

Introduction - Gwyn's Descent

In the verses we are looking at today Gwyddno continues to question Gwyn:

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

Gwyn replies:

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

Gwyn then introduces himself:

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

It seems significant that, after asking Gwyn about his land of origin, Gwyddno then asks Gwyn about his 'descent'. Ancestry was important in medieval Wales, which was a patriarchal society, thus placing emphasis on the patronym 'ap' (as in 'ap Nudd') rather than the matronym 'fab' (as in Gwydion fab Don).

This is exemplified by the genealogies such as 'Bonedd Gwyr y Gogledd', 'The Descent of the Men of the North' where we find the genealogy of one of the warriors whose death Gwyn refers to attending later in the text. 'Gwenddolau and Nudd and Cof sons of Ceidio son of Athrwys son of Mar son of Genau son of Coel.' The latter is Coel Hen, "Coel the Old", 'Old King Cole', the progenitor of many of the kingly lines of Yr Hen Ogledd, 'the Old North.' It seems one of these men, Nudd, borrows the name of the God.

Within this context it is of interest that Gwyn does not introduce Himself first but His horse, Carngrwn, 'Round-Hoofed', 'from battle throng'. This suggests His horse is a fundamental part of His identity and a medieval Welsh audience would have guessed who He is from this clue before He reveals His name and this technique was employed by the poet to create suspense. 'Ah! Carngrwn... the horse of Gwyn ap Nudd...' And it would sink in that Gwyddno faces the Lord of Annwn and thus is likely to be dead.

Gwyn's introduction of Carngrwn also adds to his developing representation as a God who rides the battlefield gathering the souls of the dead.

Gwyn then speaks his name and patronymic 'ap Nudd'. Nudd 'Mist' or Lludd Llaw Eraint 'Silver Arm' is the medieval Welsh name of His father, Nodens, a God who was worshipped in ancient Britain with a temple at Lydney 'Lludd's isle' and two silver statuettes dedicated to Him as Mars-Nodontis found on Cockersand Moss in Lancashire.

The evidence from His temple shows He was associated with sacred waters and the weather. A mural crown depicts Him riding from the waves on a chariot pulled by four water-horses. Flanking Him are wind-spirits and water-spirits. In the centre was a mosaic depicting two blue and white sea-serpents with intertwined necks and striking red flippers and numerous fish.

He was also worshipped as a God of healing dreams. The layout of the temple suggests pilgrims arrived at the guesthouse, bathed in the baths, then made offerings to Nodens through a funnel in His temple (suggesting He dwelled below in the Deep). They then retired to a long row of cells to enter a likely drug-induced sleep during which they would receive a vision from Nodens. The 'interpretus' referenced in an inscription would then listen to the dream and suggest a method of healing based on Nodens' message.

Offerings include coins and several beautifully crafted bronze hounds. Dogs may have licked the wounds of the injured and acted as psychopomps guiding the sleepers through the dreamworld.

A bronze arm was also found in the precinct linking to His epithet. It is likely that, like His Irish cognate, Nuada Airgetlam 'Silver Hand', there existed a story about how He lost His arm in battle and it was replaced by a silver one.

In 'Lludd a Llefelys' He saves Britain from three plagues including a dragon's scream, which blights the land, and results from the red dragon Wales/Britain fighting against a white dragon of an enemy people (the Romans?).

Gwyn then tells Gwyddno He is 'the lover of Creiddylad, daughter of Lludd'. His love of His sister, Creiddylad is also a fundamental part of His identity. Creiddylad is referred to as the most majestic and magnanimous maiden in the island of Britain. 'Creidd' means 'heart', 'centre', and 'Crei' 'belief' with 'dylad' relating to the flow or rush of water (as in Dylan of the Wave). This fits with Her descent from Nodens/Nudd/Lludd as a god of sacred waters and the sea.

The story of Gwyn's battle for Creiddylad against His rival Gwythyr ap Greidol, 'Victor son of Scorcher' appears in 'How Culhwch Won Olwen.' This Arthurianised episode is likely to be based upon an older seasonal struggle in which Gwyn (Winter) battles against Gwythyr (Summer) for Creiddylad as a sovereignty Goddess. On Calan Mai Gwythyr wins and enters a sacred

marriage with Creiddylad as King and Queen of Summer and on Calan Gaeaf Gwyn takes Creiddylad to Annwn to become Queen of Annwn, Her absence explaining the winter months.

In the 'Speculum Christiani' Gwyn is invoked 'for the love of' His 'mate'. This suggests that when he cannot be moved directly by human pleas He can be compelled to respond for love of Creiddylad, showing He holds Her in high esteem.

Gwyn's descent from Nudd is so central to His identity we rarely see His name without His patronymic. Knowing one's ancestral line was incredibly important to the Brythonic peoples and likely dates back to earlier tribal societies and I wonder whether matronymics were once just as important?

An alternative meaning of 'Gwyn's Descent' that struck both Thorn and I when we were exchanging emails is the literal meaning of Gwyn's descent into the Otherworld where the souls of the ancestors can be seen to dwell. To descend with Gwyn into Annwn can be to descend into deep time, into ancestral memory, back through the generations, known and unknown to us.

Caesar reported 'All the Gauls assert that they are descended from the god Dis, and say that this tradition has been handed down by the Druids.' Caesar also asserts that the Gaulish tradition of Druidry came from Britain. Dis may be *interpretatio Romana* for Gwyn, suggesting He was viewed by the Gauls and the Britons as an ancestral deity thus Gwyn's descent ultimately leads to... Gwyn!