

Wizardry, Prophecy and the Origins of Merlin

By Tim Clarkson



A depiction of Merlin in a painting by Gustav Doré (1832-83)

Merlin, the famous wizard of Arthurian legend, is one of the most recognisable figures in literature. He has featured in stories about King Arthur since the Middle Ages, ever since Geoffrey of Monmouth linked the two characters together in his *History of the Kings of Britain* (c. 1138). Geoffrey doesn't show Merlin and Arthur meeting in person but he does describe how Merlin's powers of sorcery facilitate Arthur's birth. The episode in question tells of a legendary king, Uther Pendragon, who desires to sleep with the beautiful Lady Igerna. Merlin concocts a magical potion that disguises Uther as Igerna's husband, thus enabling him to enter her bedchamber to satisfy his desire. Out of this deception the future King Arthur is conceived. Geoffrey also has Merlin using wizardry to magically transport Stonehenge from Ireland (presented by Geoffrey as its original location) to Salisbury Plain in England.

To modern eyes it is clear that Geoffrey was not offering his readers a straightforward history but an inventive blend of history and myth. His Arthur is a sort of medieval superhero, while Merlin is a sorcerer of considerable power. With such larger-than-life characters it is hardly surprising that the *History of the Kings* became a medieval bestseller. Writers and poets in Geoffrey's lifetime and in the centuries after his death used his work as inspiration for their own tales of Arthur and Merlin, their combined efforts giving us the Arthurian legend with which we are familiar today - a fantasy world of knights, castles, chivalry and heroic quests. In this literary landscape we see Merlin famously embedding the magical sword Excalibur in an anvil from which only Arthur, as the rightful king of Britain, can withdraw it.¹

Although Merlin the wizard was Geoffrey's own creation he was actually based on another figure who already featured in stories and poems. This was Myrddin (pronounced 'Mir-thin'), a character well-known among Geoffrey's contemporaries in his native Wales. Long before Geoffrey's birth, Myrddin had been credited in Welsh folklore with founding the town of Carmarthen, the name of which was believed to derive from *Caer Myrddin* ('Myrddin's Fortress'). Although Myrddin was no wielder of magic like Geoffrey's Merlin, he did possess a supernatural ability that by some definitions might be called magical: the power of prophecy. In one tenth-century poem he is portrayed as a kind of national prophet who foresees a great war between the Welsh and their allies on one side and the English on the other. In another tradition, the whole island of Britain is described as *Clas Merdin*, 'Myrddin's Precinct'. Here the word *clas* has the sense of a sacred enclosure or cloister, conjuring an image of Britain as an enchanted island under Myrddin's magical protection.

However, the main collection of old Welsh lore on Myrddin is a group of six poems that were said to have been composed by him, together comprising a sort of autobiography in verse. These survive only in manuscripts of the thirteenth century or later but specialist analysis suggests that some parts were composed in the tenth century or perhaps even the ninth.² The poems' main geographical focus is not Wales but a region that the Welsh called *Hen Ogledd*, 'The Old North', roughly corresponding to what are now southern Scotland and adjacent parts of northern England. Here, in the Dark Ages, lay a number of small kingdoms of the native Britons.

According to the poems, Myrddin served the ruler of one of these realms – a king called Gwenddolau – as a noble retainer. Modern historians generally accept that Gwenddolau was a real historical figure. He lived in the sixth century AD, ruling from a core territory at the western end of today's Anglo-Scottish border. The hamlet of Carwinley, on the English side of the border, appears to derive its name from *Caer Gwenddolau* ('Gwenddolau's Fortress') which is thought to have lain in the vicinity. In the poetry attributed to him, Myrddin grieves for the deaths of Gwenddolau and countless others who fell in a savage battle at a place called *Arfderydd*. This is now Arthuret, a civil parish encompassing Carwinley, and the battle itself is a historical event that occurred in 573. In the poems, Myrddin says that he took part in the battle and emerged unscathed, but the scenes of slaughter overthrew his mind and sent him insane. Fleeing northward in a madness of grief and horror, he entered a great forest known in Welsh as *Coed Celyddon* ('The Wood of Calidon'), an ancient wilderness that once comprised large parts of southern Scotland.³ There he dwelt in solitude, finding that his madness had given him the gift of prophecy and an ability to converse with woodland animals. He spent the rest of his days foretelling the future while evading the clutches of a king called Rhydderch who sought to capture him.

Such is the essence of the autobiographical element in the Myrddin poems. One of them reports a long conversation between Myrddin and his sister who visits him in the forest. She asks him questions about past and future political events, worries about his health and refers to him by a nickname 'Llallawg' and its diminutive 'Llallofan'. Nothing in the six poems suggests that this Myrddin is the same person as the legendary founder of Carmarthen. It is almost as if early Welsh literature knew of two Myrddins, both of them seers, the one associated with a town in Wales, the other with the Old North. Both were borrowed by Geoffrey of Monmouth for his newly created character Merlin, who not only uttered prophecies but who also wielded magic. In fact, Geoffrey incorporated even more of the northern seer in yet another characterisation of Merlin, this one the subject of a long poem with the Latin title *Vita Merlini* ('Life of Merlin'). Published a dozen or so years after the *History of the Kings*, the *Vita* borrowed heavily from the Myrddin poems and shows that Geoffrey was well acquainted with them.⁴

Neither the North British Myrddin of the poems nor his Carmarthen namesake shared the spell-casting abilities of the Merlin whom Geoffrey depicted in his

History of the Kings. The northern one did, however, have a slight connection with the magical world. In one fragment of Welsh lore – presumably from a tale that is now lost – it is said that his patron King Gwenddolau had a golden chessboard whose pieces moved by themselves. Another fragment tells of a mysterious ‘battle-fog’ that enveloped the field of slaughter at Arfderydd. To some modern observers, these allusions to the supernatural combine with the theme of prophecy to suggest that the northern Myrddin was a shaman or druid, a priest of the ancient pre-Christian religion. Gwenddolau’s magical chessboard, for example, has been seen as hinting at the practice of shamanistic rituals in his kingdom, with the king himself as a pagan ruler and Myrddin as his chief druid. The eerie battle-fog has likewise been interpreted in some quarters as smoke from a ‘sacred fire’ lit by Myrddin to terrify Gwenddolau’s foes. This kind of theorising lies behind the popular modern notion of Gwenddolau’s kingdom as one of the last bastions of druidism standing against the forces of Christianity.⁵

Whatever Myrddin’s religious leanings, whether Christian or pagan, a bigger question is whether his story ultimately originated in Wales or in the Old North. A Welsh origin seems unlikely, given that the idea of Carmarthen as ‘Myrddin’s Fortress’ is erroneous. The place-name actually derives from an ancient Celtic term meaning ‘Sea Fortress’, reflected in the Latin name *Moridunum* borne by a local Roman settlement founded in the first century AD. The Roman presence in Wales ended by c.400 and, at some point in the ensuing centuries, the original meaning of the element *Moridun* appears to have been lost. Eventually, a belief arose that the place-name commemorated a seer called Merdin or Myrddin who may have been invented simply to fulfil this role of eponymous founder.⁶ What happened next in the development of the legend is uncertain. A strong possibility is that a North British tale of a wild, mad prophet found its way to Wales in the eighth century. Under the influence of Welsh folklore its principal character seems to have been replaced by Myrddin of Carmarthen, yet with the North British setting retained. If this scenario is close to the truth, it leaves us with a question: what was the name of the northern seer whom Myrddin supplanted?

To find an answer we must turn away from Wales and look again at the Old North, the region containing the Arfderydd battlefield and the Wood of Calidon. Here we find another legend – preserved in medieval Scottish texts – in which the central figure is a crazed seer who uttered garbled prophecies. His name is not Myrddin but Lailoken. He, too, was stricken by madness after witnessing the carnage of a

savage battle and fled into the depths of the forest. His legend survives today in three tales linked to a larger body of folklore relating to Kentigern, the patron saint of Glasgow. Kentigern died in 612 after serving as chief bishop to King Rhydderch of Dumbarton, a place on the River Clyde fourteen miles downstream from Glasgow. This is the same Rhydderch who appears in the Myrddin poems as a hostile pursuer of the wild seer.



St Kentigern and Myrddin in a window at Stobo Kirk in the Scottish Borders (photo by Freyja Appleyard-Keeling)

Kentigern is absent from the Myrddin poems but the name Lailoken appears to be present in the one that shows Myrddin being referred to as 'Llallogan' by his sister. The three Lailoken tales share with the Welsh poems a major focus on prophecy. In one, preserved as a chapter in a twelfth-century *Life of St Kentigern* commissioned by a bishop of Glasgow, Lailoken correctly foresees that King Rhydderch will die within months of Kentigern's death. The other two tales survive in a fifteenth-century Scottish text under the curious title *The Life of Merlin of the Forest*.⁷ From them we learn that the savage battle in which Lailoken's mind was overthrown took place beside Liddel Water, a river that flows near Carwinley in Arthuret parish. We also see Lailoken foreseeing the manner of his own death, telling Kentigern that he will be beaten, impaled and drowned. This gruesome demise duly occurs after a vengeful queen, whose adultery Lailoken has exposed, sends a gang of men to attack him. Mortally wounded, he

falls onto a sharp stake sticking out of the River Tweed and drowns when his head drops below the surface. Twice in *The Life of Merlin of the Forest* we are told that Lailoken and Merlin are believed to be one and the same.

What are we to make of the similarities between what seem at first glance to be independent Welsh and Scottish traditions of a sixth-century North British prophet? Both traditions focus on a figure who sought refuge in a remote part of southern Scotland after having been traumatised by the horror of a bloody battle. In each case, the battle is said to have been fought in the vicinity of either Carwinley (*Caer Gwenddolau*) or Arthuret (*Arfderydd*), in a district close to the present-day border between Scotland and England. Likewise, the central figure in both traditions is linked to the wizard Merlin of Arthurian fame: Myrddin is plainly the model for Geoffrey of Monmouth's creation while Lailoken is explicitly identified as Merlin. An obvious inference is that the Welsh and Scottish traditions derive from a single story that originated in the Old North, the tale of a wild seer whose name was something like Lailoken or Llallogan.⁸ His story was probably connected in some way with a body of northern folklore relating to the battle of Arfderydd.

A focus on supernatural and magical themes is likely to have ensured the popularity of both the seer and the battle in North British storytelling circles, while the prophetic element is arguably what led to Lailoken being linked with the ecclesiastical legend of St Kentigern. Likewise, when Lailoken's story eventually reached Wales, its focus on prophecy resonated with the home-grown legend of Myrddin of Carmarthen who eventually became its central character. Dating the various processes of creation and transmission is an exercise in guesswork but the original northern story cannot be any older than 573, when the conflict at Arfderydd took place. A likely context for transmission to Wales is the late eighth century, when tales of the battle and other information from the Old North are known to have been circulating among Welsh bards and storytellers. The change of the central character's name from Lailoken/Llallogan to Myrddin was surely complete before c.950, by which time one or more of the Myrddin poems may have existed in their earliest versions. Later still, in the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth mined the Myrddin material for ideas and thus created the new character of Merlin the wizard.⁹

At the end of our study we are left wondering if the roots of the Merlin legend are

true, in the sense of being based on someone who actually lived. Many devotees of the Arthurian wizard certainly want to believe that he was 'real' rather than fictional. It says much of his enduring appeal that the question of his historical existence has become such an important part of his legend. Numerous attempts to answer the question have been made, most of them beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth and looking back at his sources. The answer offered here proposes that, although Merlin is a literary creation of the 1100s, he is based on a real person who lived in northern Britain six centuries earlier. We can tentatively call him Lailoken. He was not a wizard but a traumatised survivor of war who dwelt alone in the wilderness, an outcast living in self-imposed exile. In early times such 'wild men' were often seen as so removed from normal society that they straddled the boundary between the real world and the Otherworld, hence the frequent belief that they possessed supernatural or even magical abilities.¹⁰ This perhaps explains how Lailoken became the subject of folk-tales in which he was portrayed as a crazed seer who uttered strange prophecies. After passing through the hands of generations of scribes and storytellers, his tale in a much-altered guise eventually came to the attention of Geoffrey of Monmouth who turned him into the Merlin we recognise today.

(c) The Bottle Imp