

BRYTHONIC Period (to 1066)

In ben ba bech de mnāph, ba rí opair bognuib, techt ar cenn cacha cachtōi, dāl dūnaib, fechtā flōgaut, zōnæ aiphgh. A tīagh loon fop inbapa tāib dī, al-lenban fop in tōib n-ailiu. A fīdcheif fīria haif. Trīcha traigeth ina haipdi. Lorrpān īarpoinn fop inbapa cinn dī, conīth ebh doberēdh ar trīlīf na bandycāile aili aifin cad n-apaile. A fep inna dīaibh; cūille aipbēd inna lāim oc a fīoigleōd ar cenn cacha. Ar ba cenn mnaa nō dācuch nobepche ī trīlībhach in tan fīn.

—Adomnán of Iona, *Cain Adomnán* (c. 697)¹

The work that the best women had to do was to go to battle and battlefield, engage and camp, muster and fight, wound and slay. She would carry, on one side, her bag of provisions, her babe on the other, her wooden pole upon her back. Thirty traigeth long it was, and had on one end an iron hook, which she would thrust into the tunic of some woman in the enemy host; her husband behind her, carrying in his hand a fence-stake and flogging her on to courage. For in those days the head of a woman, or her two breasts, were taken as trophies.

—trans. DWF



THE CELTS, by the third century BCE, registered their influence from Turkey in the east to Portugal in the west, and from the Mediterranean to the British Isles. But the notion that “the Celts are the fathers of Europe” – that there once existed, at the heart of the Continent, a grand and sophisticated iron-age Celtic culture which shrank to a western rump in Great Britain – is a myth constructed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians. The distribution of Celtic languages in southwest Europe indicates rather a trail of agriculturalists who dispersed 7,000 years ago from Anatolia, migrating along the north coast of the Mediterranean to Italy, France, and Spain, eventually to Britain. Celtic arrival in what is now England is often said to correspond with the appearance of chariot burials, from about the sixth century BCE. By the third century, the Britons dominated what is now England and Wales; by which time Celtic peoples on the Continent were under retreat from the Germanic tribes and coming under the rule of Rome. Julius Caesar’s conquest of Gaul in the 50s BCE left only the British Isles under independent Celtic control.

In 43 CE, Claudius invaded the island, with the object of total conquest. By the early 80s, the Romans had established the province of “Britannia” and pushed as far as Scotland (“Caledonia”). The Britons at the time had no written language, but the Romans, who did, have much to say about them. The reputed sexual freedom of the continental Celts (noted already by Aristotle in the fourth century CE), and the fierceness of their women in battle, are much noted. Diodorus Siculus (fl. 60-30 BCE), possibly borrowing a line from military recruiters, alleges that the boys of Britannia “will offer themselves to strangers and take offense if the offer is refused.”² Athenaeus (second century CE), and Ammianus (fourth century) harp on the same string, reporting that the men slept openly with one another, often preferring boys even though their women were strong, tall, and beautiful. Celtic women seem to have been accorded a corresponding freedom. Divorce could be requested by either husband or wife and was easily obtained, after which both parties were free to remarry. Nor was marriage thought to entail exclusive rights. Cuckoldry and bastardy were not such points of anxiety among the Britons as among the Romans: in the determination of a legitimate heir, robustness trumped monogamous wedlock, as Edmund argues in *King Lear*. In this regard, Cassius Dio cites “a very witty remark” made by the wife of the Scots prince, Silver-Leg (“Argentocoxus”) to Julia Augusta (58 BCE - 29 CE): “When the empress jested with her (after the treaty) concerning the free intercourse of her sex with men in Britain, the foreigner replied: ‘We fulfill the demands of nature much more satisfactorily than you Roman women: we consort openly with the best men, whereas you let yourselves be debauched in secret by the vilest.’”³

The Celts both male and female were indeed robust, powerfully built, and stood a full head taller than most Roman soldiers, many of whom returned from the front bearing tales (as surviving reports attest) of the women’s ferocity in battle. Among the most justly famous of their women warriors is Boudica (Welsh “Buddug”), queen of the Iceni tribe (in what is now roughly Norfolk). Her husband Prasutagus had ruled the Iceni as a nominally independent ally of Rome. When he died, he named Boudica as regent, leaving his kingdom jointly to his daughters and to the Roman Emperor, the Icenis’ acknowledged overlord. Instead, as Tacitus tells us, Catus Decianus annexed the kingdom as if conquered, subjugated the nobles, flogged Boudica, and raped her daughters. Awaiting her moment, Boudica raised an army, and in 60-61 CE led a revolt that began with the sacking and demolition of the provincial capital, Camulodunum (Colchester). Next to fall was Londinium, followed by Verulamium (St. Albans). Dio’s vivid account describes a ritual in which Boudica before battle invoked the goddess Andraste for victory and re-

¹ Ed. Kuno Meyer (1905); 2-3; *Trīcha traigeth*] thirty feet; but the measure of the Irish foot is unknown; perhaps about 8½ modern inches (which would still make her *fīdcheis*, or staff, more than twenty modern feet long).

² Diodorus Siculus (fl. 60-30 BCE), *Bibliotheca Historica*, 5:32, trans. DWF.

³ Cassius Dio (c. 165-235), *Historia Romana*, 5:7777, trans. DWF.

leased a hare from within her robes, whose running through the camp cheered the Britons, who understood it to represent the flight of the Romans. Seventy to eighty thousand Roman subjects were slain by Boudica's army, with the usual terrors: the noblest women (reports Dio) were impaled on spikes and had their breasts cut off and stitched to their mouths. Suetonius met the resistance somewhere in the West Midlands. A better military tactician, the Roman commander, though greatly outnumbered, defeated Boudica and slaughtered Britons by the tens of thousands, including vast crowds of women and children stationed in wagon-trains as a last line of defense. Boudica's death marked the end of armed insurgency against the Roman occupation.

Sometime between 400 and 700 CE, in what is now Scotland and northern England, the Welsh became culturally distinct from the Cornish, the Bretons, and the tribes of the Hen Ogledd (Old North). From this period there developed the Welsh dialect and the literary tradition represented by *Y Cynfeirdd* ("The Early Bards"). Depending on the patronage of kings, these professionals – the bard Taliesin is regarded as the first in the line – produced chiefly poetry of praise. Saga poems associated with Llywarch Hen (Llywarch the Elder) and Heledd (the sister of Kynddylan) date from the ninth century, having roots in the seventh (though few textual witnesses survive earlier than the fourteenth century). Llywarch Hen is a legendary hero, a sixth-century prince of the northern Brythonic kingdom of Rheged who is said to have lost his lands, plus dozens of sons and a few daughters, in battles with the invading Saxons. Other poems lament the fall of Pengwern, the kingdom of Kynddylan (in what is now Shropshire).

The *Beirdd yr Tywysogion* ("Bards of the Princes"), also called *Y Gogynfeirdd*, ("the Less Early Bards") were members of a guild who worked from the time of the Norman invasion of England until 1282, when the defeat of the Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd by England's Edward I ended eight centuries of independent rule. Welsh poets thereafter were obliged to seek patronage among land-owning aristocrats. The *Beirdd yr Uchelwy* ("Bards of the Nobility") date from the fall of Gwynedd until 1536, when Welsh law was fully replaced by English law, and the Union established. This fertile period produced both praise and satire, much of both being written in the popular meter of the *cywydd*.¹

Alongside the court poet worked the king's storyteller, a tradition represented by the "Mabinogion," eleven tales, preserved in two manuscripts: the Red Book of Hergest (which also contains the earlier Song of Heledd) and the White Book of Rhydderch. Written in Middle Welsh, the common literary language from the late eleventh century to the fourteenth, the Mabinogion preserve much pre-Christian Celtic mythology and draw upon the developing legends of King Arthur.

Despite rich troves of extant verse from as early as the sixth century, the Welsh tradition has remained untaught and virtually unknown in the literature classrooms of England and America, which typically take Beowulf as the starting point of our literary tradition, and Chaucer as "the father of English poetry." The Canu Heledd here serves as an apt starting point for a parallel women's tradition in English that remains almost as widely unknown as the Welsh.

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¹ Traditional Welsh poetic meters consist of 24 different forms, called *Y Pedwar Mesur ar Hugain*. All require *cynghanedd* – complex structural arrangements of sound, each having a set number of syllables per line, off-rhymes, and internal rhymes that anticipate end-rhymes (features impossible to replicate in English translation). As set down in the fourteenth century by the masters Einion Offeiriad and Dafydd Ddu Athro, the Measures are divided into three classes: the *englyn* or stanza; the *awdl* or ode; and the *cywydd* or harmony. The oldest is the popular *englyn*, consisting of three or four lines. (Well suited to epigrammatic statement and compact imagery, individual *englynion* often exhibit the beauty and compression of the Japanese *haiku*.) Eight different types of *englyn* are given among the traditional forms, with varying degrees of complexity in the obligatory *cynghanedd*. The *awdl* originally had a single end-rhyme throughout, which could stand alone or be embedded in a longer work. Eventually, the monorhyme gave way to *awdlei* in monorhyme sections of 20-40 lines, in various meters. An innovation of the fourteenth century was the inclusion of *englynion* at the beginning or end of the *awdl*, or between sections. Poets of the late medieval period tended to reserve the *awdl* for serious and ceremonial occasions. The *cywydd*, used for much popular verse including dialogues and satires, was written in rhymed couplets (occasionally, in triplets), with seven-syllable lines, one line rhyming on a stressed syllable, the other on an unstressed one. By the end of the fourteenth century, the *cywydd* meter had become a standard for all genres and subject matter, with no set length.

Canu Heledd (tenth century)

*Heledd hwyedic y'm gelwir, ...
Ys ysgawn gan rei vy ruch.*

*I shall be known as wandering Heledd...
When nothing remains, I shall travel light.*

—lines 235, 198



THE RED BOOK OF HERGEST (*Llyfr Coch Hergest*) is a Welsh anthology compiled near the end of the fourteenth century, probably in a monastery. Preserved today in the Bodleian Library (Jesus College MS 111), the vellum manuscript derives its name from the color of its leather binding and from its later association with Hergest Court. *The Red Book* contains ancient Welsh prose, notably the tales of *Mabinogion*, and verse attributed to *y Gogynfeirdd* (“the Less Early Poets”). Its poetry dates from the ninth and tenth centuries but with roots in an oral tradition as early as the seventh. Much of its verse is concerned with the Anglo-Saxon conquest.

Following Rome’s withdrawal from Britain in the fifth century, Germanic tribes arrived in wave upon wave – Saxons from northern Germany, Jutes and Angles from the region of Denmark.¹ Settling at first on the eastern shores, the “Lloegrwys” (as the medieval Britons called the tribes of England) battled their way up the Thames River, destroying all that stood in their way. Against overwhelming force, the Celtic Britons had only a few memorable victories, later mythologized as triumphs of King Arthur. Those who stayed and fought were killed or captured, with young captives only being kept alive, as slaves. Those who fled found refuge in North Wales or Ireland, or crossed the Channel and settled in Armorica (the Brittany coast).

The Cornovii – a name by which two or three Celtic tribes were known in Roman Britain – stood their ground in the lowland border regions of Wales. Powys was governed by King Kyndrwyn “the Stubborn,” whose seat was at Pengwern in what is now Shropshire, on the modern Welsh border. After Kyndrwyn’s death, his sons, chief of whom was Kynddylan, formed an alliance against the Anglo-Saxons. They are believed to have joined forces with Penda of Mercia, which places them at the Battle of Maes Cogwy on 5 August 642, when the Christian king Oswald of Northumbria was defeated and slain.

That was the Celts’ last great victory. About 655, Kynddylan and his brothers are said to have met the Lloegrwys at the ford of the River Tren (i.e., the Tern). Their resistance proved futile. Invading Powys-land, the English burned Pengwern to the ground. Kynddylan was slain, together with his many brothers and sisters. Only Heledd escaped.

From at least the tenth century onward, perhaps from the seventh, there developed a bardic tradition of lamenting the fall of Pengwern and the death of King Kynddylan, whose reign came to represent a Golden Age before the English arrived. Among the greatest of the extant exemplars is the cycle of poems known as “Canu Heledd,” sung by Kynddylan’s sister – verses written for a woman’s voice, to the accompaniment of a harp, and luckily preserved in the *Red Book of Hergest*. In these elegiac poems, Heledd grieves for her slain family and mourns the fall of Pengwern, reduced now to a smoking ruins.

The “Canu Heledd” was not composed in any ordinary sense by an “author,” least of all by the male scribe who recorded its lyrics into the *Red Book of Hergest* in the latter fourteenth century. The surviving Canu Heledd represents a single inscription of an elegiac tradition rooted in pre-history and branching across time.² Composed for a woman’s voice, the “Canu Heledd” is like Heledd herself a survivor, a figure of inexpressible grief transfigured into music for the harp, and heart.

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Note: *Women’s Works*, vol. 1, includes the complete Welsh and English text of the Canu Heledd. What follows here is only an extract.

¹ The Jutes, who occupied portions of what is now Kent, Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight, were wiped out or assimilated by their Anglo-Saxon rivals in the latter seventh century.

² Heledd figures in the Welsh *Triads* as an unrestricted guest of King Arthur and one of the Tri Eniryavl – the three driven mad by grief; elsewhere as the originator of wise sayings (e.g., “Have you heard what Heledd sang, the daughter of Cyndryn of great wealth? Prosperity cannot come of pride ... nor is it generosity that causes poverty”).

...KYNN BU VYG kylchet croennen°
 Gavyr galet, chwannawc y gelein;
 Ry'm goruc y nuedw ued Bryum. 1
 KYNN BU VYG kylchet croenen
 Gavyr galet, kelyngar y lllilen,
 Ry'm goruc y uedw ued Trenn.
 GWEDY VYM brodyr o dymyr Hafren,
 Y am dwylan Dwryrw,
 Gwae vi, Duw, vy mot yn vyw!
 GWEDY MEIRCH hywed a chochwed
 Dillat, a phlwawr [mawr] melyn,
 Mein uyg coes ny'm oes dudedyn.

•••

GWARTHEC Edeirnyawn ny buant
 Gerdennin, a cherd neb nyt aethant,
 Ym buw; Gorwynnyonn [gwr anchwant].
 GWARTHEC Edeirnyawn ny buant,
 Gerdennin. a chant neb ny cherdynt,
 Ym byw Gorwynnyon, gwr eduynt°.
 GWARTHEGYD GWERTH gwyla negyd.
 Ar a dyvo dra, gwarth a'e deubyd.
 Mi a wydwn a oed da: [225]
 Gwaet am y gilyd, gwrda.
 BEI GWREIC GYRTHMWL, bydei gwan 2
 Hediw. Bydei bann y disgyr:
 Hi gyva, diva y gwyr.
 TYWARCHEN ERCAL ar erdywal, wyr.
 O etived Moryal:
 A gwedy rys macrysmal.

•••

HELEDD HWYEDIC y'm gelwir,
 "O Duw, pa diw yt° rodri;
 Meirch vym brodyr° ac eu tir?"
 HELED HWYEDIC a'm kyveich:
 "O Duw, padiw yt° rodri gurumseirch.
 Kyndylan a'e bedwardeg meirch?"
 NEUR SYLLEIS olygon ar dirion dir
 O orsed orwynnyon.
 Hir hwyl heul; hwy vyghouyon.
 NEUR LLYSSEIS [olygon] o dinlleu
 Ureconn, Ffreuer werydre, 3
 Hiraeth am damorth vrodyrde.
 MARCHAWC o Gaer adanaw,
 Nyt oed hwyr a gwynnyon, 4
 Gwr o Sannair.
 LLAS VYM BRODYR ar vnweith, [250]
 Kynan, Kynndylan, Kynnwreith;
 Yn amwyn Tren, tref diffeith.
 NY SANGHEI WEHELYTH ar nyth
 Kyndylan. Ny thechei droetued vyth.
 Ny vagas y uam uab llyth.

...MY COVERS, THEN, were made of the hide
 Of the hardy goat – intent I was on carnage,
 Being made drunk on the beer of Bryurn. 1
 MY COVERS, THEN, were made of the hide
 Of the hardy goat, the kid who's fond of holly:
 I, too, was made drunk on the mead of Tren.
 NO MORE, my brothers of Severn's vale,
 From the banks of both the Rhiws –
 (Alas, God, that I survive!)
 AFTER THE HORSES, trapped out in red, lie broken,
 After the waving of yellow plumes,
 My legs are thin. No covers remain.

•••

THE CATTLE of Edeyrniawn never strayed,
 With none did they wander away,
 In the lifetime of Gorwynion, great man of war.
 THE CATTLE of Edeyrniawn, then, never strayed,
 No company carried them off, not
 When Gowryniwn, wise war-man, had life.
 THE HERDSMAN knows only shame and contempt.
 He who suffers, wins no respect.
 I know what is good:
 For the blood of one warrior, another.
 WERE GYRTHMWL A WOMAN, she'd be weak 2
 This day. Shrill would be her cry:
 She would wail the loss of her heroes.
 ERCAL'S SOIL covers men of courage.
 Dirt now lies upon Moryal's line:
 The earth, having fed, returns them to dust.

•••

I SHALL BE KNOWN as wandering Heledd.
 O God, to whom are given
 My brothers' horses, and their land?
 WANDERING HELEDD's greeting:
 "O God, to whom are given the dark trappings
 Of Kynddylan and his fourteen steeds?"
 I HAVE GAZED with mine eyes on fallow land
 From the mound of Gorwynion.
 Long, the course of the sun; longer, my remembrance.
 I HAVE GAZED with mine eyes, from
 Wrecon, upon Freuer's heritage:
 I grieve that our valiant brothers are dead. 3
 A HORSEMAN from Caer beneath him,
 He was slow to complain, 4
 That man of Sannair.
 SLAIN WERE MY BROTHERS, at once,
 Kynan, Kynddylan, Kynwraith –
 In defending Tren, a town laid waste.
 PRINCES DARED NOT tread on the nest
 Of Kynddylan. He would not retreat one inch.
 His mother nursed no weakling son.

¹ Cf. lines 138, 171; Heledd may have called for war, prophesying victory; *gelyn:carnage...holly*] blood-drops

² *Gyrthmwl*] possibly a herdsman, though the name probably derives from Gwyrth-Mael, *prince of miracles*.

³ *Wrecon*] Wroxeter

⁴ *Caer*] Chester; *Gwr o Sannair* : *man of Sannair*] uncertain text, possibly corrupt

BRODYR, a'm bwyat ny vall,
A dyvynt ual gwyal coll;
O un y un edynt oll.
BRODYR, a'm bwyat a duc
Duw ragof: vy anffawt a'e goruc.
Ny obrynynt ffaw yr ffuc.

•••

TENEU AWEL tew lletkynt,
Pereid y rycheu; ny phara
Ae goreu, [tru] ar a vu nat ydynt.
AS CLYWO a Duw a dyn,
As clywo y ievinc a hyn,
Mevyl barveu madeu Hedyn.
YM BYW Hedyn° ehedeyi
Dillat yn aros gwaedvei,
A'r glas vereu haf nwyfei.
RYVEDAF dincleir na diw
Yn ol, kilyd kelvyd, clyw!
Yg gwall tyrch torri cneu kynw.
NY WN y° ae nywl ae mwc,
Ae ketwyr yn kyuamwc. [275]
Ygweirglawd, aer yssyd drwc.
EDEWEIS y weirglawd aer ysgwyt.
Digyvyng, dinas y gedyrn,
Goreu gwr, Garanmael.
KARANMAE, kymwy arnat.
Atwen dy ystlen° o gat.
Gnawt man ar gran kyniviat.
KYMWED ognaw llaw hael,
Mab Kynndylan clot avael,
Dywedwr Kynndrwynin, Caranmael.
OED DIHEID ac oed [dihat],
Oed diholedic tref tat,
A geissywys Caranmael yn ynat.
KARANMAEL, kymwed ognaw,
Mab Kyndylan clot arllaw,
Nyt ynat kyt mynat ohonaw.
Pan wisgei GARANMAL gatpeis Gyndylan,
A phrydyaw y onnen,
Ny chaffei Ffranc tranc oe benn.

•••

AMSER Y BUUM° vras vwyt
Ny dyrchafwn vy mordwyt
Yr gwr a gwynei claf gornwyt.
BRODYR a'm bwyat inneu
Nys cwyneni glevyt cornnwyeu;
Un Elvan, Kyndylan deu. [300]
NY MAT WISC BRIGER nyw dirper o wr
Yn dirvawr gywryssed.
Nyt oed levawr vym broder.

BROTHERS I had who never were forlorn.
They grew straight as the hazel tree.
One by one, they fell.
BROTHERS I had, taken from me
By God: my own misfortune, the cause.
They would not purchase fame by deceit.

•••

A LIGHT BREEZE, and a thick storm.
Furrows remain. Those who made them, are gone.
Those who have been, exist no more.
LET IT BE HEARD by God and man,
Let it be heard by young and old:
Disgrace on their beards for failing Hedyn!
IN THE LIFETIME of Hedyn, he shot forth,
Enduring all upon the field,
With the grey-blue blades of a lord he provoked.
I WONDER at that which approaches:
Skillful defenders, listen!—
In dens of the boar, pigs breaking nuts:
IS THAT NOT MIST? Is it smoke?—
Or is it warriors, engaged in fight?
On farmland, slaughter is a terrible thing.
I'VE HEARD In the fields the clatter of shields.
A fortress cannot contain the strong,
The best of men, Caránmael.
CARANMAEL, you are pressed by the foe.
I know your course of fight:
On the cheeks of a warrior dwell many scars.
MIRTH-MAKING, extending a liberal hand,
The son of Kynddylan, retainer of praise,
The last son of Kyndrwyn, Caranmael.
THEY WERE FORSAKEN, deprived,
Their heritage lost, those who
For their vengeance, Caranmael sought.
CARANMAEL, mirth-making,
Praise-giving Kynddylan's son,
Was no avenger, though that was his wish.
When CARANMAEL wore armor of Kynddylan,
When he shook his ashen spear,
The Franks from him had no relief.

•••

IN THE DAYS when I fared on rich repast,
I scorned to lift up my thighs
For a man who complained of his scabs.
BROTHERS, too, I had
Who would not complain of the plague.
Elvan, for one. Kynddylan, too.
'TIS NOT GRACEFUL HAIR that becomes
A man engaged the heat of a fight.
My brothers were not men who fussed.