

## Introduction - Horse and Hound

In previous lines in the poem Gwyn introduced us to His horse, Carngrwn.

He said:

‘My horse is Carngrwn from battle throng  
So I am called Gwyn ap Nudd.’

It was noted that it seemed significant that Gwyn introduced His horse before He introduced Himself and that His relationship with Carngrwn is an intrinsic part of His identity and was well known to a medieval Welsh audience.

Gwyn describes Carngrwn as a ‘white horse’ (later ‘gold-adorned’) who calls their talk to an end, his bridle leading away to battles at Tawe and Nedd, with the battle on the Tawe not being in this land, but a distant land, potentially on the otherside. It seems he plays an important role in leading Gwyn to battles and thus to His task of gathering the souls of the battle dead.

Carngrwn means ‘Round Hoofed’. After Gwyn has described the tragic battle at Caer Fanddwy, Gwyddno speaks of armies falling beneath Carngrwn’s hooves:

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

Once again we find a connection between Carngrwn’s round hooves and battle. Here Gwyn is evoked not just as a gatherer of souls but as the personification of death, riding through the battle, the hooves of His horse trampling armies like cut reeds. He shares a likeness with death in the Christian tradition as the fourth horseman of the apocalypse, in Revelations, in the Bible, who rides a pale horse.

Horses were revered as sacred by our Brythonic ancestors and most famously Rhiannon rides a white horse and has been connected with the Uffington White Horse. Epona, the horse goddess, was worshipped by the Romans with cavalrymen leaving roses as offerings on Her altars in the stables.

Gwyn is associated with a black horse too - Du y Moroedd ‘the Black of the Seas’. A partnership with both white and black horses is seen also in the story of Cu Chulainn, who was born at the same time as two horses: Liath Macha ‘The Grey of Macha’ and Dub Sainglend ‘The Black of Saingliu’, and

His death followed theirs. I recall a Dun Brython member speaking on a public forum of a gnosis that Rhiannon rides a black horse on the otherside. There seems to be some forgotten significance to the riding of both white and black horses.

After Gwyddno has described armies falling beneath Carngrwn's hooves, Gwyn speaks of His hound:

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

Gwyddno replies:

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

Much controversy has surrounded the name, which is written twice as 'Dormach', with a letter erased. John Rhys assumed this was an 'r' giving 'Dormarch' with march meaning 'horse' 'wholly inapplicable to a dog'.

Rhys suggested 'Dormach' should instead be written as 'Dormarth', 'a compound made up of dŵr, 'door,' and marth.' He went on to claim that marth is a 'personification of death' 'of the same origin as the Latin mors, mortis... perhaps, the Marth which was the door of Annwn.' Dormarth means 'door-death'.

Rhys's translation is now considered unconvincing. There is no evidence the letter was an 'r' and its erasure is viewed as a genuine correction. According to The Dictionary of Welsh Language, 'Dormach' means 'burden, oppression'. There is textual evidence of its use from the 14th century until the 18th century. These meanings fit with medieval Christian conceptions of Gwyn and his dog(s).

Rhys notes that in Wales Bwlch Safan y Ci, 'the Gap or Pass of the Dog's Mouth', is a metaphor for death and bears similarities with the English 'jaws of death' and German Rachen des Todes 'jaws of death'. This argument for Dormach's association with death and the door of Annwn seems sound. To pass through the jaws of these dogs is to die and go to the next world.

In many world myths, dogs act as guardians to the lands of the dead. The most famous is Cerberus, who guards Hades in Greek mythology. He is variously depicted with one, two, three, or fifty(!) heads, one or more stinging serpent tails, and sometimes with a mane of snakes or snakes down his

back.

Intriguingly, in *The Black Book of Carmarthen*, the scribe has sketched an image of Dormach with a dog's head and near Cheshire cat-like grin, a dog's forelegs, and a long body tapering to two serpent tails. He bears a striking similarity to Cerberus and may also have been viewed as a guardian of Annwn.

It is likely that Dormach is the best of, and perhaps the leader of, the Cwn Annwn 'Hounds of the Otherworld'. In the First Branch of *The Mabinogion* they accompany Arawn, a King of Annwn, on His hunt. They are described as 'gleaming shining white' and they have red ears. They share a likeness with Gwyn's sleek, fair hound with his red nose.

In later Welsh folklore Cwn Annwn are known by a number of names: Cwn Wybyr, 'Cloud Dogs', Cwn Cyrff 'Corpse Dogs', Cwn Toili 'Phantom Funeral Dogs', Cwn Mamau 'Mother's Dogs', 'Hell-Hounds' and 'Infernal Dogs'. Here we find an admixture of pagan and Christian folk beliefs.

They are famed for barking through the skies pursuing the souls of the dead. Therefore to hear them is a death-portent. They often fly the ways corpses will follow: hence their associations with teulu ('phantom funerals').

Their magical and disorientating qualities prevail. The 14th C poet Dafydd ap Gwilym speaks of encountering 'the dogs of night' whilst lost in 'unsightly fog' after hearing Gwyn's 'Crazy Owl'. In a report from Carmarthenshire the closer Cwn Annwn get the quieter their voices until they sound like small beagles. The further away the louder their call. In their midst the 'deep hollow voice' of a 'monstrous blood hound' is often heard.

Like Dormach they delight in a Cheshire-cat-like ability to shift their shape. Some appear as white dogs with red ears or noses. One is a 'strong fighting mastiff' with a 'white tail' and 'white snip and 'grinning teeth' able to conjure a fire around it. Others are 'the size of guinea pigs and covered with red and white spots', 'small', 'grey-red or speckled'. Some are 'mice or pigs'.

At Cefn Creini in Merioneth they are accompanied by a 'shepherd' with a black face and 'horns on his head' who sounds remarkably like Gwyn: a horned hunter-god who has a dark or black face. He is supposedly fended off with a crucifix. In certain areas of Wales the 'quarry' of Gwyn and the Cwn Annwn is restricted to the souls of 'sinners' and 'evil-livers'.

The ability of the hounds to distort perception is shown in Gwyddno's description. Dormach is at Gwyn's side yet also wandering in the firmament.

This is due to the misty shape-shifting nature he shares with Gwyn. J. Gwengobryn Evans tells us Dormach 'moved ar wybir, i.e. rode on the clouds which haunt the mountain-tops.' 'Wybir' is 'condensed floating white cloud' referred to as Nuden and 'serves as a garment for Gwyn.'

Yuri Leitch has suggested that the nose of Dormach is Sirius, the Dog Star, in Canis Major and he accompanies Gwyn, who he identifies with Orion the Hunter.

It seems Dormach and Gwyn attended the death of Maelgwn Gwynedd, King of Gwynedd in the 6th century, who died after shutting himself in the church in Llanrhos from the yellow plague. This disease was described by Taliesin as a monster - 'a most strange creature... from the sea marsh of Rhianedd... His hair, his teeth, and his eyes being as gold.'