

Introduction - Warriors of the Old North

After Gwyn's conversation with Gwyddno draws to a close, before He departs, Gwyn speaks a verse stating his presence at the deaths of a number of warriors. All but Arthur's son, Llachau, are important figures within medieval Welsh literature from *Yr Hen Ogledd* 'The Old North'.

I was there when Gwenddolau was slain,
Ceidio's son, a pillar of poetry,
When ravens croaked on gore.

I was there when Bran was slain,
Ywerydd's son of wide fame,
When battle-ravens croaked.

I was there when Llachau was slain
Arthur's son, wondrous in wordcraft,
When ravens croaked on gore.

I was* there when Meurig was slain,
Careian's son, honoured in praise,
When ravens croaked on flesh.

I was there when Gwallog was slain,
From a line of princes,
Grief of the Saxons, son of Lleynog.

The Old North refers to the Brythonic speaking area of northern Britain and southern Scotland that maintained cultural unity from the post-Roman period until the Anglo-Saxon invasions. Their kingdoms included Rheged and Elmet. The warriors mentioned fought against the Anglo-Saxons and there was a good deal of internicine rivalry between the northern kingdoms themselves. Their names are recorded in *Bonedd Gwŷr y Gogledd*, 'The Descent of the Men of the North'.

It is notable that Gwyddno himself is included in these genealogies. Although he is now most strongly connected with Cantre'r Gwaelod it is possible his stories originated in the Old North and were relocated in Wales. In the Triads we find Porth Wyddno in the North and his magical hamper, which feeds one hundred men if food is put into it for one, is listed in the 'the Thirteen Treasures of the Island of Britain' which were in the North.

Gwenddolau ap Ceidio ('Gwen' shares its root with 'Gwyn meaning 'White' and 'Blessed') is of the Coel Hen lineage. He had a brother called Nudd Hael/Llawhael, 'The Generous/Generous Hand'.

Gwenddolau's fortress, *Caer Gwenddolau*, stood on present-day Liddel Strength beside Liddel Water. It is likely his rule extended from there throughout the modern parish of Arthuret, which was then known as *Arfderydd*, and perhaps more widely

In 'Greetings' Myrddin speaks of Gwenddolau as 'a glorious prince, / Gathering booty from every border... Chief of the kings of the North, greatest in generosity.' This shows that, like his kinsmen, he was fond of raiding his enemies and endowing wealth on his subjects and bards (hence the epithet 'pillar of poetry'). He may even have held the position of 'High King'.

In Triad 6 Gwenddolau is named as one of three 'Bull Protectors' of the Island of Britain and thus may be linked to Gwyn as a 'bull of battle'.

Gwenddolau was the owner of two birds who 'had a yoke of gold on them. Two corpses of the Cymry they ate for their dinner, and two for their supper' (Triad 33). There is a longstanding tradition of corpse-eating birds in Welsh literature. Dead warriors are said to feed the ravens or eagles and Gwyn gathers the souls of the dead accompanied by ravens who 'croak over gore'. Gwenddolau's ownership of these birds could suggest their excarnation of corpses was part of his funerary practice. By 'the Cymry' it is unclear whether they eat the corpses of his tribe, his Cymric enemies, (or both!).

Gwenddolau also possessed a magical chessboard that appears as one of 'The Thirteen Treasures of the Island of Britain' 'which were in the North'. 'The Chessboard of Gwenddolau son of Ceidio: if the pieces were set, they would play themselves. The board was of gold and the men were of silver'.

Gwenddolau was killed at the Battle of *Arfderydd* in 573. This is recorded in *The Annales Cambriae*: 'The Battle of *Arfderydd* between the sons of Elifer and Gwenddolau the son of Ceidio; in which battle Gwenddolau fell; Merlin became mad'.

Triad 84 'Three Futile Battles' refers to 'the Contest of *Arfderyd*, which was brought about because of the lark's nest'*. Robert Vaughan speaks of a tradition wherein the shepherds of Rhydderch of *Alt Clut* (*Strathclyde*) and Aeddan of *Dal Riada* fell out over a lark's nest and Aeddan sided with Gwenddolau against Rhydderch. The poems attributed to Myrddin/Merlin also suggest Rhydderch fought against Gwenddolau.

After the Battle of *Arfderydd*, Myrddin, a warrior who fought for Gwenddolau, became *wyllt*, 'mad'. *The Life of St Kentigern* records his** vision of a 'brightness too great for human senses to endure' with martial battalions in the skies. It seems likely this was Gwyn and his host arriving to gather

Gwenddolau's soul and the souls of the other warriors from the battlefield.

Bran son of Ywerydd we know less about. He appears in the genealogies and in the heroic poetry as allying with one group of northern men including Gwallog against Urien Rheged and his cousin Llywarch Hen. He may have had a role in Urien's assassination and driving Llywarch from the north. Bran later fought against Urien's son, Pelis, at Cynwyd and perished there. He may be equated with Bran Galed ('the Niggard'). His horn is listed amongst the Thirteen Treasures - 'The Horn of Bran the Niggard from the North: whatever drink might be wished for was found in it.'

Intriguingly Gwallog is named as brother not only of Caradog but a half-brother of Gwyn Himself through their shared descent on the maternal side from Tywanwedd in *Descent of the Saints*. Tywanwedd is the daughter of Amlawdd Wledig, a Welsh prince who may have ruled on the border of Herefordshire.

These three brothers appear again in an entry in *Peniarth MS 132*: 'Gwyn ap Nudd greiddyey (?) ap Lludd. He went to Llew ap Llyminod Angel. He went between sky and air. He was brother to Caradog Freichfras and Gwallog ap Lleenog. He and they had the same mother.' It is of interest to note that if Tywanwedd is Gwyn's mother, this places him in the same lineage as Arthur (Arthur's mother was Eigr daughter of Amlawdd).

Peter Bartrum argues due to Gwyn, Gwallog and Caradog's 'disparate nature' in 'character, place and time' it was more likely their mother was a fairy like Gwyn.

In *Geraint son of Erbin* Caradog, Gwallog, Gwalchmai and Owain son of Nudd appear alongside Arthur as 'guarantors' of Edern son of Nudd after he is mortally wounded by Geraint. Caradog and Edern appear together as Arthur's 'counsellors' in *The Dream of Rhonabwy*. This brings to light further familial links.

Gwallog's kingdom is traditionally Elmet. This is derived from Ifor Williams' translation of lines in *The Song of Gwallawg ap Lleenawg* where Gwallog is named 'a judge over Elmet'.

Bede speaks of 'silva elmete' ('the forest of Elmet') saying 'subsequent kings made a house for themselves in the district, which is called Loidis.' Loidis is Leeds and place-name evidence suggests Elmet covered West Yorkshire.

Further evidence Gwallog ruled Elmet comes from Nennius' *History of the Britons*. He tells of how Edwin of Northumbria 'occupied Elmet and expelled

Certic, king of that country'. Certic is usually identified as Ceredig, Gwallog's son.

Gwallog's renown as a war-leader is evidenced by the *Triads*, where he is named as one of three 'Pillars of Battle', 'Bull Protectors' and 'Battle-Leaders' of Britain. According to Nennius he was amongst four kings; Urien, Rhydderch the Old, Gwallog and Morcant, who played a leading role in defending the north against the Bernician Angles. This relates to Gwyn calling him 'grief of the Saxons.' In other poems he battles against fellow Britons.

In *The Black Book of Carmarthen* we find an enigmatic poem called A Song on Gwallog ab Lleenawg which refers to how Gwallog lost an eye in his youth. He is said to have lost it to an 'accursed tree' which appears thrice: as 'black', 'white' then 'green'. In another variant he loses it to a 'white goose'.

We have no record of how Gwallog met his end.

To the best of my knowledge, Meurig ap Careian does not appear in any other literature by that name. The patronymic 'Careian' may be the result of a scribal error. In *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, Jenny Rowlands puts forward a theory about his identity.

Rowlands mentions that in the margin of 'A Song on Gwallog ap Lleenawg' (which precedes 'The Conversation of Gwyn ap Nudd and Gwyddno Garanhir' in *The Black Book of Carmarthen*) there are two verses which associate Gwallawg with 'a certain Meurig who is probably to be identified as Meurig m. Idno, his son-in-law.' Both men are 'clearly vilified'.

'No one who would have been famous
went in the plight that Gwallog did
to the accursed one, to the thorn bushes.

No one who would have been admired
Went in the plight that Meurig did
On the back of his wife bent-in-three.'

Rowland says 'These stanzas perhaps allude to a scurrilous story in which both men fled ignominiously from battle, and the *englyn* about Gwallog could reflect a variant, more shameful, tale about how he lost one eye.'* Gwallog and Meurig are 'held up as patterns to avoid.'

Many of the Men of the North have epithets such as 'Mwynfawr' 'the wealthy' and 'Freichras' 'strong arm'. Might Careian derive from *cariad*, which is Welsh for 'lover'? There is a tradition of triads celebrating lovers and lover's horses. The marginal lines about Meurig 'On the back of his wife bent-in-three' might parody his epithet.

August Hunt's theory is the town of Moresby in Cumbria derives from 'Gwas Meurig' 'Abode of Meurig'. Guasmoric is mentioned in *Historia Brittonum* and may be identified with the Gabrosentum fort near Moresby.

Llachau is not named in the northern genealogies but we have seen he might be a distant relation of Gwyn Amlawdd. He is named in the triads of one of three 'well-endowed men of Britain'. He appears in Pa Gur fighting and perhaps dying alongside Cai.

"Cai's death was unattainable.
Cei the fair and Llachau,
They performed battles
Before the pain of blue spears (ended the conflict)

In the *Seint Greal* Llachau killed a giant then made the mistake of sleeping on top of him and Cai took his head and that of the giant.

We see the stories of many of these northern men and of Gwyn are interwoven in these fragmentary texts and can imagine a large and more coherent narrative body might have previously existed.