

The British Gog and Magog

In this introduction we have explored the evidence reinforcing a suggestion, initially made by philologist Professor John Koch, linking third-century Celtic warlords Brennus and Bolgios with the Medieval Welsh traditions of Brân (or Bendigeidfran) and Beli Mawr, the founding tribal ancestor of the British Celtic kings.⁴⁷² These figures both play a significant role in the Mabinogi, suggesting that not only the names of Brennus and Bolgios were remembered by the bardic tradition but some of the actions and exploits as well.

The persistence of this Belgic mythology is emphasised by its survival in another medieval British source – the *Historia Reges Britanniae* written by Geoffrey of Monmouth in 1136. Scholarly opinion is still divided as to the veracity of its author's claim that the *Historia* was a faithful translation of 'a certain very ancient book written in the British language'. But whether this medieval classic was a faithful translation or an outright fabrication, it can be seen that Geoffrey's work does draw on a number of genuine Brythonic traditions which were in circulation across Wales and Brittany in Geoffrey's lifetime around the mid-twelfth century. This being the case, it is worth considering one particular episode, related in chapters 1-10 of Book III of the *Historia*.

These chapters tell of two brothers – *Belinus* and *Brennius* – continually at war over the sovereignty of Britain. Belinus is said to have prevailed in this war, after which Brennius endured a period of exile in Gaul. During this time he lived among a tribe known as the *Allobroges*, whose king he eventually became. The two brothers were eventually reunited, after which they combined their hosts and embarked on a successful conquest of Gaul, Germany and Italy: culminating in the sack of Rome. Brennius, it is made clear, was the senior partner in this military venture; but the kingship of Britain remained the possession of Belinus and his descendants.

In the light of the evidence above, it is hard to doubt these are the same Belgic traditions we see hints of elsewhere in the tribal lore of Medieval Wales. And though Geoffrey, that inventive and educated Breton-Norman cleric, makes a bold attempt to relate these to accounts of the sack of Rome⁴⁷³ found in the histories of Livy and other Latin writers, there seems no need to doubt that there existed independently native oral traditions which themselves ultimately relate back to the third century sack of Delphi and the related upheavals – out of which the Belgic nation can be seen to have emerged. The initial rivalry of Belinus and Brennius is all too similar to the rivalry, or at least contemporaneousness, of the two Balkan warlords from the third-century BC, Brennus and Bolgios, alluded to above. Indeed, the role of Bolgios in keeping the Macedonian army at bay while Brennus moved in on Delphi is almost identical to that which Geoffrey has Belinus undertaking against the German armies while Brennius turned on Rome.⁴⁷⁴ Whether this was the precise origin of the Belgic tradition or not, we shall perhaps never know. But it is clear that there abided for a long time the legend of two rival kings: larger-than-life, counterpoised but essentially inseparable – the Gog and

472 John Koch 'Brân-Brennus: An instance of Early Gallo-Brittonic History and Mythology' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 20 (Winter 1990) pp. 1-20

473 The leader of this hosting, which took place in 390 BC (see p. 277 above), was also called Brennus. It is in fact likely that the memory of this as well as the hosting of Brennus and Bolgios contributed to the Belgic origin myth.

Magog, or Romulus and Remus, of Brythonic tribal myth. Both figures appear in later medieval lore: at various instances in the topographical traditions of the British Isles⁴⁷⁵, as the fighting brothers *Belin* and *Balan* of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*. Bran himself appears elsewhere in the Arthurian tradition as Brandegore (Bran de Gower), as *Sir Brandigiles* and as Bron, guardian of the Holy Grail in the medieval French metrical tale of Joseph of Arimethea, as we will consider in more detail on pp. 609-612 below.

A Gaulish myth, relayed by Livy, describes another two brothers: Bellovesos and Sigovesos. Sent by their uncle, the king of Gaul, to colonise foreign lands: omens are drawn for each to assign them a territory into which to expand. For Sigovesos, the direction of his destiny is East – into the less welcoming land of the Hercynian forests on the other side of the Rhine. While, as Livy puts it, 'the more fortunate Bellovesos' is assigned the area of Northern Italy which came to be known as Cisalpine Gaul. Although this story is more immediately associated with the area of south-eastern Gaul and the Massilote⁴⁷⁶ hinterland – it mirrors the dichotomy between the brothers Beli and Bran that would seem to be a central feature of the Gallo-Brittonic Belgic tradition. Beli/Belinus is seen as the father of kings, and (like Bellovesos) the comfortable ruler of a fertile homeland. The Bran/Brennus figure, on the other hand, is associated more with harder road of exile and adventure. While these myths may well have been shaped and sustained by the social infrastructure of the Belgic world⁴⁷⁷, the origin of the characters themselves can be ultimately traced back with some degree of certainty to the two rival warlords active in third-century Macedonia: the aforementioned Brennus and Bolgios. Brennus, who led his war-host deep into the heartlands of the Athenian civilization to the South, but lost his life in the process, was to become the archetypal warrior-adventurer. Bolgios, on the other hand, while never making it further than the Macedonian borders, survived to implant a tribal dynasty which was to endure for over a thousand years: first the northern Balkan area (c.f. Belgrade, Bulgaria), and subsequently in the Belgic territories of Northern Gaul and Southeast Britain in the Late Iron Age. Bolgios was therefore remembered over a thousand years later in the Welsh tradition as Beli Mawr the eternal patriarch, the father of kings: the ancestral source of power and abundance.

This relationship is crucial for an understanding of the Mabinogi, and of the significance of Brân (Bendigeidfran) in the Second Branch. It is through the association of Brân with wandering and far-flung exploits that his story may well have originally become conflated with the Insular Druidic tradition of the *Immrama*, or the Otherworld Voyage. It is this other side of the tradition (which

474 "After due consultation with his brother, Belinus remained in Germany with his Britons and pressed on with the war against that enemy. Brennius, for his part, marched towards Rome with his own armies" [HRB iii, 9]

475 *Dinas Bran* in Denbighshire and *Cwm Bran* in Western Cornwall are two examples of the association of the name Bran (which, of course, also means 'Raven') with prominent landscape features. Stories concerning the exploits of a giant called Bell are used to explain various place-names in the Leicestershire area (Westwood, 1987, p.244). Bran is recalled in the name of numerous valleys, castles and other landscape features: including *Cwm Bran* – the westernmost hill of the British mainland overlooking Land's End.

476 The semi-Hellenised tribes around of the Greek colony of *Massilia* (modern day Marseilles) would have considered themselves culturally distinct from their wilder cousins to the North in Belgica.

477 Issues of inheritance and patrimony represent a major source of instability in agnatic societies. Myths such as that of Bran and Beli may have served both to define and legitimise the power of the senior inheritor – whilst also glamorising the military and colonial potentials of the non-inheriting members of the kindred.

played a significant role in the evolution of the Grail Quest mythology of later Arthurian Romance) which we will be exploring in the second half of this chapter. There are other occult traditions that appear in the Second Branch as well – including the rather gruesome motif of the *Living Head*: a severed head which lives on after death, exerting protective magical power. This device was of particular significance to the Celts, even well into the medieval period and beyond, and would warrant more detailed discussion for this reason alone. But the relevance of this motif both to Belgic martial lore, and its rather sinister relation to actual historical events in the middle of the eleventh century lend it particular importance for our present study.

If we have lingered on this Belgic background, it is hoped that the point has now been made about the importance of this traditional tribal-historic material – some of it stretching back thirteen centuries or more – to the formation and understanding of the Mabinogi. Although these traditions were frequently used to articulate contemporary political concerns, or appropriated as a medium for more timeless magico-mythical expressions, they nonetheless constituted an important cultural resource in *their own right* for the bardic author and his audience. The medieval tradition of the Sons of Beli Mawr, for example, *gave to the ruling caste of Wales a sense of identity*: on a genealogical, political and tribal-historic level. The typological relationship between the Sons of Beli Mawr to the medieval progeny of Rhoddri Mawr has already been suggested (p. 276), and this is an equation we will consider again at the end of the chapter. Like the complex of the Indigenous Underworld, discussed at this juncture in the previous chapter, the Sons of Beli Mawr define a coordinate of contemporary tribal-political identity that was back-projected into the mythological past. It is only in relation to the Sons of Beli Mawr that we can understand any of the other, more indigenous elements in the Mabinogi, including the Children of Llyr, the *dramatis personae* of the Second and Third Branches.