

### Singing of the Birds of Rhiannon

Immediately after the burial of Branwen, the survivors are approached by a group of women and men who inform them that Casswallon son of Beli Mawr has seized the High Kingship of Britain. Like Branwen and Efnisien, Caradog (Brân's son and regent) had died of a broken heart when he witnessed the magician Casswallon's destruction of his men. The men continue, nonetheless, to follow the instructions of the Head and make for the royal court of Harlech. There begins an episode where the author of the Mabinogi refers to himself as 'The Feasting of Harlech' and 'The Singing of the Birds of Rhiannon':

*And then they made for Harlech, and they began a feast, and the indulgence in food and drink was begun. And [as soon as] they began to eat and drink there came three birds, which began to sing a kind of song to them; and when they heard that song, every other [tune] seemed unlovely beside it. It seemed a distant sight, what they could see far above the ocean yet it was as clear as if they had been right next to them. And they were at that feast for seven years.*

In many respects, this is a classic Celtic Otherworld experience, and it is noteworthy that it takes place at no more exotic a location than the royal court at Harlech, where the action of the Second Branch began. Nonetheless, the limitless food and drink, the magical song-birds and the distortion of spatial perception are all features one would typically associate with the Island Otherworld experience as described above on pp. 314-321). This would suggest that the rather more introspective, meditative sense of the Otherworld as a subjective state (cf. p. 164) – rather than a physical location – was being explored at this juncture.

We have already drawn attention to the evident conflation of identities between the heroines of the First and Second Branch, both of whom are linked with equine symbolism, and suffer a form of unjust punishment at the hands of their marital kin (p. 302 n. 535). It is therefore especially interesting that the 'birds of Rhiannon'<sup>644</sup> should appear at this juncture, immediately following the death of Branwen.

No definitive explanation is given however for this appearance, or any of the other mysterious distortions that occur during the feasting at Harlech. There is, however, a strong suggestion that the singing of the birds is somehow connected with the otherworldly phenomena involved, possibly in a causal capacity. From other sources we know that the singing of the birds of Rhiannon was considered so intense in its beauty that it could draw the living into the world of the dead, and vice versa.<sup>645</sup> It is into this liminal state, suspended in time and between life and death, that this Otherworld reality truly belongs.