lives with them and must make a space for them in our narratives of their activities. But we should not take their stories too literally. They move between our world and theirs, or inhabit both simultaneously. Interpolated as these worlds are, they are also distinct. The gods have their beings, their own ways of relating with each other, and their diverse ways of manifesting themselves in the world, in our stories about them and symbolically in the shades of varying significances they bring into our lives. Though we insist on their absolute distinctiveness in our cultural experience of them, we must allow them an absolute fluidity in their transpositions, their human and their non-human identities, and the messages they convey to us. Polytheism is different from monotheism not just in the refusal of a single identity of deity, but also in the fact that its founding principles are not - like the laws given to Moses - written on stone, but in the running waters of the rivers and streams, the drifting vapours of the clouds, the falling of the rain, the drifting of the snow and also the hardness of the glacial ice. Which of these is the true identity of water? They all are. So it is with our gods.

#### FROM ARTIO TO ARTHUR: THE PATH TO CAERLEON

Nothing better represents the journey from myth to folklore, legend and literature than the medieval stories about King Arthur. His literary identity in these stories largely stems from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, though the poets and story tellers

who developed his story also seem to be drawing on other sources, perhaps, also available to Geoffrey.

The twentieth century poet and artist David Jones suggests, in a long essay on 'The Myth of Arthur', <sup>10</sup> that Arthur's origins might be found farther back in an Iron Age bear goddess. His appellation of Arthur as 'the Bear of the Island' conflates this sense of him as a warrior of wild-animal ferocity (a common feature of heroic poetry) with a sense of his origins as an actual bear deity. The discussion of him in the essay references Gaulish inscriptions of a male bear god Artaius and a female deity Artio and suggests that the bear might have been a totem animal for the earlier Gaulish tribes and that "the hero god may later have become associated with Arthur the man-hero". He notes that there other precedents for agricultural deities becoming gods of war, and that this was so for the early development of the Roman Mars. A bronze statue of the goddess Artio was much more recently shown in the exhibition 'The Celts' which toured Britain a few years ago. It has the inscription 'To the Goddess Artio, dedicated by Licinia Sabinilla'.



What is particularly interesting about this statue is that the exhibition catalogue notes that the human figure is a later addition and that the statue was originally just the bear figure<sup>11</sup>. The assumption is that the addition occurred when the statue was acquired for use in the Romanised Gaulish villa where it was found. This suggests that the original statue reflected an earlier practice of representing the deity in animal form, but that this was unacceptable to the romanised individual who acquired it so the human figure was added. The statue was found in northern Gaul. Inscriptions to the male god Artaius are recorded mainly in the south which was romanised earlier. One reads "to Holy and August Artaius".<sup>12</sup> Was there a male and female pair of bear deities or, as David Jones suggests, did one develop into the other? A shift, that is, from female to male and then on from animal to humanised deity.

If so, how might a bear goddess and god, recorded in epigraphy and iconography in Gaul, become the Arthur of British tradition? Clearly bear deities did not fit well with the tendency of the Romans to assimilate Celtic deities to their own pantheon, but these bear deities are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>David Jones 'The Myth of Arthur' in *Epoch and Artist* (Faber, 1959)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> CELTS: Art and identity Exhibition catalogue (British Museum, 2015)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>Inscription from Beaucroissant CIL 12, 02199, referencing Mercury together with Artaio dedicated by Sextus Genius Cupitus

attested and did survive Romanisation, at least for a time. So when a heroic figure resisting the Saxons is commemorated in the ninth century Welsh-Latin *Historia Brittonum* with the same 'Arth-' (bear) stem to his name, and as such a name is not common, it is worth asking where this name might have come from. It also the case that the name Arthur is attached to a figure in early folklore in Welsh which feeds into such literary manifestations as the tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, an Arthurian story which predates the appearance of Geoffrey of Monmouth's shaping of Arthur in his 'History'. Surveying early Arthurian literature in Welsh, O J Padel has written; "the Arthur of local legends and magical animals is the dominant one until the 12th century, when the military one becomes prominent". <sup>13</sup> This early Welsh Arthur was a leader of a group of rugged and often themselves magical individuals rather than a 'king'. Padel compares them variously to Robin Hood's band and the Fianna under Finn in Ireland. In this context it is easier to see how such a view of the emergence of Arthur from a bear deity, and such a representation of him, in some of David Jones' verse, as the Green Man or a chthonic Sleeping Lord, begins to make sense.

Arthur's continuing presence in folklore as a giant should also be borne in mind, as should the legend that his wife Gwenhwyfar was the daughter of a giant. This view of him seems to have easily survived his translation to the king of medieval romance and seems to be persistent from earlier traditions. It is reflected in many landscape features such as 'Arthur's Seat', suggesting a giant-sized occupant; there are many cromlechs, other megaliths and large rocks citing Arthur in their name or with a legend connecting him to them. Other members of Arthur's retinue such as Gawain are also credited with gigantic stature<sup>14</sup>. In *Culhwch and Olwen* the 'chief giant' Ysbaddaden Pencawr says that Arthur is one of his men although he is helping Culhwch to fulfil the task that Ysbaddaden has set for him. It is easy to see how a folklore giant who becomes human might later be portrayed as confronting or otherwise dealing with giants. Arthur's dog is called Cafall (horse) making it a suitable sized dog for a giant.

All of which underlines the metamorphic nature of mythic narratives, legends and folk memory. Though contexts and forms of representation might change, the underlying figure remains. The sequence "Bear - Goddess - God of the Soil - God of Weapons - Romano-British General - Christian King..." suggests that we make what we will of what has come down to us from the storehouse of our mythic life. It's a long way from bear deity/giant/chthonic-sleeper to the 'Dux Bellorum' of Roman Caerleon and then on to the 'king' of medieval romance. Many accretions have been accumulated on the way. The task, then, to conclude with David Jones: " ... is to make significant for the present what the past holds ..... this is the function of genuine myth, neither pedantic nor popularizing, not indifferent to scholarship, nor antiquarian, but saying always 'of these that thou hast given me have I lost none'." 15

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>O J Padel Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature (University of Wales Press, 2000)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup>William of Malmesbury mentions an outsize grave of Gawain in the 1120's. Many references to Arthur as a giant also occur in Chris Grooms *The Giants of Wales/Cewri Cymru* (Lampeter, 1993)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup>David Jones 'The Myth of Arthur' in *Epoch and Artist* (Faber, 1959)

#### WHO IS THE GATEKEEPER?

"Although is was said there was a gatekeeper at Arthur's court, there was not. But Glewlwyd Gafaelgar was there ...."

Owein: The Lady of the Well

A gatekeeper is an elusive character. He may not be a gatekeeper. He may only keep that gate on certain days of the year, or only on 1st January, the gateway to the year. He may deny entry to those for whom, elsewhere, he keeps their gate. Like Glewlwyd Gafaelfawr ('Bravegrey Mighty-grip'), who is the keeper of the gate (though not the keeper of the gate) of Arthur's hall in different tales, as when Culhwch comes calling in the tale of *How Culhwch Won Olwen* and the keeper of the gate in quite another hall where he refuses admittance to Arthur in the poem 'Pa Gur yw y Porthaur?' (Who is the Gatekeper?) unless he can prove the worth of his men. This is one of the many 'doublets' in the tale, mirroring a similar incident in a parallel episode elsewhere in the tale as if on the other side of a gate in another tale. He may also be the keeper of the gate for Wrnach the giant when Cei and Bedwyr come calling seeking the things Culhwch needs to wed Olwen, a detail which may be referenced in the poem 'Pa Gur yw y Porthaur?' where Cei's exploits "in Awarnach's hall" are alluded to when Arthur tells Glewlwyd of his heroic deeds. This would, of course, be an elaborate and circuitous joke in a tale which is noted for the burlesque humour of its teller, but it also embodies the double-sided nature of portals.

If we are puzzled, who should we ask? Manawydan fab Llyr is said to be deep in understanding and counsel when Arthur tells Glewlwyd of the qualities of his men. He, too, is a gatekeeper, remarking the door out of the otherworld fortress of Gwales which should not be opened until the occupants are ready to leave. He also watches the Portal through which both Rhiannon and Pryderi pass in the enchanted fortress which appears on Gorsedd Arberth, and keeps watch until he is able to bring them back into the world again. His representation in the *Mabinogi* as one who patiently bides his time and in *Triad 8* as "*Illedyv*" (humble, subdued) suggests one who waits to act at the appropriate time. Consider, too, the Irish tale of Mananaan mac Lir who meets Bran out on the sea as he is passing to the otherworld islands. Manannan says the sea is for him like a grassy plain as Bran passes in his boat through the rolling waves and Manannan sends him on his way.

Rachel Bromwich <sup>16</sup> thought that the two gatekeepers had been interchanged, and that Glewlwyd Gafaelfawr originally figured as the guardian of the fortress of Wrnach. She also suggests that the poem would therefore represent an earlier version of the episode of Cei and Wrnach.

#### **Otherworlds**

The Girl in Ogyrvan's Hall

I love a fair fort on the side of a hill where seagulls glide: there stands a shy girl.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Trioedd Ynys Prydein 2006 edition, p.362)

I yearn to be with her but she would not have me
Though I came on a white horse for her sweet mirth
To tell of the love that has overcome me
To lighten my darkness out of the gloom
To see her whiteness like the foam on the wave
Flowing towards us out of her realm,
Gleaming like snow on the highest hill.
To cool my vexation in Ogrvan's Hall
Unwilling to leave her (it would be my death)
My life-force is with her, my vitality ebbs
Like Garwy Hir\* my desire undoes me
For a girl I can't reach in Ogrvan's Hall.

After the Welsh of Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd (died 1170).

Ogrvan's Hall was identified by Sir John Rhŷs as a place in the Otherworld, occupied by the god that ruled over it. But there is also legend of a giant called Gogvran who was said to be the father of Gwenhywyfar who may, in turn, have been confused with [G]Ogyvran who occupied a fortress in Powys in the sixth century.

\*Garwy Hir was a legendary lover in Welsh tradition. His love affair with Creirwy is alluded to by other early poets though the details of their story is lost beyond the idea that she was 'the fairest maiden in the world' and, in one version of the Taliesin story, the daughter of Ceridwen. Garwy was enchanted by her and made helpless by the thought of her, as Hywel in the poem seems also to be by the unattainable girl in the otherworld fortress.

An ogyrven is also one of the divisions of the Awen (poetic inspiration) according to a poem in *The Book of Taliesin*. There may be no etymological connection between these names, but that Hywel (and others) should be inspired by a woman in Ogyrvan's Hall is surely a correspondence difficult to ignore!

#### The Otherworld and the Netherworld

Consider the stories from Greece about Hades and Persephone, which operate at the purely mythic level and Orpheus and Eurydice which enacts the same mythic pattern but sets it as a story about humans rather than gods. In the first Hades snatches Persephone away to his dark realm and her mother Demeter eventually manages to rescue her but only on the basis that she spends half the year in Hades and half in the world we know. This is a story about the gods and the turning of the seasons. Now consider the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. As with many Greek stories about interactions between the worlds, the human characters concerned have some divine ancestry but live as humans in our world. Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies so her husband Orpheus, a musician with divine gifts, one might say inspired by the *Awen* and so godlike in his nature, goes to the Land of the Dead and plays his music, charming Hades into releasing her, though the condition that he must not look back until they are both in the open air introduces a tragic dimension that is often a feature of the Greek stories. This feature often translates to an ironically comic view of human frailty as in the Roman Ovid's re-telling of the tale.

So what we have here is a basic myth of a goddess being snatched away by a god into his realm and her return being allowed for part of the year and a parallel story of a woman being taken into this realm and her release negotiated, though not successfully achieved. The story is different but the mythic pattern is the same. In Ireland this pattern occurs in the story of

Midhir and Etain. There are two versions of this story which echo the differences between the two Greek stories. In one they are both inhabitants of Tir na Nog (i.e. both gods) but in another version Etain is human and is carried off by Midhir, a king of the Tuatha de Danaan, after he tricks her husband and wins her in a game of chess. The cultural context here is very different and firmly embedded in the mythical history of Ireland. But, again, the mythic pattern is the same.

Celtic otherworlds may be in caves or under hills, beneath lakes or seas, or on far-away islands. The variety of location and context reveals a multi-layered inheritance in how these worlds are perceived and how they tend to fuse, in later literature, in a more generalised experience of Faery or, more trivially, Fairyland. In both these latter cases most often this is an inaccessible place that may be glimpsed but rarely visited though its inhabitants may well also inhabit our world. In an article about the Welsh name for the Otherworld, Bernard Mees and Nick Nicholas remark that "the Welsh name Annwfn ... suggests an etymological notion of an otherworld" 17. Suggested Brythonic origins of the name are \*an-dubnos ('notworld' or 'not-deep' [deep-notness?]) or \*ande-dubnos ('underworld' or 'under-deep'). Also discussed is a Gaulish word antumnos, used in calling upon Dis or Prosperpine and therefore suggesting a nether world of darkness rather than a paradisal parallel realm. The probable Greek origin of antumnos also suggests a dark, underworld location. The authors of the article find it unlikely that the supposed Brythonic term \*an-dubnos was used without knowledge of its associations with the Greek Underworld. This may imply that its later associations with the 'Hell' of Christian tradition is not entirely a later overlay. Rather, as Mees and Nicholas suggest "... the entrance of the term to early Brythonic might even be plausibly connected with the development of the dual nature of the Insular Otherworld and Graeco-Roman influence: paradisaical and ageless on the one hand, sinister and Stygian on the other."

In this view, it seems that the Brythonic Celts wanted it both ways, not wishing to abandon the idea of a blissful parallel dimension to their own world but also paradoxically seeing it as a dark Underworld where the souls of the dead reside. If the fabric of these alternatives appear to have little in common with each other this may be because, for us, ancestors and other-beings seem to require differently imagined locations. But do they?

In Britain the story exists in various folklore and literary versions including the Shetland ballad 'King Orfeo' and the Breton lay 'Sir Orfeo'. Both conceive of the place into which Orfeo's wife Heroudis is snatched as a domain of Faery. The confusion between this and the Land of the Dead is expressed ambiguously in these tales. 'King Orfeo' has the lines "The King of Faery with his dart/Has pierced your lady through the heart" possibly suggesting death but also, potentially, enchantment. 'Sir Orfeo' portrays the land that Orfeo enters as one where the folk who had been captured were "thoughte dede and nere nought" (seemed dead but were not) but a few lines further on "some dede and some awedde" (some dead and some mad). The mythic pattern of capture and release from the Otherworld may also be seen in the story of Rhiannon in the Third Branch of the Mabinogi tales where it is Manawydan who rescues her. Again the cultural context changes but the pattern remains. The medieval Welsh poem of 'The Girl in Ogyrfan's Hall', discussed above, I think gains much of its power from its concentration on just one aspect of this mythic pattern. The gods live in an Otherworld which is parallel to and connected to our world. The seasons come and go as the gods move between the worlds, life leaving the land and returning in due season. So that land is also the Land of the Dead, where the ancestors dwell, just as they also dwell

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup>Bernard Mees and Nick Nicholas in *Studia Celtica* XLVI (2012) pp.23->

in the landscape that we know, their embedded actions in shaping and naming the landscape and the memories of their lives, their spirits, their being here with us which is also there in the Otherworld where the cauldron of re-birth gives them new identity.

So the mythic world of the gods is also our world, the legendary world of those semi-divine or heroic figures who have visited that world also inhabit our own world, and so it is there for us too if we would see it. Or it is 'other' if we choose it to be so.

### 4. DFITIFS

#### **RIGANTONA AND MAPONOS**

Look at the coins of Gaulish and Brythonic tribes and you'll see that many of them feature a horse, sometimes in abstract form, on one face of the coin. Think too of the horse carved into the downs at Uffington in the Iron Age, and maintained ever since, the chalk showing through to make the figure visible from some distance. This too indicates the importance of the horse both literally and symbolically at this time. In Gaul the horse goddess Epona (literally 'Divine Horse') was worshipped. In Britain she was also associated with the goddess \*Rigantona ('Divine Queen'). We can back construct her name from the medieval Rhiannon whose son Pryderi shares a mytheme with Mabon son of Modron in being snatched away from his mother shortly after birth. Mabon and Modron are medieval form of Brythonic Maponos ('Divine Son') and Matrona ('Divine Mother'). Rigantona has been seen as "Matrona on horseback"\*, that is, the Mother Goddess of peoples who reared horses or for whom horses were a symbolically important part of their inherited culture.

The worship of Epona is generally thought of as being centred on Gaul though there are records of dedications in Roman Britain and elsewhere. There is, for example, a bronze statuette of her which is now in The British Museum. The statuette is about 7.5 centimetres high and features her sitting, but not on a horse as is most common, or on any other identifiable support, though she holds a yoke to identify her connection with horses and also some ears of wheat which is the other common feature of her depiction. On either side of her are ponies, a mare on her left and a stallion on her right, each face the wheatsheaf. The statuette is thought by the Museum to have been part of a chariot fitting.<sup>18</sup>

It is from depictions in stone, bronze and terracotta that we can gather most available evidence of the nature of her worship and her identifiable attributes. For the most part these date from between the First and the Third centuries and follow Graeco-Roman practice in depicting the gods iconographically in this way. We know she was one of the array of deities acknowledged in the Roman Empire with a feast day of 18th December assigned to her. But there is no surviving evidence of her specific depiction before the influence first of Greece and then Rome on the lands occupied by the Gauls. Although the main area in which these depictions are found is in Gaul, they are also found as far south as Spain, eastwards across Germany and as far as south-east as Bulgaria as well as in Britain. The range of her depictions and the emphases in different places have been usefully analysed by Kathryn Linduff<sup>19</sup>. The most common are those where she is mounted side-saddle and are mainly found in central and northern Gaul and in Germany. There is a sub-group among this type where she is accompanied by a foal found around the French town of Autun (Roman Augustodunum, Gaulish Bibracte) and also a few from this area where she is shown with a horse

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> C. M Johns British Museum Quarterly 36 (1971)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Katheryn M Linduff 'EPONA: A Celt Among the Romans' Latomus 38 pp 817-838 (1979)

on either side of her, either facing away from her (mainly along the Rhine) or towards her (examples from along the Danube, Italy, Spain and Britain).

So where does the connection with horses come into this? It has been pointed out that the area of Gaul where her worship is most strongly attested is also an area where horse breeding was prevalent and so a goddess of fertility would therefore be associated with the fertility of horses. Looking at her wider provenance it may also be significant that she was worshipped by horsemen of the Aedui tribe, recruited by Caesar as calvary officers in the Roman army and there is the incidental reference in Apuleius<sup>20</sup> which tells us that bouquets of roses were offered to her in stables. There is also the question of Rigantona as one of her manifestations in Britain, resulting in the medieval form of her name Rhiannon in the medieval Welsh tales in the Four Branches of Y Mabinogi. We know that several Brythonic tribes featured horses on their coinage seeming to indicate a long tradition of horse iconography in their culture. But we don't know how far back we can take the names Epona or Rigantona as a goddess in human form, or even if these earlier Iron Age peoples specifically regarded the goddess a horse rather than a deity in human form. But by the Roman period it is clear that Epona is not seen as a horse but, rather, always depicted in association with horses, either riding one (usually side-saddle) or having some equine trappings about her. The wheatsheaf is an equally common feature of her depiction and suggests a wider association with fertility and sustenance. Also to be considered is the role she plays in the concept of sovereignty. Her survival into medieval folklore and romance sets her astride her horse and stresses her otherworldly nature making her not so much a devotional subject as an active player in the cycle of fertility and the traffic between our world and the Otherworld. So are the stories of the gods told in literature in Britain and Ireland in the Middle Ages.

Going back to that statuette, it does, along with other depictions of her, seem to embody the idea that she takes human form while the appearance of horses of either sex facing each other across the wheatsheaf on her lap encompasses both aspects of fertility and abundance. She has a yoke on one side of her (or is it, as Anne Ross suggests, a snake?<sup>21</sup>) and a patera for offerings on the other. And yet her name is formed from the Brythonic word for horse - 'epo -' together with the suffix '-ona' signifying divinity. Clearly she is not, literally, to be thought of as a horse. But her horse nature seems more than a simple matter of association. This is attested both by historical and personal testimony. In a detailed consideration of the horsenature of Epona, Laura Oaks identifies this as a developed attribute in her iconography from the Aedui tribe of horse warriors. She suggests that "the cult need not have been confined to equestrian economics" and also notes evidence of her association with maternal deities, healing, sacred springs and the underworld<sup>22</sup>. In the sacred precinct of Altbachtal in Trier she is depicted on her pony with a fruit basket. An inscription identifies the adherence of a local guild within the town<sup>23</sup>. Miranda Green regards the presentation of her by classical authors as simply a horse goddess as superficial and outlines "a far more profound set of beliefs" following a closer look at her iconography<sup>24</sup>. She cites examples of her depiction at healing springs where she appears in the guise of a water nymph and in a cemetery where she

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Apuleius *The Golden Ass* Trans. Robert Graves (Penguin ,1950) p.92

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Anne Ross Pagan Celtic Britain (1967) p.224

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Laura S Oaks 'Epona' in *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire* ed. M Henning & A King pp77-84 (1986)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> E. M. Wightman *Roman Trier and the Treveri* p.217 (1970)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Miranda Green *Celtic Goddesses* British Museum p. 185 (1995)

appears to be leading a follower to the after life. She is conflated with the *Deae Matres* - referred to as 'Eponas' at one site in Burgundy and depicted as a triple image at another in Moselle. Miranda Green concludes that Epona was not herself a horse, "However she was, in a real sense, identified through her equine imagery and the message of her concerns was conveyed by the constant presence of the animal in her iconography"<sup>25</sup>. This is an example of the need to merge the frames of the literal the perceptual and the mythical in order to find a language (visually or in words) to address or speak of the gods. It's something we now find very difficult to do. 'A horse -v- Not a horse' gets us nowhere. To be able to hold both propositions at once approaches a necessary way of seeing across such a linear axis stepping aside from the straight road onto, in the words from one tale of the goddess on horseback, to the winding path "across the ferny brae".

Epona, then, was a multi-faceted goddess whose horse nature was expressed in different ways in different aspects of her worship in different geographical and social contexts. The same can also be said about different ways that Rigantona appears as Rhiannon in the medieval Welsh tales and elsewhere in later folklore. Take, for example, the discussion of her primitive origins by Patrick Ford. He asserts that her son Pryderi " is a divine hero, his father was lord of the otherworld. In Celtic tradition, the lord of the other world is preeminently the sea god. When he mates with the Great Queen, he partake of her characteristic shape, which is equine." Ford's argument shows that this mythic theme works it way out in different narrative sequences in the *Mabinogi* tales. The tales also show their main characters moving between the other world and our world, again in different narrative sequences articulating the transactions between the worlds in various ways in terms of later story themes. These are not, Ford insists, barely understood fragments of folklore and myth but elements woven into the stories told by narrators who are aware of their mythic significance and who are consciously presenting events from a past time when things were different from the times in which the tales were put together as medieval stories.

For another example consider Rhiannon in terms of other significant women who are said to have refused husbands chosen for them by their fathers as in the stories about the Welsh Ffraid and Melangell. Rhiannon's story is different as she came from her world to claim a husband she wanted for herself rather than the one her father had arranged for her. (We might also note that arranged marriages in the medieval Welsh tales – such as those between Matholwch and Branwen or between Lleu and Blodeuwedd – do not go well). In the case of the wooing of Pwyll by Rhiannon the refusal of an obedient role goes further. The story-teller makes a point of telling us that she "drew back the part of her head dress that should cover her face and fixed her gaze upon him"27. That is, she should keep her face covered by a veil but ignores this convention to speak directly to Pwyll and make a proposal of marriage to him. In societies where high status women are expected to maintain a standard of modesty this would be considered wanton behaviour. Rhiannon's subsequent arranging of events during the wedding feast and the defeat of her unwanted spouse Gwawl similarly sees her taking charge of proceedings. In spite of choosing Pwyll as her husband she is quite able to tell him "never has man been more stupid than you" after Gwawl has tricked him. Clearly she is a woman who must be deferred to.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> ibid p.187

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Patrick K Ford 'Prolegomena to a Reading of The Mabinogi' in *Studia Celtica* 16-17 (1981/2)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> The Mabinogion ed. Sioned Davies Oxford (2007) p.10

Later in the tale, after the birth of her son who is spirited away in the night, she is apparently less able to direct affairs. But rather than challenge the lies of the attendants who accuse her of killing the child, she chooses to accept the penance of offering to carry visitors from the horse block. She retains here, in spite of being 'punished' a stubborn independence until her son is restored to her by Teyrnon. There is a parallel to this in the third of the four Mabinogi tales where she re-appears as an older woman and this time it is her son Pryderi who suggests to Manawydan, following their return from Ireland and from the enchanted island of Gwales, that he should marry Rhiannon. This time she agrees to her son's proposal. But things soon go wrong. The consequences of her earlier manipulation of events now bring about the revenge of a spell cast over the land of Dyfed after she marries Manawydan as a result of which both she and Pryderi are taken back into Annwn and must remain there until Manawydan takes control of events and gets them released and the spell over Dyfed lifted.

The question here is why does Rhiannon, who proved herself so assertive and resourceful in the first tale, allow herself to be married to Manawydan and then captured by going into the enchanted fort in spite of Manawydan's advice that she should not go into it? There seems to be a set of contraries here. Pwyll has established himself as Lord of Annwn when he sits on the hill of Gorsedd Arberth. The gates of the other world are open to him and Rhiannon rides through them on her pale white steed. She brings a tang of her world into our world. In the later tale, although there is a spell on the land, it can be regarded as being disenchanted. The land has become as it was before it was settled. A blanket of mist falls and when it clears "where they had once seen flocks and herds and dwelling places, they could now see nothing at all." The land has become "desolate, uninhabited, without people ... only the four of them remained."28 Once Rhiannon and Pryderi have also been spirited away, only Manawydan and Pryderi's wife Cigfa remain. Rhiannon came out of the Otherworld and has now returned to it. In the first tale she was temporarily removed from events by the penance of the horse block. In the later tale she is removed from Dyfed into captivity and must wear an ass's collar. Her withdrawal to her horse nature - which is always implicit - a sense of wildness and the uncanny, is reflected in the wildness of the land.

If she is to return it is up to Manawydan to bring her back just as Teyrnon brought her back from the horse block penance. Manawydan does this by capturing a creature from Annwn (a pregnant woman who has shape-shifted into a mouse) and skilfully negotiating with disguised emissaries. So Rhiannon returns and the land is restored to its former state, reshaped as a settled land which people can inhabit again. In both cases her return restores things to how they should be. The tale stresses not the return of natural life so much as the domestic order which brings the harvest. We can think here of the wildness of the horse goddess now with us again in human form: the figure holding the wheat sheaf in those depictions of Epona. When she is absent there is disruption, discord, vacancy. If in that first lifting of her veil she displayed her wildness and broke a taboo, once she was in the world it was not complete without her.

## **MAPONOS**

'The Oldest Animals' is an episode in the medieval Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, in which each animal is consulted by Arthur's men in an attempt to find Mabon. Here is my verse presentation of each animal:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> ibid. p.37

The Ousel of Cilgwri did not know Though she had pecked at an anvil each day She had lived and over the years Had worn it away so long was her life.

So she took them to the *Stag of Redynfre*Who did not know though he had watched
An oak grow from a sapling which now
Was a withered stump, so he took them to

The *Owl of Cwm Cowlyd*, who would tell if she knew But though she had watched three forests Rise and fall and her wings were stumps She did not know, but she took them to

The Eagle of Gwernabwy who was so old That the rock from which he once pecked the stars Was now less than the height of a man But he had not heard tell of Mabon

Once, though, he had caught the *Salmon of Llyn Llyw* Who dragged him under the water And would have drowned him, but they made a truce. So they went to the *Salmon of Llyn Llyw* 

The Salmon was so old that he remembered The dungeon of Mabon at the Caer Loyw So Arthur besieged it and rescued Mabon Son of Modron from out of the darkness into the light.

The tale has Arthur's men searching for Mabon so that Culhwch can meet the demands of the giant Ysbaddaden Pencawr in order to marry his daughter Olwen. It is said he is a great hunter and later in the tale he takes part in the hunt for the great boar Twrch Trwyth to fulfil another of the giant's demands.

So here we have a medieval tale drawing upon a a traditional folktale linked to a name that can be shown to be a development of the name of a Brythonic deity. The tale also recounts that Mabon was taken from his mother shortly after birth and that no-one now knows where he is. In Culhwch and Olwen the tale of Mabon is inserted into the narrative which is made up of a string of different folktale motifs, and he is released by Arthur to forward the plot of that story. But the motif also occurs elsewhere in different contexts, one of which is the story of Rhiannon whose son Pryderi is also snatched away soon after birth. Rhiannon has been recognised as an aspect of Matrona ('Divine Mother') whose son is Maponos ("Divine Son'). Her name in the medieval tales is Modron which, following established patterns of change, is a development from Brythonic Matrona. So the story of the god Maponos has survived from mythology into different folktale motifs which were themselves then variously shaped into literary forms by the medieval Welsh storytellers. We can deduce that part of his story is that he was taken as a young child into the Otherworld and eventually released by the agency of a rescuing power. In Culhwch and Olwen this power is ascribed to Arthur but also to the ancient animals, which introduces a different folktale motif into the mix. In the Mabinogi stories of Rhiannon, her child Pryderi is brought back by Teyrnon who has brought him up after rescuing him as a baby from the clutches of an Otherworld monster. But the

motif is repeated in different form in a later story in which both Rhiannon and the adult Pryderi are enchanted into the Otherworld and brought back by Manawydan who has replaced Pwyll as Rhiannon's husband.

The universal mythological narrative of the goddess whose child (who might be male or female) is abducted and then returned is here given literary form in a number of ways, each of which express aspects of the mythology of Maponos. That he was also a hunter is also referenced in *Culhwch and Olwen* as in depictions of Maponos from ancient times. Or, in the *Book of Taliesin (38)*, a great warrior who can come to the aid of the tribe: *Gogyfarch Vabon o arall vro* (Call upon Mabon from the Other Realm) where it appears that Maponos is being invoked as an otherworld warrior who can join the warrior band and ensure victory.

As well as being the Divine Son of Divine Mother he is also the embodiment of music and poetry, playing the Harp of Time

#### **Telyn Mabon**

Bum tant yn telyn Lletrithawc naw blwydyn -\*-I was a string in a harp Enchanted for nine years

Taliesin: Kat Godeu

Nine years of enchantment the awen sang, Rang from the string of the harp I became Or which became me as I heeded the song The harp, the harpist and the harp-string as one.

The Awen was on me, within me, around me
The sounds of Rhiannon's birds singing out clear
The flow of the music and the flowing of time
Entwined and was still yet they moved through the air.

Time and not-time were fused in our song Both World and Not-world keeping their part The span of the days and the moons and the suns Caught in the span of the strings of the harp.

It was Mabon who played then in the youth of the World Though the music reached out , eternally young Stretching forward in time to suns yet untold The god, the awenydd and the harp as one.

He brings the music of the world out of silence into the sights and sounds of Summer. His is the bright step into the eternal present of Now, the act of Being, the vitality of youth grown to manhood. He is simultaneously the Divine Youth, the ever-young, and one whom only the most ancient of the ancient creatures of the world can remember The stories of Mabon enact on the plane of human narrative the mythology of Maponos moving between Time and Not-Time, between Light and Darkness, between Music and Silence, between Thisworld and Annwn.

He plucks the strings the harp or the lyre as he twangs the string of his bow to bring inspiration or show the way for a seeker after the mysteries. As Mabon he takes the razor from between the ears of the boar Twrch Trwyth for the giant Ysbaddaden to be shaved so Culhwch can wed Olwen. As Pryderi he hunts a shining white boar which leads him into an otherworld caer. Manawydan - 'wise of counsel' - does not follow but finds a way to bring him back. These then reflect the rites of departure and beckoning as we welcome him once more onto the path of discovery, of life, and all its mysteries which are his to reveal.

So he may walk the plains of Summer in our world, bringing it alive with each vibration of the strings of his harp, or he may be sought for through a seer, an *awenydd* or one who walks the paths between the worlds. An inscription in Gaulish found in a sacred spring at Chamelières calls upon him thus:

Maponos of the Deep, Great God I come to you with this plea: Bring the powers of the Otherworld To inspire those who are before thee.<sup>29</sup>



Lead tablet with Gaulish inscription to MAPONOS from Chamelières

He may come, once again, into the world to inspire us, to touch the strings of his harp riding the particles of silence behind him as they touch the waves of sound that rush through the world like the song of the Birds of Rhiannon over the waves of the sea and on every zephyr that touches the trees of the world. So we shape these words to call upon him:

Maponos: we sense your call

From the silence of the Deeps beyond our world

Maponos: Matrona remembers her child

Whom we bring to her with this wish for your coming

Maponos: You are the seed of Summer

Dwelling in darkness and springing into light

Maponos: we hear your harp-song

As the Sun rides high in the Midsummer sky.

The Romans associated Maponos with Apollo, so consider how god identities might shift. He

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup>The Gaulish text of the Chamelières Tablet is given in *The Celtic Heroic Age* ed. John Koch & John Carey (Aberysywyth, 2003) where a word by word interpretation is also given. The four-line verse above is based on that.

is the *Awen*, youth transforming itself to the fullness of age but remaining ever young, the inspiration and the expiration of the Muse and he plays his music in what seems like an endless day:

## **Maponos**

Awenau hear me aid my song
As I write of the one who is ever young:

Maponos, the son of Matrona – Mabon Who from Modron was taken out of the light of the World

Into the darkness of unWorld he was Maponos and not-Maponos When the darkness held him and he held the darkness about him.

Matrona – who is Being – searched but he was in not-Being; She was in every place in the World but he was in not-World,

So she went there, and Being was not, and light faded from World.

. .

Who was it held the key to release them? Many stories

Tell of heroes in the spring of World: Manawydan breaking the spell That lies on the land for Rhiannon and Pryderi to return,

Cei and Bedwyr riding the salmon to find Mabon and bring Arthur To release him from Caerloyw out of the darkness into the light.

. .

O Awenau, he is the one who holds the harp, the lute, the lyre,

He is the one who contains your song, He is the muse of Fire!

#### **LUGOS**

Lleu Llaw Gyffes .... is that Lugos?

The character Lleu Llaw Gyffes in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi tales, has been associated with the Irish god Lug(h) and therefore the pan-Celtic god Lugos. Linguistically the name 'Lleu' cannot have developed from the Irish 'Lug' and can only have developed from Brythonic 'Lugos', so if we can indeed associate Lleu with Lugos, this is a direct development from Brythonic and not due to influence from medieval Irish tales. Ideally to make the connection with Lugos we would wish to have other evidence as well as the *Mabinogi* story. One possible source of additional confirmation is the *Gododdin*. This early Welsh poem is a series of elegies for warriors of the Gododdin tribe, mostly centred around the attack on Catraeth in northern England where many of them were slain. But the whole poem is not a connected narrative of that battle and some elegies concern other conflicts, in particular the part of the poem which is considered the earliest and which preserves most vestiges of Old Welsh in the Middle Welsh into which it was copied. This is also the most difficult part to interpret and is not included in all modern editions, but these three lines occur in the translation by John Koch <sup>30</sup>:

The rock of Lleu's tribe,
the folk of Lleu's mountain stronghold
at Gododdin's frontier ....

Unlike the verses which deal with an attack to the south, these lines refer to a defence of the territory on its northern edge facing across the Firth of Forth towards the lands of the Picts. The identification of Lleu here is also supported in a discussion of these lines by T M Charles Edwards <sup>31</sup>, but other translations of these lines treat 'lleu' as meaning something like 'open ground' so, as often with the interpretation of early Welsh poetry, there is a lack of absolute clarity. But if the Gododdin (the Brythonic tribe known by the Romans as the Votadini) did think of themselves as 'Lleu's tribe', then this would supply some confirmation to the identification of Lleu with Lugus in the Mabinogi tale.

If so, what significance does the narrative of that tale have in terms of the mythos of the god Lugus, and is there anywhere else we might look for Lleu?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup>John Koch's translation of *The Gododdin* is given in *The Celtic Heroic Age* ed. Koch and Carey (Aberystwyth, 2003)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup>T M Charles Edwards. Wales and the Britons, 350-1064, (Oxford, 2013)

In Ireland there are many stories about Lug spanning many centuries. In some of these stories he is a god, in others he is mortal. In different versions of The Tain he is either the father of Cuchulainn or his otherworld persona/protector, even taking on his appearance and fighting for him when he is injured. In one of the earlier stories about him he acts in conjunction with the sovereignty goddess of Ireland to confer authority on a king spirited away to an otherworld fortress. By contrast in Wales there are few references to Lleu and only one extended narrative in which he obviously features. As both Lleu and Lug must derive separately from the earlier Lugos, rather than one being derived from the other, it seems that any mythos from earlier times also developed separately in the lore and derived literature in each language. Before looking at the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi tales it is worth noting one other narrative where he might appear. The tale of Lludd and Llefelys included in the 'Mabinogion' collection usually appears in translation with the second of those two names spelt, as here, with an 'f' to indicate the 'u' of the medieval manuscript i.e.: Lleuelys. But the letter 'u' can also indicate an 'ei' sound (as in Lleu and Lludd). So there is some reason to suggest that the first part of Lleuelys could be Lleu's name. Both Patrick Ford and John Koch have suggested this on the basis of a comparison by George Dumezil<sup>32</sup> of the tale of Lludd and Lleuelys with the Irish tale of The Second Battle of Mag Tuiredh where the equivalent characters are Nuadu and Lugh with the proposed derivation of both sets of names from Nodens and Lugus. In this analysis Brythonic Nodens becomes Welsh Nudd and then Lludd while Lugus becomes Lleu in the Mabinogi tales and Lleuelys in the tale of Lludd and Lleuelys where Lleuelys uses his great skill to ward off the three plagues that are oppressing the Island of Britain.

What of Lleu's story in the *Mabinogi*? Here we have a more creatively shaped artefact. Can we extract the mythos of a god from the accidentals of a literary tale? His 'steady hand' with a spear, his skill with crafts , the circumstances of his birth and the ability to shape-shift after his 'death' all seem to stem from a divine nature. Like Pryderi (and Mabon) he is separated from his mother soon after birth and, also like Pryderi, he soon grows to the stature of a youth many years older than his age. But unlike Pryderi he is not re-united with his mother and has to shape an identity for himself without her help, or even the help of a surrogate mother. His uncle Gwydion aids him by both subterfuge and magical arts. In fact Gwydion acts as much as his father as his uncle. Like the relationship between Cuchulainn and Lug, the relationship between Lleu and Gwydion is both one of common family and one which spans the borders of the supernatural and the natural worlds.

Lleu has to 'become' himself with the aid of Gwydion with whom he shares the characteristics of a shape-shifter. Perhaps we can identify both Gwydion and Lleu as aspects of Lugos, differentiated in the medieval narrative but each an expression of the god in a different guise. In the first part of the tale, before Lleu is born, Gwydion is a powerful wizard who uses his magic negatively to trick Pryderi and help his brother to rape Goewin, but he himself is subject to the magic of Math who transforms the brothers into a series of animals who mate with each other and bear children as punishment for their transgression. Later Math and Gwydion seem to work as one to aid Lleu. Here their use of magic might seem more positive, but if we see Lleu and Gwydion as expressions of one identity, it could also been seen as reflexive magic worked to shape an identity as well as to conjure a wife out of flowers. This is the work of a trickster. Later, when Lleu has been pierced by Gronw's spear, apparently fulfilling the complicated conditions for his death, he does not actually die but shape-shifts into an eagle, while the sovereignty of his lands passes for a time to Gronw. When Gwydion tracks him down and rescues him he chants a series of englyns which are regarded as older than the tale that contains them, or at least have retained older linguistic features from an earlier version. These are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup>Patrick K Ford *The Mabinogi and other Medieval Welsh Tales* (UCP, 1977) *Celtic Culture an Historical Encyclopaedia* ed. J. Koch (ABC-Clio, 2006).

further spells of becoming, bringing Lleu back into the world. Lleu sitting as an eagle in the oak tree with his flesh falling from him is resonant with the sacrifice of Odinn 'himself to himself' if we see Gwydion and Lleu as a unified pair. We might, in comparing this tale with Lludd and Lleuelys, see Gwydion and Lleu as Nodens and Lugos. Or should we say, however they are differentiated elsewhere, their locus in Lugos in this tale is clear? Lleu returns to the human world, like Gwydion before him, after being cast out of it, only to throw the spear from his steady hand to kill Gronw and win back sovereignty of his lands. Here the mytheme of the Summer and the Winter kings seems to be shadowing the plot of the literary narrative. Consider that in the Irish story Lugh takes over from Nuadu in the fight against the Fomorian Balor, the mythological pattern and the story details equally served by the transfer of power.

So there are a number of mythical elements woven into the tale. But it is also a story shaped by a human narrator who creates lives for his characters that engage the human listeners in events that also appear to be about human characters. If the gods are present in such a tale they are so as living presences rather than the formal functions of Dumezil's analysis. Which is not to say that Dumezil is wrong, just that if the gods are alive for us they cannot be tied down to a schema but must live lives as varied and as arbitrary as our own. They will then appear not as idealised forms but as individuals with characteristics that may range from the honourable to the despicable. They may shape-shift between appearances and appear to us in a variety of guises and their relationships to each other slide from siblings to cousins to parents in different stories about them, though their mythos, which is their defining story, remain the same.

In *Celtic Heritage* Alwyn and Brinley Rees discuss the births of gods and semi-divine heroes. They note that in early societies births usually occur within carefully arranged marriages to ensure either material gain or the promotion of dynastic alliances. In contrast, the births of gods and heroes are often the result of impulsive liaisons, obsessive attractions, incest, trickery, coercion or rape. They cite a number of examples in the Irish tradition. Similar parallels occur in early Welsh tales.

According to Geoffrey of Monmouth Arthur is born as the result of a liaison between Uther Pendragon and Ygerna arranged by Merlin who disguises Uther so that he looks like her husband. The later story of Arthur being hidden away until he is older is also a common theme in many of these begettings. Pryderi is brought up by Teyrnon and his wife, growing unusually quickly to maturity, until being returned to Pwyll and Rhiannon. Pwyll had married Rhiannon after her sudden mysterious appearance, though not without first having to contend with trickery from a rival and respond with trickery of his own to ensure his marriage. Culhwch falls in love with Olwen, a giant's daughter, at the very mention of her name without even seeing her. In the fourth Mabinogi Math marries Goewin, his maiden foot-holder, after her rape by his nephew. We apparently hear no more of the results of this marriage as the tale then takes a different turn. Or does it? Might the strange births of Lleu and Dylan from Aranrhod be linked to the supposedly unrelated events in the earlier part of the tale? Aranrhod claims she is a virgin and the father of the children is not identified. Gwydion, Lleu's uncle, takes on the role of a father to him. But an alternative source<sup>33</sup> suggests that Gwydion is actually his father. Furthermore, two separate references by medieval bards<sup>34</sup> indicate an alternative tradition that Aranrhod was the maiden foot-holder of Math rather than Goewin who is otherwise unknown in Welsh tradition. This may be

<sup>33.</sup> Discussed by Ian Hughes in his edition of Math uab Mathonwy (Cardiff, 2000)

<sup>34</sup> ibid.

because they knew a variant of the oral tale which the author of the *Mabinogi* used as a source for the written stories, or because the author of the written work did not maintain every detail from the oral tradition. In the written story, Gwydion helps his brother Gilfaethwy, who is infatuated with Goewin, to rape her. But if Gwydion is Lleu's father, and it is Math's niece Aranrod who is his foot-holder, then it must be Gwydion who fathers the child upon her. This could explain his later relationship with Lleu and also Aranrhod's unwillingness to have anything to do with either of them.

Gwydion is Aranrhod's brother and although, in the genealogy of this tale, she is one of the children of Dôn, in another genealogy given in *Triad 359*, she is the daughter of the ancestor god Beli. So there is the not uncommon tangle of relationships between gods and other characters in mythic narratives. But there is, here, also the basis for an emerging myth of origins. In an essay on this topic<sup>35</sup> John Carey suggests that the motif of Goewin as a virgin in whose lap Math rests his feet, represents the transition from a 'Golden Age' before sexual procreation, but her rape in the story and the fact that Math subsequently marries her represents the transition to sexual procreation. I found this unconvincing when I read it originally, particularly as Goewin was not a sufficiently prominent character to carry such a significant role. But such an interpretation begins to make more sense if it is Aranrhod who does so. Lleu would then be the result of an incestuous liaison between two of the children of Dôn, created within a family of divinities, so also divine. That he should later be married to a woman of flowers and have to contend for her with a rival also introduces a mytheme that that places him as a god of the turning year, though this may be a case of bringing together different mythic elements into the same tale.

But his conception could also represent a transition within the divine family to sexual procreation. The conflict between suitors that this potentially introduces, and the possibility of an introduction of a partner from outside the divine family, brings further implications into play. Having discovered otherness the desire for a particular other becomes paramount regardless of the consequences. The gods, in mixing with humans, not only blur the boundaries between their world and ours, and in so doing come closer to us, but also bring about liminal identities for characters that seem to inhabit both worlds. In Ireland Lug appears in some stories as a god but in others as human. The character, behaviour and allegiances of such characters may sometimes be suspect. Characters like Gwydion in the fourth Mabinogi do not adhere to restraints on their behaviour that would be required for humans though in the story he is punished by Math for the rape of Goewin. Gods may be amoral but may still be represented in tales as humans whose moral behaviour has to be accounted for. The nature of Lleu's birth, the complicated conditions necessary for his death and the fact that he is able to be re-born after taking the shape of an eagle all imply a divine rather than a human identity. Gods, when they appear in stories, can take many forms, sometimes as direct human expressions of a god's nature, sometimes as a character possessed by a god and sometimes as a god in disguise.

#### **NODENS**

This section relies less on historical attestations and academic investigation than previous sections. But there are a number of ways that data from historical sources, folklore and archaeology link into my personal insights.

<sup>35. &</sup>quot;A British Myth of Origins?" History of Religions 31: 24-38. 1991

There is a temple of Nodens above the River Severn at Lydney, facing across the river from the western side and the eastern edge of the Forest of Dean. The temple was constructed quite late in the Roman occupation of Britain and so would have been thoroughly Romanised in its practice though dedicated to a Brythonic god Nodens who has survived in the folklore record variously as Nudd, Lludd and Lud. There are a number of landscape features in the forest containing the element 'Lyd-' which I once spent some time pursuing on foot. This area between the rivers Severn and Wye, and westwards into the old forest of Wentwood, was known as 'Gwent Is-Coed' ('Gwent below the Forest') and, according to the first Mabinogi story featuring Rhiannon and Pryderi, Gwent Is-Coed was the domain of Teyrnon who rescues Pryderi after he had been snatched as a baby from Rhiannon by a creature who is also intent on stealing a foal from his stable every May Eve. Teyrnon eventually returns Pryderi to Rhiannon, ending her penance at the horse block for allegedly murdering her son. He is one of four fathers for Pryderi alongside his other foster-father Pendaran Dyfed, his biological father Pwyll Pen Annwn and, when he is an adult, his virtual step-father Manawydan. We have seen that Pryderi is an analogue of Mabon, Divine Son of Matrona, so it is appropriate for a character who is based on a god whose identified descent is matrilineal that his fatherhood should be more diversely identified. Whether we are to regard each of these fathers as aspects of one divine figure, or different expressions of male partners for the Divine Mother, it is instructive to note that the name Teyrnon as been derived from Brythonic Tigernonos ('Divine King'), an appropriate partner for Rhiannon whose Brythonic origin in Rigantona ('Divine Queen') suggests that they should be placed together. Consider, too, that an early version of a triad(36 which predates the Mabinogi story claims that Pendaran Dyfed was the original owner of the Otherworld pigs that Pryderi loses to Gwydion in the fourth Mabinogi and so might be conflated with Pwyll Pen Annwn who was in later versions said to be the recipient of the pigs from Annwn. Finally consider that Manawydan has been associated with the Irish sea god Manannan, in spite of himself having no apparent maritime characteristics in the Welsh sources, but may also be conflated with Pendaran as he also becomes a lord of Dyfed when he marries Rhiannon.

It is my intuition that we can we regard each of these characters as expressions of Nodens and that he is a sea god whose temple at Lydney overlooks the lower reaches of the River Severn where it broadens to the sea and where the phenomenon known as as the 'Severn Bore' causes the river to reverse its downwards flow and rush back upon itself with the incoming tide. This, it has been suggested, is an explanation for the epithet 'Twrf Lliant' which may mean 'thundering waters' and is attached to Teyrnon's name. That is, the wooded domain of Teyrnon by the tidal Severn, where the temple of Nodens is located, the land of Dyfed much further west — the domain variously of both Pendaran and Pwyll and later of Manawydan — might all be earthly locations for characters who carry the mythology of Nodens, though not explicitly of the sea. If all of these have their origins in earlier folklore based on even earlier mythology, there is also a much later folktale in Welsh which tells of a character called 'Nodon' who was lord of the vast plain which now lies under the sea between Wales and Ireland. The tale tells that a healing well was kept for him by a well maiden called Merid, whose violation caused the land to be flooded. This is clearly a variant on the story of Mererid and the drowning of Cantre'r Gwaelod recorded in The Black Book of Carmarthen. But this story refers to a much larger area than the lands of Gwyddno Garanhir and is ruled by a character who is clearly Nodens.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup>"And Pryderi son of Pwyll Pen Annwfn, who tended the pigs of Pendaran Dyfed in Glyn Cuch in Emlyn." (*Trioedd Ynys Prydain*, No. 26)

Consider that flooded plain in the context of the words in the second Mabinogi where Bran crosses to Ireland: "... the sea was not wide then and Bran waded across the two rivers Lli and Archan. It was later that the sea flooded across the realms between." Legends reflecting the historical raising of the sea levels in earlier times also carry mythological significance. Bran is Manawydan's brother and is portrayed as a giant because of his characteristics in the Mabinogi, though he is never specifically referred to as a giant. The two brothers are clearly beings from the mythos as well as characters in the story, and if we can associate them with the sea, as we can their Irish counterparts, and the sea as a primordial place of origins, and Nodens as the Sea God, then those who are related to him as brother, sister, child or alter-ego — god relationships are fluid — can also be seen as having their identity not as 'equivalents' or syncretised deities but as springing from a source in the primordial deep, manifesting now perhaps as Annwn, or the deep place of origins, in the keeping of Gwyn 'son' of Nudd or Nodens; or the legendary dimensions of Gwent Is-Coed or Dyfed. When there is an enchantment on Dyfed in the third Mabinogi, and both Rhiannon and Pryderi are taken back to the Otherworld, that land becomes wild and uncultivated as it would have been before people lived in it. When Manawydan brings them back the land returns to its cultivated state and the people who live on the land have also returned. Just as the gods move between the worlds, and bring their world into our world, so they also make our world what it is, a place we can inhabit when the gods as cultural beings are with us, but we are also reminded of their primordial origins and that other place which the sea washing over the land also represents. What is given may also be taken away. A salutary reminder for our times.

# 5. AWENYDDION

Nine Songs for the Awen

Nine songs to the plucked strings of the harp For the Awen are sung; A tenth when the Awen sings Where the silent harp is strung.

The awenydd calls and the walls of the world are unwoven for a while; the chosen path winds through them

Where no track may be discerned, the trail meanders revealing soon an unsealing of the senses

Perceiving in the interstices of the wind, in the strings of the harp, the songs of Rhiannon's birds:

Voices singing not in words, or phrases but in music that swings silently between the staves.

Blackbird's song is sweeter than any as is Lark's high trilling rising and thinning to otherwhere

And deeper in Heron's creak, Raven's cronk, Owl's shriek and Nightjar's churr through the chink in the night

Opening the way through to a quietness of unspoken words unerringly spelled out to the unhearing

Awenydd who receives the revelation of a voice that once it has spoken feels so intensely a sense

Of an apparent presence, no echo but a tangible companion to accompany a life of devotion.

In the 12th century Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) wrote

"There are certain persons in Cambria, whom you will find nowhere else, called Awenyddion, or people inspired; when consulted upon any doubtful event, they roar out violently, are rendered beside themselves, and become, as it were, possessed by a spirit. They do not deliver the answer to what is required in a connected manner; but the person who skilfully observes them, will find, after many preambles, and many nugatory and incoherent, though ornamented speeches, the desired explanation conveyed in some turn of a word: they are then roused from their ecstasy, as from a deep sleep, and, as it were, by violence compelled to return to their proper senses. After having answered the questions, they do not recover till violently shaken by other people; nor can they remember the replies they have given. If consulted a second or third time upon the same point, they will make use of expressions totally different; perhaps they speak by the means of fanatic and ignorant spirits. These gifts are usually conferred upon them in dreams: some seem to have sweet milk or honey poured on their lips; others fancy that a written schedule is applied to their mouths and on awaking they publicly declare that they have received this gift." <sup>37</sup>

This account of bards as druids was still apparent in 1694 when the antiquary John Aubrey asked his cousin, the Welsh poet Henry Vaughan, to supply details of any remnants of the druids in Wales. Vaughan replied

"... the antient Bards ... communicated nothing of their knowledge, butt by way of tradition: which I suppose to be the reason that we have no account left nor any sort of remains, or other monuments of their learning or way of living. As to the later Bards, you shall have a most curious account of them: This vein of poetrie they called Awen, which in their language signifies rapture, or a poetic furore & (in truth) as many of them as I have conversed with are (as I may say) gifted or inspired with it. I was told by a very sober, knowing person (now dead) that in his time, there was a young lad fatherless & motherless, soe very poor that he was forced to beg; butt att last was taken up by a rich man, that kept a great stock of sheep upon the mountains not far from the place where I now dwell who cloathed him & sent him into the mountains to keep his sheep. There in Summer time following the sheep & looking to their lambs, he fell into a deep sleep in which he dreamt, that he saw a beautifull young man with a garland of green leafs upon his head, & an hawk upon his fist: with a quiver full of Arrows att his back, coming towards him (whistling several measures or tunes all the way) att last lett the hawk fly att him, which (he dreamt) gott into his mouth & inward parts, & suddenly awaked in a great fear & consternation: butt possessed with such a vein, or gift of poetrie, that he left the sheep & went about the Countrey, making songs upon all occasions, and came to be the most famous Bard in all the Countrey in his time." 38

So we have the Welsh example of a figure clad in green leaves with a quiver full of arrows and a hawk, clearly a hunter who is also able to enter a shepherd and inspire him to write

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup>(Description of Wales, Chapter XVI: 'Concerning the soothsayers of this nation, and persons as it were possessed')

<sup>38</sup> Early Modern Letters online, Bodleian Library, Oxford

poetry, a figure we can associate with the ancient Brythonic god Maponos. But what has happened between? In spite of what Vaughan says about the druids not leaving any written records, we do have the later testimonies of the early Welsh bards to the divine origins of their practice as reflected also in the Latin text of Giraldus and his account of the awenyddion in the twelfth century.

Taliesin is the legendary representative of this tradition, though it is also apparent in the works of historically attested bards from the early medieval period. So who was Taliesin? By the period of the Welsh Bards and the *Awenyddion* Taliesin had become three different entities:

## (1)The Historical Poet

This view of Taliesin sees him as the bard of the Brythonic chieftain Urien in the sixth century kingdom of Rheged which extended from Strathclyde (around modern Glasgow) down into Cumbria in the northern part of the Lake District. Of the mass of poems in *The Book of Taliesin* a few are still held to be possibly written by this poet. They mainly sing the praises of his lord in common with much of the poetry composed by tribal bards at this time. But *The Book of Taliesin* is a fourteenth century manuscript collection given that name when discovered in a library in the seventeenth century. So the poems in it are not, in the form we have them, from the sixth century but later copies. As, initially, no-one could read them, they were assumed to be the work of a poet writing in Old Welsh. By now it has been established that most of the poems must be much more recent than that and all are, in fact, written in Middle Welsh in the manuscript versions we have.

If that was all that could be said, Taliesin would be no better known than Aneirin, another poet from what is now southern Scotland writing around the same time, who composed a series of elegies for the members of the Gododdin tribe who were wiped out in an attack on the Angles at the battle of Catraeth (modern Catterick in Yorkshire). That is, as with Aneirin, the debate about him would mainly be restricted to scholars attempting to date the poems from linguistic and historical evidence or discussing their contribution to the successive literary tradition in Welsh.

But Taliesin, like Myrddin, a third poet identified with the same area, has been mythologised in a number of ways. And if the mythologisation of Myrddin as Merlin is at least clear and transparent, Taliesin has been transformed into a much more complex wizard for later generations.

## (2) The Legendary Bard

Many of the poems in *The Book of Taliesin* contain prophecies which link them to historical events in the ninth and tenth centuries. Others refer to stories that link them with prose tales in *Y Mabinogi*. Or with legendary exploits such as the raid by Arthur on Annwfn – the Brythonic Other World – to capture a magical cauldron. What is clear from consideration of the range of poems attributed to Taliesin is that, like Arthur, his name became a magnet for disparate material but also that he became the 'type' of the inspired poet. When later generations of Welsh poets in the Middle Ages looked back to the sources of their tradition, the place of beginning was 'The Old North', an area of southern Scotland and Northern England. Here the earliest poets using Welsh after it had developed from the Brythonic language some time after the Roman occupation, were seen as forefathers of the Welsh bardic tradition – one was called 'Tad Awen' (Father of the Muse) by Nennius in the 9th century, though none of his poems have survived. Collectively they were called the

'Cynfeirdd' (the earliest poets) and Taliesin became their iconic representative. So already, by the ninth century, he was being represented as a prophet and a magical figure who was present (whether imaginatively or otherwise) at various historical and legendary events from the beginning of the world to Arthur's raid on the Other World. He was, in the Second Branch of *Y Mabinogi*, one of the seven who returned with the head of Brân from Ireland and sojourned with that head in Gwales in a timeless suspension of the everyday world. This is the poet as 'awenydd', an inspired individual such as those described by Gerald of Wales in the twelfth century, going into a prophetic or visionary state. He could now be regarded as the Spirit of Poetry.

## (3) The Spirit of Poetry

At some point, inevitably, Taliesin entered the folklore tradition. The familiar story about Gwion Bach being given the job of stirring the cauldron of Ceridwen, and gaining universal knowledge by tasting a drop of the contents, uses a common folklore narrative pattern. As does the sequence of shape-shifting when Ceridwen chases him and each turn into something different until she, as a hen, gobbles him up when he is disguised as a seed. His rebirth from her womb, his survival in his new identity as Taliesin, and his subsequent exploits at the court of Maelgwn Gwynedd, link this story to the legend of the gifted poet. In one sense this is just another example of the 'magnet' effect mentioned above, with the name Taliesin simply being attached to existing folk tale motifs. But in another sense it indicates how the figurative shape-shifter has become a 'type' not just of the Welsh bardic tradition but of the Spirit of Poetry itself.

Patrick Ford in his discussion of *Ystoria Taliesin* (the sixteenth century prose tale in Welsh based on his continued presence on the folk tradition) says this:

"Clearly the tales of Gwion Bach and Taliesin cannot be lightly dismissed as "folktale" or late developments. Perceptible in them and in their attendant poems, despite the layering of successive generations and external influences, lies the myth of the primeval poet, in whom resides all wisdom."<sup>39</sup>

He sees the story of Gwion being swallowed by Ceridwen and cast into the waters in a leathern bag to emerge as Taliesin as a death and rebirth theme, still being retold in the version known as *Ystoria Taliesin*. He presents this as the poet sacrificing himself to his muse, to be compared therefore with mythological figures such as Odin sacrificing himself to himself, and with representations of the Spirit of Poetry in Irish stories. He defines the ideal form of the *awenydd* or inspired poet and the condition that such a figure aspires to attain.

Many of the elements in the folktale can be found in the poems of *The Book of Taliesin*. For instance, in a number of the poems the source of poetry is identified as a cauldron, most often identified as the Cauldron of Ceridwen. But in one poem there is a quite dense poetic construction

"pan doeth o peir / ogyrwen awen teir"

which can be translated

"when there came from the cauldron / the ogyrwen of three-fold inspiration",

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup>Patrick Ford *Ystoria Taliesin* (Cardiff, 1992)

or they could equally be translated as

"when there came from the Sovereign (God) / the three aspects of inspiration".

In the most recent scholarly edition of these poems Marged Haycock describes this as "a nicely calculated ambiguity"<sup>40</sup>, indicating that both meanings are intended here. *The Book of Taliesin* is a difficult text to interpret so any interpretations are provisional. But from its use here and elsewhere it is clear that 'ogyrwen' is the name of at least one of the three divisions of awen, or it is a term describing all three (so, 'the three ogyrwen of awen'). But what is clear is that the poem deliberately conflates the cauldron and God (as the Trinity) as its source. We might regard this as a neat bit of theology or an example of clever bardic wordwizardry of the sort the Taliesin figure often boasts about.

This reference is, in fact, just one example of a debate about the nature of *awen* among the early Welsh bards as to whether is comes from the "Holy Spirit" or from "The Cauldron of Ceridwen". A line from another medieval Welsh bard, called Prydydd y Moch, conflates the two options with the line "The Lord God gives me sweet *awen*, as from the cauldron of Ceridwen". It is thought that Prydydd y Moch might have written some of the poems in *The Book of Taliesin* and so would be Taliesin himself in his thirteenth century guise. That is, he would have adopted the Taliesin persona for the purposes of an *awenydd* rather than in the context of his duties as a court poet for which he would use either his own name or his recognised bardic title (Llywarch ap Llewelyn/Prydydd y Moch).

So later bards writing as Taliesin make him a representative of the old native tradition and insist on the magical origins of *awen*. He looks both ways, expressing current Christian thinking about God conceived of as a Trinity, locking this into the concept of the threefold nature of *awen*, but also maintaining his status as one who had links back to the older world. So Taliesin denounces the other bards not as Gildas had done for their ungodliness, but because they have lost touch with the real roots of poetry, with the authentic *awen*. At the same time he ensures that he cannot himself be accused of being ungodly.

By the end of the eighteenth century, when Iolo Morganwg was putting together the scattered remnants of this tradition and the process of re-interpreting it was getting under way, the *awen* became the central symbol and ideal expression of the druidic renaissance as it is still held to be today both in the religious practice of druidry and in the continuing bardic tradition among Welsh language poets.

## TALIESIN AND THE BRYTHONIC GODS

It has been suggested that Taliesin was a god whose identity - and perhaps name - became confused with the historical bard of the 6th century Brythonic warlord Urien of Rheged.<sup>41</sup> Be that as it may, it is certainly the case that many of the poems in *The Book of Taliesin* were written by later *awenyddion* who adopted his mantle and sought to develop his mythos. In doing so it may be that his place among the gods, or his relation to them, became less clear as he gained legendary significance as a bard/*awenydd*. It may also be that in their later literary representation the gods themselves, and their relationships to each other, became

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup>Marged Haycock (ed.) Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin (CMCS, 2007).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup>Ifor Williams *Chwedl Taliesin* (O'Donnell Lecture 1955-6)

interlaced as the weavers of song developed their stories into more complex narratives. What follows is an attempt to identify a few threads woven into the later medieval tapestry.

In the poem known as 'Cad Goddeu' (Battle of the Trees) in *The Book of Taliesin*, Gwydion conjures a host of trees to assist in the battle. The poem also asserts that Taliesin himself was created out of plants, earth and 'water from the ninth wave' by Math and Gwydion, in much the same way they created Blodeuedd in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*. No reason is given for the battle in the "Cad Goddeu' poem itself, but No. 84 of *Trioedd Ynys Prydain* says that it was fought for 'a bitch, a roebuck and a lapwing'. The Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi* contains other examples of Gwydion's magical abilities, including an episode where he travels from North to South Wales to trick Pryderi into giving him some pigs that were a gift from the Otherworld domain of Annwn. Gwydion later kills Pryderi when they engage in man-to-man combat as part of the war which breaks out as a result of Gwydion's trickery. But there might be an older version of this story in which Gwydion's brother Amaethon actually raids Annwn itself, not for the pigs but for a white roebuck and a young hound. The story is contained in the Peniarth manuscripts (No. 98B) and records two englyn verses with some explanatory prose. It is thought that the englyns must be older than the prose which refers to the 'Cad Goddeu' by an alternative name of 'Cad Achren'. It says that:

"This battle took place because of a white roe deer and a young hound which came from Annwn. They were taken by Amaethon fab Dôn . Because of this Arawn, King of Annwn, attacked Amaethon."  $^{\rm 42}$ 

The text goes on to say that there was a person on either side of the battle whose name was not known but if guessed it would ensure that the battle would be won by the side that guessed correctly. On one side this person was a woman called Achren. On the other a man called Brân. It is then said that Gwydion sang two englyns:

[Like this]

Steady are my horse's hooves as I spur him on The alder sprigs held high on the left Brân is your name, of the shining crest.

Or like this:

Steady are my horse's hooves on the day of battle The alder sprigs held high in your hand Brân in your coat of mail with [alder] sprigs on it The good Amaethon won this battle.

This must mean that Brân was with Arawn and the woman Achren was with Amaethon. If this is the Bendigeidfran of the Second Branch of The *Mabinogi* then his presence with the Otherworld troops might go some way to explaining his 'blessed' appellation and the description of him as a giant. The name-guessing game is a well-established folklore motif, most well-known in the story of Rumpelstiltskin as given by the Brothers Grimm, though I know of no other example of it in Brythonic lore. This does suggest that the conflict between Gwydion and Pryderi in *The Mabinogi*, which takes place entirely between North and South

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> My translation from the text as given by Ian Hughes in the introduction to his edition of *Bendigeiduran Uab Llyr* (Aberystwyth, 2017). What follows is based both on his discussion in Welsh (p. xxvii), and that of Rachel Bromwich in English in *Trioedd Ynys Prydain* (p.p. 218-19)

Wales, might be a re-telling of an earlier tale of a conflict between the Children of Dôn and Arawn in Annwn. Amaethon does not appear with his siblings in *The Mabinogi* tale so a story which includes him does suggest an earlier provenance.

Instead of pigs this story cites a white roebuck and a young hound as the cause of the battle, two of the three items cited in the Triad as the cause of the 'Cad Goddeu'. It would be helpful to know the significance of these animals in this case but the story as it has survived appears to be an incomplete fragment preserved only to (partly) explain the verses. Amaethon is usually identified as a god of agriculture and agricultural gods do sometimes become gods of war<sup>43</sup> Gwydion is clearly portrayed as a magical adept and trickster, consonant with his appearance in *The Mabinogi*. Although the suggestion is that Amaethon stole the deer and hound from Arawn, this may not be a raid on Annwn from Thisworld, but a war between different groups of deities. If so the war might be within Annwn itself as with the conflict between Arawn and so Pryderi and Hafgan in the First Branch of the *Mabinogi*, or possibly between different otherworlds. In one of the 'conversation' poems in The Black Book of Carmarthen, discussed in Chapter Two, Gwyn ap Nudd speaks of his role as a harvester of souls not just in Thisworld but in Otherworld battles too . In another of these conversation poems Taliesin refuses the invitation of Ugnach (a probable synonym for Gwyn ap Nudd) and instead says he is going to the fortress of Lleu and Gwydion. 'Caer Gwydion' or 'Caer Aranrhod' (the fort of Gwydion's sister) are names for the Milky Way. Might they also indicate an alternative Otherworld and is this where Taliesin is heading?

If we are dealing with two opposing group of deities, one linked to Annwn and led by Arawn (another probable synonym for Gwyn ap Nudd) and also including Pryderi, Brân and indeed the other chief characters of Branches 1-3 of *The Mabinogi*, opposed to the family of Dôn, some of whom feature in the Fourth Branch but also include Amaethon and Gofannon, then where does Taliesin fit? The author or redactor of the 'Cad Goddeu' poem in The Book of Taliesin (probably the 12th century awenydd Prydydd y Moch<sup>44</sup>, wearing the mantle of Taliesin, clearly wants to place him as a significant presence in the battle, and to suggest a divine origin for the bard, shaped by the magic of Math and Gwydion and brought into being by the Divine mother Modron. Taliesin is a presence in other conflicts with Annwn, notably joining Arthur's raid in the 'Preiddeu Annwn' poem. In 'Cad Achren' he appears to be on the same side as Amaethon and Gwydion if this battle is the same as the 'Cad Goddeu' as the prose attached to the englyns sung by Gwydion asserts. But he is said elsewhere to keep company with Brân and Pryderi. 45. When he joins Arthur's raid on Annwn his purpose was not the desire for loot but rather to discover the deeper mysteries is the Cauldron of Awen. He is a shape-shifter, a trickster and an all-round slippery customer who makes it hard for us to pin him down. He seems closest in nature to Gwydion and it may be they both originate in a trickster deity who inspired awen and may have been tricksy in causing conflict between the gods too.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup>The most well-known example is Mars who protected agriculture as well as being a god of war.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> As suggested by Marged Haycock Legendary Poems From The Book of Taliesin pp. 27-30

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> e.g in The Second Branch of The *Mabinogi* where he is one of the seven who returned with Bendigeidfran from Ireland and sojourned with the head of Brân in Gwales.

Mi na fi Neirin

Ys gŵyr Taliesin

•••

### Neu chant Ododdin

Aneirin (or Neirin) was one of five poets mentioned in the Ninth Century *Historia Brittonum* as being active in the Sixth Century. The lines above are included in the series of elegies for warriors of the Gododdin tribe killed in the battle of Catraeth attributed to Aneirin. They seem to say "I who am not Aneirin / As Taliesin knows /.../Sang The Gododdin". Or do they? Translators have tended to hedge their bets with something like "I, yet not I ..." for the first line. We might think also here of the line from the poem in *The Black Book of Carmarthen*: "As I am Merlin, and then Taliesin". It seems that the persona of the bard can shift, that one prophetic bard can become another, or speak – inspired – in another's voice. The act of creating the poem, in this view, comes from the bard drawing upon a power from beyond that inspires 'song', a condition which Aneirin here says would also have been shared by Taliesin

It has been suggested that this verse and the one following from manuscripts in *The Book of Aneirin* actually belong to a separate saga about Aneirin <sup>46</sup> Taken together the two verses suggest that Aneirin lies beneath the earth in chains with worms or slugs crawling over him and that he was rescued from this place by Cenau whose praise he sings in the second of the two verses. The place of incarceration was "a place of death".

There seems to be a conflation of two themes here: Aneirin's rescue from a grave-like prison and his composition of a series of elegies by escaping from his everyday self. It is difficult to know for certain if these two themes are to be taken as significantly connected or if they stand against each other as separate pieces of information. It is not uncommon in this early poetry for unrelated facts to be conveyed together in a single stanza. But if they are connected, the release of the poet from captivity, or from death, and the release into the world of the verses which comprise *The Gododdin* would need to be taken as a single event. So the poet, who describes himself as "no weary lord" laboured through the night to produce his work "before the dawn" of the following day.

Whether this is to be taken as the night following the battle or the 'night' from which he was released, the composition of *The Gododdin* verses (or those of them that can be regarded as original) were the product of a night's work during which the bard dwelt in a state resembling death. It's important here not to think of him as writing down these verses. They would have been composed in the mind and remembered until – having been memorised and perhaps added to by successive generations – eventually written down centuries later. So what of Cenau who released him from whatever condition he was in to greet the dawn

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> A O H Jarman *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (Caerdydd, 1982)

Cenau was a son of Llywarch Hen, related to Urien of Rheged and so unlikely to have fought at Catraeth. But if he rescued Aneirin rather than fought in that battle his "undaunted, bold" actions and his "shining sword" must have been employed in some other way. It could be that Aneirin was captured and that his "fair song" – as an earlier verse has it – saved him and that Cenau rescued him after he had composed the verses. But the narration here suggests that he was released from a death-like state, perhaps an awenydd-trance, after which Cenau rescued him or during which he guarded him.

So these verses may come from a different story, but collected with other extraneous material into *The Book of Aneirin* (as, for instance the 'Pais Dinogad' lines or the verses which apparently record other events than the attack on Catraeth. If so then that story has been lost and these verses may be all that remains of it. Such a story might include events before the composition of the *Gododdin* verses. Even so, that they were composed by someone who was both Aneirin and Not Aneirin; that he was released (like Mabon) from an earthen prison, returning from darkness to light to sing his song; that it was the quality of his 'fair song' that saved him, and that Taliesin would also know these things: all point to the role of the bard as an *awenydd*, drawing inspiration from the *Awen* to ensure his immortality.

#### MYRDDIN WYLLT

The oldest of the verses in *The Black Book of Carmarthen* are thought to be those telling the story of Myrddin Wyllt, particularly the *Afallennau* sequence, and within that those that tell of his life in the Caledonian Forest. These are framed by verses containing prophecies which, according to A O H Jarman, were later additions fulfilling the political purpose that prophesies often did in the Middle Ages. Jarman distinguishes these prophetic verses from the earlier 'mythological' verses which he thinks may have been attached to a lost saga telling Myrddin's story<sup>47</sup>.

There is another sequence of verses telling the same story in the manuscript known as *Peniarth 3*. Some of these verses are the same as those in the Black Book, some are different, and they are in a different order. Ifor Williams dates the Peniarth verses earlier than those in the Black Book but also suggests that they come from a different source (\*\*). This implies a lost original with multiple variations of which only two survive, though they may also have given rise to other sequences such as the prophetic verses contained in the 'Prophecies of Myrddin and Gwenddydd' in *The Red Book of Hergest*. Gerald of Wales, writing before the Black Book verses were copied, also claims to have seen a manuscript containing Myrddin's prophecies in Nefyn in North Wales. <sup>48</sup>

Clearly this material was shaped and re-shaped for different purposes in the Middle Ages. The verses below are the result of my own re-shaping based on an earlier poem I wrote about the Battle of Arfderydd and partly on loose translations made more recently of the core verses in the Black Book.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Ifor Williams Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies IV, 121-5

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Gerald of Wales *Journey Through Wales* various editions.

## **Myrddin Wyllt**

Like a wolf pack biting into bone, bloody-chapped we bit the bitter core of that battle and gulped

Its poison; Gwenddolau sighed his last breath as Rhydderch's shield was held high over the land. I stole away by ditch and field.

Where could I hide but the wild wood from Rhydderch's men? That tree with apples on its boughs guards the glade they cannot see.

Sweet apples falling to earth forsaking ripeness fester slowly into another year a freight of sadness.

The cycle broken: the circle shrunk to this one glade in the wildwood; defeat dogged us but I made

A spell here and grew hair like a wild thing in the wild wood which I wander like a wolf under leaf shade ashamed but undefiled

~\*~

by the new lord's common law.

Under the mantle of this tree cast wide over the glade, my refuge from fear, and from the bustle of far-folk,

the shadows hide and cast a cloak of stillness and silence to succour me, even when wolf calls, when wind blows and the forest sings in a clatter of branches and leaves or – when wind is still – and owl's quaver is carried

through the quiet of the night, or when I hear the screech of jay through the soft hum of day in the long hours of summer.

In winter no-one comes anyway and I dwell here harried by ice and snow – where else to go? For this is my world contained as an apple seed, settled in a hidden nook to grow a new life far from the rumours of battles

and the hurts of the world.

~\*~

Sweet apple tree that grows in this grove you know how to hide me from Rhydderch's men

milling around, a host of them, richly arrayed. But there is no Gwenddydd to greet,

her love lost to me. No woman comes for delightful dalliance. Once I wore a gold torc around my throat, now the necks of swans are splendid to me.

Sweet apple tree of tender blossoms here in this hideaway I hear Gwasgawg curse me day and night for the slaughter of his son

and of his daughter.

~\*~

Sweet apple tree that grows by this river, by rushing water, your fruits out of reach of any intruder. Once I dallied here beneath them in wanton play with a graceful girl, a lost companion.

Time tracks away: wild time in the woods

with wild things, far from fair words of bards and the songs of minstrels heard only now in the empty space that is their absence. All that was dear in the court of Gwenddolau, my Dragon Lord, Echoes through the trees of Celyddon, my awen's aid: it's service now all that sustains me.

§

## 'Merlin's Isle of Gramarye'

So Rudyard Kipling in 'Puck's Song' from Puck of Pooks Hill. 'Gramarye' is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as meaning both 'grammar' and also 'occult learning, magic'. Another form of the word is 'glamour' in the sense of 'enchantment'. Where does 'grammar' merge into 'glamour' to make magic? Consider that the earliest books of instruction for welsh bards, based on the even earlier purely oral methods of instruction, are known as 'Gramadegau'r Penceirddiaid' (Grammars of the Chief Bards). Grammar, in the Middle Ages, was regarded as the 'mother of the arts'. The secrets of the bards of Ynys Prydain were revealed alongside grammatical instruction in these handbooks. Versification and the structure of language were seen as one and the same study: the keys to the mysteries.

We are talking here of a time when literacy was possessed by only a few, and fewer still who were not using it more or less exclusively for ecclesiastical purposes in Latin. These select few were the holders of a skill which enabled them to give shape to a developing tradition to which only they had access. So to manipulate its history, and the ability to pass it on to the future, was an act of power involving both 'occult knowledge' and the skill to use it.

But, as the bardic grammars also make clear, both *cynghanedd* (the music of the language) and the traditional verse forms (the artistic shape of the language) are held within language itself, part of its hidden grammar which the bards had the power to reveal. As one modern theorist of *cynghanedd* puts it, the bards were instructed to "dathla yr anweledig yn weledig"<sup>49</sup> (celebrate the invisible into visibility). The same theorist also asserts that language has developed not simply as a denotive medium for naming and describing things in the everyday world, but also carries a deeper structure of meaning which may be hidden in its everyday use but which has the power to reveal otherness and, from that revelation, to create articulations of a hidden world. The welsh bards were special in that they produced an institutionalisation of this idea in the bardic grammars.

So grammar becomes glamour or enchantment, glossed as 'gramarye' in English in spite of there being no tradition of arcane handbooks of bardic practice in that language. But any inspired poet, or awenydd, in any language, will wish to fulfil the instinct to carry meaning from the hidden realms into the cultural sphere of common conversation and, by doing so, to infuse the world we know with hidden meaning. This is the only grammar that counts.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> R. M. Jones *Meddwl y Gynghanedd* (Barddas, 2005)

#### **CERIDWEN**

Much of the lore of Taliesin, and the source of inspiration of the early Welsh bards who took on his mantle, is linked to Ceridwen and her cauldron. Who was she?

The name 'Ceridwen' has had various forms and implications. The spelling with one 'r' is the most common in modern Welsh usage both as a given name and as a rendering of the name as used by the early Welsh bards. But 'Cerridwen' is also often used by those referring to the character in the Tale of Taliesin and associated references in legendary texts. An attempt to unravel the uncertain origins of the name was made by Marged Haycock in 2003 where she also catalogued the various forms of the name in the early texts<sup>50</sup>. These mainly occur in manuscripts which have been dated to the Thirteenth Century, though they may, of course, be using earlier forms or 13th century adaptations of earlier forms. The Black Book of Carmarthen gives 'Kyrridven'. Peniarth 3 gives 'Kyrrytuen', The Book of Taliesin variously gives 'Cerituen', 'Kerrituen' and 'Kerritwen', while *The Red Book of Hergest* gives 'Kerituen'. So '-fen' is the most common termination (a mutated form of archaic 'ben': 'woman') and 'rr' is more common rather than the single 'r' of modern Welsh spelling. Whether the variations are due to different spelling patterns at different times and places, or by different scribes, or whether the different forms reflect developments in speech pronounciation is unclear. The difference between the 'C' and the 'K' initial consonant is clearly simply a matter of a different spelling convention to represent the hard 'c' sound. But the following vowel, 'y' or 'e' could well represent a shift in actual pronounciation of the vowel sound.

Later examples include: 'Cereidven', 'Cyridven', 'Caridwen', 'Cridwen' and 'Cridfen'.

Elis Gruffydd uses 'K/Ceridwen' in his 16th century version of the prose tale of how Gwion Bach became Taliesin, and K/Caridwen is also found in other sources of this tale. Hence Charlotte Guest's popularisation of 'Caridwen' in the translation included in her *Mabinogion*.

What about possible meanings of the name? Ifor Williams <sup>51</sup> asserted that 'Cyrridfen' is the most likely original form from 'cwrr' (bent, angled..?): 'cwrr-rhid-ben' (= woman with an angled joint, or 'crooked back') so fitting the stereotype of a witch; but later scholars since have thrown some doubt on this interpretation.

## Marged Haycock also discusses:

- -the first syllable as 'cyr' which could relate to 'crynu' so Cyridfen could be like the Gwrach Cors Fochno that makes people shake or shiver
- -the first syllable as 'crid', judged to be "difficult" but 'craid' (for 'graid') (passionate, fierce, powerful) is possible
- -the second syllable as 'ŷd' (corn, relating her to a corn goddess like Ceres as some earlier antiquarians had supposed)
- her daughter Creirwy, with the first syllable a form of 'credu' (belief') and so, by analogy, her mother's name as Credidfen would mean 'woman to be believed in', making the mother's and daughter's name stems a pair.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Marged Haycock 'Cadair Ceridwen' yn *Cyfoeth y Testun* 148-> (Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 2003)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Ifor Williams *Chwedl Taliesin* (Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1957)

None of this is conclusive. Nor is there any surviving early evidence of divine origin as no references to her before the 13th century manuscripts exist and all references since seem to be based either on those manuscripts or the later prose tale which itself stems from them, or is an elaboration of more detailed earlier sources which have not survived. Many have, nonetheless, experienced her as divine or chosen to characterise her a witch or powerful enchantress on the basis of interpretation of the prose tale and the reference to her later in that tale by Taliesin when he says, "I was nine months in the womb of the witch Ceridwen".

What the earlier poems emphasise is, rather, her keeping of the cauldron of *awen* and so a source of poetic inspiration. In the prose tale, she gives birth to Taliesin and then ceases to be part of the tale. In the bardic tradition this giving birth to Taliesin may be seen as inspiring his presence and inspiring bards to sing in his name. Certainly, many of them asserted this. Cuhelyn Fardd (1100-1130) spoke off being inspired by "awddl Cyridfen", while Cynddelw Prydydd Mawr (1155-1200) acknowledged "Cyridfen" as the source of his art and Prydydd y Moch at the beginning of the 13th century specifically mentions the cauldron of "Cyridfen" as the source of the gift of awen. These and other references by identified bards are of course in addition to the many references in *The Book of Taliesin*.

## CODA

## **GWALES**

I

## **GODODDIN**

"Am drynni drylaw drylen"

Men called him an eagle - Gwyddien Deadly to his prey;
The land he fought for was fair
But ravaged - Morien - Myrddin was his bard;

Women called after him - Bradwen -He faced death like a man Who would hold a wolf-mane weaponless.

> These and many more Bitten by that sad battle -An end of boldness.

Who was it sang for them?: Aneirin, And not Aneirin, fluid as Taliesin Who also knew this awen.

Ш

#### **BRAN**

"dyuot tri aderyn, a dechreu canu udunt ryw gerd"

Seven years they feasted on birdsong At at the end of the seventh Took the head to Gwales.

Sweet voices of Rhiannon In chants of forgetfulness For eighty years of the world's time. Heilyn opened the door To end the song; He had no choice But to choose sorrow.

The raven croak
Brought back the black
Head to them.
They took it to the White Hill
The world moved on.

Ш

## **LLYWELYN**

"Nyt oes le y kyrcher rac carchar braw"

To quench the fire of the dragon,
Cut off his head
But do not bury it
For the grave is a refuge from fear,
A place of resurrection

His head is stuck with an iron pole The searing pain of it runs through my soul

His people must weep to be broken.

We took his head To rot in the sun But didn't cut out The phoenix tongue

The bird flew
From the embers to teach
His scattered people
With fiery speech.

In homesteads the hearth flame flickered To nurture the soul of a nation.

IV

## **DAFYDD**

"Annhebyg i'r mis dig du

A gerydd i bawb garu"

It is May and the speckled thrush Chatters in the greening bush.

Castle walls stand against the sun.

In the wood the filtered light gleams
On brindled shade and it all seems
Such a hush as I await the welcome
rustle
Of a gown against the leaves
foretelling love's bustle

The thrush's silver song
Trills on
And even the crow
Brings no memory
Of black winter.

Castle men penetrate Their conquered land

My love finds no rebuke.

V

#### **OWAIN**

"Na gwall, na newyn, na gwarth

Na syched fyth yn Sycharth"

Gold gleams in his gift hand Rich morsels for retainers Bright mead for a bard Each to his rightful portion No court is nearer heaven!

> So his bard sings His praise, But Sycharth falls

He raises his standard In other halls.

A prince of mist And castles in the air

They blew each one away

Made a cage Of his mountains For a bird That had flown.

"No-one knows Where he lays his head".

Ş

Gwales is the island in the second of the Mabinogi tales, where the head of Bran is taken after the return from Ireland, and where those who return spend eighty years of repose while time stands still.

Ş

Quotations at the head of each section from the following early or medieval Welsh texts:

I The Gododdin of Aneirin, elegies for warriors slain in a sixth century battle between Brythons and Angles at Catraeth, one of the earliest texts in Welsh;

II The Mabinogi;

III The Elegy of Gruffudd ap yr Ynad Coch following the death and beheading of Lywelyn;

IV Dafydd ap Gwilym;

V Owain Glyndwr's bard Iolo Goch.

§

## The End of the Old North

"There is no counsel, no lock, no opening..."

So wrote the bard Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch in response to the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the last native Prince of Wales in December 1282. It is a record of despair. The death of Llywelyn and the subsequent invasion by Edward I meant the end of a line of rulers of Gwynedd that stretched back through Maelgwn Gwynedd to Cunedda and the Brythonic chieftains of 'The Old North'. Wales had retained the Brythonic heritage of the island of Britain and now a Norman-English king invaded and crowned his own son as Prince of Wales.

What is more, Llywelyn's head had been cut off after he was killed. Although they allowed his body to be buried in Wales they took his head to London and displayed it on London Bridge. Was this a simple act of spite or something done in full knowledge of its symbolic significance? Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch certainly made much of the beheading:

"His head has fallen and with it our pride Fear and surrender are all we have left His head has fallen – a dragon's head Noble it was , fierce to our foes His head is stuck with an iron pole The searing pain of it runs through my soul, This land is empty – our spirit cut down. His head had honour in nine hundred lands Proud king, swift hawk, fierce wolf True Lord of Aberffraw"

(from my translation of the elegy)

The cutting off of heads in Midwinter is a motif of the season. Think of Gawain riding through the borderlands of Wales and Cheshire to meet the Green Knight to offer his own head a year after he had cut off the Green Knight's head and it had magically re-attached itself. Gawain rode from the court of Arthur who himself, in another story, disappeared into the Otherworld awaiting his time after being mortally wounded.

Then consider the episode in the Second Branch of the *Mabinogi* where the mortally injured Brân asks the other survivors of the battle in Ireland to cut off his head:

'Take the head' said he 'and bring it to the White Hill in London, and bury it with its face towards France. And you will be on the road a long time. In Harlech you will be seven years in feasting, the Birds of Rhiannon singing to you. The head will be as good company to you as it was at its best when it was ever on me. And you will be at Gwales in Penfro for eighty years. Until you open the door facing Aber Henvelen on the side facing Cornwall, you will be able to abide there, along with the head with you uncorrupted. But when you open that door, you will not be able to remain there. You will make for London and bury the head.

In the Welsh *Triads* (No.37)it is said that the burial of the head of Brân protected Britain from invasion, but that Arthur removed it "because it did not seem right to him that his island should be defended by the strength of anyone, but by his own". Severed heads, according to Anne Ross in *Pagan Celtic Britain*, were an integral part of pagan Celtic religious practice. Before re-birth there must be a death. In the story of Brân, in order for him to retain his protective function, his head must be struck off and buried. Llywelyn's bard could not see this because the head had been taken to London not, as Brân's, for burial but to be stuck on a iron pole on London Bridge. There could be 'no counsel, no lock, no door' to be opened at the appointed time and so no opening to a new life. His despair is understandable historically.

But the heritage of the Old North lived on in Wales, nurtured by bards as a sustaining inspiration for renewal. It was taken up again by Owain Glyndwr two hundred years later before he disappeared without being captured so could potentially rise again, and it has never been forgotten, inspiring bards writing in the Welsh strict metres still today; in, for example, the work of Gerallt Lloyd Owen whose poem 'Cilmeri' hauntingly re-plays the events of Llywelyn's death.

This is both a universal and a personal initiatory theme. However labyrinthine the paths of the dead, however gloomy the darkness of the Netherworld, shall we not follow our guide on the path, the dark figure on the Grey Mare, through the last shadows and on past forgetting to

where we have always lived, and always will? And will the Sun not rise again on our hopes as well as our fears? May the gods will it so.	;