

The Four Branches and 12th Century Wales

Contextual Overview

The aim of this chapter has been to elucidate the various historical, social and cultural circumstances which provided the formative context of the Mabinogi. With this contextual understanding provisionally established, we are now in a position to begin an informed and sympathetic exploration of the Branches themselves. Before we move on to a consideration of the traditional material underlying the First Branch, we will conclude this chapter with a contextual overview: summarising the ground that has been covered throughout the last 120 pages.

We have seen how Medieval Wales had emerged out of the remnants of the Romano-British world, which in turn owes its origins in part to a political geography that had been established during the Late Iron Age world that had immediately preceded it. The all-important political divide in Britain during the Roman occupation, between the civilian South and the militarised North, harks back even further to the geo-tribal situation of Late Iron Age, pre-conquest Britain (p.36), the period with which the Four Branches is overtly concerned. During the violence and upheaval of the sub-Roman Dark Ages – the decisive period of formation for medieval Wales – it was the militarised North that was to take the lead in what remained of the British-Celtic world.

These descendants of the northern-based warlords of the sub-Roman era were to remain a powerful force in the tribal politics of Medieval Wales, especially after the joint king of Gwynedd and Powys, *Rhodri Mawr*, routed the Vikings in 856 AD. Thereafter, the North and West of Wales was ruled almost exclusively by descendants of this man (pp. 41-42), a group we refer to as *The Royal Tribe*. The grandson of Rhodri Mawr, Hywel Dda, married into the old house of Dyfed – which extended the power of the Royal Tribe for the first time into the South of Wales (p.42-43). This influence was extended to its natural limits by the eleventh century Gruffydd ap Llywelyn – the first and last man to rule the entirety of pre-Norman Wales as sovereign entity. However, the Southern kingdoms retained a degree of cultural distinctness, and would never really be fully subsumed into the same political mould as the kingdoms of the North where the dominance of the Royal Tribe was altogether more pervasive. These two different cultural worlds, whose differences were still evident in the twelfth century, is a central dichotomy within the Mabinogi.

Soon after the death of Gruffydd ap Llywelyn in 1064 the island was occupied by Norman invaders, who effected the destruction of the Anglo-Saxon ruling elite while assuming total control over the Early Medieval kingdom of England. In Wales, their success was limited by social, linguistic and geographic factors; and remained largely confined to the semi-autonomous ‘Marcher lordships’ in the southern and eastern borderlands of Wales. However, over the next few decades they were able to exploit the internal divisions of the Welsh warlord kings, and even achieve the nominal occupation of the mountainous hinterlands of the North and the West. But, towards the end of the eleventh century, a successful rebellion was led by Cadwgan ap Bleddyn, son of the last of the great Welsh over-kings, Bleddyn ap Cynfyn, and native power was once again restored in the native heartland.

Elsewhere, in native Wales (or ‘*Pura Wallia*’ as it was sometimes known at the time), the sons of

Bleddyn, collectively known as The House of Mathrafal, dominated the tribal-political scene. The numerous male offspring of the House of Mathrafal were to prove unusually violent and uncontrollable and a menace to the inhabitants of the large tracts of Wales under their control (p.48-50). Although the head of the House, Maradudd ap Bleddyn, retained power in Powys up until his death in 1132, many of his brothers, cousins and nephews were killed in internecine conflicts, or successfully brought to heel by Henry I, who continued the ongoing Anglo-Norman project of neutralising the independence of the native Welsh kings.

Out of the chaos wrought by the House of Mathrafal two strong leaders emerged from elsewhere. Gruffydd ap Cynan of the House of Aberffraw successfully consolidated the position of Gwynedd: first as a client of Henry I, then as a serious threat both to the dominance of the House of Mathrafal and the Marcher Lords alike. While the House of Aberffraw was not immune to the intermittent bloodshed that plagued the House of Mathrafal, power seemed to be more closely concentrated in fewer hands, during the middle decades of the twelfth century at least. When Gruffydd died in 1137, he was able to pass on power, uncontested, to his son Owain. At the same time in the South, an emergent House of Dinefwr, with its power-base in the valleys of Ystrad Twyi, offered a consolidated leadership that was increasingly accepted as the legitimate native power amongst the notorious fractious *uchelwyr* or noblemen of the South.

Throughout the middle decades of the twelfth century, the two royal houses of Aberffraw and Dinefwr collaborated, increasingly effectively, against the Anglo-Norman presence, in western and southern Wales in particular (p.128-130). Ceredigion was returned into native hands, this time under the southern sphere of influence. The over-kingdom of Deheubarth thereby restored the enlarged borders it had boasted during its heyday in the time of Hywel Dda. This was also precisely the political geography represented in the Mabinogi, and there are good reasons for thinking the composition of this bardic work took place during this period of relative stability, the result of this benevolent balance of power between the North and the South. The final version of the extant text as we know it was probably composed around 1194, at a Caernarvonshire court sympathetic to the dynastic aims of the young Llywelyn ap Iorwerth (later Llewelyn Fawr, Prince of Wales). Traces of Llywelyn's political agenda can be detected in the Mabinogi, and the Fourth Branch in particular, and it seems likely that he was being obliquely mythologised in the person of Lleu Llaw Gyffes, arguably the most important character in the Four Branches.

Assuming this provenance, we have examined the social, artistic and intellectual world of the late-twelfth century, using medieval Welsh legal tracts, literary references and contemporary eyewitness accounts. Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) has been particularly useful in this respect. The picture that emerges is of a gregarious, hospitable but often unstable and violent tribal society. There was a strong ruling caste but also a divisive complex of regional and social ties. Combined with the agnatic nature of inheritance and succession, this led to ongoing problems with factionalism, intrigue and internecine violence (p.55-56). These are areas with which the author of the Mabinogi was evidently profoundly concerned.

The artistic culture that produced the Mabinogi was dominated by the bardic schools – an ancient institution which had strong links with its counterparts across the Irish Sea, where it was virtually indistinguishable from the ecclesiastical elite (p. 61 ff.). The traditional bardic interest in tribal history and esoteric myth was especially pronounced among a group of tenth and eleventh century poets I have referred to as the ‘School of Taliesin’. There would appear to be a strong intertextual relationship between the work of this group and the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. Another influence was a list of classificatory notiae, known as the Triads of the Island of Britain. Despite the conservative, syncretic nature of the Mabinogi, with its evident interest in some of these older bardic sources, the Four Branches itself was also a highly progressive, literary work, if a comparison with an earlier work of vernacular prose, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, is anything to go by (p.76).

The Four Branches was deeply preoccupied with the magical dimension of the thought-world to which it belonged. The nature of these magical beliefs in Medieval Wales is evidenced by the folklore of the time (again, this has been well documented by Gerald of Wales), as well as in the more conservative areas of the bardic tradition. As with many pre-industrial cultures, it would seem that the people of medieval Wales had a precarious sense of ego-identity, which would on occasions result in a primitive lack of differentiation between the worlds of man, nature and the ancestral spirit world. The appearance of animals in the Four Branches, for example, frequently seems to be tinged with superstitious preconceptions concerning shape-shifting magicians and lycanthropic warriors (p. 115-120).

More specific to the Celtic world was a complex mythology relating to the faery otherworld. Common elements of this tradition include a blissful, arcadian paradise located either under the earth or on an overseas island, where the people live a life of pleasure and harmony unaffected by age or disease (p.124-127). Under the influence of the clerico-bardic elites, this faery otherworld came to acquire additional (and sometimes contradictory) significations. It was variously interpreted as Hell or Paradise, or, in some cases as an allegorical representation of the processes of paradise or redemption, or occasionally seeming to involve highly metaphysical questions of the relationship between time, sense perception and reality. Overall, the influence of the clerical and bardic establishments on the content or meaning of the popular tradition should never be discounted, but neither should it be seen as the only formative process involved. In the medieval Celtic world, one even wonders whether the influence was not sometimes more in the other direction.

The more nativist elements of the bardic tradition were in the ascendant throughout the twelfth century, and it was possibly at this time that it was acquiring the characteristics of a *literary* as well as an oral-performative tradition (p.75 ff.). Either way, it was instrumental in the ‘nation-building’ projects which were evidently in place during the 1160s and 70s (p.131-132). And this synthesising of a pan-Welsh identity, centred on the North-South axis of the Gwynedd and Deheupath, is perhaps the central exoteric purpose of the Mabinogi.