

**PERCEPTIONS OF ANNWN:
THE OTHERWORLD
IN THE FOUR BRANCHES OF THE MABINOGI**

Rhian Rees

**MA Celtic Studies Dissertation
Department of Welsh and Bilingual Studies
Supervisor: Dr Jane Cartwright**

University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter 2012

ABSTRACT

There is little description or positive information about the realm of Annwn in the Four Branches, and relatively few publications have explored the Otherworld in the Mabinogi in any depth. The redactor presumably did not deem such detail necessary since in his time the Otherworld was a place familiar to his audience from many other stories and folk-tales which have not survived to inform our own times. The objective of this thesis, therefore, is to establish the perceived location of the Celtic Otherworld, its nature and topography, and to obtain descriptions of its people, buildings and animals and any distinctive objects or characteristics pertaining to it. The ways in which Annwn influences each of the Four Branches are also considered. Some sketchy evidence is available in Welsh poetry, mostly various descriptive names reflecting different aspects of Annwn, but for more detailed information it is necessary to trawl the waters of early Irish literature. The Irish poems and stories give much fuller particulars of all characteristics of the Celtic Otherworld, though they do suggest that there was more than one such other world. Some parallels from Norse literature and the *Lais* of Marie de France also reinforce certain themes of this thesis, such as magical tumuli and magical bags and animals.

PERCEPTIONS OF ANNWN:

the Otherworld in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi

CONTENTS:

Page No:

Abstract

2

Introduction

4

Chapter 1: The Classical Otherworld	7
Chapter 2: Location of the Celtic Otherworld	17
Chapter 3: The Celtic Otherworld	25
Chapter 4: Otherworldly Beings	40
Chapter 5: Otherworld Objects, Artefacts and Animals	49
Chapter 6: Influence of Annwn on the Four Branches	59
Conclusion:	81
Plates:	84
Bibliography:	93

INTRODUCTION

Anyone reading *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* and the *corpus* of medieval Welsh literature including the works attributed to Taliesin and the native tales known as the Mabinogi, soon becomes aware of the presence of Annwn, or the Celtic Otherworld, sometimes unstated, but always understood. The contemporary medieval audience must have had a shared background knowledge of ideas, assumptions and images associated with Annwn, which allowed the storyteller to make only brief references to the place, secure in the knowledge that his audience's memories would fill in the gaps with detail which is now lost to us. I have attempted to reconstruct this lost background information, using evidence from Welsh literature and folk tales, and also from Irish and other sources, as to the nature of the Otherworld and its inhabitants.

Annwn is a pervasive force in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. In the First and Third Branches, its power is more obvious than in the Second and Fourth, but it forms a constant backdrop to those branches also, despite being veiled in mystery. No details are given of the landscape, and few of the appearance or dress of the people, or of the buildings and artefacts. This thesis examines these areas to build up a picture of the Celtic Otherworld, of which Annwn is a part, and considers its intimate links with the Four Branches of the Mabinogi.

Questions which arise on reading the Mabinogi are:

Where is Annwn supposed to be located?

How is it possible to get there?

What sort of landscape and buildings does it have?

What are the inhabitants like?

Is there anything special about the animals and artefacts of Annwn?

Are there other accounts of Annwn/the Otherworld?

A great deal of information is available on this subject-matter, but it is disseminated over many different sources; consequently this dissertation gathers together widely dispersed elements to resolve the above questions. In order to set the Celtic Otherworld in a contemporary context, other major influences on Western thought about the Otherworld have been considered. The Heaven and Hell of Christianity were the main influences in the medieval west; however those ideas, with their heavy emphasis on death, judgement and atonement, are too well-known to need further clarification here. We begin, therefore, with those Classical ideas of the afterlife and the Otherworld which were familiar to every educated person because of the dominant Latin influence on learning in the medieval period. Chapter One describes an Underworld, a Land of the Dead, and demonstrates that it was vastly different from the Celtic Otherworld, which was a land of the very-much-alive.

The Celtic traditions of Wales and Ireland suggest differing ideas of the location of the Otherworld, and these have been explored along with the means of entrance and the various types of topography and environment which are described in differing sources. Poetry and folklore, both Welsh and Irish, have been used to help flesh out the scant information available in the Mabinogi, as have the Welsh Triads and ancient Irish tales. The latter give interesting information as to the physical form of Otherworldly beings,

especially their size, which can vary dramatically, and a chapter has been devoted to reviewing information regarding their appearance. Besides its people and its topography, the Otherworld's unique animals are also considered, along with various objects and artefacts which have magical properties.

Each individual Branch reflects the different aspects of Annwn's influence in distinctive ways: it is magnificent, warlike, vengeful, magical, and many other things besides. A detailed examination of how the Otherworld impinges on each branch of the Mabinogi has been reserved for Chapter Six, which examines its persistent and pervasive influence, even in those Branches which superficially give it scant reference. Although Sioned Davies's translation of the Mabinogi is now regarded as the standard text, I have always preferred that of John Bollard, as I like his rather more literal, slightly archaic phraseology, and accordingly, I have used both texts.

This dissertation collates and discusses information about the appearance of the Otherworld, its animals and inhabitants, and the properties of its artefacts, to build up a picture of a mostly - but not invariably – idyllic place. Furthermore, the influence which it exerted on each of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi is analysed. Some of the stories alluded to appear to be pre-Christian in origin (see Chapter 1), despite later interpolated allusions to God and Christ, and in them the Otherworld is for the most part a desirable place. The name of Annwn itself eventually became a synonym for Hell, but the reasons for this and the process by which it occurred are material for a dissertation in themselves.

1: The Classical Otherworld

The stories of the Celtic Otherworld contained in both Welsh and Irish literature may be extremely old. Two complete manuscripts of the Mabinogi exist, dating from about the fourteenth century, though remnants survive of a manuscript at least a century older. Sioned Davies states:

[T]here is general agreement that the texts are much older than the manuscripts, and the consensus of opinion is that the *Pedeir Keinc* appeared in a written form for the first time between about 1050 and 1120 ... It is possible to go back even further - it would seem that the tales... were transmitted orally for centuries before they were safeguarded in manuscript form and therefore the material ... can claim to have its roots in the distant past.¹

Similarly, Irish saga texts dating to the eighth century; "have evidently a long oral tradition behind them and probably reflect the social and political conditions of...the first century before Christ."² Before investigating these stories for information about the Celtic Otherworld, the Classical Otherworld will be examined to see how it differs.

The Classical Otherworld was perceived primarily as the abode of the dead. The religions of Ancient Greece and Rome had many similarities, especially after Rome conquered Greece in the second century BC. Along with other aspects of Greek culture, the Romans embraced and assimilated Greek ideas about religion, the gods and the Otherworld, as well as adopting Greek cults such as that of Apollo.³

¹ Sioned Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1993), p. 9.

² Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), p. xii.

³ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/roman_religion_ <accessed 20 March 2012>

When the Romans invaded Britain they brought their gods with them, and found parallels with native gods.⁴ The imported Roman gods made such a strong impression on Britain that their names replaced the original native names for the days of the week, but despite their long sojourn here and the great impact they made on the language, Roman ideas of the Otherworld seem not to have greatly influenced those of the Celtic Otherworld.

The Classical Otherworld was a land of the dead, and apart from occasional living visitors, such as Orpheus and Aeneas, mortals went there only after death. Olympus was also an Otherworld although its inhabitants were gods and deified heroes, so it was never a destination for normal human beings. The majority of the Immortals – the gods – lived there, but Hades, (Dis/Pluto) lived and ruled in the Underworld, accompanied by his wife, Persephone.

Excepting an occasional reference to it as the Fortunate Isles, or the Isles of the Blest, the Classical Otherworld was primarily an Underworld, conceived as lying below the earth. Homer, in the *Odyssey*, dated before the end of the eighth century BC, sent his heroes to the Underworld by ship from Circe's island "to the Halls of Hades and Persephone".⁵ Circe tells them they will find a thickly wooded shore where the groves of Persephone grow; they must go to a rock by the junction of two mighty rivers, and there make their sacrifice to the dead.⁶ Having landed, they walked beside the waters of the river Ocean to the place which Circe described.⁷ Virgil (70BC – 19BC) depicted the approach to the Underworld:

There was a huge, deep cave with ... a gaping mouth guarded by dark woods and the black waters of a lake. No bird could wing its

⁴ Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (New York: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1973), p. 32.

⁵ Homer, *The Odyssey* trans. E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1946), Book X, p.170.

⁶ *ibid*, Book X, line 509, p.165.

⁷ *ibid*, Book XI, line 9, p.168.

flight over this cave and live, so deadly was the breath that streamed out of that black throat and up into the vault of heaven. Hence the Greek name, 'Aornos', 'the place without birds'.⁸

This was precisely located in the region of Campania in Italy, where Strabo's Geography informs us that a volcanic crater containing Lake Avernus was believed also to contain the entrance to the Underworld.⁹ The grotto and sanctuary of the Cumaean Sibyl were situated nearby, and she guided Aeneas on his journey to the Underworld.

The *Iliad* tells us that Hades, ruler of the Underworld, was a brother of Zeus, king of the Gods, and Poseidon, ruler of the seas; all were children of Cronos and Rhea. They drew lots to determine their spheres of authority, and Zeus won the sky, Poseidon the sea and Hades 'the nether dark'.¹⁰ Hades also had several euphemisms, one - *Plouton* - referring to the riches which the earth contains; this name the Romans adopted as *Pluto*, and equated with their god *Dis Pater*. Persephone, daughter of the earth-goddess Demeter, is the wife of Hades, and the myth of her kidnap and enforced stay in the Underworld for part of the year purported to explain the changing seasons. The connection with the corn going into the earth in autumn when the world turns cold, and its subsequent springing to life with the return of warmth is apparent.

Odysseus does not enter the Underworld to speak with the dead in *The Odyssey*. At the appointed place, he sacrifices sheep, pouring their blood into a pit as a libation to the souls of the departed. Such blood libations were

⁸ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans David West (London: Penguin Books, 1990), Book 6, line 238, p.121.

⁹ *The Geography of Strabo*, Book V Ch. 4, available at http://www.penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/5D*.html <accessed 20 March 2012>

¹⁰ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950), Book XV, p. 276.

believed to give some temporary semblance of feeling to those souls which drank it.

[T]he dark blood poured in. And now the souls of the dead who had gone below came swarming up from Erebus - ... brides, unmarried youths, old men with life's long suffering behind them, and a great throng of warriors killed in battle... From this multitude of souls... there came a moaning that was horrible to hear.¹¹

Tiresias the seer forecasts future events on Odysseus's journey, and tells him that those dead who are allowed to drink the blood will answer his questions truthfully. Thus Odysseus speaks to his mother and subsequently to many other souls, and learns the impossibility of touching the dead, who melt away from him. His mother says "once the life-force has departed from our white bones ... the soul slips away like a dream and flutters on the air."¹² Aeneas discovers this when he tries to embrace his father and "the phantom melted in his hands, as weightless as the wind, as light as the flight of sleep".¹³

When Aeneas and the Sibyl arrive in the Underworld, they walk through empty halls in darkness, with shadows everywhere.¹⁴ Suddenly, disembodied spirits flutter about them, "a mere semblance of living substance".¹⁵ A road leads to Acheron, the river of Tartarus, and whirlpools disgorge sand and slime into Cocytus, the river of lamentation, which joins the Acheron. Nearby are the swamp of the river Styx and Charon the ferryman. Spirits swarm on the riverbank, pleading to be allowed across the river in Charon's boat.¹⁶ Some are allowed aboard, others not, these latter being unfortunates who

¹¹ Homer, *The Odyssey* Book XI, p.172.

¹² *ibid*, Book XI, p.177.

¹³ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, line 700, p.134.

¹⁴ *ibid*, Book 6, line 268, p.122.

¹⁵ *ibid*, Book 6, line 290, p.123.

¹⁶ *ibid*, Book 6, line 304, p.123.

have not received proper burial and must wait for a hundred years before crossing.¹⁷

Across the river, the three-headed dog Cerberus waits outside his cave.¹⁸ Beyond him is the destination for the souls of infants, suicides and those who have been wrongly condemned to death;¹⁹ then the Mourning Plains stretch into the distance, encircled by woodland, where unhappy lovers suffer still.²⁰ The road leads to far-off fields, the appointed home of valiant fighters.²¹ Homer says these meadows are covered in asphodel flowers,²² but his version of the afterlife is a dreary shadow of existence, where even a privileged soul like Achilles can say:

I would rather be a serf in the house of some landless man, with little enough for himself to live on, than king of all these dead men that have done with life.²³

Homer shows Orion rounding up wild animals that he had killed in the mountains,²⁴ thus indicating that animal spirits exist in the afterlife. Virgil likewise refers to animal spirits, but his are happier ideas of the afterlife, at least for the virtuous. Homer describes the judgement and punishment of souls, detailing the sufferings of Tityos, who had two vultures feeding on his liver, Tantalos, who could never eat nor drink despite being surrounded by food and water, and Sisyphos who struggled futilely to roll an enormous

¹⁷ *ibid*, Book 6, lines 296–317, p.123.

¹⁸ *ibid*, Book 6, line 411, p.126.

¹⁹ *ibid*, Book 6, lines 427–431, p.127.

²⁰ *ibid*, Book 6, line 440, p.127.

²¹ *ibid*, Book 6, line 478, p.127.

²² Homer, *The Odyssey* book XI, p.186.

²³ *ibid*, Book XI, p.184.

²⁴ *ibid*, Book XI, p.186.

stone over the top of a hill, for all eternity.²⁵ Lucan contrasted Druid teachings on the afterlife with Classical ideas:

No ghosts descend to dwell in dreadful night,
 No parting souls to grisly Pluto go,
 Nor seek the dreary, silent shades below,
 But forth they fly immortal in their kind,
 And other bodies in new worlds they find;
 Thus life for ever runs its endless race,
 And, like a line, death but divides the space,
 A stop which can but for a moment last,
 A point between the future and the past.²⁶

These immortal souls which find other bodies in new worlds after death are much more like the inhabitants of the Celtic Otherworld than they are to the wispy wraiths inhabiting the Classical Otherworld.

Virgil's description of the Underworld is detailed; once past the fields of asphodel, the road divides. The left branch "is the road of punishment for evil-doers, leading to Tartarus, the place of the damned", and the right-hand road leads to Elysium,²⁷ or the Elysian Fields. Aeneas saw:

on his left a broad city encircled by a triple wall and washed all round by Phlegethon, one of the rivers of Tartarus, a torrent of fire and flame, rolling and grinding great boulders in its current. There before him stood a huge gate with columns of solid adamant...and an iron tower rose into the air...They could hear the groans from the city, the cruel crack of the lash, the dragging and clanking of iron chains.²⁸

Tartarus is sometimes called Erebus. Erebus was the personification of darkness in Greek myth, and the word is occasionally used to designate the

²⁵ *ibid*, Book XI, pp.186-7.

²⁶ Lucan, *The Civil War*, trans. N. Rowe, edited by S. A. Brown and C. Martindale (London: Everyman, 1998), Book 1, line 797, p.22.

²⁷ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, line 538, p.130.

²⁸ *ibid*, Book 6, line 549, p.130.

first place in the Underworld to which the souls of the recently dead are sent. Rhadamanthus rules there, enforcing strict laws and punishing men for crimes they committed in life. The Fury, Tisiphone, flogs the guilty and keeps watch at the entrance. Within is the Hydra's lair and the pit of Tartarus itself, the place of eternal torment, "stretching sheer down into its dark chasm twice as far as we look up to the ethereal Olympus in the sky".²⁹ It is also referred to as the "abyss", and is the place where Jupiter's thunderbolt hurled the Titans; Tityos resides there too, his liver regenerating even as the vulture (only one in Virgil) feeds on it.³⁰ The worst punishments are reserved for those who have committed crimes against the gods, but the Sibyl lists a host of offences perpetrated by those awaiting punishment within.³¹ This description of Tartarus shows great similarities with Christian ideas of Hell, punishment for the wicked, and eternal damnation. Milton's depiction of Satan and the rebel angels being hurled into the depths of Hell by God parallels that of the Titans being hurled into the abyss for challenging the gods. The religions differ, but the crime and punishment are identical.

If Hell is here, so is Heaven:

[T]hey entered the land of joy, the lovely glades of the fortunate woods and the home of the blest. Here a broader sky clothes the plains in its glowing light, and the spirits have their own sun and their own stars. Some take exercise on grassy wrestling-grounds and hold athletic contests and wrestling bouts on the golden sand. Others pound the earth with dancing feet and sing their songs while Orpheus, the priest of Thrace, accompanies their measures on his seven-stringed lyre.³²

²⁹ *ibid*, Book 6, line 578, p.131.

³⁰ *ibid*, Book 6, line 597, p.131.

³¹ *ibid*, Book 6, line 608, p.132.

³² *ibid*, Book 6, line 639, p.132.

Here great heroes retained their armour and chariots, their swords planted in the ground and their horses wandering freely. "Reposing there below the earth, they took the same joy in their chariots and their armour as when alive, and the same care to feed their sleek horses".³³ Still others sing hymns to Apollo, whilst sitting on the grass and feasting.³⁴

Music, singing, dancing, wrestling, feasting and revelling in horses, chariots and armour as they did when living - this is literally 'the good life' whereby as a reward for behaving virtuously on earth, the dead souls lead an idyllic version of their former lives. Here is also a hint of a belief in reincarnation. When Aeneas asks his father who are the "numberless...tribes of men, like bees in a meadow on a clear summer day",³⁵ who swarm in a quiet side valley where the Lethe flows, he is told that they are the souls who are owed a second body.³⁶ They have been punished for their former sins: some scoured out by water, others by fire, until every trace of evil was removed.³⁷ This scouring of the souls is reminiscent of the Catholic Christian idea of Purgatory, but here the aim is not to ascend into heaven, purified, but to have a second chance at earthly life.

Despite their many similarities, there is some contrast between Greek and Roman descriptions of the afterlife in the Otherworld. Robert Parker comments that Greek religion often seems strangely amoral, and Greek gods behave scandalously. The Greeks did not see mankind as being sinful and needing redemption, though their gods did penalize certain offenders,

³³ *ibid*, Book 6, line 654, p.133.

³⁴ *ibid*, Book 6, line 658, p.133.

³⁵ *ibid*, Book 6, line 705, p.134.

³⁶ *ibid*, Book 6, line 713, p.135.

³⁷ *ibid*, Book 6, line 739, p.135.

particularly oath-breakers, who never escaped punishment.³⁸ According to Homer, certain transgressors against the gods were punished eternally, but for the majority a shadowy wraith of the dead person vanished to the underworld, where it led a futile joyless phantom existence. Some 'mystery' rites, notably those of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, claimed their devotees would have a more enjoyable afterlife, as contrasted with the wretchedness awaiting non-initiates.³⁹

Virgil's Roman version has a more rigorous insistence on judgement and retribution for sins committed during life. The judges expose everybody's guilty acts and sentence them accordingly. Judgement is fair, but there is no appeal, and no mention of mercy. Perpetual torment awaits serious sinners, but those who have lived virtuously and performed their obligations are rewarded, as they continue to enjoy the pleasures and possessions which gave them happiness in life. Some, even amongst the sinners, get a second chance at life on earth.

The Celtic Otherworld, however, is a place of life, rather than death. Those who live there are no vaporous wraiths. On the contrary, they have solid bodies, like Hafgan, Arawn's enemy in *Pwyll*, who fights Pwyll and is vanquished. Also, Arawn's wife, with whom Pwyll sleeps chastely for a year, was a warm, living woman, as was Rhiannon, the woman from Annwn who became his own wife. Some Irish stories, eg, *Immram Brain* and 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel', have references to Otherworldly beings fathering children on mortal women, much as the Roman gods, especially Jupiter, were supposed to have done. The Celtic Otherworld was a vibrant,

³⁸ Robert Parker, 'Greek Religion', in *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (London: Guild Publishing, 1986) pp. 261-2.

³⁹ *ibid*, p. 269.

idealised version of our own world, where people led happy, luxurious, busy lives free from sickness or care or the fear of death. The misery and aimlessness depicted in the Classical accounts are noticeably absent, as is retribution for sins committed.

The fundamental difference between the Classical Otherworld and the Celtic Otherworld is that both Romans and Greeks described the Classical Otherworld as a place of reward and punishment. The Celtic Otherworld is neither: no moral judgements are made of those who go there, and death is not a necessary prerequisite for entry.

2: Location of The Celtic Otherworld

The Celtic Otherworld, as evidenced in both Welsh and Irish literature, was a land of living people, as opposed to those disembodied wraiths supposed to exist in the Classical Otherworld. Greeks and Romans had elaborate ideas of the soul's destiny, but besides the eternal question of where we go after death, people have always been fascinated by the idea of travelling to other lands, other worlds and times. The First Branch of the Mabinogi has an example where the hero travels on horseback to another world – The Other World – a world, or realm, called Annwn.

This name, variously spelled Annwn, Annwfn, Annwfyn, has been considered to derive from the intensifying prefix 'an', meaning 'very' or 'extremely', and 'ddwfn' meaning 'deep'. The word would thus mean 'the very deep-down land'.⁴⁰ Sims-Williams considers this could be the correct etymology.⁴¹ Ifor Williams suggested that there was an identical, but rare, word 'dwfn' (cf Gaulish *dubno-*, *dumno-*) which meant 'world', and that 'an' represents the negative 'not' (or, perhaps, 'inside'); the whole meaning 'not-world', a place which is literally out of this world, though he eventually favoured 'an' as meaning 'in', or 'under', thus giving 'Under-World'.⁴² Whichever explanation is preferred, the meaning denotes somewhere other than the everyday world of the storyteller (or writer) and the audience he entertained.

Where was the Otherworld thought to be?

⁴⁰ Gwyn Thomas, *Gair am Air* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 2000), p. 26.

⁴¹ P. Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 57.

⁴² Ifor Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1951), pp. 99–100, note 25.

In *Pwyll*, it is contiguous with our own, possibly being in a different dimension. People appear, vanish and reappear, and certain settings, such as clearings and hillocks, are favoured for these phenomena. The king of Annwn appears to Pwyll in a clearing whilst he is hunting;⁴³ Rhiannon becomes visible to Pwyll while he is sitting on Gorsedd Arberth (Plate 1),⁴⁴ and their son Pryderi is there with his family and retinue when all human and (domestic) animal life, other than his immediate family, vanishes from Dyfed.⁴⁵ Manawydan, later in the Third Branch, is again on Gorsedd Arberth building a gallows for a magical mouse when Llwyd fab Cilcoed appears to him in various guises, and eventually Rhiannon and Pryderi reappear in the same place.⁴⁶ Pwyll was told that noblemen who sit on Gorsedd Arberth receive wounds or blows, or see a wonder.⁴⁷ H. R. Ellis makes the interesting point that there is a Norse tradition of kings sitting, to dispense justice or watch a hunt, on a natural or artificial hillock or tumulus (especially the burial *howe* of their father).⁴⁸ Sometimes they thereby encounter supernatural beings, both from within the *howe*, and without. King Rerir, in the *Volsunga Saga*, was sitting on a *howe* when the goddess Frigg gave him an apple, which enabled his wife to conceive after eating it.⁴⁹ She cites further exemplars from Irish stories – those of Muircertach,⁵⁰ Cormac,⁵¹ Art,⁵² and Connla,⁵³ all of whom are sitting on various hills or mounds when

⁴³ John K. Bollard, (trans), *The Mabinogi Legend and Landscape of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2006) p. 21.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ *ibid*, p. 66.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, p. 75.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p. 25.

⁴⁸ H. R. Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 105.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, p. 107.

⁵⁰ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble edition, 1996), p. 518.

⁵¹ *ibid*, p. 503.

⁵² *ibid*, p. 492.

⁵³ *ibid*, p. 488.

Otherworldly beings appear to them. The stories of Pwyll and Manawydan on Gorsedd Arberth fit into this convention, and she concludes that the Welsh and Irish allusions point to a Celtic variant of the Norse traditions.⁵⁴ This is not implausible, given that Vikings had settled in Ireland by the early ninth century,⁵⁵ and had a few isolated settlements in Wales by the late ninth century,⁵⁶ so there were opportunities for cross-cultural exchange.

Across the sea is a location frequently suggested for the Otherworld; one which appears in *Branwen*, where Ireland substitutes for the Otherworld, and also in the Irish *Immram Brain*. Other ancient Irish tales also portray the Otherworld as an island, or a peninsula of islands. Grassholm (Plate 2), under the guise of *Gwales*, is mentioned in the Second Branch as the enchanted outpost of Annwn where the companions of Brân's magical severed head spent eighty years feasting, without ageing. In 1896, Captain John Evans told the *Pembroke County Guardian* that when sailing past Grassholm Island he was surprised to see a beautiful green meadow two or three feet below the surface, and he recalled hearing old people tell of a floating island in the vicinity which sometimes emerged, and subsequently vanished, not to be seen again for years.⁵⁷ Hy-Brasil is another such mysterious vanishing island, which was actually recorded on maps (Plate 3) until the nineteenth century, somewhere to the south-west of Ireland.⁵⁸ Significantly, it was always covered by thick mist – a recognised sign of the Otherworld - which lifted only once every seven years, when the island

⁵⁴ Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, p.109.

⁵⁵ www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland <accessed 5 April 2012>

⁵⁶ www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/253 <accessed 5 April 2012>

⁵⁷ R. S. Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1956), p.150.

⁵⁸ <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/Maritime/Sources/1476brasil.htm> <accessed 5 April 2012>

became briefly visible. Hy-Brasil was reputed to be the home of fairies, magicians and wizards.⁵⁹

There were stories in Pembrokeshire of fairies visiting the markets in Haverfordwest and Fishguard, and

The Milford Haven folk could see the green Fairy Islands distinctly, lying out a short distance from land; and the general belief was that they were densely peopled with fairies.⁶⁰

One Welsh name for the fairies, or Otherworld denizens, is *Plant Rhys Ddwfn*. Literally, the name means "the children of Rhys of the Deep". The country of these people lies off the Dyfed coast, becoming visible only when viewed from a patch of land in Cemaes, or a turf from St David's churchyard.⁶¹ An Irish analogy is cited by W. J. Gruffydd:

The king Under the Wave gave the king of Spain a marvellous cow called *Glas Goinach*.⁶²

His note says that "the King Under the Wave", or *Rígh fo thuinn*, is a common Irish title for the King of Fairyland. Alwyn and Brinley Rees, however, believe "Plant Rhys Ddwfn" to be a corruption of "Plant yr Is-ddwfn" or "Plant Rhi Is-ddwfn", that is, "the children of (the King of) the Nether World".⁶³

A further connection with water appears in the traditional stories locating the Otherworld under a lake: one well-known Welsh folk tale is that of the Lady of

⁵⁹ Donald S. Johnson, *Phantom Islands of the Atlantic* (London: Souvenir Press, 1997) p. 113.

⁶⁰ Sir John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore Welsh and Manx* vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901) p.161.

⁶¹ *ibid*, p.158.

⁶² W. J. Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1928) p 152.

⁶³ Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961) p 179.

Llyn y Fan Fach (Plate 4), who came out of the lake with her dowry of cattle to marry the human who loved her, and returned there years later when the taboo against being struck three causeless blows by her husband had been broken.⁶⁴

Other accounts affirm that the Otherworld is situated underground, especially those Irish tales where the fairies live in the *Sídh* mounds (Plate 5), such as *Echtrae Nera*:

Thereupon Nera ... went after the fairy host into the cave of Cruachan... Thereupon they reached the fairy-mound of Cruachan and went into it.⁶⁵

According to pagan belief, the cave of Cruachan (Plate 6)⁶⁶ was an entrance to fairyland, though Christianity later debased it into an entrance to Hell.⁶⁷

Giraldus Cambrensis (c.1146-1223) repeats the story of his contemporary, the priest Elidyr, who maintained that he had visited such an underground land in his youth, and Gervase of Tilbury (c.1150-c.1228) has a story of a Derbyshire swineherd who visited a wonderful underground land, which he entered via a cave.⁶⁸ More details of these are given in Chapter 3.

Ellis states that in the Norse saga *Vafþrúðnismál* (v. 43) a wise giant maintains that he gained his wisdom when he descended into the underworld: "Of the runes of the giants and all the gods ... I can tell with truth. I have been into nine worlds below, to Niflhel; there die men out of Hel".⁶⁹ She mentions also the tale of Hadingus, who visited the Underworld and

⁶⁴ Sir John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore Welsh and Manx* vol. 1, pp. 2-12.

⁶⁵ Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 249.

⁶⁶ See picture on page 89 and video available at:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrjvOudgFYE&feature=player_embedded&noredirect=1
<accessed 14 April 2012>

⁶⁷ *ibid*, p. 248.

⁶⁸ Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, pp. 67-8.

⁶⁹ Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, p. 85.

found "a fair land where green herbs grow when it is winter on earth."⁷⁰ This account from Saxo Grammaticus has echoes of the story of Nera (see p.34).⁷¹

It may seem self-evident that by the twenty-first century, such ideas and beliefs would be considered as superstition and fairytale, but Anne Ross, writing in 2001, reveals a remarkable incidence of such beliefs which purportedly go back many hundreds of years. These beliefs centre on a cult object kept in the Hendy area of Anglesey; a stone head said to represent Eog Agor, one of the three sons of Gwydion ap Dôn.⁷² This is the same Gwydion as the enchanter in the mabinogi of *Math*. Eog Agor and his brothers were believed to inhabit a different dimension from ours, though some people could contact them. Anne Ross says that a leading member of the cult centred on the Hendy head was "courageous enough to talk about the old beliefs" some years before.⁷³ She saw and photographed the head, which made a strong impression on her, and she maintains that, far from being abandoned, the cult's membership is expanding.⁷⁴ She elaborates:

One important aspect of the cult was that the people in it believed they did not die but simply went through a vortex to another world: 'That's our belief ... and you can come and go, backwards and forwards, through that vortex'. Apparently those who went through this vortex remained the same in appearance and did not age.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ *ibid*, p. 85.

⁷¹ Saxo Grammaticus, *History of the Danish People* Book 1

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1150/1150-h/1150-h.htm> <accessed 15 April 2012>

⁷² Anne Ross, *Folklore of Wales* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing, 2001), p. 152.

⁷³ *ibid*, p.151.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, p.152.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, p.152.

The comment about ageing is exactly what is said of ancient travellers to the Otherworld, including those in the Mabinogi, and of those in accounts of people who had been taken by fairies and returned home years later; for example, Evans-Wentz's Scottish tale of a bridegroom abducted when newly married, who returned home two generations later, looking as young and fresh as when he disappeared.⁷⁶

Gwyn Thomas speaks of people who have undergone near-death experiences:

Y mae amryw o'r bobol sy'n honni iddynt gael y profiad yn dweud eu bod nhw fel pe baent yn cychwyn ar daith am y Byd Arall. Y mae mynd trwy dwnel neu bibell o dywyllwch yn dra chyffredin: 'Yna fe es i i dwnel. 'Roeddwn i'n teimlo fel pe bawn i mewn twnel a hwnnw'n troi, twnel du. Dim ond tywyllwch'.⁷⁷

This description of a dark tunnel or pipe, which is turning, resembles that of a vortex. In such instances, presumably, the experience is happening within the brain of the person who is approaching death, and possibly the near-death experiences of people in previous centuries may have contributed to some of the tales which have come down to us. It is interesting also that those who told Anne Ross that members of their sect could travel to and from another world said that they do so by means of a vortex.

To sum up, literature and tradition suggest varying locations for the Otherworld. One is underground, as in *Echtrae Nera* and the stories of

⁷⁶ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in the Celtic Countries* (Glastonbury: The Lost Library, no date; facsimile reprint of 1911 edition), p.113.

⁷⁷ Gwyn Thomas, *Gair am Air*, p. 22.[Several people who assert that they have had the experience say that it was as though they were starting on a journey into the Other World. Going through a dark tunnel or pipe is very common: 'Then I went into a tunnel. I felt as though I were in a tunnel and it was turning, a black tunnel. Nothing but darkness.'] My translation.

Giraldus and Gervase of Tilbury. The entrance is usually via a cave or tunnel. This Otherworld may lie under the ground, but is very different from the Underworld of Classical myth, in that it is a happy place of living people, not a dismal land of the dead. The other major location is connected with water, and portrays the Otherworld as an island or peninsula of islands across the water, accessed by boat, as in *Immram Brain* and also the story of *Plant Rhys Ddwfn*, or as a land hidden under a lake like Llyn y Fan. However, there is a further possibility, hinted at in the Mabinogi: the Otherworld is all about us, but in a different dimension. Humans cannot see it, but those who live there can enter our world from many different liminal places and people can visit there by invitation without difficulty.

3: The Celtic Otherworld

Whether underground, overseas, or in another dimension, what was the Otherworld like? Wherever it is located, such descriptions as we have agree that it is above all a land of everlasting beauty and luxury. In the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, Annwn is an enigma, scarcely described at all. Pwyll rides from his own land into Arawn's kingdom in Annwn without faltering or noticing any difference in the terrain until he reaches the buildings of Arawn's court.

*Ac yn y llys ef a welei hundyeu ac yneuadeu, ac ysteuyll, a'r ardurn
teccaf a welsei neb o adeiladeu... y guelei ef teulu ac yniuroed, a'r
niuer hardaf a chyweiraf o'r a welsei neb yn dyuot y mywn ... A
threulaw a wnaethant bwyt a llynn a cherdeu a chyuedach. O'r a
welsei o holl lyssoed y dayar, lyna y llys diwallaf o uwyt a llynn, ac eur
lestri, a theyrn dlysseu.⁷⁸*

This brief portrayal leaves the details to the hearers' imaginations. There are, however, descriptions of the Otherworld in Welsh poetry, although for fuller information we must examine Irish tales. The difficult and allusive Welsh poem, *Preiddau Annwn*, attributed to Taliesin, gives many different descriptive names whilst recounting Arthur's raid on Annwn. Proinsias MacCana says the poem infers that the Otherworld is an island, though it is given different names and descriptions at variance with one another.⁷⁹ Since Arthur's group reached Annwn in his ship Prydwen, it could have been either an island or another part of the mainland, but from clues within the poem, it

⁷⁸ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p.4 [[H]e could see sleeping quarters and halls and chambers and the fairest ... buildings anyone had ever seen... he could see the household troops and hosts, and the most beautiful and best equipped host ...coming in... And they passed the time with food and drink and song and revelry. And whatever he had seen of all the courts in the world, that was the court most abundant in food and drink and gold plate and royal jewels.] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 22.

⁷⁹ Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (New York: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1973), p.129.

would seem that it was imagined as an island. Because the poem starts with Gwair's imprisonment in Annwn, Sims-Williams proposes Lundy or the Isle of Wight as its setting, both being "Ynys [G]Wair" in Welsh.⁸⁰ The objective of the raid was to secure the *Peir Pen Annwryn*, 'Cauldron of the Head of Annwn' (see Chapter 5), and other magical plunder. This poem, considered to date from the eighth or ninth century, contains several allusions to the Mabinogi, thus emphasising the antiquity of these stories, besides being one of the earliest mentions of Arthur.⁸¹ There are echoes here of Brân's disastrous vengeance raid on the island of Ireland in *Branwen*, where a magic cauldron revived slain Irish soldiers until Efnisien burst it open in an attempt to atone for the harm he had caused.

The poem refers to the *sídh* stronghold, *Caer Sidi*, and Loomis says

we may assert with confidence that *Kaer Siddi* is ... Annwn, for it was characteristic of the medieval Celts to give several names to the Otherworld;⁸²

He thinks it is probably in the secondary adjectival sense that the Irish word *síde* was adopted into Welsh and applied to the fortress of Annwn.⁸³ Sims-Williams favours the idea that *síd* originally meant 'abode', became specialised as the abode of gods, and then restricted to their abode in Ireland, the tumulus, or fairy-mound.⁸⁴

Furthermore, it is said to be four-cornered, four-sided, another indication that

⁸⁰ Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 66.

⁸¹ *ibid*, p. 310, note 11.

⁸² Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, p. 148.

⁸³ *ibid*, p. 148.

⁸⁴ Sims-Williams, *Irish influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 56.

it is an island, and a motif which recurs in poem No XIV in the Book of

Taliesin:

*Ys kyweir vyg kadeir yg kaer sidi...
Ac am y banneu ffrydyeu gweilgi.*⁸⁵

Caer Vanddwy (the Fort of the Divine Place), and Caer Ochren (the Enclosed Fort?)⁸⁶ are other names Taliesin gives the Otherworld in *Preiddau Annwryn*, and he also calls it the Fort of Intoxication (Caer Vedwyd). Poem XIV says it has a spring flowing with drink sweeter than white wine, and Loomis mentions references in *Pwyll*, *Buchedd Collen* and *Branwen* to the “lavish potations in Annwn and its euhemerised counterpart, Gwales.”⁸⁷ Most descriptions of the Otherworld affirm that its drink is strong and sweet. In *Immram Brain*, the inhabitants of the Otherworld are drinking the best of wine, and in *Tochmarc Etain*, Midir asserts: “Fine though you think the ale of Ireland, more exhilarating still is the ale of Tír Már... Sweet warm streams flow through the land, the choice of mead and of wine”.⁸⁸ Many descriptions of the Otherworld emphasise its choice and profusion of food and drink.

Poem XIV also refers to it as the Frigid Fort (Caer Rigor), and the Glass Fort (Caer Wydyr). The latter designation evokes the story of the glass tower in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, ascribed to Nennius, which tells of the failed attempt of the sons of Mil to capture a glass tower surrounded by sea.⁸⁹ All drowned, except the occupants of a crippled ship which was

⁸⁵ Marged Haycock (ed.), *Legendary poems from the Book of Taliesin* (Aberystwyth:CMCS, c2007), p. 277. [Perfect (kyweir) is my seat in Kaer Siddi...And around its corners are ocean's currents] trans. R. S. Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, p. 148.

⁸⁶ John T. Koch and John Carey,(eds.), *The Celtic Heroic Age* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003), pp. 310–11.

⁸⁷ *ibid*, p. 164.

⁸⁸ MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 124.

⁸⁹ John Morris, (ed. and trans.), *Nennius British History and the Welsh Annals*, (London: Phillimore, 1980) p. 20.

unable to join the others. MacCana believes that the glass tower here represents the land of the dead.⁹⁰ According to him, there is no inconsistency in representing the Otherworld as the Land of the Dead and also the Land of the Living, as he feels the answer to this seeming paradox lies in the idea of the Otherworld as an archipelago of islands, each different from all the others.⁹¹ Loomis, however, feels that “There seems to be no warrant in medieval Welsh literature for the view that Annwn in any of its forms was a land of the dead”,⁹² and comments also that Irish literature before 1200 shows little evidence for the idea that the Celtic Otherworld was the land of the dead, and that Welsh literature shows none at all.⁹³

Certainly there seems to be no evidence available from the *Immrana* and *Echtrae* considered here that it was necessary for anybody to die before their journey could begin. Indeed, it is specifically stated in *Immrana Brain* that one of the men died when they returned to Ireland and he attempted to land. They had been so long 'out of time' in the Otherworld that contact with the earth and reality brought all the years crashing down on him and he shrivelled into dust. Neither does any of the Four Branches contain any suggestion that people access the Otherworld via the portal of death. On the contrary, the characters we meet are full of life, and Pwyll, who ruled in the Otherworld for a year, returns as a living man, marries and fathers a child, and rules his own kingdom for years before eventually dying.

The redactor of the Four Branches relied on his audience's background

⁹⁰ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, p.129.

⁹¹ *ibid*, p.129.

⁹² Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, p.141.

⁹³ *ibid*, pp.143–4.

knowledge to fill in the particulars of his formulaic descriptions, but some Irish tales give detailed, lyrical depictions of the Otherworld. Bran mac Febhail is lured there by a woman who describes it as a distant isle “around which sea-horses glisten”,⁹⁴ with white waves surging on the strand. It is supported by pillars of white bronze, and has a beautiful plain where games and sports are held and coracle races against chariot,⁹⁵ reflecting the later section of the poem where Bran, rowing his coracle, meets Manannán mac Lir driving his chariot over the sea. She tells of a happy, blossoming land of colour and supreme beauty, where no sorrow or treachery exist and only sweet music and gentle sounds are heard: “The sea washes the wave upon the land. Hair of crystal drops from its mane”⁹⁶ and decay and death are unknown. She also refers to it as *Aircthech*,⁹⁷ the Bountiful Land, *Ciuin*, the Gentle Land,⁹⁸ and *Imchiuin*,⁹⁹ the Very Gentle Land.

She tells Bran that there is wealth and all kinds of treasure there.¹⁰⁰ Chariots are made of silver, gold and bronze.¹⁰¹ The horses are brightly-coloured, with hair of golden yellow, crimson, or heavenly blue.¹⁰² The stones themselves sing, and there are many birds, and very many women. At night, they listen to music and drink the best of wine.¹⁰³ Finally, she tells him that “there are twice fifty distant isles In the ocean to the west of us”, each two or

⁹⁴ Kuno Meyer (trans), *The Voyage of Bran* (London: David Nutt, 1895), p.4 v. 4. This is a *kenning* for 'crested sea waves'.

⁹⁵ *ibid*, p. 4 v. 5.

⁹⁶ *ibid*, p. 8 v. 12.

⁹⁷ *ibid*, p. 8 v. 12.

⁹⁸ *ibid*, p. 8 v. 13.

⁹⁹ *ibid*, p.10 v. 20.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, p. 8 v. 13.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, p. 8 v. 14.

¹⁰² *ibid*, p. 8 v. 15.

¹⁰³ *ibid*, p. 8 v. 13.

three times as large as Ireland,¹⁰⁴ thus supporting MacCana's argument that the Otherworld is imagined as an archipelago. This idea is restated in the poem addressed to Colum Cille by Mongan, who says:

*Mac Eit[h]ni is Fei[d]limid finn
cuigi romcinn Dia do cein
a Tir Tarrngaire na finn,
mar a cantar fír gan bréig.*

*Tri caoguit inis rea rim
ma docuired on rig réd,
in gach innsi dar mo leighend
tri coibheis Eirenn fodein.¹⁰⁵*

Apart from Brân's voyage to Ireland in the Second Branch, where his raid has echoes of Arthur's in *Preiddau Annwryn*, the Four Branches have no indication that the Otherworld lies across water. The impression gained from them is, rather, that Annwn is ubiquitous and all-pervading, separated from normal human life by only a veil, which can disappear at any time, allowing Annwn and its denizens to become perceptible to human eyes. The idea of altered perception recurs in both Welsh and Irish material.

In *Immram Brain*, Manannán mac Lir, driving his chariot over the waves to Ireland, meets Bran on his way to the Otherworld in his coracle, and tells him that what Bran thinks is sea is actually a beautiful plain. The changed perception makes all the difference. Manannán says that the salmon Bran sees leaping out of the sea are actually calves and lambs,¹⁰⁶ and tells him that although he can see only one chariot rider, horses and riders abound on

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, p.12 v. 25.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, pp. 88–89. [The son of Ethne and of Fedlimid the Fair, To him [Colum Cille] God sent me from afar, From the Land of Promise of the blessed, Where truth is sung without falsehood. Thrice fifty isles are counted, As they were set by the bright King, In every isle, by my lore! There is three times the size of Erin herself.]

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, p. 18.

the flowery plain, which itself is vast; the hosts of people are numerous and gloriously colourful and the welcome abundant.¹⁰⁷

Again, there is stress on the profusion of everything desirable in this glorious Land of Promise. Other tales describe further wonders. In *Serglige Conn Culainn*, The Sick Bed of Cú Chulainn, his charioteer reconnoitres the fairy world for him. He describes the palace of Labraid of the Long Hair, with beds having beautiful round bedposts decorated with gold, which shine in the light given off by a brilliant precious stone. Near a door are two troops of horses, one grey with dappled manes - a highly prized colouration¹⁰⁸ - and the other purplish-brown. Nearby grow trees of purple crystal, thronged with birds singing for the royal children, while the branches of a silver tree also make music.¹⁰⁹

King Iubdan of the Lepracan, a magnificent people of tiny size,¹¹⁰ has a palace with a silver floor and a ceiling of red gold. The door's threshold is copper, and its lintel of white bronze. The thatch is pale yellow feathers, and the candelabra are gold. Iubdan himself gives this information, and Aed also describes this palace as being built of huge blocks of marble, with many windows. The beds are roomy, with bedclothes of red, yellow, green and blue, and it has twelve doorways, with golden doors. There are baths, and cooking-places for warriors, and its pillars are of crystal, silver, and copper. In contrast to the solidity of the marble blocks and crystal or metal columns, its terraces are paved with egg-shells, which might seem more appropriate for beings of such small stature.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁸ Nerys Ann Jones, 'Horses in Medieval Welsh Court Poetry', in S. Davies and N. A. Jones, (eds.) *The Horse in Celtic Culture* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 98, note 2.

¹⁰⁹ Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp. 188 - 189.

¹¹⁰ See p. 44.

¹¹¹ *ibid*, p. 484.

People in the Otherworld do not have to work to eat. In the story of Connla the Fair, a beautifully dressed woman approaches him, invisible to the others present, though they can hear her. When Conle asks where she comes from, she answers:

[F]rom the Land of the Living, a place in which there is neither death nor sin nor transgression. We enjoy lasting feasts without preparing them and pleasant company without strife.¹¹²

This place is obviously part of the non-judgemental Otherworld. In *The Adventures of Art son of Conn*, Conn journeys alone in his coracle to an unknown island with wells of wine, scented apple-trees, and a lovely hazel-wood with golden-yellow nuts and bees humming over blossoms. Nearby is a fine hostel with crystal doors, bronze doorposts, and a roof thatched with coloured birds' wings. Conn sits down and his feet are washed by invisible hands and the fire kindled. Tables laden with varied foods appear, followed by a drinking-horn. The dishes vanish, a beautiful blue crystal vat banded with gold materializes, and he is told to bathe in the vat to refresh himself. All this happens without anybody else being visible.¹¹³ Here again, the Otherworld is an island, beautiful and luxurious. Food and drink appear instantaneously, and unseen servants do the work.

Cormac mac Airt visits the Land of Promise and enters a palace with bronze beams, silver wattling and thatch of white birds' wings, where "There was bathing in a pool without the need of attendance. The heated stones of themselves went into and came out of the water".¹¹⁴

¹¹² *ibid*, p. 488.

¹¹³ *ibid*, p. 494.

¹¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 505.

One might have expected that in an attempt to describe the ultimate in beauty and luxury as found in the Otherworld, there would have been a plethora of servants attending to every need, thought or wish before it was uttered. However, it would seem that in the story of Art, son of Conn, privacy – of which there cannot have been much in a crowded medieval court – and solitude have a high value. Instead of servants crowding everywhere, there are none to be seen. Service is immediate, but silent and invisible. Fire, food and drink appear, as does a prepared bath, all of which he can enjoy in seclusion. Cormac's bath is different, but noteworthy in that it gives us a picture of what must have been the normal Irish method of heating bathwater: with heated stones. The emphasis here is not on the fact that the water is heated with stones, as that is taken for granted, but that the stones go in and out of the water of their own volition. The silver wattling and birds' wing thatch are also interesting, in that they suggest that normal buildings – even palaces – were built of wattle and daub, and thatched, so that the storyteller's imagination could offer no other idea of splendour, than to have wattle of a valuable metal and thatch of beautiful feathers.

In *Immram Brain*, Bran and his men, "in three companies of nine"¹¹⁵ journey to the Land of Women, *Tir inn mBan*, where they immediately obtain lovers and "Thereupon they went into a large house, in which was a bed for every couple, even thrice nine beds"¹¹⁶ There is no sexual prudery in the Otherworld. As well as sports and music, the inhabitants enjoy sex without guilt or shame. Manannán talks of:

Cluche n-óimin n-inmeldag
*aigdit fri fín n-imborbag*¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran*, p. 16.

¹¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 30.

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 20: Meyer notes that he has guessed that *imborbag* means luxurious.

*for os mná míne fo doss,
cen peccad, cen immorboss.*¹¹⁸

There is no hint of clerical disapproval here, and although later on Manannán refers briefly to the coming of Christ, after this interpolation he goes on to explain that his journey to Ireland is for the purpose of begetting a hero on the wife of a king, and again, no disapproval is manifest. There is an echo of this attitude in the First Branch, when Arawn tells Pwyll that he will have "the fairest woman you have ever seen to sleep with you every night, with my face and my form upon you".¹¹⁹ What he does not mention at the time is that this woman is his own wife, and he is later surprised that Pwyll has not taken advantage of his many opportunities to make love to her; he was not expecting such restraint.¹²⁰

The Otherworld in *Echtrae Nera* is underground, and Nera follows a troop of fairies through a cave to reach it.¹²¹ These fairies are nothing like the minuscule, ethereal creatures with gossamer wings which were so beloved of Victorian imaginations. Rather, they are human-sized, substantial warriors who were planning to destroy Nera's settlement. St Patrick's Purgatory, which was until recently a living Irish tradition, involved spending a sleepless night in prayer, latterly in a chapel, but originally in a cave which was supposed to be the entrance to the Underworld, or of Hell itself. Alwyn and Brinley Rees believe this to be a Christianized version of a ceremony originally connected with the Adventures of Nera, namely ritual descents into

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, p.20 v. 41 [A beautiful game, most delightful, They play (sitting) at the luxurious wine
Men and gentle women under a bush, Without sin, without crime.]

¹¹⁹ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 21.

¹²⁰ *ibid*, p. 24.

¹²¹ Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 249.

caves, such as occur in initiation rites as widely separated as the Mithraic mysteries and those of some Australian aborigines. Everywhere they symbolise a visit to the world beyond.¹²² The Otherworld is also a safe haven: in *Echtrae Laeghairi*, it is called *Magh Dá Cheo*, 'The Plain of the Two Mists', and in this story, the heroes choose to stay there, "secure from the anxieties and infirmities of the mortal world".¹²³

Clerical disapproval is, however, manifest in the description of the visit of St Collen to the Otherworld in *Buchedd Collen*. Collen was in his cell on Glastonbury Tor, and overheard men talking about Gwyn ap Nudd, saying that he was king of Annwn. Collen immediately challenged them, saying they were talking about demons, and subsequently, Gwyn ap Nudd invited him to a meeting on top of the tor. Eventually, he went, and:

*Aeth i ben y byryn Affan ddaeth yno ef a welai y kastell teka ar a welsai irioed a meirch a bechin yni marchogeth ar i kevyne ... A dyvod anaeth kollen i vewn y kastell affan ddoeth yr oedd y brenin yn eiste mewn kader o avr A chyroesawv kollen ... ac erchu iddi vyned i vwyta ir bwrdd ac yna y dyvod kollen wrth y brenin ni vwytaf vi ddail y koed...*¹²⁴

The description of the fairy palace in *Buchedd Collen* recalls that of the court of Arawn in *Pwyll*. Collen found the king sitting in a chair of gold, and was welcomed and invited to eat, the king saying that every luxury of civilised entertainment would be his. Collen refused, and in reply to the king's asking what he thought of the servants' parti-coloured livery, said that the red side portends burning, and the blue side cold.

¹²² Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 304.

¹²³ MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 126.

¹²⁴ S. Baring-Gould and John Fisher, *Lives of the British Saints* (London: Charles J Clark, 1908) Vol. IV p. 377. [He went to the top of the hill and when he came there he saw the fairest castle that he had ever seen, and steeds with youths riding on their backs... And Collen went into the castle and when he did, the king was sitting in a chair of gold. He welcomed Collen ...and urged him to come to the table to eat, and Collen said to the king "I will not eat the leaves of the trees".] My translation.

*Ac ar hyny y tynodd kollen isiobo allan ac a vwriodd y dwr bendiged
am i pene ac ar hyny yr aethant ymaith oi olwc ef hyd nad oedd yno yr
un na chastell na dim ond y twmp pethe gleision.*¹²⁵

Collen's refusal to eat is interesting, seeming to reflect the belief that if food is eaten in the Otherworld, then the person who eats it cannot return to the normal world. In ancient Greek myth, Persephone had to remain with Hades for as many months as she had eaten pomegranate seeds. This is a widespread tale type classified by Stith Thompson as C211.¹²⁶ Evans-Wentz reports evidence taken in Ireland that "once...you taste food in their palace you cannot come back. You are changed to one of them, and live with them for ever."¹²⁷

The tradition of plenty, luxury and beauty in Annwn is reflected in *Buchedd Collen*, but here such things have become undesirable in a clerical context and must therefore be the work of devils.

Annwn in *Pwyll* shares the same light of day with Dyfed, and nothing is said in the other branches to indicate that it is not lit by the same sun as our everyday world. However, there is a tradition whereby some parts of the Otherworld enjoyed only a reflected, twilight type of light. There is an allusion to this in *Preiddau Annwfn*, according to some translators. *Preiddau Annwfn* is such a problematic poem that the same line can be translated in different ways, and inevitably involves an element of interpretation on the part of the translator. What Koch and Carey translate as "running water and jet are

¹²⁵ *ibid*, pp. 377–8, [And then Collen pulled out his flask and flung the holy water on their heads and with that they went from his sight until there was no castle and nothing there but the green tumps.] My translation.

¹²⁶ <http://storysearch.symbolicstudies.org> <accessed 22 January 2012>

¹²⁷ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in the Celtic Countries*, p. 47.

mixed”,¹²⁸ Skene renders “The twilight and pitchy darkness were mixed together”.¹²⁹ Loomis says

[T]he rendering of *echwyd amuchyd kymyscetor* is far from certain ... and if *muchyd* meaning ‘jet’ can be interpreted as ‘jet-blackness’, then the line would refer to the mingling of strong light and deep darkness in a sort of twilight.¹³⁰

Giraldus Cambrensis tells of an Otherworld with such a light, maintaining that an elderly priest called Elidyr claimed he had been there. Aged twelve, he ran away from his lessons, when two little men appeared and invited him to a land of constant enjoyment.

They led him first through a dark underground tunnel and then into a most attractive country, where there were lovely rivers and meadows, and delightful woodlands and plains. It was rather dark, because the sun did not shine there. The days were all overcast, as if by clouds, and the nights were pitch-black, for there was no moon nor stars.¹³¹

This was a rich, luxurious place, where truth was valued above all else. The boy travelled to and from this subterranean world for some time, but was eventually banished when he stole a golden ball, and could never find the way back.

A similar subterranean Otherworld, but this time with a bright light, is described in *Otia Imperialia* by Gervase of Tilbury as having been found in Derbyshire.¹³² William Peverell of Peak Castle had a swineherd who discovered it accidentally, whilst searching for a strayed pregnant sow. He entered an unexplored cave, and eventually emerged from the darkness to a bright place with fields of grain, where he found the sow with her piglets.

¹²⁸ Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, p. 310.

¹²⁹ William F. Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (np: Forgotten Books 2007), p. 182.

¹³⁰ Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, p. 165.

¹³¹ Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Journey Through Wales/The Description of Wales*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), pp. 133–4.

¹³² Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, p. 67.

Loomis considers that the references from Gerald and Gervase are proof that “in twelfth-century Britain the folk belief in a subterranean fairyland was taken seriously by clerics”.¹³³

The various texts which have been surveyed for the purpose of attempting to define and describe the Otherworld vary considerably in their information, so that it is not possible to come to a definite conclusion as to its nature. In the *Mabinogi*, the Otherworld appears to be one land, divided into different kingdoms and accessible from different places, both natural, like the clearing in *Pwyll* and *Gorsedd Arberth*, and artificial, such as the magic castle in *Manawydan*. Welsh folktale does not necessarily contradict this: the lands of *Plant Rhys Ddwfn* and the *Lady of the Lake* could be considered as further realms of one Otherworld, rather than different, discrete worlds. The Irish sagas and adventures do seem to represent many different Otherworlds, however. Each of the *sídh* mounds appears to contain a different realm; they are not entrances to a single underground kingdom.¹³⁴ The voyage tales depict many dissimilar worlds on different islands, which can be rationalised as an archipelago of diverse places forming one Otherworld, as stated in *Immram Brain* and in Mongan's poem to Colum Cille (p.30).

Whether The Otherworld is considered to be contiguous with earthly realms, as appears in the First Branch, veiled from human perception as in the Third Branch, an island across the sea, hinted at in the Second Branch and stated plainly in Irish story, or a land beneath the waters of a lake or under the ground, it seems to be an idealised version of our own world, writ large and highly coloured. It is a land of wish fulfilment, where sex is sinless and death

¹³³ *ibid*, p. 68.

¹³⁴ Sims-Williams, *Irish influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 59.

irrelevant. No hard work is required, and riches of every kind abound; in an age when poor harvests could mean starvation for some and privation for many, there is plentiful food and drink of every variety. There is also every luxury imaginable to the people of the time – even privacy, on occasions. While some of the dress and artefacts are similar to, though richer than, those found in normal human courts, there is a profound difference, in that the timescale and seasons differ. Humans who go there usually find that a short time in the Otherworld equates to many years or centuries on earth, though this did not apply to Pwyll's stay in Annwn. In his story, Annwn time equates to Dyfed time. In *Branwen*, however, the Otherworldly time-slips are present, when the companions enjoy two feasts lasting a total of eighty-seven years and emerge looking no older. Conversely, when Nera spends three days in the Otherworld, he returns home to find that his absence has not been noticed as he has been away for only moments.¹³⁵ He is able to prove that he has been in the Otherworld, however, as summer lasts all year there and he has returned with wild garlic, primrose and golden fern at Samhain.¹³⁶ All temporal rules are suspended in the Otherworld: time there can move faster or slower than on earth, or even progress at the same pace, this elasticity being imperceptible to visiting humans until their return home.

¹³⁵ Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 250.

¹³⁶ *ibid*, p. 251.

4: Otherworldly Beings

As previously seen, many descriptions of the Otherworld environment emphasise its outstanding beauty and colour, and similarly the majority of Otherworldly beings, male and female, are described in both Welsh and Irish sources as exceptionally beautiful and agelessly young. In *Pwyll*, Arawn's wife is "*yn deccaf gwreic o'r a welsei neb, ac eurwisc amdanei o bali llathreit*".¹³⁷ The household was "*hardaf a chyweiraf o'r a welsei neb*",¹³⁸ and the court itself had "*[y]r ardurn teccaf a welsei neb o adeiladeu*".¹³⁹ These stereotyped descriptions give no indication of the court itself, or its setting, and the redactor leaves it to his audience's imaginations to supply the fine details of its beauty and splendour.

Some Irish tales are more informative about Otherworld inhabitants. In *The Wooing of Etain*, the fairy king Mider is described as a young warrior with long, golden-yellow hair reaching to his shoulders. He had lustrous grey eyes and wore a purple tunic. In one hand, he carried a white-bossed shield studded with gold, and in the other a five-pointed spear.¹⁴⁰

Etain herself, "daughter of the king of Echred out of the fairy-mounds"¹⁴¹ has golden hair dressed in two elaborate four-stranded plaits, each strand finished with a gold bead. The hair was "like red gold after...burnishing".¹⁴² Her hands were soft and snow-white, her eyes hyacinth-blue beneath dark

¹³⁷ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 4. [the most beautiful woman that anyone had seen, wearing a golden garment of shining brocaded silk] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.22.

¹³⁸ *ibid*, p. 4, [the fairest and best-equipped ... that anyone had ever seen] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.22.

¹³⁹ *ibid*, p. 4. [the most beautifully adorned buildings that anyone had seen] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 22.

¹⁴⁰ Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 87.

¹⁴¹ *ibid*, p. 84.

¹⁴² *ibid*, p. 94.

brows, and her cheeks the colour of the foxglove. Her lips were red as rowan-berries and her teeth like pearls. We find her about to wash her hair, and learn that she had a silver comb decorated with gold and a silver basin with golden birds on it and carbuncles decorating the rim. She wore a purple cloak with a silver-bordered mantle below it, and a tunic of green silk embroidered with red gold, and golden brooches decorating her garments. The story says “Every lovely form must be tested by Etain, every beauty by the standard of Etain.”¹⁴³ There is a similar description of her in the tale of *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*.¹⁴⁴

Male beauty was equally prized and celebrated. Cú Chulainn, son of Lug of the *Tuatha Dé Danaan*, is a hero of many tales of the Ulster cycle, and in *Bricriu’s Feast* is described as

a dark, melancholy man, comeliest of the men of Erin... His two cheeks blue-white and blood-red. He emits sparks of fire and burning breath, with a ray of love in his look. A shower of pearls, it seems, has fallen into his mouth.¹⁴⁵

In *The Phantom Chariot of Cú Chulainn*, we learn that his eyes are grey and his thick black hair, “smooth as though a cow had licked it”.¹⁴⁶ His purple-blue tunic is bordered with white gold lacing and clasped with a gold brooch, and over it he wears a white cloak bordered with bright red; he carries a purple shield encircled with silver and chased with gold animals.¹⁴⁷ Neutral shades and restrained colours do not suit such vital characters, who are decked out

¹⁴³ *ibid*, p. 83.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid*, p. 93.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid*, p. 265.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*, p. 348.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*, pp 348–9.

in a riot of sparkling colour. This was very different from the Irish clothing described by Giraldus Cambrensis when he visited Ireland, firstly in 1183:

They use very little wool in their dress and that itself nearly always black – because the sheep of that country are black – and made up in a barbarous fashion. For they wear little hoods, close-fitting and stretched across the shoulders and down to a length of about eighteen to twenty-two inches, and generally sewn together from cloths of various kinds. Under these they wear mantles instead of cloaks. They also use woollen trousers that are the same time boots,...and these are for the most part dyed.¹⁴⁸

(See Plate 7). Giraldus gives no information as to the colours of the dyes, but is obviously not impressed by the appearance of the Irish. The eponymous hero of *Oisín in the Land of Youth* travels to the Otherworld whilst hunting, which is a frequent motif of such journeys, including that of *Pwyll*. There he meets Niam the Golden-haired, daughter of the King, who loves Oisín for his nobility and high reputation. Niam wears a golden crown on her golden hair, has eyes like dewdrops in a harebell, rosy cheeks and a bosom whiter than a swan's. Her silken mantle is studded with golden stars. The horse she rides is white, with a purple and gold saddle and golden bridle and shoes, and on his head he wears a silver wreath.¹⁴⁹ The loving description of her is in stark contrast to that of Rhiannon in *Pwyll*, who travelled from the Otherworld to seek the human man she loved. We are told only that she wore a garment of shining gold silk brocade, and was mounted on a large pale white horse.¹⁵⁰ Later, we hear that Pwyll thought that every other woman and girl he had ever seen looked unlovely, compared to her.¹⁵¹ Again, the redactor is allowing his audience's imaginations free rein.

¹⁴⁸ Giraldus Cambrensis, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John J. O'Meara, (London: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 101.

¹⁴⁹ Cross and Slover *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 440.

¹⁵⁰ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 25.

¹⁵¹ *ibid*, p. 28.

Although there is no physical description of Rhiannon, her sharpness of wit and tongue are shown; her horse which cannot be overtaken, her magical bag which cannot be filled, and her perennial youthfulness¹⁵² all demonstrate her Otherworld origins.

It is frequently remarked that the men of the Otherworld have long hair, reaching to their shoulders; so possibly that was unusual at the time. Giraldus notes disapprovingly that the Irish have flowing hair and beards which gives them an uncultivated appearance.¹⁵³

In *Tain Bo Froéach*, the Connaught hero Froéach, nephew of Boann, goddess of the river Boyne, wooed and won Findabair. He is described swimming across a pool with a branch of rowanberries:

Findabair ... [saw] Froéach coming across a dark pool, the white body, the lovely hair, the shapely face, the grey eye, the gentle youth without fault or blemish, his face narrow below and broad above, his body straight and perfect, the branch with the red berries between his throat and his fair face.¹⁵⁴

The Irish storytellers delight in describing elaborate, colourful, richly embroidered silk clothing and splendid ornamentation and jewellery. We also learn that the most admired characteristics for otherworld beauty were golden hair and blue or grey eyes, white skin and rosy cheeks, and that these standards applied to both males and females.

Since these Otherworldly beings wooed and mated with ordinary humans and produced children, it must be assumed that they were of normal human

¹⁵² See Chapter 6, page 67.

¹⁵³ Giraldus Cambrensis, *History and Topography of Ireland*, p.102.

¹⁵⁴ Gerard Murphy, *Saga and Myth in Ancient Ireland* (Dublin: Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland, 1955) p. 46.

size. That was not so for those mentioned by Giraldus Cambrensis, however. In his story, the priest Elidyr visited a part of the Otherworld when young, by means of a tunnel in the Neath valley, and described the people as being:

[V]ery tiny, but beautifully made and well-proportioned. In complexion they were fair, and they wore their hair long and flowing down over their shoulders like women. They had horses of a size which suited them, about as big as greyhounds.¹⁵⁵

Irish tradition also has stories about little people. In *The Death of Fergus mac Leide*, Esirt is described as being “of the Lepra and Lepracan”.¹⁵⁶ He is white-skinned and wears a silken shirt under a tunic embroidered with gold. His shoes are of white bronze with gold ornamentation, and his cloak is scarlet, fringed with gold. He is a brave sight, carrying his poet’s wand and wearing his silken hood. When he arrives at his destination:

[T]he gate-keeper... beheld there a man, comely and of a most gallant carriage ... but so tiny that the close-cropped grass of the green reached to his knee, aye, and to the thick of his thigh.¹⁵⁷

These little people have the same social organisation as that of the normal-sized Otherworld gods and heroes, which was also presumably that of human society of the time. Esirt was the poet of King Iubdan of the Lepracan. Iubdan himself is described as having curly black hair and white skin with red cheeks, and being exceptional amongst the Lepra people in that he alone had black hair. All the others had yellow ringleted hair.¹⁵⁸ Though Iubdan’s palace¹⁵⁹ sounds similar to other palatial dwellings, he has a horse

¹⁵⁵ Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Journey through Wales*, p. 134.

¹⁵⁶ Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 472.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*, p. 473.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*, p. 478.

¹⁵⁹ See previous chapter, p.31.

which might have been created by a jeweller. It was about the size of a hare, thus smaller again than those seen by Elidyr, and:

Of which horse the fashion was this: two fierce flashing eyes he had, an exquisite pure crimson mane, with four green legs and a long tail that floated in wavy curls. His general colour was that of prime artificers' gold-work, and a gold-encrusted bridle he bore withal. ¹⁶⁰

This little horse is as colourful and exquisite as any glorious enamelled brooch, and his colours recall those of the horses described in *Immram Brain*.

Otherworld beings are generally depicted as being very beautiful, and the Otherworld itself a 'Gentle Land', but occasionally things are different. MacCana says that the Celtic Otherworld responds to events and conditions, so when human heroes visit by invitation, the people they meet are beautiful, and happiness and contentment are universal. However, if the heroes are attempting to invade and carry off its treasures, then it is no longer welcoming and lovely. Its people are transformed into terrible enemies, worthy foes for great heroes. ¹⁶¹

Cú Chulainn in the Land of Shade – another descriptive designation - battled snakes and monsters who attempted to prevent him and his companions entering a magic citadel surrounded by seven walls, each topped by an iron fence upon which nine heads were planted. He killed them all and captured the treasures of the fortress. In *The Adventures of Art, Son of Conn*, Art has to undertake a journey to win the daughter of the King of the Land of Wonders (again an illuminating name).

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*, pp 476–7.

¹⁶¹ MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, p.126.

There is a great ocean and dark between; and deadly and hostile is the way there, for there is a wood that is traversed as though there were spear points of battle under one's feet, like leaves of the forest under the feet of men.¹⁶²

A sea inlet full of monsters follows, then an impenetrable oak forest where seven hags waited with a bath of molten lead. Afterwards came a deadly frozen mountain and a valley teeming with poisonous toads. Nearby was the fortress "with a palisade of bronze round about it, and a man's head on every stake of it".¹⁶³ All this had been contrived by Coinchenn, wife of Morgan, king of the Land of Wonders, who was as strong as a hundred fighting men. It was prophesied that she would die when her daughter Delbchaem was wooed, therefore she killed every suitor and exhibited his head on the palisade. Art defeated her, and displayed her head on the last empty stake. Despite his having just killed her mother, Delbchaem and Art slept together that night, "merry and in good spirits".¹⁶⁴ Delbchaem's description is familiar: she has long blonde hair, flashing grey eyes with dark brows, and a lovely figure with snow-white skin. She wears a green cloak with a gold pin.¹⁶⁵ Giraldus does not describe the dress of Irish women (Plate 9), but says the men wear mantles, not cloaks.¹⁶⁶

Otherworld beings can often change their shape. Irish tales tell of those who could turn into birds, and others so transformed against their will; the story of *The Fate of the Children of Lir* being one of the latter. These sons and daughter of Lir were changed into swans by their stepmother Aiofe, regaining

¹⁶² Cross and Slover *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 499.

¹⁶³ *ibid*, p. 499.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*, p. 501.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid*, pp 500– 501.

¹⁶⁶ Giraldus Cambrensis, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, p. 101.

human form before death. However, Dechtire, mother of the hero Cú Chuláinn, transformed herself and her maidens into birds who destroyed the vegetation on the plain about Emain Macha.¹⁶⁷ The fearsome goddess of battle, the Morrigan, frequently changed shape and often took the form of a raven, perching thus on Cú Chuláinn's shoulder when he was dying.¹⁶⁸ In *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, Mess Buachalla, the beautiful daughter of a king, is visited the night before her wedding to king Eterscel, by a man who comes to her in the form of a bird. Leaving his bird-skin on the floor, he makes her pregnant, saying his son should be called Conaire, and should never kill birds.¹⁶⁹

In the Welsh tradition, Arawn gives Pwyll his own appearance in the First Branch, and takes Pwyll's upon himself. People are changed willingly into mice in *Manawydan*, and Llwyd fab Cilcoed, the magician who changes them, also transforms himself into various clerics, including a bishop. He has come from the Otherworld, and devastated Dyfed in revenge for the maltreatment of his friend Gwawl in *Pwyll*. Similarly, in the Fourth Branch we have many transformations. Gwydion and Gilfaethwy are metamorphosed as a punishment into deer, pigs and wolves, and have offspring born as animals but altered by Math into human shape. Their transformations are Math's way of making their punishment fit their crimes. They have behaved like beasts, so become beasts in truth, thus being effectively imprisoned for three years, though their prisons are their own bodies. Lleu changes from man to eagle¹⁷⁰ following an attempt to kill him, which transformation saves his life; Gwydion restores his own appearance to Lleu when he is found. However,

¹⁶⁷ Cross and Slover *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.134.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid*, p.338. See also Plate 8.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid*, p.96.

¹⁷⁰ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.103.

transmutation is again used as a punishment when Gwydion changes Blodeuedd, herself originally created from transformed flowers, into an owl because of her treachery to Lleu.¹⁷¹ These magical transformations will be examined further in Chapter 6, to consider how the influence of Annwn extends into the Fourth Branch.

¹⁷¹ *ibid*, p.106.

5: Otherworld Artefacts, Objects and Animals

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi are singularly devoid of detailed descriptions of magical characters or artefacts, or indeed of depictions of the Otherworld landscape, for which Irish sources are more informative. From *The Adventure of Art son of Conn*, who was supposed to have ruled Ireland between 220 and 254 AD,¹⁷² we learn that it is adorned with various trees, notably apple trees and hazel trees with golden-yellow nuts.¹⁷³ The woman who visits Conle in *Echtrae Conli* throws him an apple before she leaves, and for a whole month he does not eat or drink anything else, thus maintaining a connection with her and the Otherworld.¹⁷⁴ The apple never diminishes, and later, when the woman reappears, Conle leaves with her in her coracle, which is made of crystal.¹⁷⁵

In *Immram Brain*, Bran mac Febhail was walking near his fortress when lovely music soothed him to sleep. He awoke to find nearby a silver branch bearing white blossoms¹⁷⁶ which he took inside the fortress, and when all the people were gathered together, a woman appeared, and sang:

*Cróib dind abaill a hEmain
dofed samail do gnáthaib,
gésci findarggait fora,
abrait glano co m-bláthaib.*¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 491.

¹⁷³ *ibid*, p.494.

¹⁷⁴ MacCana, P., 'The Sinless Otherworld of Immram Brain', in J. Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), p. 54.

¹⁷⁵ Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.490.

¹⁷⁶ Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran*, pp.2 and 4.

¹⁷⁷ *ibid*, p. 4. [A branch of the apple tree from Emain I bring, like those one knows; Twigs of white silver are on it, Crystal brows with blossoms.]

Seemingly, the branch itself had made the music Bran heard,¹⁷⁸ as another musical apple-tree branch appears in the Irish tale of *Cormac's Adventures in the Land of Promise*. A warrior approached Cormac, carrying on his shoulder a branch of silver bearing three golden apples.¹⁷⁹ When shaken, the branch made such delightful music that even those in extreme sickness or pain fell asleep at the sound.

Strange and beautiful trees made of crystal, glass and precious metal grow in the Otherworld, but still bear fruit and support flocks of birds: *Serglige Conn Culainn* has trees of purple crystal and of silver, the latter making music like the apple-trees mentioned above, as well as normal fruit trees.¹⁸⁰ In *Immram Brain*, Manannán mac Lir tells Bran that his coracle is not on the sea, as he thinks, but floating over a fruitful orchard – altered perception again:

*Fid co m-bláth ocus torud
forsmbí fíne fírbolud,
fid cen erchre, cen esbad,
forsfil duilli co n-órdath.*¹⁸¹

Mist is often a meteorological manifestation of the Otherworld – as with Hy-Brasil which was cloaked in mist - which must have sent shivers up the spines of those living in damp, Celtic climates where mist is commonplace. In *Echtrae Laeghairi*, the Otherworld is itself referred to as *Magh Dá Cheo* 'The Plain of the Two Mists', and in the Third Branch of the Mabinogi, mist and tumult signal the beginning of the enchantment of Dyfed. When the mist disperses, only buildings and wild animals remain; all human life is gone,

¹⁷⁸ *ibid*, note 3, p.2.

¹⁷⁹ Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 503.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid*, pp 188-9.

¹⁸¹ Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran*, p. 20. [A wood with blossom and fruit On which is the vine's veritable fragrance, A wood without decay, without defect, On which are leaves of golden hue.]

excepting Pryderi and Manawydan and their wives.¹⁸² In the Irish *Baile in Scáil*, Conn and his people are lost in a mist, and are taken to a long house with a ridgepole of white gold. A golden tree grows alongside, and Lug (cognate with Lleu – see Chapter 6) is within, accompanied by a beautiful girl in a crystal chair, who is the Sovereignty of Ireland personified.¹⁸³ The mist serves to veil the Otherworld from human sight as and when required.

Rhiannon's magical bag from the First Branch of the Mabinogi is considered in the next chapter, but other magical objects abound. Cauldrons like that of the Daghdá, which never ran dry, and the *Peir Pen Annwn*, with pearls around its rim, which refused to cook a coward's food;¹⁸⁴ another was the Cauldron of Rebirth, which originally came from Ireland. Brân gave it to Matholwch as part of his compensation in the Second Branch, and the Irish used it to restore dead warriors to life.¹⁸⁵ There was also, in early Welsh poetry and story, the cauldron of the witch Ceridwen, in which she took a year to brew the potion intended for her son, but which gave Taliesin his polish and talent, much against her will. Ceridwen's son, Afagddu (Utter Darkness), was also called Morfran, and was so ugly that he survived the battle of Camlan because nobody would fight him, thinking he was a demon.¹⁸⁶ Ceridwen wanted to give him poetic inspiration to outweigh his ugliness, so brewed the potion. Gwion Bach (later known as Taliesin) tended the cauldron, but was splashed by the boiling liquid and put his scalded fingers in his mouth, accidentally gaining the advantage of Ceridwen's work, though he went through many transformations before being reborn as

¹⁸² Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.65.

¹⁸³ Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948, reprinted 1997), p.108.

¹⁸⁴ Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, p.310.

¹⁸⁵ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 55.

¹⁸⁶ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.185.

Taliesin.¹⁸⁷ Rachel Bromwich notes “The early sources thus concur in presenting Ceridwen as the owner of a cauldron (*peir*) which was the source of poetic inspiration (*awen*)”.¹⁸⁸ The elaborately decorated silver cauldron found at Gundestrup is a stunning example of the cauldron-maker's art and demonstrates dramatically what a prestigious object a cauldron could be.

The hamper of Gwyddno Garanhir was one of the thirteen treasures of the Island of Britain.¹⁸⁹ If food for one person were put inside, it would multiply to food for a hundred; it is also mentioned in *How Culhwch Won Olwen*, as giving to everyone the food of their choice.¹⁹⁰ The list of the Thirteen Treasures contains other magical items, like the halter of Clydno Eiddyn: “*a damunai y march a fynai yno, ef a'i kae(i) (yn y kebystr)*,”¹⁹¹ Morgan the Wealthy's magic chariot, which took its occupant wherever he wished, quickly,¹⁹² and the mantle of Arthur in Cornwall: “*a fai deni, nis gwelai neb ef, ag ef a welai bawb*”.¹⁹³ A similar cloak is mentioned in *Branwen*, when Caswallawn wore it to slay those who had been left in charge of the Island of the Mighty in Brân's absence.¹⁹⁴ The chessboard of Gwenddolau ap Ceidio, made of gold with silver pieces, would play by itself. It is probably no coincidence that the chess-players in *The Dream of Macsen Wledig* are using a similar set.¹⁹⁵ In fact, the splendours of the court of Elen's father in this story are reminiscent of Irish Otherworldly descriptions, and as in *Pwyll*, everyone seems to be dressed in silk brocade.¹⁹⁶ The Crock and Dish of

¹⁸⁷ Rachel Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961), p. 309.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid*, p.309.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid*, pp. 240-1.

¹⁹⁰ John K.Bollard, *Companion Tales to the Mabinogi* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2007), p. 40.

¹⁹¹ Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, pp. 240–1.[whatever horse he might wish for, he would find in the halter].

¹⁹² *ibid*, p. 240–1.

¹⁹³ *ibid*, p. 242.[whoever was under it could not be seen, and he could see everyone.]

¹⁹⁴ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 57.

¹⁹⁵ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.104.

¹⁹⁶ *ibid*, p.104.

Rhygenydd the Cleric would provide whatever food was wished for,¹⁹⁷ while the Horn of Bran the Niggard would supply whatever drink was desired.¹⁹⁸ Others of the treasures were testing talismans: the sword of Rhydderch the Generous,¹⁹⁹ which showed whether a man were well-born or not and the coat of Padarn Red-coat, which did likewise; the cauldron of Dyrnwch the Giant, which would never boil a coward's meat, and which R. S. Loomis equates with the *Peir Pen Annwfn*,²⁰⁰ the whetstone of Tudwal Tudglyd which made only a brave man's sword deadly, and the mantle of Tegau Gold-breast, which reached to the ground only when worn by a chaste woman.²⁰¹

In Irish story, Cormac mac Art obtains such a testing talisman from the Land of Promise. He is lured there by a warrior who is Manannán mac Lir, and who gives him a gold cup marvellously worked and engraved, which breaks into pieces if lies are told, and is reunited by the truth.²⁰²

Alwyn and Brinley Rees maintain that:

These vessels of life and plenty may be classed with the Holy Grail of medieval romance... As symbols in myth, and probably as insignia and utensils in pre-Christian rites, such sacred relics enshrined eternity in the world of mortal existence. They also enhanced the meaning of their counterparts in ordinary life. In some measure, the cauldron and cup of every generous host partook of the nature of the archetypal vessels of plenty.²⁰³

Apart from the gold and silver chessboard, these magical treasures are not

¹⁹⁷ Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p.242.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid*, p. 240–1.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid*, p. 240–1.

²⁰⁰ Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, p.156.

²⁰¹ Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p.242.

²⁰² Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p.506.

²⁰³ Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p.312.

treasures because of their intrinsic worth; for the most part they are very ordinary items. A halter, a whetstone, cloaks, a coat, a cauldron, a hamper, a crock and dish, and a drinking-horn are all items which would be found in most ordinary homes; the value of these particular ones lay in their magical potential and their appeal to the imagination.

Some Otherworld articles may appear commonplace, but Otherworld animals are not. One noteworthy characteristic is that they are frequently (though not invariably) white. The hunting dogs which bring down the stag in *Pwyll* have a very striking colouration: they are gleaming white, with red ears, the white of the coats and the red of the ears being equally bright. *Pwyll* should have known that such colouration was characteristic of the Otherworld. The owner of the pack, Arawn, King of Annwn, comes into view riding a very big white (dapple-grey) horse.²⁰⁴ Besides the Otherworldliness, there is also a factor of costliness associated with this colour. White horses were particularly prized, and therefore more expensive than other colours,²⁰⁵ as was the dappling: "contemporary sources such as the *Chansons de geste* ... suggest that these horses were much sought after".²⁰⁶ Arawn's dogs, with their striking colouration, were the original Cwn Annwn, 'dogs of Annwn', but they have other quarry than game according to Welsh folklore: the souls of those who had died unrepentant, or unbaptised.²⁰⁷ They are a Welsh version of the Wild Hunt, but rather than Arawn, it is another king of Annwn, Gwyn ap Nudd (see Chapter 3) who leads them in Welsh tradition.

²⁰⁴ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 21.

²⁰⁵ Sioned Davies, 'Horses in the Mabinogion', in *The Horse in Celtic Culture*, p.126.

²⁰⁶ Nerys Ann Jones, 'Horses in Medieval Welsh Court Poetry', *ibid*, p. 98, note 2.

²⁰⁷ Sir John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore Welsh and Manx* Vol. 1, p.143.

Later in *Pwyll*, Rhiannon rides from her home in the Otherworld on a “*uarch canwelw mawr aruchel*”.²⁰⁸ Her son is lured into a trap in the magic castle, in the Third Branch, by a shining white magical boar, which tempts the huntsmen to ensure they do not give up the chase. Proinsias MacCana notes that the boar is often the savagely ferocious target who decoys his pursuers to the Otherworld.²⁰⁹ White deer also perform the same function in some stories. In Marie de France’s Anglo-Norman version of a Breton Lai, *Guigemar*, which dates from about 1170, the hero is kidnapped by a fairy in the shape of a white hind. Marie writes:

*En l'espece d'un grant buissun
Vit une bise od un foün;
Tute fu blanche cele beste,
Perches de cerf out en la teste,*²¹⁰

The chase of a white deer which is actually a fairy reappears in many of Marie's tales.²¹¹

Birds play a very important part in descriptions of the Otherworld; their beauty, their ability to fly and their delightful song all qualified them as magical.

The concept of the wonderful birds whose song brings joy and frequently sleep is ever-recurrent also in Celtic tradition, and it is to be found very frequently in both the pagan and the later Christian textual material.²¹²

²⁰⁸ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 9 [a great tall pale white horse] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 25.

²⁰⁹ MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 53.

²¹⁰ Marie de France, *Lais*, edited by A. Ewert (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), p.5 line 89. [In the thick part of a large spinney (He) saw a hind or a fawn; This beast was white all over, A deer's antlers were on its head.] My translation.

²¹¹ *ibid*, notes, p.165.

²¹² Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London: Sphere Books, 1974) p.339.

The birds of Rhiannon are discussed in Chapter 6. They belong to Welsh tradition, but have parallels in Ireland. In the story of Tadhg mac Céin, he and his companions are sailing in their curragh through a storm, when they hear a flock of strange birds singing. On two extraordinary islands they find flocks of wonderful birds like blackbirds, though some are the size of eagles. Their bodies are red, their heads green, and their eggs blue or scarlet. Once again, the storytellers' delight in brilliant colours is apparent.

Other birds are a beautiful shining white, with purple heads and golden beaks. They sing wonderful music which would send sick and wounded men to sleep. Clídná meets Tadhg, and three glorious birds appear, blue, crimson and speckled, with heads of crimson, green and gold respectively, and they sing sweetly. "Clídná ... must be regarded as a goddess of a similar island otherworld to that presided over by Riannon."²¹³

Anne Ross further maintains that

As birds are associated so intimately with the pagan ... happy otherworld, and regarded as a form adopted by otherworld beings, it is natural that the concept of ... otherworld birds, bestowers of joy and forgetfulness, and relievers of pain, should be transferred with ease ... into a Christian milieu... The miracle-working saint with bird attributes is not so very far removed from the wonder-working god or Druid, also possessing helpful birds or magic bird-flocks.²¹⁴

Christianity took over hallowed areas in the physical landscape which were associated with earlier religions, building churches on top of sacred mounds and rededicating holy wells to Christian saints. In the same way, pagan festivals were adopted and Christianised: the birthday of the Unconquered Sun became the date of Christ's birthday, and the spring festival of the

²¹³ *ibid*, p. 339.

²¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 340.

goddess Eostre became the Christian Easter, symbolic of birth and new life. Likewise, goddesses such as Brigid metamorphosed into saints and retained their previous specialities and attributes. Although Christianity attempted to debase the pagan Otherworld by equating it to Hell, it nevertheless did not disdain to adopt some of its characteristics, such as the joy and peace and singing birds to be found there.

When considering the various magical objects recorded in this chapter, it will be seen that they fall into distinct groups. There is firstly a group of testing talismans, two of which would prove the nobility of one's birth, something that was evidently of great importance. Another of the items in this group would prove truth or falsehood; yet another would render a sword invincible, but only if it belonged to a brave man; still another could prove a man a coward by refusing to cook his meat, and the last would prove the chastity of any woman courageous enough to wear it. Any of these objects would be very useful to the person who owned, or was reputed to own it.

Another group is concerned with food and drink: an apple which never diminishes, a cauldron which never runs dry, a hamper which multiplies food a hundredfold, thus turning a single meal into a feast, a crock and dish which provide any food desired, and a horn which would do the same for drink. In an age when munificence and generosity of feasting – there are many feasts in the Four Branches - were praised by poets, and when poets could make or break reputations, such items would be highly desirable. When travel was limited to the speed of a horse, the items in the next group: a halter which could provide a superlative mount, and a chariot which could transport its owner anywhere, quickly, would be indispensable, especially to those for

whom battle was a way of life. A cloak of invisibility would also be useful in life-threatening situations. The final group of objects would likewise be priceless in unsettled, dangerous times: the apple-tree branches which give sleep to those in extreme pain, and the singing birds capable of giving the same relief; most important of all, the cauldron which can restore life to the dead. All these articles provide different, desirable outcomes, but the main characteristic of each of them is that of wish fulfilment. One may therefore conclude that the function of such magical Otherworld items was to make dreams come true, or at least to suggest that they could.

6: Influence of Annwn on the Four Branches

Annwn is a protean protagonist throughout the Four Branches, its influence varying with the branch. In the first branch, its presence is overt. Pwyll, prince of Dyfed, not only visits Annwn, but rules there for a year, in consequence of his exercising discretion and choosing to make a friend of Arawn, king of Annwn, who was hunting Pwyll's deer on Pwyll's land. It is arguable in Welsh law whether Arawn could have claimed supremacy when hunting over land which was not his own, though he was of higher rank than Pwyll. Pwyll's choice has consequences which extend beyond his story, into the other branches. Guided by Arawn, Pwyll rides straight to Annwn and there is no mention of any physical barrier to be crossed in order to reach Arawn's court.²¹⁵ In some dimension, therefore, Annwn's boundaries march with those of Dyfed.

After his return from Annwn, Pwyll is sitting on the mound at Arberth when Rhiannon appears on her great white, slow-pacing horse.²¹⁶ She has come from Annwn, and become perceptible to Pwyll and his companions because the mound where they sit has links with Annwn.²¹⁷ The powers of Annwn to alter human perceptions are made manifest by the chase to approach Rhiannon, which continues during three successive days. She and her horse are not bound by the natural laws applying to our world. The fastest horse in the stables, ridden flat out, cannot catch her apparently ambling mount.²¹⁸ The horse-goddess Epona, with whom Rhiannon has been equated,

²¹⁵ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 22.

²¹⁶ *ibid*, p.25.

²¹⁷ Compare Norse tradition, page 18.

²¹⁸ *ibid*, p.27.

(though there is no conclusive proof) is often depicted in statuettes and reliefs seated on a horse which is walking.²¹⁹ W J Gruffydd emphasises that “The horse is always shown as *walking or trotting – never galloping*”.²²⁰

Like his earlier discretion concerning Arawn, Pwyll's indiscretion at his wedding feast has consequences which extend far into the future. Initially, he loses Rhiannon to Gwawl, her rejected suitor from Annwn, but her quick thinking saves the situation. However, the object which she gives Pwyll to bring to her rearranged marriage feast a year later is an unquestionably magical bag, something like a reverse cornucopia. Several Celtic goddesses, including Epona, Rhiannon's putative *alter ego*, are pictured holding cornucopias, symbols of fruitfulness and abundance which produce an unending supply of food. A characteristic of the Otherworld is a constant, ever-replenishing supply of delicious food and drink. Conversely, Rhiannon's magical bag swallows an enormous amount of food and is not full, even when Gwawl climbs inside it.

Rhiannon and Pwyll's success turns the vengeful powers of Annwn against them: Rhiannon's son vanishes the night he is born. This part of the story recalls that of Mabon, the boy taken from his mother, Modron, when he was only three nights old and who became celebrated as one of the “Three Exalted Prisoners of the Island of Britain”.²²¹ W J Gruffydd concludes that “Rhiannon and Modron played comparable parts in Welsh mythology, and that Rhiannon was, or was identified with, the Horse-Goddess”.²²² Further,

²¹⁹ Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, pp. 51 and 77.

²²⁰ W. J. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1953), p. 104. He references Pauly-Wissowa, *Encycl. Sub Epona*.

²²¹ Bromwich, *Triodd Ynys Prydein*, triad 52, p.140.

²²² Gruffydd, *Rhiannon*, pp 104–5.

he states that “Rhiannon is Modron on horseback”.²²³ Loomis maintains that the name Modron derives from a Celtic river-goddess, Matrōna, meaning the Great Mother. He points out that the Welsh used to call the female fairies *Y Mamau*, ‘the Mothers’, and that in Brittany they are called “*nos bonnes Mères les Fées*”.²²⁴ If Rhiannon is correctly linked to Epona, who is a fertility goddess in one aspect, it is strange that her own fertility should be questionable, though this may be part of her punishment. Rhiannon’s connection with horses is strengthened by the fact that her child is stolen at the same time as Teyrnon saves a new-born foal from being stolen from its mother. Teyrnon’s mare has previously lost several foals, always on May Eve – Beltane – when the boundaries between this world and the Otherworld become fluid. Teyrnon lay in wait and chopped off a huge claw which came through the window to seize the foal, causing a “tumult and a shriek”²²⁵ and then discovered a silk-wrapped baby lying on the ground.

The Anglo-Saxon saga of *Beowulf* has a similar instance of a monstrous claw being removed from its owner, though in this case we know that the owner is the monster Grendel: “*þæt wæs tāken sweotol, syþðan hilde-deor hond ālegde, earm ond eaxle – þær wæs eal geodor Grendles grāpe – under gēapne hrōf.*”²²⁶ Another interesting piece of information from this saga is that Grendel possessed a mysterious bag, in which he intended to abduct warriors, presumably to eat later, at his leisure:

²²³ *ibid*, p.104.

²²⁴ Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, pp 119–20.

²²⁵ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 36.

²²⁶ C. L. Wrenn (ed.) *Beowulf*, (London: Harrap, 1953), p.128, line 834. [That was a clear token when the bold warrior laid down the hand, the arm, and shoulder under the wide roof - it was all there together - the claw of Grendel.] trans. R. K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1977), p.18.

*Glōf hangode sīd ond sillīc, searo-bendum fæst; sīo wæs orðoncum
eall gegyrwed, dēofles cræftum ond dracan fellum. Hē mec þær on
innan unsynnigne, dīor dæd-fruma, gedōn wolde manigra sumne;*²²⁷

This sounds as though it has a seemingly limitless capacity, like Rhiannon's magical bag.

The foundling child is later given the foal born the same night as himself. Although Rhiannon retains her honoured position as Pwyll's wife, thus foiling the mysterious powers of Annwn, she suffers by losing her child and being accused of his murder. She subsequently performs a humiliating penance which reinforces her horse connections by making her carry visitors on her back. Juliette Wood comments that

[T]he accusations of infanticide and persecution parallel the dilemma of the Calumniated Wife in folk-tales where the heroine's status as queen, wife and mother is jeopardised and she becomes marginalized.²²⁸

Rhiannon is in an indeterminate state; on the one hand, she is a supernatural being, on the other, she is wife to a human man of her own choosing. She is an earthly wife, but also a mother, who has no child. Her position is vulnerable, and she is victimised in consequence, until her son's return solves her problems.

²²⁷ *ibid*, p. 174, line 2085 [A pouch hung, wide and wondrous, made firm with artful clasps; it was all cunningly devised by the power of the devil and with dragon skins. He purposed to put me into it, though guiltless, with many others.] trans. R. K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* p. 42.

²²⁸ Juliette Wood, 'The Horse in Welsh Folklore: A Boundary Image in Custom and Narrative', in S. Davies and N. A. Jones, (eds) *The Horse in Celtic Culture* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p.168.

In *Branwen*, Annwn's influence is more subtle. Brân son of Llŷr, appears at the beginning with his brother Manawydan, who is a link to the third branch. Manawydan, son of Llŷr, appears to equate to the god Manannán mac Lír of the Irish stories, though neither in *Branwen* nor in *Manawydan* does he seem to use magic. According to the Irish *dindsenchas*, Manannán mac Lír had a brother called Bron.²²⁹ Manawydan in the Welsh Triads is one of the Three Chieftains of the Isle of Britain who do not forcibly claim territory which is uncontestedly theirs.²³⁰ This is referenced in the Third Branch, a sequel to *Branwen*, after the survivors of the expedition to Ireland have returned home to find that Caswallawn has usurped Brân's throne in his absence. Caswallawn is a magician, since he makes himself invisible with a magic cloak to overcome Brân's appointed governors. Only his murderous sword can be seen. Brân himself is obviously magical, being a giant who can wade across to Ireland, although the terrain is represented as being rather different at that time:

*ac nyt oed uawr y weilgi, yna y ueis yd aeth ef. Nyt oed namyn dwy auon, Lli ac Archan y gelwit. A guedy hynny yd amlawys y weilgi, pan oreskynwys y weilgi y tyrnassoed.*²³¹

He may also be related to the Bran who travels to the Otherworld in *Immram Brain*, meeting Manannán mac Lír on his journey. Sioned Davies remarks that the wound he suffers from a poisoned spear during the battle in Ireland “has led many to regard him as the prototype of the Fisher King Bron in the

²²⁹ Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 49.

²³⁰ Rachel Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1961), p. 14.

²³¹ Ifor Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1930), p.39. [And the sea was not great then; he went by wading. There was nothing but two rivers, called Lli and Archan. And after that the sea increased, when the sea overran the kingdoms.] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 52.

²³¹ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 232, note 22.

Grail Cycle of medieval romance.”²³² Like his brother Manawydan, he seems to be an euhemerised deity, because of his size and his head which lives on after decapitation and becomes a protection against invasion for his country.²³³ Even a king like Brân is circumscribed by law and custom, however. Brân cannot exact vengeance for Efnisien's mutilation of Matholwch's horses, because Efnisien is his half-brother.²³⁴ Brân makes recompense, but this incident motivates Branwen's ill-treatment at the hands of the Irish, and her brothers' invasion to rescue her. Branwen was forced to work in the kitchens, where the butcher came daily to box her ear; this blow constituting *sarhaed* of a very serious kind, according to Welsh law.²³⁵ Branwen too has become a Calumniated Wife, again being marginalised and victimised, a foreigner in a strange country with nobody to support her, until her brothers invade.

This expedition to Ireland parallels that of Arthur to the Otherworld in *Preiddau Annwfn*. Ireland itself has been regarded as the Otherworld, the analogy being that “the Other World is a land across the water”,²³⁶ and when Brân and his forces invade intent on revenge, it wears its unfriendly aspect. A significant part is played in this story by the Cauldron of Renewal, which Brân gave to Matholwch as part of his recompense. It had originally come from Ireland with Llassar Llaes Gyfnewid and his wife Cymidei Cymeinfoll when they fled from Matholwch's treachery to the Island of the Mighty, where

²³² Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.232, note 22.

²³³ Ibid, p.232, note 22.

²³⁴ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.47.

²³⁵ Dafydd Jenkins, (ed. and trans.), *The law of Hywel Dda* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2000), p. 6.

²³⁶ W. J.Gruffydd, *Folklore and Myth in the Mabinogion* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), p.6.16.

Brân treated them well.²³⁷ This cauldron restored life to the dead, and the Irish used it to revive their fighters. Efnisien attempted to atone for the harm he had done by stretching out to burst it, bursting his own heart in consequence.²³⁸ R. S. Loomis points out that cauldrons were much honoured in the palaces of Irish kings, and that those of the gods had magical properties. Some of these were considered in the previous chapter. Furthermore, he says that the Cauldron of the Head of Annwn was also a testing talisman, as it would not boil the food of a coward, and maintains that it is the same cauldron as was listed among the thirteen Royal Treasures of Britain.²³⁹ The lists of the thirteen treasures, which include the cauldron of Tyrnosc, give variant readings of the name – *Dyrnwch*, *Dyrnog* – which suggest that it is identical with that of Diwrnach, seneschal of the king of Ireland. This suggestion is confirmed by the fact that Tyrnosc's cauldron has the same properties as the cauldron of the Head of Annwn, and Diwrnach's cauldron is the centre of the same story of Arthur's raid as is the cauldron of the Head of Annwn, so to all intents and purposes was identical with the cauldron of the Head of Annwn.²⁴⁰

This cauldron, *Peir Pen Annwn*, is described in *Preiddeu Annwn* as having a ridge of pearls around its rim,²⁴¹ and being kindled by the breath of nine maidens.²⁴² This was the treasure taken by Arthur and his men from the Otherworld. Out of Arthur's expedition only seven returned, and of all Brân's army, again only seven men returned home with the Living Head, a

²³⁷ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 49.

²³⁸ *ibid*, p. 55.

²³⁹ Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, pp. 158–9.

²⁴⁰ *ibid*, p.156.

²⁴¹ Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age*, p. 310 line 16.

²⁴² *ibid*, p.310 line 14.

powerfully magical object. Ireland is devastated and Brân mortally wounded, but Pryderi and Manawydan are among the aforementioned seven who survive to return home with Brân's head, which does not decay and continues to be good company to his friends.

As if that were not magical enough, when the companions reach Harlech (Plate 10) on Brân's instructions, they feast happily there for seven years, entertained by the song of the birds of Rhiannon. These wonderful birds emphasise that Rhiannon is a goddess; they sing to the feasters in Harlech, clearly audible although they are so far away over the sea that they are scarcely visible. They are mentioned again in *How Culhwch Won Olwen*. The giant Ysbadadden demands that they be brought to entertain him on the night when his daughter Olwen marries. He must die then, and it is perhaps significant that he mentions that the birds of Rhiannon "wake the dead and lull the living to sleep".²⁴³ Perhaps he hopes that his death will be a temporary condition only. Anne Ross comments

The goddesses who appear most frequently in the company of birds... are the grouped mother goddesses with their fertility prosperity symbols. Epona 'Divine Horse' is also represented with birds ... Epona's insular counterpart, Riannon, 'Great Queen', with similar horse connections, possesses three beautiful singing birds²⁴⁴

Although it cannot be completely proved, the association of Epona with Rhiannon is favoured by many scholars;²⁴⁵ Epona is sometimes shown with birds, sometimes with a bag, both of which are connected with Rhiannon in the Mabinogi, and it is interesting that one of Epona's epithets was *regina*

²⁴³ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.196.

²⁴⁴ Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London: Sphere Books, 1974) p.337.

²⁴⁵ S. Davies and N. A. Jones, *The Horse in Celtic Culture*, p.169.

'queen', and Rhiannon's name ultimately derives from *Rīgantonā* 'great queen goddess'.²⁴⁶

After seven years in Harlech, the companions move on to Gwales, where they feast for a further eighty years. As with the period in Harlech, time is suspended and nobody ages. They all have the blessing of forgetfulness until the day when the door facing Aber Henfelen is opened and the memories come flooding back. This suspension of time and sorrow equates to Otherworldly time slips; in effect, the places where they feast have become part of the Otherworld while they are there.

The presence of Annwn is overt again in *Manawydan*, when the powers of Annwn take their revenge. This story continues immediately from the previous branch, after Brân's magical head has been buried in London. Brân's son is dead and Manawydan will not pursue his claim to the kingship. However, Pryderi's offer of authority over the seven cantrefs of Dyfed, together with the hand of his mother, Rhiannon, pleases Manawydan. As an inducement, Pryderi tells him that when she was in her prime, Rhiannon was more beautiful than any other woman, and she is still goodlooking. Rhiannon must be living on Otherworldly time, thus halting the ageing process, or the redactor has forgotten that she is more than eighty years older than she was at the end of the first branch! Pwyll died before the start of *Branwen*; Pryderi went to Ireland with Brân, and subsequently spent 87 years feasting before returning home. There is inconsistency here, as we are given to understand that the feasters do not notice the passage of time, so this time-slip cannot be of the *Echtrae Nera* kind, where days in the Otherworld equate to seconds in ours. Pryderi is lord of Dyfed when he returns and thus able to make his

²⁴⁶ Patrick K Ford, *The Mabinogi* (London: University of California Press 2008) p. 5.

offer to Manawydan. They are delighted with one another when they meet, so Rhiannon is happy to agree to her son's giving of her in marriage without consultation.²⁴⁷ This is the woman who defied her father and all the powers of Annwn to choose her own husband in *Pwyll*. Before the welcome-home feast ends, they are married. Some time later, they are sitting with their retinue on Gorsedd Arberth when an Otherworldly mist descends, accompanied by a tumult:

*A phan edrychassant y ford y guelyn y preideu, a'r anreitheu, a'r kyuanhed kyn no hynny, ny welynt neb ryw dim, na thy, nac aniueil, na mwc, na than, na dyn, na chyuanhed, eithyr tei y llys yn wac, diffeith, anghyuanhed, heb dyn, heb uil yndunt; eu kedymdeithon e hun wedy eu colli, heb wybot dim y wrthunt, onyt wyll pedwar.*²⁴⁸

Dyfed is laid waste, so eventually they go to Lloegr and work variously at making saddles, shields and shoes, becoming so successful each time that they put others out of business and have to move elsewhere, or be killed. Manawydan prefers not to attract Caswallawn's attention, so they return to Dyfed²⁴⁹ until a seemingly normal day's hunt changes their lives again. Their hounds start a shining white boar out of a bush. As we saw in Chapter 5, white is the usual signifier of otherworldly animals. According to MacCana, the boar frequently lures his hunters to the otherworld,²⁵⁰ and this is what happens in *Manawydan*. The boar led them on until they could see a fort where none had been before, and boar and dogs vanished inside. Pryderi chased after them, ignoring Manawydan's warning "*A'r neb a dodes hut ar y*

²⁴⁷ *ibid*, p.64.

²⁴⁸ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, pp. 51-2. [They looked to where they used to see the flocks and herds and inhabited places ... no one could see anything at all – neither house nor animal nor smoke nor fire nor person nor inhabited place, but the houses of the court empty, desolate, uninhabited, without a person, without an animal in them, their own companions lost ... except for those four.] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 66.

²⁴⁹ *ibid*, p.68.

²⁵⁰ MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, p.53.

wlat, a beris bot y gaer yma".²⁵¹ The trap is sprung, and Pryderi caught. His hands stick to a marble basin, his feet to the slab he stands on, and he cannot speak. Pryderi is abducted again, and used as bait to catch Rhiannon, who rushes after him and also sticks to the marble basin and the slab.

This phenomenon of sticking to an object was widely believed to be possible in medieval times. Giraldus Cambrensis cites several examples in *The Journey through Wales*. There was a boy who tried to steal pigeons from a nest in St David's church in Llanfaes, and whose hand stuck to the stone for three days before he was released by prayer.²⁵² He tells of a poor woman in Bury St Edmunds trying to steal pilgrim offerings by sucking them into her mouth, when her mouth stuck to the altar.²⁵³ He also offers two saucier instances of this common hagiographical motif, one of which happened in Howden church, Humberside, when the parson's lover sat on the wooden tomb of Saint Osana, and "her backside stuck tight to the wood and she was unable to wrench herself free".²⁵⁴ The last incident occurred in Winchcombe, Gloucestershire, when a monk had sex with a female pilgrim in the monastery grounds. He then carried a miraculous psalter in the procession in honour of St Kenelm, after which the psalter stuck to his hands until he confessed and did penance.²⁵⁵ From this, it would seem that sticking to an object in this way was seen as a punishment for transgression, and for Rhiannon and Pryderi this is merely the beginning of their chastisement. Once Rhiannon has been caught, the mist and tumult descend again, the fort

²⁵¹ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 56. [And the one who placed an enchantment on the land caused the fort to be here] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 70.

²⁵² Giraldus Cambrensis, *The Journey through Wales*, p. 83.

²⁵³ *ibid*, p.84.

²⁵⁴ *ibid*, p.84.

²⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.85.

disappears “and away with them too”.²⁵⁶ The castle which has appeared overnight, like a mushroom, is a portal to Annwn.

Manawydan and Cigfa are bereft of their partners and revisit Lloegr, where Manawydan's success at shoemaking means his life is again threatened, so he returns to Dyfed and sows three crofts of wheat. All goes well until harvest time, when he finds only bare stalks in each of the first two when he comes to reap them.²⁵⁷ The devastation of Dyfed continues. Manawydan witnesses a horde of mice stripping the third croft; but catches only one, who is too fat to escape. The scene is now set for his confrontation with the powers of Annwn.

Ignoring Cigfa's disapproval of his handling vermin, he announces that he will hang the mouse. He, as territorial lord, is within his rights in Welsh law to hang a thief caught in the act of stealing.²⁵⁸ However, he does not hang the creature on the nearest tree, but goes to Gorsedd Arberth, with its links with Annwn, and starts building a gallows. Moments later, the first new person that he has seen in Dyfed for seven years appears. This is a poor cleric, the first of three churchmen of increasing power and wealth who appear to him and bargain for the mouse's life. The cleric offers a pound, followed by a well-horsed priest, who offers three pounds – a set fine for being involved in theft - which is again refused. Manawydan knows exactly what he is doing, as he says he is hanging a thief: “*Pryf ... ar ansawd llygoden*,”²⁵⁹ so he knows it is not a real mouse. Finally, Manawydan is confronted by a bishop

²⁵⁶ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.70.

²⁵⁷ *ibid*, p. 72.

²⁵⁸ Jenkins, *The law of Hywel Dda*, pp. 156–169.

²⁵⁹ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 62. [a creature in the form of a mouse] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 74.

with an extensive retinue, and this time the offer for the mouse's release starts at seven pounds – another set fine for somebody who catches, then releases, a thief – then twenty-four pounds of silver, then seven horses with their packs, and all this is refused.²⁶⁰ Finally, Manawydan is asked his price for the mouse's freedom. He specifies, and is promised

*rydhau Riannon a Phryderi... Guaret yr hut a lledrith y ar y seith cantre Dyuet... no bo hut uyth ar seith cantref Dyuet, ac na dotter... no bo ymdiala ar Pryderi a Riannon, nac arnaf inheu, uyth am hynn.*²⁶¹

This is to be the exchange for the mouse, the transformed pregnant wife of the magician Llwyd fab Cilcoed.²⁶² He had enchanted Dyfed in revenge for the incident in *Pwyll*, when his friend Gwawl fab Clwyd was tricked inside Rhiannon's magic bag and beaten severely.²⁶³ Pryderi and Rhiannon had been imprisoned in Annwn, Pryderi wearing “*yrd porth uy llys i am y uynwgyl, a Riannon a uydei a mynweireu yr essyn ... am y mynwgyl hitheu*”.²⁶⁴ Llwyd tells Manawydan that had he not specified that no revenge be taken, “*Bei na metrut hynny ... ef a doy am dy benn cwbyl o'r gouut*”,²⁶⁵ to which Manawydan replies that he took care specifically against that. Terrifying though the powers of Annwn are, Manawydan has shown that they can be defeated without magic, by quick and careful thinking and speech. This part of the story sounds as though it could have been written by a lawyer.

²⁶⁰ *ibid*, pp. 74–5.

²⁶¹ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, pp. 63–64. [the freeing of Rhiannon and Pryderi... lifting the enchantment and spell from upon the seven cantrefs of Dyfed ... no enchantment ever on the seven cantrefs of Dyfed, and none placed upon it ... [and] that no revenge for this be taken upon Pryderi and Rhiannon, nor upon me, ever.] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 75.

²⁶² Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 75.

²⁶³ *ibid*, p. 30.

²⁶⁴ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 65. [the hammers of the gate of my court about his neck, and Rhiannon ... the collars of asses ... about her neck] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 76.

²⁶⁵ *ibid*, pp. 64–5. [If you had not struck upon that ... all of the trouble would have fallen on your head.] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 75.

The whole of *Math* is suffused by magic, as two of the main protagonists are powerful magicians, but Annwn itself is directly referenced only by the theft of the pigs which originated there.²⁶⁶ Math, lord of Gwynedd, is a mighty magician, strong enough to prevail over another formidable magician, his nephew Gwydion. Math is renowned as a magician outside the Mabinogi. He is mentioned in the Triad of the Three Great Enchantments:

*Teir Prif Hut Enys Prydein: Hut Math mab Mathonwy (a dysgavd y Wdyon vab Don), a Hut Vthyr Bendragon (a dysgavd y Venw vab Teirgvaed), a Hut Gwythelyn Gorr (a dysgavd y Goll vab Kollvrevy y nei).*²⁶⁷

W. J. Gruffydd states that Dafydd ap Gwilym also refers to Math as a magician.²⁶⁸ Furthermore, in the *Book of Taliesin*, Math is linked with Gwydion and described as “skilful in enchantment of trees” and in another poem, Taliesin says he was made by Math’s magical power and “by magicians, like Math”.²⁶⁹ Math taught magic to Gwydion, and it would seem that magic was a family affair, as Math must have learned from his own parent, since the Book of Taliesin mentions Mathonwy’s *hutulath*, or magic wand, growing in the woods.²⁷⁰ Despite his power, Math cannot live without having his feet resting in the lap of a virgin, unless he is at war.²⁷¹ His nephew Gilfaethwy pines for love of her, so Gwydion, Gilfaethwy’s magician brother, deliberately provokes war to get Math out of the way so that

²⁶⁶ *ibid*, p.80.

²⁶⁷ Bromwich, *Tríoedd Ynys Prydein*, triad 28, p. 56. [Three Great Enchantments of the Island of Britain, the Enchantment of Math son of Mathonwy (which he taught to Gwydion son of Dôn), and the Enchantment of Uthyr Pendragon (which he taught to Menw son of Teirgwaedd), and the Enchantment of Gwythelin the Dwarf, (which he taught to Coll son of Collfrewy his nephew).]

²⁶⁸ Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy*, p. 165.

²⁶⁹ *ibid*, p.166.

²⁷⁰ *ibid*, p.166.

²⁷¹ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.79.

Gilfaethwy can have access to the girl, Goewin.

Gwydion does this by stealing from Pryderi the pigs Arawn sent him from Annwn. Gwydion, disguised as a bard, impresses Pryderi favourably so he is sympathetic to Gwydion's request for the pigs. Pryderi is honourable and keeps his bargains, so tells Gwydion that the pigs cannot be given away, nor sold, until they have bred double their numbers. Gwydion must have anticipated this, because had Pryderi been willing to sell the pigs there would have been no war, and Math would have stayed home. Gwydion is not honourable, and persuades Pryderi that an exchange would not breach the terms of his agreement with Arawn. In this episode, we see Gwydion using magic for the first time, and typically, it is used with intent to deceive.

*Ac yna yd aeth ef yn y geluydodeu, ac y dechreuawd dangos y hut, ac yd hudwys deudec emys a deudec milgi bronnwyn du bob un ohonunt a deudec torch a deudec kynllyuan arnunt, a neb or ae gwelei ny wydyat na bydynt eur, a deudec kyfrwy ar y meirch, ac am bob lle oc y dyliei hayarn uot arnunt y bydei eur o gwbyl, ar ffrwyneu yn un weith a hynny.*²⁷²

Pryderi consults his advisers before agreeing to the exchange, then Gwydion leaves quickly, to be well away before his magic fades. His journey north ostensibly accounts for several Welsh place-names referencing pigs. At home, warriors are being marshalled, as Pryderi has mustered twenty-one cantrefs against them,²⁷³ thus Math is leading his troops and Gwydion has succeeded. The troops march to Arfon; but Gwydion and Gilfaethwy secretly

²⁷² Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* pp. 6–7. [And then he went to his magic arts and began to exercise his enchantment, and he made by magic twelve steeds and twelve greyhounds, each one of them black with white breasts, and twelve collars with twelve leashes on them, and anyone who saw them would not know that they were not gold, and twelve saddles on the horses, and for every place where iron should be on them, there was gold altogether, and the bridles wrought in the same way as that.]

²⁷³ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.85.

return to Caer Dathyl, where Goewin is raped by Gilfaethwy.²⁷⁴ Fighting continues until Pryderi offers to meet Gwydion in single combat. He wishes to avoid further slaughter, again showing his nobility of character:

*Y gwyr hynny a neilltuwyd, ac a dechreuwyd gwiscau am danunt, ac ymlad a wnaethant. Ac o nerth grym ac angerd a hut a lledrith, Gwydyon a orvu a Phryderi a las.*²⁷⁵

If, as suggested by scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth century,²⁷⁶ the *Mabinogi* is the story of a hero's - Pryderi's - birth, life adventures and death, the latter is almost incidental in *Math*. Pryderi features only as a means for Gwydion to cause the war necessary to get Math away from his footholder, and is then killed by Gwydion with magic, in a cowardly way. We hear no more of him, though Gilfaethwy and Gwydion's attempt to avoid facing Math's anger is futile. They flee, but Math uses the law to compel the culprits to come to him. Here again, as in *Manawydan*, it would seem that the law is as efficient as magic. Effectively, he starves them out:

*Ac yn hynny ny doethant wy yg kyuyll y llys, namyn trigyaw y gylchaw y wlat a wnaethant yny aeth gwahard udunt ar y bwyt ae llynn. Yn gyntaf, ny doethant hwy yn y gyuyll ef; yna y doethant wy attaw ef.*²⁷⁷

They had shamed him and caused the deaths of Pryderi (occasioned by the magic which Math had taught Gwydion) and many others from both armies, and he takes an appropriate magical vengeance upon them. Math strikes Gilfaethwy the rapist with his magical staff and turns him into a hind.

²⁷⁴ *ibid*, p.85.

²⁷⁵ Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* pp. 12–13. [Those men were set apart, and they began to array them, and they fought. And by force of strength and violence and magic and enchantment, Gwydion conquered and Pryderi was killed.]

²⁷⁶ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.121.

²⁷⁷ Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* pp. 12–15. [And in that time they came not near the court, but they remained to make a circuit of the country, until an order went forth prohibiting them their food and their drink. First, they did not come near him; then they came to him.]

Gwydion, though Math's pupil, is obviously no match for him because he cannot escape, and becomes a stag.²⁷⁸ This is the first of three transformations the brothers endure, each lasting a year, next becoming pigs, then wolves, and during which time each bears offspring to the other. Math strikes their young with his magic wand and they become human and are given names recalling their origin.²⁷⁹ It is interesting to note that, while Gwydion's deceitful magic lasts only a day, Math's powerful revenge is long-term, and lasts as long as he feels appropriate. They had caused shame to Math because of his failure to protect his footholder – protection of virgins was a duty owed them by their lords²⁸⁰ – and shame to Goewin because she was raped and the whole court knew it.

The sexual nature of Gilfaethwy's crime, brought about by his lust for Goewin, aided and abetted by his brother Gwydion who thereby partook of the guilt for the rape, is punished fittingly by their both being turned into wild beasts, not once, but three times. Gilfaethwy, the actual rapist, twice had to change sex, as well as shape, becoming a doe in the first year and a female wolf in the third, thus actually discovering what it felt like to be pregnant and to bear young. Hence he experienced something of the powerlessness felt by women by reason of their sexuality in a man's world. Gwydion also learned this lesson, though he spent only one year as a female, a sow. The shame imposed upon them by these transformations was heightened by the fact that their sexual relationship, as animals, was incestuous, and that each bore progeny to the other. Their offspring, changed into human form, remained in Math's court and served him well.²⁸¹ Their presence would have

²⁷⁸ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 91.

²⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁸⁰ Jenkins (ed.), *Hywel Dda, The Law*, p. 55.

²⁸¹ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p. 92.

been a constant reminder to the brothers and to others of the shame consequent upon their crime, as the names Math gave their sons – Bleiddwn, from *blaidd*, 'wolf', Hyddwn, from *hydd* 'stag' and Hychddwn Hir from *hwch* 'swine' – reflected their animal origins.²⁸² Not only that, but their very existence served as a warning to all who met them of the consequences of challenging the Otherworldly power of Math himself.

Math fab Mathonwy may have been a king in this world, but his powers are Otherworldly. Not only can he transform people into animals, like the magician from Annwn, Llwyd fab Cilcoed, but he has the god-like power to create a living person, Blodeuedd, from flowers. Furthermore, he has the ability to hear whispers on the wind, so that nothing which is said escapes him if the wind catches it, like the oppressive Coraniaid in the tale of *Lludd and Llefelys*,²⁸³ and the fairies of Snowdon, who "were sharp of hearing, and no word that reached the wind would escape them".²⁸⁴

When Gwydion's sister Aranrhod is suggested as Math's new footholder, she seems ambivalent about her virginity. Math makes her step over his magic staff, causing her to drop a full-term baby, plus "a small something"²⁸⁵ which Gwydion picks up and hides in a chest which seems to act as a womb or an incubator, turning it into a small boy. Gwydion takes responsibility for him, as Aranrhod will not do so, even swearing he will never have a name unless she gives it. Aged four, the child is as well grown as any eight-year-old, thus showing the doubtful birth and prodigious growth pattern of many a hero. Gwydion's anger at his sister gives us our next opportunity to see him

²⁸² *ibid*, note 69, p. 92.

²⁸³ W. J. Gruffydd, *Math fab Mathonwy*, p. 167 and Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p.240.

²⁸⁴ W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, p.137.

²⁸⁵ *ibid*, p. 94.

working magic. He magically disguises himself and the boy, then materialises a ship and sails to Caer Aranhod. Using transformed seaweed as leather, he begins shoemaking and eventually succeeds in enticing Aranhod to the ship, where her comment about the boy's shooting skill gives him his name "*Llew Llaw Gyffes yw bellach*".²⁸⁶

Similarly, he defeats Aranhod's intention to deprive Llew of arms, and thus of his proper place in the world, by their visiting Aranhod's fort transformed into bards. The next day Gwydion creates the illusion of an armada of ships attacking the fort,²⁸⁷ thus tricking Aranhod into arming Llew; her consequent anger causes her to declare that he shall never have a wife of the race now living on earth. Gwydion's magic is the same as that of Annwn, creating illusions and altering people's perception of things. This last attempt of Aranhod's to deny Llew a full place in society is more difficult to overcome, and Gwydion and Llew have to seek the help of Math.

*Ac yna y kymerassant hwy blodeu y deri, a blodeu y banadyl, a blodeu yr erwein, ac or rei hynny, asswynaw yr un uorwyn deckaf a thelediwaf a welas dyn eiryoet...*²⁸⁸

The girl produced by enchantment has no choice about her marriage, but when chance brings a handsome young lord to her court while Llew is away, they fall in love and conspire to kill Llew.²⁸⁹ That Llew is a magical person is shown not only by his strange birth and prodigious growth, but by the conditions necessary for him to be killed. It seems that *Llew Llaw Gyffes*,

²⁸⁶ Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 80. [He is Llew Llaw Gyffes from now on] trans. Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.97.

²⁸⁷ *ibid*, p.98.

²⁸⁸ Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* pp. 26–27. [And then they took the flowers of the oaktrees. and the flowers of the broom and flowers of the meadow-sweet, and with those made by enchantment the fairest maiden above all and the most beautiful that man had ever seen...]

²⁸⁹ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.102.

'Lleu of the Skilful Hand' is, like others in the Mabinogi, an euhemerised god. Lleu is cognate with the Irish *Lugh Lamfada* (Long Arm),²⁹⁰ also called *Lugh Samildanach* 'Lugh the Many Skilled' and they are both versions of the Celtic god Lug whose main festival was Lughnasad. To be killed, he has to be in a liminal condition, on the borderline between two states of being: neither inside nor outside, neither naked nor clothed, not on horseback nor on foot.²⁹¹ The murder weapon, despite being made at the peril of its creator's soul, cannot kill Lleu. Instead, he metamorphoses into an eagle and flies away, leaving Blodeuedd and Gronw temporarily victorious.

Gwydion does not use magic, but searches Gwynedd, Powys and Arfon to find Lleu. Ironically, considering the previous use Gwydion had made of pigs, Lleu is discovered through the agency of a sow – a chthonic animal originally given by the King of Annwn whom we met in the first branch. Gwydion's magic staff restores Lleu to human form, though he is very sick. The last magical episode in the Fourth Branch deals with Lleu's revenge upon his wife and her lover. There is another transformation when Blodeuedd is turned into an owl by Gwydion, her creator. Her lover then has to stand and allow Lleu to cast a spear at him, which he tries to avoid by asking his warband if any of them will take his place. Their refusal gave them their place in the Triads as one of the Three Faithless Warbands:

*Teulu Goronwy Peuyr o (Benllyn), a omedassant eu harglvyd o erbynneit y gwenwynwayw y gan Lleu Llaw Gyffes yn Llech Oronwy ymblaen Kynuael.*²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 243.

²⁹¹ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, pp. 102–3.

²⁹² Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, triad 30, p. 61. [The War-Band of Goronwy the Radiant of (Penllyn), who refused to receive the poisoned spear from Lleu Skilful-Hand on behalf of their lord, at the Stone of Goronwy at the head of the Cynfal.]

Gronw blames Blodeuedd for his treachery and still tries to avoid the consequences of his behaviour by asking to hold a stone up as a shield, which is agreed to. With magical strength, speed and precision, the spear drills a hole through the stone and kills Gronw; thus Lleu is avenged.²⁹³

Unlike Blodeuedd, who was artificially created from flowers, Lleu, whose strange birth, abnormal growth and exacting conditions for death mark him out as a euhemerised deity, and Gwydion, who is a powerful magician, Gronw is an ordinary human being involved in a situation with which he is not equipped to deal. He gives in to his human emotions of love or lust, and fear, and, like many people, blames others and tries to avoid paying the penalty for his actions. To the very last moment, he searches for a solution, and evidently believes he has found one when he is allowed to hold a stone between himself and Lleu's spear. Unfortunately for him, despite asking Blodeuedd to discover how Lleu could be killed, thus seeming to acknowledge that Lleu is not an ordinary person, and subsequently seeing him change into an eagle and fly away rather than falling dead from a spear wound, Gronw still does not appear to understand that he is not dealing with other normal human beings, but with Otherworldly powers and magic.

In contrast to Manawydan, who was in the right and who proceeded with lawyer-like caution, patience and guile against the powers of Annwn, thus defeating them, Gronw was in the wrong. He had taken Lleu's wife whilst enjoying the hospitality of his court, had conspired to kill him and had taken his kingdom by treachery. Gronw had jeopardised his soul - presumably a Christian interpolation - by missing mass for a year while he worked on the

²⁹³ Bollard, *The Mabinogi*, p.108.

purportedly-fatal blade, and generally failed to exercise any prudence or forethought. This contrasts with what Pwyll – another ordinary human - had managed to do in the First Branch, and Manawydan, an euhemerised god, in the Third Branch. Gronw therefore did not deserve to succeed, and thus could not overcome the powers which were working against him, specifically the Otherworldly magic of Gwydion.

CONCLUSION:

We have examined various aspects of the Celtic Otherworld, its location, description, inhabitants, animals and artefacts, and must come to the conclusion that there is no simple answer to the question "What is the Otherworld like?" Its attractions are obvious: in a harsh and uncertain world, the allure of somewhere safe, luxurious and sinless must have been strong – a pre-Christian idyll similar to the Garden of Eden. In some respects, the Celtic Otherworld would seem to be a masculine wish-fulfilment fantasy, especially in Irish sources. Theirs is a world of wine, women, song and sport, without problems or cares. There is no obligation to work, though there is an abundance of the choicest food. Drink is not measured in barrels or jugs, but in wells and springs of sweet wine, besides strong ale. It is surely a masculine fantasy, because of the references to 'very many women' and to an actual island where women are the only inhabitants, *Tir Inn mBan*, where Bran and his men, three companies of nine, land and immediately obtain lovers and "a bed for every couple, even thrice nine beds"²⁹⁴ to accommodate them. Sex here is a sinless pleasure. In this Otherworld, the surroundings are beautiful, the buildings sparkle with precious metal and jewels, as does the clothing of the inhabitants. The chariots are of silver, gold and bronze and the horses brilliantly coloured. There is racing of chariot and coracle, as well as feasting and music. Trees are fruitful, some being silver or coloured crystal, and some of these make music. Even the stones sing in this glorious bountiful Otherworld of perpetual summer, and, best of all, sin, sickness and death are unknown, so these splendours can be enjoyed for all eternity. Parts of this Otherworld seem to be located across

²⁹⁴ Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran*, p. 30.

the sea, on an island or archipelago of islands, although each of the *sídh* mounds also seems to contain its own Otherworld, which is not connected to any of the others, indicating that there is more than one Celtic Otherworld.

However, in the Mabinogi the Celtic Otherworld does not seem to exhibit this tendency to fragment. There, the Otherworld appears to be one country with different kingdoms, accessible from diverse places. It is contiguous to Dyfed, and the countryside is similar to that of Dyfed, as Pwyll remarks no difference in the landscape before he reaches Arawn's court. There are no trees of silver or crystal here, but like the Irish Otherworld, this is a rich place, where Pwyll sees splendid buildings with undreamt-of luxury and ornamentation new to him. The people are beautiful, superbly apparelled and equipped, with the transcendently lovely queen dressed in gold brocaded silk. Time is spent hunting, feasting and revelling, and the provisions and gold plate the most magnificent that Pwyll has ever seen anywhere, as are the wonderful jewels. In effect, this seems to be a description of an idealised court of this world, having the retainers and feasts characteristic of such courts, exaggerated to express every possible luxury, but having these soaring ideas compressed into the redactor's laconic shorthand references which would spark his auditors' imaginations.

Annwn, then, is a dazzlingly opulent place of beautiful people, glorious buildings, feasting, hunting, carousing and jewels, similar to the Irish stories, though there is no sense of sexual freedom in the Mabinogi; although Arawn has explicitly given Pwyll permission to sleep with his wife, Pwyll is chaste and does not take advantage of the situation. Annwn is also the source of rich presents, as mentioned in the First Branch and alluded to in the Fourth

Branch, which says that the first swine ever seen in Wales originated there. It is the abode of powerful magicians and shapechangers like Llwyd fab Cilcoed, who can materialise and dematerialise a castle, magically kidnap and imprison people and vanish away all inhabitants and domestic animals from a large tract of countryside to avenge an insult to a friend. He, like the other Otherworldly characters we meet in the Four Branches, is a powerful force, and very much alive. This characteristic of the Celtic Otherworld, namely life, rather than death, is consistent throughout both the Welsh and Irish traditions and is in strong contrast to the Classical ideas of the Otherworld. Although less detailed than the Irish sources, the Celtic Otherworld as represented by Annwn and its denizens is likewise a wish-fulfilment fantasy, though of a more refined, sophisticated and courtly variety, better suited to the times and the audiences for whom it was intended.

Plate 1

GORSEDD ARBERTH

This image of Gorsedd Arberth is by Anthony Griffiths and can be seen at:

<http://sites.google.com/site/themabinogi/GorseddArberth.jpg>
<accessed 19 June 2012>

Plate 2

GRASSHOLM ISLAND (GWALES)

Grassholm Island. This image is available at:

www.welsh-cottages.co.uk/pembrokeshire/grassholmphoto1.php
<accessed 19 June 2012>

Plate 3

MAPS SHOWING LOCATION OF HY-BRASIL

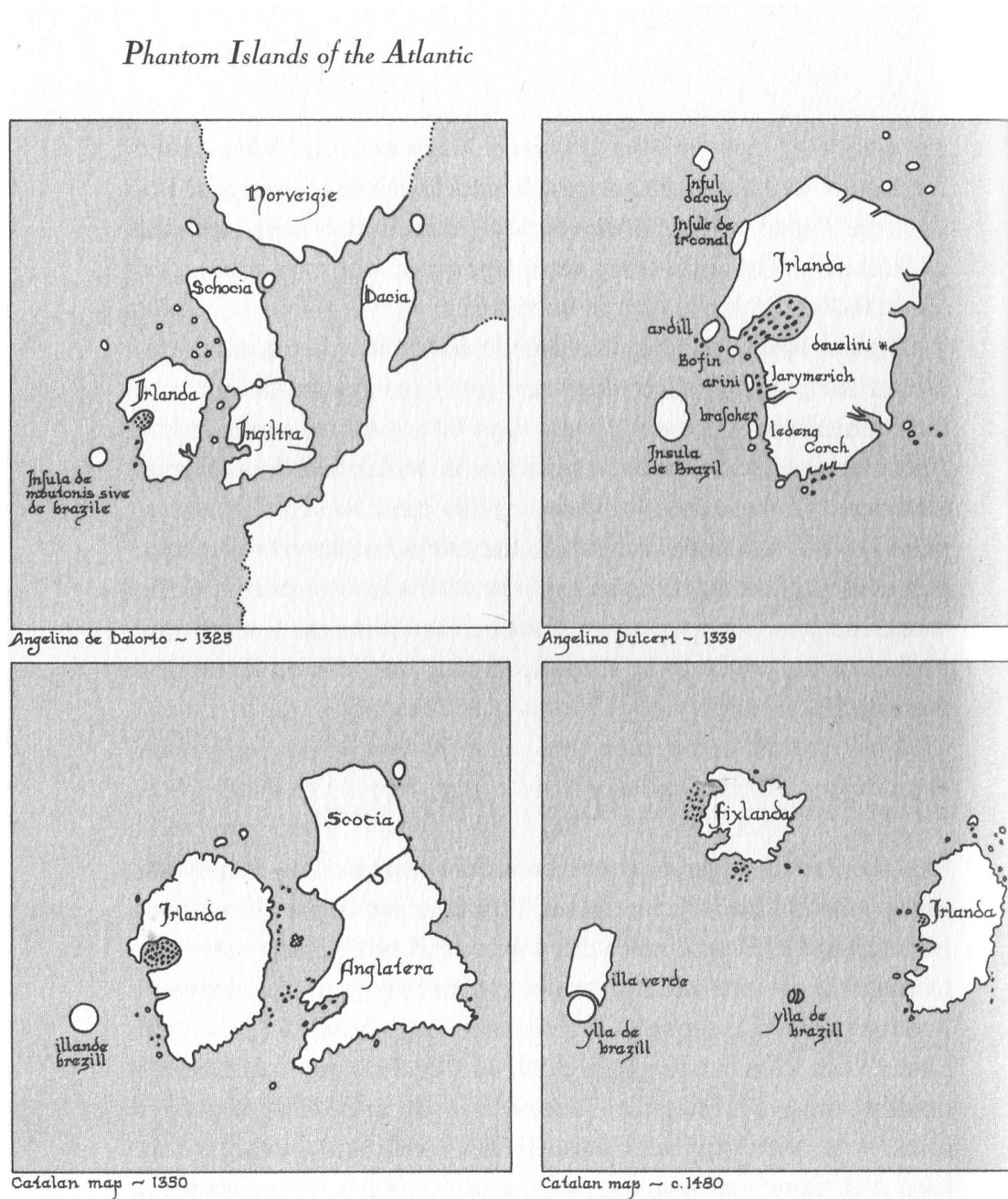


FIG. 24. Four early charts of the North Atlantic in the vicinity of Ireland. The island of Brazil first appears on the Angelino de Dalorto map of 1325. All show Brazil southwest of Galway Bay.

The above illustration appears in the book *Phantom Islands of the Atlantic*, by Donald S. Johnson, page 120.

Plate 4

LLYN Y FAN FACH

This image of Llyn y Fan Fach is available at:

www.cambrianway.org.uk
<accessed 19 June 2012>

Plate 5

EXAMPLE OF A SIDH MOUND

This Sidhe Mound – the Mound of the Hostages - is located on the Hill of Tara.

The image can be found at:
<http://merganser.math.gvsu.edu/myth/irish-gal.html>
<accessed 19 June 2012>

Plate 6

THE CAVE OF CRUACHAN

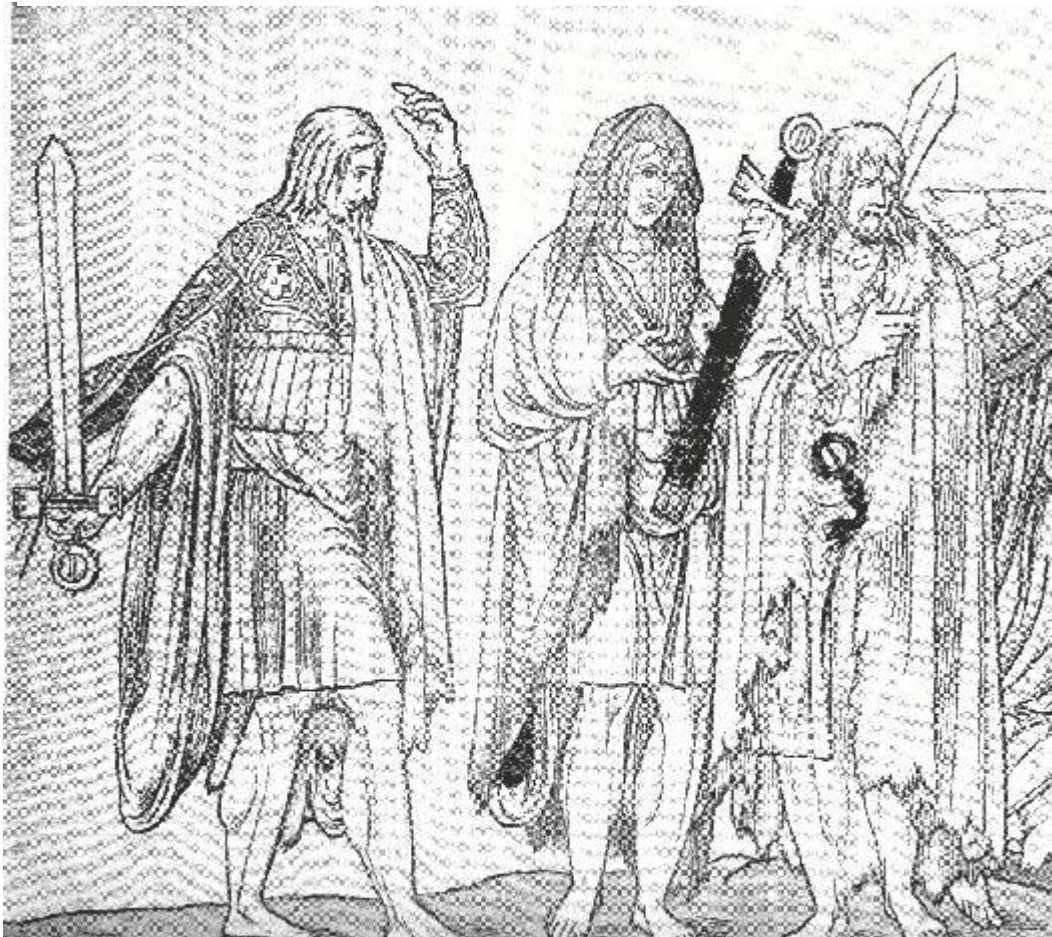
This image of the Cave of Cruachan is available at:

<http://www.rathcroghan.ie/history/>

There is also a video of the cave on YouTube:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrjvOudgFYE&feature=player_embedded&noredirect=1
<accessed 19 June 2012>

Plate 7

MALE IRISH COSTUME IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

It is interesting that they all appear to be wearing cloaks, whereas Giraldus maintains they do not do so.

The above illustration of male Irish dress in medieval times can be found at:

<http://www.macmaolain.com/medievalirishdress.htm>
<accessed 19 June 2012>

THE DYING CUCHULAINN

This bronze statue by the Irish sculptor Oliver Sheppard was created in 1911-12, and later installed in the General Post Office as a memorial to the 1916 Rising. Cú Chulainn is tied to a pillar and the Morrigan perches on his shoulder in the shape of a raven.

It is available at:
<http://comma.english.ucsb.edu/content/dying-cuchulainn-installed-gpo> <accessed 17 September 2012>

Plate 9

MEDIEVAL IRISH CLOTHING

The above illustration of male and female Irish dress in medieval times can be found at:

http://members.efn.org/~celtic/celtic_looks.html
<accessed 19 June 2012>

Plate 10

THE COAST AT HARLECH

This photograph of the sea at Harlech is available at:

www.secretsnowdonia.co.uk/
<accessed 19 June 2012>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Printed Primary Sources:

Bollard, John K. (ed. and trans.), *The Mabinogi* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2006).

Bollard, John K. (ed. and trans.), *Companion Tales to The Mabinogi* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2007).

Bromwich, Rachel, (ed. and trans.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Cardiff: UWP, 1961).

Cambrensis, Giraldus, *The Journey through Wales* (trans. Lewis Thorpe), (London: Penguin Books, 1978).

Cambrensis, Giraldus, *The History and Topography of Ireland* (trans. John J. O'Meara), (London: Penguin Books, 1982).

Cross, T. P., and Slover, C. H., *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble edition, 1996).

Davies, Sioned, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

Ewert, A. (ed.), *Marie de France, Lais* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

Gordon, R. K., (trans.) *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Everyman's Library, 1977).

Gruffudd, W. J., *Math vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff: UWP, 1928).

Gruffudd, W. J., *Rhiannon* (Cardiff: UWP, 1953).

Haycock, Marged (ed. and trans.) *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin* (Aberystwyth: CMCS, c2007).

Homer, *The Iliad* (ed. and trans. E. V. Rieu), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950).

Homer, *The Odyssey* (trans. E. V. Rieu), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1946).

Jenkins, Dafydd (ed. and trans.), *The Law of Hywel Dda* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2000).

Koch, John T. and Carey, J. *The Celtic Heroic Age* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003).

Lucan (trans. N. Rowe, eds. S. Brown and C. Martindale), *The Civil War* (London: Everyman, 1998).

Meyer, Kuno, (ed. and trans.), *The Voyage of Bran* (London: David Nutt, 1895), [facsimile reprint 1994 by Llanerch Publishers, Felinfach].

Morris, John, (ed. and trans.), *Nennius British History and the Welsh Annals* (London: Phillimore, 1980).

Skene, William F., *The Four Ancient Books of Wales* (Edinburgh: 1868), republished by Forgotten Books 2007.

Virgil, (trans. David West), *The Aeneid* (London: Penguin, 1990).

Williams, Ifor, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1930).

Wrenn, C. L. (ed. and trans.) *Beowulf* (London: Harrap, 1973).

Secondary Sources:

- Baring-Gould, S., and Fisher, John, *Lives of the British Saints Vol. IV* (London: Charles J Clark, 1908).
- Boardman, J., Griffin, J., and Murray, O. (eds.) *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (London: Guild Publishing, 1986).
- Bromwich, Rachel, Jarman, A.O.H, Roberts, Brynley F., (eds.) *The Arthur of the Welsh* (Cardiff: UWP, 1991).
- Cooper, J. C., *Brewer's Book of Myth and Legend* (London: Cassell, 1992).
- Davies, Sioned, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1993).
- Davies, Sioned, and Jones, Nerys Ann (eds.), *The Horse in Celtic Culture* (Cardiff: UWP, 1997).
- Dillon, Myles, *Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994).
- Ellis, H. R., *The Road to Hel* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968).
- Ellis, Peter Berresford, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (London: Constable, 1992).
- Evans-Wentz, W. Y., *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (Henry Frowde, 1911), [facsimile reprint, undated, by The Lost Library, Glastonbury].
- Ford, Patrick K., *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (California: University of California Press, 1977).
- Frazer, James, *The Golden Bough* (London: Octopus Publishing, 2000).
- Green, Miranda Jane, *Celtic Myths* (London: British Museum Press, 1993).
- Green, Miranda Jane, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992).
- Gruffydd, W. J., *Folklore and Myth in the Mabinogion* (Cardiff: UWP, 1958).
- Jackson, K. H., *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff: UWP, 1961).
- Johnson, Donald S., *Phantom Islands of the Atlantic* (London: Souvenir Press, 1997).
- Loomis, Roger Sherman, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend* (Cardiff : UWP, 1956).

Loomis, Roger Sherman, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (London: Constable, 1993).

MacCana, Proinsias, *Celtic Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1970).

Murphy, Gerard, *Saga and Myth in Ancient Ireland* (Dublin: Cultural Relations Committee of Ireland, 1955).

Parker, Will, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (California: Bardic Press, 2005).

Rees, Alwyn and Brinley, *Celtic Heritage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961)

Rhys, John, *Celtic Folklore Welsh and Manx Volume 1* (Oxford: OUP, 1901).

Rhys, John, *Celtic Folklore Welsh and Manx Volume 2* (Oxford: OUP, 1901).

Ross, Anne, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London: Sphere Books, 1974).

Ross, Anne, *Folklore of Wales*, (Stroud: Tempus, 2001).

Sims-Williams, Patrick, *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture* (California, 1990).

Sims-Williams, Patrick, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2011),

Sjoestedt, Marie-Louise, (trans. Myles Dillon), *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (London: Methuen, 1949).

Sullivan, C. W., (ed.) *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Thomas, Gwyn, *Gair am Air* (Caerdydd : Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 2000).

Wooding, Jonathan M. (ed), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000).

Websites:

The Geography of Strabo, Book V Ch. 4, available at
http://www.penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/5D*.html

Saxo Grammaticus, *History of the Danish People* Book 1
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1150/1150-h/1150-h.htm>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/roman_religion_

www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland

www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/253

<http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/Maritime/Sources/1476brasil.htm>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrjvOudgFYE&feature=player_embedded
&noredirect=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrjvOudgFYE&feature=player_embedded&noredirect=1)

<http://storysearch.symbolicstudies.org>

<http://comma.english.ucsb.edu/content/dying-cuchulain-installed-gpo>