

Meditations on the Sacred Places of Gwyn

by Sister Aelfwyn

Sunday April 14th 2024

Meditation 5: Castel Dinas Bran:

Reflections on St Collen through the Mirror in the mists

Welcoming and Housekeeping -

Honouring spirits of place and land acknowledgement –

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth meditation on the sacred places of Gwyn ap Nudd. This month we will be exploring Castell Dinas Bran and its connection to Gwyn ap Nudd and St. Collen. We shall re-visit the story of St. Collen and the King of Faery, however not as we know it. Inspired by personal journeys and insights, I have explored the faerylore within the story and re-written it with a twist, a mirror image, what if not all was as it seemed? What if St. Collen settled in the dwelling place of Gwyn ap Nudd with the intention to devote himself to the Faery King? Did he intend to become a monastic devotee to the Gods of Annwn?

So in honour of Gwyn ap Nudd and the mystery of Castell Dinas Bran I will present this talk with a mixture of historical and geological facts, exploring the landscape, books and resources that I recommend (see below) along with my own personal journey work. We will then go on to a meditation to meet Gwyn ap Nudd through the Mirror in the mists and reflect upon our own devotions.

Sources: T Gwyn Jones Welsh Folklore and folk customs, The Welsh Fairy Book – W. Jenkyn Thomas, Faery – John Kruse, Welsh Fairies – John Kruse, Fairies – Morgan Daimler, Gwyn God of Annwn expanded edition – Yuri Lietch, Wild Wales guide book, Land of the Fae – Rob Wildwood, Magical Places of Britain – Rob Wildwood, Fairy sites - Janet Bord

Castell Dinas Bran

This is a story of a steep, rocky Iron age hillfort located high above the Dee valley near the town of Llangollen Wales. A wild and mysterious place that seems to command attention. Upon the summit lay the ruined remains of the 13th c castle Dinas Bran which translates to The place of crows. The Hill is surrounded by a vast woodland area which is said to be a haunt of the fairies, and in the valley below an ancient hollow named Nant yr Ellyllon which translates to Hollow of Elves or Goblin Hollow.

St Collen is said to have arrived in Llangollen by coracle and founded a church beside the river there. Llangollen is named Llan meaning 'enclosure' and gollen "Collen"). It is said that Nant yr Ellyllon could be the location of Collen's cell where he was invited to the courts of Gwyn ap Nudd. Legend says that he climbed the hill and entered a kingdom of faerie where he was offered all that his heart could desire. He refused to believe the vision and banished the fairy court with holy water. Or did he?

I have already covered the original story of St Collen, (please see week 1 Glastonbury Tor PDF for further info) however, whilst researching the sacred places of Gwyn, I came across a reoccurring theme, an appearance of a Monk at each site. St Collen appeared three times, Glastonbury Tor, Berwyn Mountains and Castell Dinas Bran all said to be the location where he met the King of Faery.

This had me thinking that perhaps it was not a coincidence, at a time when both Celtic, Christian and folk beliefs were more fluid maybe there is more to the story of St. Collen. Perhaps, inspired by the landscape of Cymru, listening to the voices of the land, seeking quiet solitude, he was drawn to take up residence within these sacred sites? Perhaps hearing the call of Gwyn ap Nudd he was inspired to journey into his kingdom of Annwn or commune within his Castle of Glass? Besides the story of St Collen, there are other examples of folklore suggesting Castell Dinas Bran as a possible faery site:

- 1) A shepherd had an encounter with the fairy folk in the woodland of Nant Yr Ellyllon. He met a small man dressed in moss and leaves playing enchanting music on a fiddle while the fairies danced. Unable to resist he joined in the dance and was unable to stop until his master arrived in the morning and broke the spell.
- 2) Legend says that there is a silver harp hidden beneath Dinas Bran, and that only a boy with a white dog with a silver eye can recover the treasure.
- 3) The castle is also linked to King Bran. Myth tells that the castle was built by the giant king, Brân Fendigaid, which means Blessed Crow in Welsh.

I was also inspired by a journey written in the book *Land of the Fae* by Rob Wildwood. The following quotes referring to Gwyn ap Nudd are from the book and blog on the website: landofthefae.blogspot.com

“I sat in the woods above Llandyn Hall and meditated, hoping to make some connection with the Fae there, but all I could sense was Gwyn ap Nudd up on the hilltop!

“Gwyn ap Nudd stood before me, no longer dark he was now composed entirely of white light covered in streams of iridescent colours”

“The magical wooded glade ahead is surely Nant yr Ellyllon as mentioned in the folk tales. The glade of the shining ones, where if you're not careful you'll spend all night dancing with the fairies!”

Collen and the Faery Path

Collen felt distressed, the noise within the town had become too much of a distraction, he could not find solace upon the Isle of Glass. The Abbey grounds absorbed the noise of daily life it was far from the solitude he needed to commune with spirit. He felt within his heart that he must leave this place.

One day, whilst collecting water from the sacred well upon the isle of Apples, he heard voices speak upon the wind guiding him to set off on a pilgrimage.

His journey had drawn him to the mountains of Cymru, seeking a deeper connection by listening to the voices within the landscape he felt more and more at peace. He had travelled across the waters by coracle and walked far across the rugged landscape and ancient woodlands to arrive in a secluded spot upon the side of a vast hill. It was here that Collen finally felt at peace, as if he had arrived home. He set to work building a small Monastic Cell for quiet reflection.

Quietly breathing, stilling his thoughts he found that he had drifted into a trance like state. Within the silence, again he heard the whispering of otherworldly voices. This time more distinct. Who is it that speaks? He thought to himself, or did he speak out loud? He did not know whether he was within or without of his body it was a strange feeling. The whispering grew louder he could hear the voices clearly, opening his eyes, steadying himself, he looked out from his cell. The Mists had drawn down all about him. He could see no one. He called out: "Who is it that speaks?" surprised by his own voice!

We are messengers of Gwyn ap Nudd king of Annwn, and of Faerie, we come to you with an invitation to meet with Gwyn ap Nudd at the top of the hill at midday. Thinking he was hearing things, and fearing the unknown, he suddenly said to himself "go away you are just voices in my head I must be dreaming" "Please stop Please go away" "I do not know the King of Annwn" He went inside to steady his nerves.

The next day there was a knocking at the door. The same messengers "Do not ignore us Collen, you may cause insult to the King of Faerie" Collen was now afraid as to what to do. He did not go to the hill at noon, he decided to meditate within his cell and contemplate meaning of the message. He did not yet have the knowledge on how to commune with the King of Faerie, and yet despite his fear, he felt drawn to do so. Going deeper into his meditation, he had a vision of a great Glass castle, a magical place above the hill, full of wonder. He saw himself offering up sacred water to the land. He knew that he would learn much from the experience but had to take the journey with some caution. He prayed for guidance.

The following day for the third time whilst in prayer, his guidance came. The two voices now became visible as two otherworldly beings shining bright in the doorway of his cell. "Collen Gwyn ap Nudd invites you now to meet him within his faery court at the top of the hill". Collen felt a calling towards the path set out before him. So be it if this is the path that calls to me I shall meet with Gwyn ap Nudd King of Annwn and of Faerie, I shall commune with him in the castle of glass. The Guides lead the way and eventually they arrive at the summit.

Collen and the lessons in Faery Lore

Collen communes with his guide

How have I come to be here? what has drawn me to this place?

The guide replies

You have journeyed here by your free will and intuition to commune with spirit. By seeking the stillness and silence in solitude by dwelling upon the hollow hills that hold the entrance to Annwn you

are able to commune with the courts of faerie. I have been your guide and inner voice upon the path. Here you will learn the teachings of faerie lore.

There upon the hilltop, Collen finds the most beautiful castle he has ever seen, reflecting in the light stands a magnificent castle of glass, surrounded by Faerie knights, minstrels, the most otherworldly looking people all dressed in a clothes of red and blue.

The guide advises Collen with some of the rules of Faerie:

Be respectful to the court at all times however you must keep your boundaries. No matter how tempting the food may be, I advise you not to eat the food of Faerie lest you may never leave this place as human. No matter how beautiful the music may be, I advise you not to get swept away in the dance lest you dance away until you fall to dust. You will do well to greet the King of Annwn with honour and respect he awaits you within.

Collen enters the castle of glass. Inside, the king is sitting on a shining throne, a throne of mirrors.

Gwyn Speaks:

I welcome you with honour Collen, I desire you to eat, you should have all that the mind could desire, and all that your heart could wish: we will show you every courtesy and service, of banquet and of honourable entertainment, and every respect and welcome due to a man of wisdom.

Collen speaks: Gwyn ap Nudd I greet you with honour and respect. I appreciate the wondrous bounty of nature upon your table. The beauty in the leaves and fruit of the trees, although I am unable to eat today I am grateful for your generosity.

Gwyn Speaks:

What can you see in the beauty of the courtiers, didst thou ever see men of better equipment than those in red and blue? Have you ever heard such music? Will you join the dance?

Collen replies:

There is beauty in the music indeed as I hear the song of the birds, although I am unable to dance today I will watch the courtiers in red and blue weaving the colours of nature. The red on one part may signify fire and the passion of creativity, and the blue on the other signifies the healing waters that I have brought with me as an offering.

Collen draws out his bottle of Water from the sacred well, and makes an offering to Gwyn ap Nudd and the kingdom of Annwn. He gives thanks to his guide for the wisdom he has learned from the journey into the courts of Faery

The guide speaks

It is time to return, to make your way back.

Slowly the courtiers disappear, there was neither castle, nor song, nor banquet. Collen slowly opened his eyes, once again he found himself within his cell within the hollow of Nant yr Ellyllon upon the hillside. At last Collen was at peace, he had found his home, he had heard his calling as monk of Annwn.

Meditation – A journey through Mirrors and Mists

I invite you now to close your eyes and focus on your breath. Breathing in and breathing out feeling a sense of stillness about you and feeling a sense of calm within. You may wish to call upon your guides and helpers and know that you are protected and in a safe space.

You find yourself standing within an ancient woodland the earth beneath your feet soft with moss and leaves. There is a light mist in the atmosphere and a feeling of magic and mystery about you. You may sense the presence of Faerie as you begin to walk slowly between the twisting moss covered

roots. You notice there is a clearing up ahead and the mist is slowly dispersing to reveal a shining pathway upon the side of a magnificent green and rocky hill. The hill is steep and the landscape rugged you feel drawn towards the path and begin to climb. You continue to climb noticing the landscape about you, climbing further upwards and onwards until eventually you reach the summit

Upon the summit you notice the remains of hillfort and old castle ruins that crown the hill. There is a presence before you, you are greeted by a courtier of the King of Annwn. The courtier invites you to meet with the King Gwyn ap Nudd. As you start to absorb the atmosphere You notice before you a great silver archway, shining mirror like within the castle ruins. You see yourself reflecting within the Mirror, you have reached the entrance to the castle of glass.

Your reflection starts to change, distorting in the glass, swirls and spirals of mists form and you see the glass is becoming more fluid. Another form appears, it is Gwyn ap Nudd King of Faerie, he stands within the Mirror and you step closer and greet him with honour and respect. He invites you inside the castle and what you experience here will be personal to you....

You take some time now to commune with Gwyn ap Nudd. You may have a question, or you may want to take some time to reflect upon your personal path, or connect with the spirit of place....

10 mins silence here

You here a calling and know that the time has come to make your journey back. You give your gratitude to Gwyn ap Nudd and all the wisdom you have learned from your experience with the castle of glass. Retracing your steps your guide calls you back through the Mirror in the mists, back to the summit of the hill within the castle ruins, back down the hillside, back through the faery woodland through the moss and leaves and eventually finding yourself back in the here and now slowly opening your eyes back into this space.

Discussion, Sharing experiences or thoughts – all who wish to do so
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