

Bull of Battle Intro

In the opening line of *The Conversation of Gwyn ap Nudd and Gwyddno Garanhir*, Gwyddno addresses Gwyn as *tarv trin* 'bull of battle.' (*Tarv* is Old Welsh and would have been pronounced 'tarb' and in Middle Welsh became *tarw* 'tar-oo'.)

This paints a vivid picture of Gwyn as a warrior wearing a bull-horned helmet and bull skins and in this guise he stepped from the poem to me. This has led me to perceive 'bull of battle' is a sacred title. However, Gwyn is not the only one described by this epithet in medieval Welsh poetry.

In *The Gododdin*, a poem from *The Book of Aneirin* which praises the exploits of the warriors who died in the catastrophic battle of Catraeth, Eithynyn is called *tarw trin* twice. Caradog and 'a man of Gwynedd' are referred to as *tarw byddin* 'bull of an army'.

In The Triads we find *Tri Tharw Unben* 'Three Bull-Chieftains' and *Tri Tharw Caduc* 'Three Bull-Protectors'. Amongst them are several famous warriors of the Old North: Cynfawr ap Cynwyd Cynwydion, Gwenddolau ap Ceidio, Urien ap Cynfarch, Gwallog ap Lleenog and Afaon, son of Urien's bard, Taliesin.

Intriguingly *caddug*, here translated as 'protector' also means 'fog, gloom, darkness, covering, armour'. It has been linked to 'battle fog' as 'wind driven blood'. This word also invokes qualities of Gwyn as a god of mist, wind, battle, and protection.

More strangely we find *Tri Tharw Ellyll* 'Three Bull-Spectres'. *Ellyll* means 'spirit, phantom, ghost,' 'goblin, elf' or 'wraith' whilst *gwyd ellyll* refers to 'furious activity in battle' and is related to *gwyllt* 'wild' 'mad'. 'Bull-Spectres' may be bull-epitheted warriors who went mad through battle-trauma or their ghosts.

In 'The Battle of the Trees' we find the lines '*Gwyros Gwyn y vyt, tarw trin teyrn byt*' 'blessed dogwood, the bull of battle, lord of the fray.' This is part of a tongue in cheek poke at the heroic tradition where other trees are similarly described.

These bull-epithets are more than poetic metaphors. Anne Ross says their underlying significance is 'an especially apposite title for eminent warriors in

a society which at one stage likened its tribal god, leader in war and protector of his people, to a great horned bull, possessing all the most impressive and desirable qualities of the animal.'

This suggests the warriors mentioned took their titles from Gwyn.

There are also archaeological links between bulls and cranes which may bear some connection to our dialogue between 'the bull of battle' and Gwyddno Garanhir 'long crane'.

In Paris we find a sculpture named Tarvos Trigaranus ('The Bull with Three Cranes'). He is depicted on 'The Pillar of the Boatmen' (1AD) thick-set, heavy-chested, with two cranes back-to-back on his back and a third crane on his head. He stands in front of a willow. On an adjacent panel Esus ('Lord') is pictured cutting a willow-branch.

On a similar monument from Triers on a single stone a man cuts down a tree with a bull's head and three cranes or egrets in it. At Maiden Castle in Dorset a bronze bull with three horns carrying three female figures was found at a 4AD shrine and may have a basis in legends of shapeshifters who took the form of cranes.

Miranda Green suggests a naturalistic explanation for the Bull with Three Cranes: 'egrets and cattle are symbiotically linked in that the birds feed on ticks and other pests which infest the hides of the cattle.' The cattle egret is variously named 'cow crane', 'cow bird', 'cow heron', 'father of ticks' and performs this role. Could an egret picking ticks from a bull's back be the source?