Chapter Two:

Faeries, Giants, Wizards and Sleeping Knights

"Everything is older than we think."
W.G. Hoskins

After geology and geomorphology, which we touched on in chapter one with perhaps as much detail as a non-specialist account requires, comes prehistory, the disciplines for the exploration of which include paleontology, archaeology and perhaps even Jungian psychology. Trailing at some chronological distance behind these are the beginnings of history itself, and its looser associates of the oral tradition and folklore. There was an idea prevalent at one time in the study of history (I hardly need point out that this was long ago, and even by the mid-twentieth century the notion had been thoroughly and deservedly discredited), that it was ultimately dependent on "written sources", in which could be found, to quote R.G. Collingwood, "ready-made statements asserting or implying alleged facts belonging to the subject in which the historian was interested"[1].

If we were to apply this out-dated formula to our consideration of Snowdon's story, it would force us to a conclusion that the history of the mountain proper only begins some time in the late twelfth or early thirteenth

[1] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford, 1961), p. 277. A case could be made for the popular television series, with its incessant appetite for the sound-bite and inability to cope with reasoned and protracted argument, providing a Trojan Horse for the return of this approach, but that's best left for the historians to argue out among themselves.

centuries, and even then in the most fragmentary fashion through the grants of land within defined boundaries the names of which are archaic but recognizable versions of ones still in currency – *Grib Goch* (Crib Goch), for example, or *Crombroinok Hir* (Cwm Brwynog).

It is fortunate that we have those aforementioned parallel disciplines and associated areas of study to give us some sense of what took place before recorded history, and though it may be the case that they leave us with a remarkably misty atmosphere still, at the same time they provide us with source material which is richly suggestive and evocative, and like the glimpses down through rifts in the cloud from the summit on one of those late-autumn or spring days when temperature-inversions leave Yr Wyddfa islanded in a cloud-sea, the details thus isolated, the forms half-perceived or barely suggested, the dissociated epic scraps that have survived time's scatterings, seem to resonate the more truly with the landscape of which, however apparently meagre, they are the sole surviving expression of the earliest phases in the human dimensions of its story.

The fact remains that physical evidence for human activity on Snowdon not just before the Christian era but even up to the late Middle Ages is, relative to more seaward landscapes in quite close proximity, distinctly slight. By comparison with the proliferation of signs pointing to early agricultural settlement along the western flanks of the Eifionydd hills, for example, or the extraordinary concentrations of stone circles, hut circles, burial chambers, field systems, pathways, axe factories and

copper mines on the northern foothills of the Carneddau and around Conwy Bay, Snowdon itself in the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages would seem to have been much less densely populated.

It has to be said that this is not a particularly surprising conclusion. Even though the seaward hills of Eryri were the scene of considerable human activity beginning perhaps 5,000 years ago, and even given the much more favourable climate of that epoch compared either to our contemporary one or that which prevailed for perhaps five millennia in the wake of the Late Glacial Period of 12,000-8,000 BCE (this balmy and temperate weather is estimated to have lasted from 7000 to 2000 BCE, from the Mesolithic through to a time of deteriorating conditions in the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages) - then as now, the ice-scoured cirques and rocky crests of Snowdon would not have appeared as a particularly hospitable domestic and agrarian landscape. Nor would it have been one easily accessible through the densely wooded valleys of the period, at a time when the tree-line lay at between six and seven hundred metres – an altitude sufficient to reach into most of the high *cymoedd* on the mountain.

To set the stage on which the human drama of Snowdon can commence its enactment, we need now to provide some of the evidence uncovered by the minute and arduous labour and intelligent conjecture of the archaeologists[2], which has

[2] Foremost among those working in our geographical area of interest for the last thirty years has been the important pioneering rock-climber from the 1960s, Peter Crew, who we will meet in that context in the appropriate later chapter. He was, until his retirement in 2007, the Archaeology Officer for the Snowdonia National Park Authority, and his

served to paint a vivid backcloth of human migration, tradition, ritual practice, industry and settlement (all of which earnest factual endeavour will bring us in due course to the land of the fairies).

It used to be thought that the prehistory of Wales consisted in successive invasions of incoming peoples from Europe and particularly from the Danube Basin, where Celtic culture appears to have taken root at Hallstatt and developed and spread throughout the Iron Age to its full flowering in the exquisite metalwork of the craftsmen of La Tene. It was thence disseminated throughout Gaul, eventually reaching Wales in the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era and leaving its significant mark there. However, the interpretation now generally held, and derived from assessments of the archaeological discoveries of the last several decades, scales down the tidal nature of that model, and rather than mass invasions posits successive waves of migration along established trading routes of the Atlantic seaboard by relatively small numbers of people into a landscape already settled and socially developed before the Roman conquest, which was completed around 79 AD[3]. This may give a more accurate representation of a process which had been continuous at least from Neolithic times, and significantly in view of the content to come in this chapter, argues a high degree of overlap and a landscape peopled simultaneously by different tribal or even racial groupings. It postulates

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work particularly on early metal-working techniques has been of international importance.

[3] An excellent popular account of this process is given by Barry Cunliffe in his *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and its Peoples*, Oxford 2001

co-existence, mutually beneficial trading links, possible absorption and intermarriage, along with the importation of technical innovations in metalwork, agriculture and animal husbandry.

All this bears on the life-story of our mountain in the following way. The tensions and conflicting demands of increasing numbers and different "tribal" groupings, ultimately inhabiting a landscape at a time when climate change towards the end of the Medieval Warm Period was diminishing its potential as agricultural resource, formed a complex matrix out of which developed the recurrent, stylised and intensely mysterious expression in those repositories of folk-memory which are folk-tale, myth and legend. In their turn, the matter of these became not only indissociable from Snowdon in the local imagination, but also to an exceptional degree at a much later period through the literary efforts of such as Nennius and Geoffrey of Monmouth (the latter our first historical novelist, in the view of many) were crucial to the flowering of imaginative literature throughout Europe in the centuries immediately preceding the Renaissance. But all this is highly conceptual, and we need to embroider it more specifically now into the fabric and design of our mountain.

This is where our problems begin, because early evidence of human activity on Snowdon, as has been implied above, is marked by its relative paucity compared even to immediately surrounding areas. Moel Hebog, for example, which lies just across the Nant Colwyn to the west of Snowdon, has, on its shoulder of Braich y Gornel above Cwm

Ystradllyn, what amounts virtually to a Bronze Age townland (in the western Irish or Hebridean usage of that term). There is no comparable extant residue of past human occupation and dwelling on Snowdon itself. True, there are a few cairns[4], hut-circles and mounds of burnt stone – used, it is generally assumed, by family groups of the late Bronze Age for cooking meat - around the northernmost spur of the long ridge running down from Yr Wyddfa over Moel y Cynghorion to Moel Eilio and Cefn Du. Also, there are a couple of small defensive enclosures at Caer Carreg y Fran above Cwm y Glo and Dinas Ty Du just outside Llanberis dating from the Iron Age and a time in which the trend was towards living in fortified communities of which there are several notable examples along the coastal strip – Dinas Dinorwig near Bethel and Tre'r Ceiri ("the town of giants") above Trefor prominent among them, both being clearly visible from Snowdon. And here and there particularly in the northern and western lower *cymoedd* can be found groups of hut circles or the remains of long huts, unexcavated and of indeterminate date, possibly medieval but which - if we bear Hoskins' motto to this chapter in mind - may also be of Iron Age or even late Bronze Age origin (the Llanberis Track up Snowdon actually cuts right through a long hut at an altitude of about 300 metres above Hebron Station in Cwm Brwynog)[5].

[4] Among these were Carnedd Arthur on Bwlch y Saethau and Carnedd Rhita on Yr Wyddfa, for both of which there is documentary but no surviving physical evidence for their existence.

[5] The same track, it might be noted, as it climbs higher takes you on a remarkable journey through geological time, from the light-coloured slates and sandstones near the start through darker slates and massive, fractured rocks of volcanic origin around Clogwyn station through the lavas of the last mile or so to the final slate and ash fossiliferous beds around the summit itself.

Even when we get to the period of the Roman occupation, and history begins to enlist the support of documentation, of Snowdon we hear nothing, and see only the marcher camp built of piled turves which encompasses within its north-eastern boundary the present-day Penygwryd Hotel - a camp which probability suggests would have been used in the subjugation by the new governor of Britain, Agricola, of the dangerous and rebellious Snowdonian tribe of the Ordovices[6] in 77 AD. The lower proximity to this Roman marcher camp of the settlement of Muriau'r Dre (close to the present-day Cwm Dyli power station), with its associated folklore, is tantalising - though stone artefacts found at Muriau'r Dre suggest for it a much earlier date than that of the Roman invasion, and the Irish element in tales from the oral tradition which also locate here may possibly signify continuing occupation after the withdrawal of the legions.

If all this scantness of material is inclining you to despair at an authenticated story's ever beginning, then have patience or effect a paradigm shift, because here in Nant Gwynen is one of the most evocative and truly marvellous historical sites in the British Isles. But before we visit it, we must return to the western and northern aspects of the mountain to consider a clue which may well be a vital one to the earliest, unwritten chapters

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[6] "Agricola decided to meet the crisis head on. After he had assembled detachments of the legions and a small band of the auxiliaries, since the Ordovices did not dare to descend to the level plain, he led his troops up the hill, himself at the head of the column, so that the rest might have equal courage to face similar danger. And, when he had destroyed almost the entire tribe, realizing full well that he must follow up his reputation… he decided to reduce to his power the island of Mona". (Tacitus, *Agricola*, Ch.18)

of the mountain's human story; which is also, in the sense it transmits of some kind of interaction between cultures, the only one of its kind that we have; and such reality as it may possess takes us straight into the realm of faery[7].

In my time living in Cwm Pennant, which is a raven's flight of four miles to the west of Yr Wyddfa, I was befriended by a neighbour, Gwilym Morus – then an old man in his seventies, monoglot Welsh-speaking, who farmed with his brother by the most traditional means near the head of the valley. As I understood the genealogy he gave me (and you might remember Shakespeare's gentle teasing at this Welsh obsession through the person of "Owen Glendower" in *Henry IV, Part One*), he was a relative newcomer there, his family only having lived in the valley for a matter of a century or so[8]. The farmer at the topmost holding in the

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[7] I've deliberately used the version "faery" here and in the chapter-heading in order to stress the derivation from the Old French *faerie*. The usual Welsh name for the fairies – *Y Tylwyth Teg*, which translates as "the fair people" – had no recorded use before its appearance in a *cywydd* dating from the first quarter of the fifteenth century and formerly attributed to the great lyric poet Dafydd ap Gwilym. The consensus among scholars is that the term is a misapprehended late translation of "fairie" or "feiri" – a Middle English borrowing from Old French – rather than a propitiatory phrase, as the Welsh one has sometimes been thought to be. Fairy scholars (and they do exist) and interpreters such as W.Y. Evans-Wentz, Marie von Frantz and C.G. Jung are apt to approach this matter rather differently, but their readings, though interesting and suggestive, are not germane to my purposes here. Which is simply to record the proliferation of "fairy stories" that locate in the Snowdon region, and to put forward a view held by some Welsh scholars who have sought to explain recurrent themes and motifs in them. I should record here the debt I owe in trying to make sense of these stories to the pioneering work in Welsh folklore studies of W.J. Gruffydd, a quarryman's son born at Bethel, within sight of Yr Wyddfa - particularly to his seminal edition of *Math vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff, 1928) – the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi and a text uniquely located in the hills of Eryri; and also to his lecture delivered to the National Museum of Wales in 1958 on *Folklore and Myth in the Mabinogion* (pub. Cardiff 1958).

[8] Not so unusual, this, in the Welsh hills forty or more years ago. The poet Nesta Wyn Jones, who farms at Abergeirw near Trawsfynydd, told me

cwm, Wil Braichydinas, was, Mr. Morus gave me to believe, descended from the fairies. When I asked around, everyone in the valley of Mr. Morus's generation knew this – it was an accepted fact that he was one of the *Belisiaid*. And by her fireside on a winter's afternoon old Mrs. Owen of Cwrt Isaf told me the story of their origins, though the name she had for them was *Pellings*.

It was not unfamiliar to me. There are versions of it recounted from locations all along the western and northern flanks of Snowdon from Llyn y Dywarchen and Rhyd Ddu through the Nant y Betws to Betws Garmon and round into Cwm Brwynog. The most famous of them in this area takes place at Llyn Du'r Arddu[9], where we spent the night in chapter one. All the classic studies of Welsh folklore cite at least some of them, and the concentration of them around Snowdon is perhaps more marked than anywhere else in this wonderful and superstition-haunted little country of Wales. The version that follows is quite typical, and though it has been subject to frequent later recension, as given here it comes from William Williams of Llandygai's *Observations on the Snowdon Mountains* (Oxford, 1802), and is well worth quoting at length. The farm where it takes place lies under the western shoulder of Moel Eilio, and it is worth

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once not entirely in jest that her family were still regarded as incomers, having arrived there 300 years before from Y Bala, fifteen miles away to the east. Now that the hills echo to the sporadic rumble of Chelsea Tractors and *"Bratiaith Saeson y De"* (Gwenallt), and even the loneliest farmhouses are decorated with satellite dishes, this closeness of identification with a landscape has almost entirely gone.

[9] …and closely parallels, of course, the very well-known South Walian story of the fairy lady of Llyn y Fan Fach.

mentioning also that in his book Williams claims that "The best blood in my own veins is this Fairy's"[10]:

"In a meadow belonging to Ystrad, bounded by the river which falls from Cwellyn Lake, they say the Fairies used to assemble, and dance on fair moon-light-nights. One evening a young man, who was the heir and occupier of this farm, hid himself in a thicket close to the spot where they used to gambol; presently they appeared, and when in their merry mood he bounced from his covert and seized one of their females; the rest of the company dispersed themselves, and disappeared in an instant. Disregarding her struggles and screams he hauled her to his home, where he treated her so very kindly that she became content to live with him as his maid-servant; but he could not prevail upon her to tell him her name. Some time after, happening again to see the Fairies upon the same spot, he heard one of them saying, 'The last time we met here, our sister Penelope was snatched away from us by one of the mortals.' Rejoiced at knowing the name of his Incognita, he returned home; and as she was very beautiful and extremely active, he proposed to marry her, which she would not for a long time consent to; at last, however, she complied, but on this condition, 'That if ever he should strike her with iron, she would leave him, and never return to him again.' They lived happily for many years together, and he had by her a son, and a daughter; and by her industry and prudent management as a house-wife he became one of the richest men in the country. He farmed, besides his own freehold, all the lands

[10] If genetic material were available, that statement might be viewed with interest by modern researchers, particularly in view of widely-reported results from studies of long-established populations in Wales and Ireland in recent years.

on the north side of Nant-y-Bettws to the top of Snowdon, and all Cwmbrwynog in Llanberis; an extent of about five thousand acres or upwards.

"Unfortunately, one day Penelope followed her husband into a field to catch a horse; and he, being in a rage at the animal as he ran away from him, threw at him the bridle that was in his hand, which unluckily fell on poor Penelope. She disappeared in an instant, and he never saw her afterwards, but heard her voice in the window of his room one night after, requesting him to take care of the children in these words:-

Rhag bod anwyd ar fy mab,
Yn rhodd rhowch arno gob ei dad,
Rhag bod anwyd ar liw'r cann.
Rhoddwch arni bais ei mam.

That is:-

Oh! Lest my son should suffer cold,
Him in his father's coat infold,
Lest cold should seize my darling fair,
For her, her mother's robe prepare.

"These children and their descendants, they say, were called Pellings; a word corrupted from their mother's name, Penelope."

"Pellings? Belisiaid? They say…"! In Cwm Pennant forty years ago, I heard applied by a septuagenarian Welsh bachelor-farmer and an octogenarian monoglot-Welsh farmer's widow to their near-neighbour the same genealogy and versions of the original surname that William Williams reported over two hundred years ago about those from the next valley over the pass at Cwm Pennant's head. The story

was old even in his time. For how many generations had it been descending down through the oral tradition, and where did its roots lie?

I want to add in at this point material from other versions of this fairy-tale. At Llyn y Dywarchen above Rhyd Ddu the lady disappears back into the lake, but is afterwards able to meet her husband on a floating islet. Her name is Bela, whence derives *Belisiaid*[11]. The fairy wife of Cwellyn likewise vanishes into the lake; and the famous ones of Llyn y Fan Fach and Llyn Du'r Arddu do so too. In some of the versions of the story much is made of the manner of baking bread ("Llaith dy fara,/Ti ni fynna" retorts the lady of Llyn y Fan Fach to her suitor – "moist is your bread, I'll not have you"); of objections to the ploughing of greensward; of the ways the fairies have of counting; of the appearance of their cattle; of the skill of the woman in animal husbandry. The constants in each are their small stature, the terrifying effect of iron, the way in which the use of the horse is alien to them.

Is there then, as W.J. Gruffydd suggests, some "folk recollection of an aboriginal people living in inaccessible parts of the countryside, having no contact with the dominant race, and living in fear and suspicion of them"[12] behind this repetitive rehearsal of motifs? And what of the connection with water? Remember the Bronze Age canoe

[11] T.Gwynn Jones, *Welsh Folklore and Folk Custom*, Wrexham 1930, p. 65.
[12] W.J. Gruffydd, *Folklore and Myth in the Mabinogion*, Cardiff 1958, p.8

mentioned in chapter one as having been recovered from Llyn Llydaw[13]?

Is it possible that there was a culture similar to that of the Mesolithic crannog-dwellers whose habitations were discovered in the lakes of County Sligo and also of Connemara in the 1950s still extant around the foot of Snowdon at the time of the arrival here of the first bearers of iron tools (and weapons), the evidence for which may yet present itself to the archaeologists of the future? Would the newcomers, as they settled here and became the dominant race, have enshrined in their folk-memory the following qualities of their predecessors here:

"…the sallowness of their skins and the smallness of their stature, their dwelling underground, their dislike of iron, and the comparative poverty of their homes in the matter of useful articles of furniture, their deep-rooted objection to the green sward being broken up by the plough, the success of the fairy wife in attending to the domestic animals and to the dairy, the limited range generally of the fairies' ability to count; and lastly, one may perhaps mention their using a language of their own… which would imply a time when the little people understood no other"?[14]

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[13] In fact there were two of them: "…some thirty years ago Mr. Colliver, a Cornish gentleman, told the writer that whilst engaged in mining operations near Llyn Llydaw he had occasion to lower the water level of that lake, when he discovered embedded in the mud a canoe formed out of the trunk of a single tree. He saw another in the lake, but this he did not disturb, and it is there at the present day." (Rev. Elias Owen, *Welsh Folklore*, Oswestry 1896, p. 28.)

Thomas Colliver was mine-captain at the Cwm Dyli mine from 1852-1856, and would have been responsible for commissioning David Jones of Beddgelert to lower the lake level

[14] Sir John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh & Manx*, Oxford 1901, p. 660

If you think it far-fetched that a folk-memory can filter down through the oral tradition in some recognizable form, however distorted or vague, even over two or three millennia, consider this example – as unsatisfying as they mostly are in terms of precise and logical recall, but undeniably possessed of a frisson of flickering remembrance - from the writing of the Welsh and East Anglian folklorist George Ewart Evans:

"One of the best known examples of the [oral] tradition relating to a site, which later revealed an outstanding archaeological find, comes from Wales. This is the well-known Bryn-yr-Ellyllon ["hill of the ghosts"] discovery near the town of Mold. A mound near the side of the road… was broken into at the beginning of last [i.e. nineteenth] century… for stone to mend the roads; towards the lower part they found some very large bones – a skull of greater than the usual size of man – a bright corslet with 200 to 300 amber beads; the bones became dust on being exposed to the air.

"'The bright corslet' – now in the British Museum – turned out to be pure gold but later examination has established that it was not a corslet but a tippet or cape that fitted over the shoulders of a Bronze Age chieftain whose burial place the mound is assumed to be. Numerous stories were told at the time of the discovery of how local people had been frightened on different occasions by a Golden Spectre or the ghost of a Man in Golden Armour which appeared on or near the mound while they were passing to or from Mold. Many of the stories can be discounted as vague memories that had been stiffened by the discovery itself.

But Dr. H.N. Savory of the National Museum of Wales has looked at the evidence critically and has written: 'I think it is fair to say that it seems to be established that the local people believed in a ghost at Bryn-yr-Ellyllon long before the gold "corslet" was discovered…'"[15]

The dismissive rejoinder here would be to point out that the name alone tells us that. Which begs the question of how the feature originally came by it. But then, story-telling comes naturally to human-kind, and as we leave this conjecture on the matter of unions with the fairies and return now to Nant Gwynen, we are perhaps arriving at heartland and source for one of the greatest story-cycles of them all – that of Arthur, Merlin and the Knights of the Round Table. (It might be useful at this point to stress Arthur's total lack of historicity. Marc Morris, in a persuasive and thrilling biography of Edward I, makes the point succinctly:

" …as all sane historians will nowadays readily attest (whatever the assertions of lamentable Hollywood films to the contrary), Arthur himself never existed. Beyond any reasonable doubt, the legendary 'king' began life as an elemental figure or demi-god – a sort of low-grade Thor or Wodin."[16]

Dinas Emrys is, to quote D.E. Jenkins, the author of the invaluable work of local history entitled *Beddgelert: Its Facts, Fairies and Folklore* (Porthmadog, 1899), "the

[15] George Ewart Evans, *Where Beards Wag All: The Relevance of the Oral Tradition*, (Faber, 1970), pp. 227-228.
[16] Marc Morris, *A Great and Terrible King: Edward I and the Forging of Britain*, (Hutchinson, 2008) p.162.

prettiest little hill in Nant Gwynant". It is also reasonable to consider it as the site richest in story in the whole of Wales, and it is only with the most famous of these – that of the wizard and enchanter best known from Arthurian literature as Merlin[17] – that I'm concerned here.

As given by Nennius (see note), the story runs thus. Vortigern – an historical figure[18] prominent in North-east

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[17] Things here could become horribly complicated – or not – as we choose. We had better look briefly at the way in which Arthur and Merlin became historicized from the Ninth Century onwards. The name Merlin for the figure of the wizard in Arthurian literature derives from Merlinus Ambrosius, which was bestowed on this character by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* of 1136 (in the historian Marc Morris's words, "the startlingly inventive book that set the whole Arthurian avalanche in motion") and in the *Vita Merlini* – a playful and fanciful poem of about 1500 lines which followed it in about 1148-1150.

Geoffrey took the story in which his original, there called Ambrosius, occurs directly out of the *Historia Brittonum* of the ninth-century monk Nennius – the earliest source of Arthurian material. It is from Nennius that the connection with Dinas Emrys (Emrys = Ambrosius in Welsh) derives. Geoffrey's imaginative writings –bestsellers of their day, as the large number of extant manuscripts testify – quickly crossed over to France where, by 1155, they had been translated into verse by Wace under the title of the *Roman de Brut*. This, and much of the rest of the "Matter of Britain", particularly as incorporated into the Old French prose-romances of the Vulgate Cycle of the early thirteenth century, eventually made its way back across the Channel where, leavened with contemporary chivalric ideals, it was incorporated by Sir Thomas Malory into his *Morte Darthur*, completed in about 1469 and printed by William Caxton in 1485.

This was the crucial text that fixed the stories in the – by then English - cultural imagination (Edward's late-Thirteenth Century annexation of the Arthurian material is a fascinating political sub-text here). As to Merlin, here too are complex antecedents, the best short account of which can be found in A.O.H. Jarman's *The Legend of Merlin* (Cardiff 1960). For those who wish to pursue the matter more fully, Count Nikolai Tolstoy's *The Quest for Merlin* (Hamish Hamilton 1985) is quirky, entertaining and at times persuasive.

[18] Vortigern was much reviled by the sixth-century monk Gildas in his *De Excidio Britanniae,* perhaps on account of his Pelagianism. The origins of this "heresy" - a very sympathetic one to the modern mind since, in despite of the teachings of Augustine of Hippo and notwithstanding its magical rebuttal by Dewi Sant at the Convocation of Llanddewi Brefi in 545 A.D., it disputed the doctrine of original sin, believed unbaptised infants to be safe from damnation and animals to have souls, and thought good works in themselves meritorious – can be traced to the

Wales in the first half of the fifth century, possibly a Pelagian heretic and probably a war leader who fought against Hengist and Horsa in Kent in 455 AD - sought alliance with the Saxons against his fellow British princes, and having lost control of these mercenary forces, after the "Night of the Long Knives" he was forced to flee to Wales and build a stronghold there. The site chosen by his wizards was Dinas Emrys – probably an existing Iron Age defensive site - and building work began there, but every morning the work of the previous day would be discovered thrown down. The wizards declared that a spell was upon the project which could only be broken by sacrificing a fatherless child and sprinkling his blood upon the walls.

The whole country was searched, and the child Ambrosius – conceived by an incubus upon a nun (or so the nun must have testified) - was found and brought to the place. Not surprisingly, he argued against his fate, questioned the wizards' interpretation, and told them that beneath where Vortigern wished to build his tower was a lake, in which would be found two vessels, one inside the other and a white cloth between them. The objects were found, Ambrosius ordered them to be opened, and wrapped within the cloth were two dragons, one red and one white. On being awakened, they fought over the cloth, the red one finally chasing the white one across the lake and the cloth vanishing – which Ambrosius interpreted as being a sign

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monastery of Bangor is y Coed on Vortigern's home ground in what is now the Maelor Saesneg.

Vortigern does appear to have fallen foul of the "spin-doctors" of the early Church, from whom his later evil reputation mostly derives. The monks of Bangor were, of course, slaughtered by the Saxons not long after Gildas's time, in 613 AD - at the behest of Augustine of Canterbury according to Bede of Jarrow. All very *august* and Christian…

that the Saxon invaders would be ousted and the British people would prevail. But he added that Vortigern himself would never succeed in building his fortress here. Vortigern duly ceded possession of Dinas Emrys to Ambrosius, killed his useless wizards – who traditionally lie buried by the side of the present-day track leading to the farm of Hafod y Porth (the site is under the barn marked on the current map as Beudy Bedd Owen – the cowshed of the grave of Owen) – and went his way either to Nant Gwrtheyrn near Llithfaen, now the home to the Welsh Language Centre, according to one source, or to Craig Gwrtheyrn near Llandysul in Ceredigion from another.

We could now throw into this heady mix the character of another Ambrosius – Ambrosius Aurelianus – a Romano-British war-leader, who is said in one legend to have persuaded our Ambrosius, later to be transmuted into Merlin, to go away with him, having buried his treasure at Dinas Emrys. The transmutations of oral history and the alchemical power of legend will deliver the pair up in due course - the process being a complex one, as you will have gathered from this incomplete account and the footnotes to it - to our modern consciousness as Arthur and Merlin, and allow them thoroughly to claim the locality in their names. As a coda to this process, it is interesting to quote the entry from the *Cadw/HMSO guide to Ancient and Historic Wales*'s volume on Gwynedd by the archaeologist Frances Lynch on Dinas Emrys[19]:

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[19] Frances Lynch, *Gwynedd* (HMSO, 1995), p.128.

"The archaeological features of the hilltop appear, in an astonishing way, to correspond to the situation described in the ancient story. It is certainly a most precipitous rock, which might be judged the strongest natural fortress in Gwynedd, but the most notable coincidence is the discovery of evidence for 5th-6th century occupation around the pool at the centre of the site."

Some vague historicity having been established – in that we can assert with a degree of certainty that something of significance was going on around here a very long time ago, and nothing more definite than that - we could now jump a gap of a mere fourteen centuries and bring into play in order to enrich the story of our mountain the account from a book I've already had occasion to mention several times in this narrative – D.E. Jenkins' *Beddgelert: Its Facts, Fairies and Folklore* – of Arthur's death on Snowdon:

"When King Arthur was pursuing his enemies among the mountains of Eryri, he heard in Dinas Emrys that they were encamped in strong force within the walls of Tregalan, and that all the passes were under defence. He summoned all his forces to meet on the flat ground opposite Craflwyn, called 'Y Waen Wen', and there selected a strong regiment from the pick of his men. He then directed his march to Cwm Llan, over the mountain of Hafod y Porth, and through Bwlch Castell y Wawch. After a tremendous struggle, Arthur drove the enemy from the town in the direction of Cwm Dylif, and then followed them in pursuit. But when the leading portion of the army had reached the top of the pass, the ranks of the enemy let fly a shower of arrows, and Arthur received a

fatal wound. His soldiers buried him in the pass, so as to prevent a single man of the foe from returning that way while Arthur's body rested there. To this day there remains in the middle of this pass a large heap of stones, which is called 'Carnedd Arthur'…"[20]

The pass is, of course, Bwlch y Saethau – "the pass of the arrows" between Yr Wyddfa and Y Lliwedd – and we would be perfectly justified in feeling the presence here of an habitual onomastic element in the early stories, by which existing names were given explanations (Thomas Pennant, himself a considerable collector of tales, has quite a different and perhaps more prosaic take on this name, as we shall hear in a later chapter). In a continuation to the story, after Arthur's death his men ascend the ridge of Y Lliwedd, then climb down into a vast cave in the face of the cliff, Ogof Llanciau Eryri ("the cave of the lads of Eryri"), which they seal up behind them, there to sleep in their armour and await the second coming of Arthur, when the governance of Britain shall be restored to the Welsh.

On the whole, their sleep is undisturbed, though as John Rhys relates, *"As the local shepherds were one day long ago collecting their sheep on the Lliwedd, one sheep fell down to a shelf in this precipice, and when the Cwm Dyli shepherd made his way to the spot he perceived that the ledge of rock on which he stood led to the hidden cave of Llanciau Eryri. There was light within: he looked in and beheld a host of warriors without number all asleep, resting on their arms and equipped for battle. Seeing that*

[20] D.E. Jenkins' *Beddgelert: Its Facts, Fairies and Folklore,* Porthmadog 1899, p.255

they were all asleep , he felt a strong desire to explore the whole place; but as he was squeezing in he struck his head against the bell hanging in the entrance. It rang so that every corner of the immense cave rang again, and all the warriors woke uttering a terrible shout, which so frightened the shepherd that he never more enjoyed a day's health; nor has anybody since dared as much as to approach the mouth of the cave."[21]

Whether the last statement is true or not is a matter we shall examine in a later chapter. As to the cairn, it was clearly visible in the mid-nineteenth century and the poet Glaslyn at that time could write, *"Gerllaw Carnedd Arthur ar ysgwydd y Wyddfa/Y gorwedd gweddillion y cawr enwog Ricca"* (Near Arthur's cairn on the shoulder of Yr Wyddfa/Rest the remains of the famous giant Ricca). These days there is no apparent trace of any ancient and substantial cairn on the pass of the arrows– one rather unlikely supposition being that it was dismantled and the stone carried up to be used in the building of Victorian refreshment huts at the summit. As for the giant Ricca (or Rhita), you can make his closer acquaintance in the earliest Welsh folk-tale *Culhwch ac Olwen*[22].

I want to conclude this chapter with introductions for you to three charming former residents of the slopes of Snowdon whose existence here was quite as likely as those of Arthur and Merlin. The first of them was known as *Canthrig Bwt*, and she lived under the boulders by Pont y

[21] Sir John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, Oxford 1901, pp. 473-474
[22] See bibliography.

Gromlech[23]. *"She was known to the inhabitants, and the children feared her, but nobody thought that she did them any harm. It happened that several children were lost and no trace could be found of them. One day a workman noticed his dog devouring something near the cromlech and found it was a child's hand. One finger was wanting, not through any recent accident, and the hand was thus recognized as that of a missing boy. The hag was observed. A man went to the place and heard a child crying. He called to the hag, telling her he had children for her. She replied she would come out after dressing the head of her child. When she came, the man struck off her head."*[24]

The second member of this triad of grotesques we may (but probably won't) have the misfortune to encounter lives in the depths of Llyn y Ffynnon Las, or Glaslyn as it is better known nowadays, which Sir John Lloyd tells us *"has a most sinister reputation in folklore, answering well to its uncanny aspect. It is the abode of demons and, needless to say, it is bottomless, harbours no ordinary fish, and never*

[23] This name and that of the cliff above - Dinas Cromlech – may refer simply to the boulders themselves resembling a cromlech - not a likeness ever apparent to my eyes - or they may suggest the former presence hereabouts of a prehistoric monument (in Welsh a cromlech is generally a burial chamber consisting of a capstone supported on three or more uprights – though in Breton, interestingly, it signifies a circle of standing stones). The *Canthrig Bwt* story has close parallels to others associated with stone circles in Denbighshire, farther to the east. The point of this is to isolate the echo of the story's possible association with a ritual site. Though there is no trace of a monument here now, there are prehistoric settlements very close at hand, and many clearly important prehistoric sites in Wales were destroyed even as late as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by road-building and farming operations.

[24] T.Gwynn Jones, op. cit. p.82

freezes. Any living creature venturing into it comes to a speedy end and no bird will fly over its eerie waters."[25]

"Wild swimmers" beware, then, if ever you feel tempted to a bracing dip after descending from the summit on a hot day. Fishermen have pulled strange creatures from this pool on the end of their lines, and been forced to flee in dread – or so the stories go.

What lives most notably in the lake is the *Afanc*, a monster which had caused grievous losses to the people living near its former lair, and which seemed invulnerable until, lured by a maiden's trickery out of the Beaver Pool below the confluence of the Conwy and the Lledr near Betws y Coed and bound in iron chains, it was dragged away by the oxen of Hu Gadarn, which were the strongest in the world, across the shoulder of Moel Siabod. In the field now known as Gwaun Llygad yr Ych, on the mountain-land of Gwastad Annas farm, so great were one of the oxen's exertions that an eye started out of its socket and fell on the ground, forming a pool, Pwll Llygad yr Ych, which never dries though no water runs into or out from it. Eventually, at Llyn y Ffynnon Las, its chains were loosed and it jumped headlong into the lake, and the local people did not mind its dwelling there, for they knew what terrible company it kept in so doing, and many stories are told about these other creatures as well.

So much for the Afanc and his friends – enormous toads, terrible water-horses and the like. For our last new

[25] In *The Mountains of Snowdonia*, ed. Carr & Lister, Second Edition, Crosby Lockwood, 1948, p.16.

acquaintance, we need to descend back into Nant Gwynen, and make our way up the Afon Merch, which we came down alongside in the journey described in chapter one. There is a story locates here, mentioned in a letter of Edward Lhuyd's and told again by D.E. Jenkins, about Ogof y Gwr Blewog – the cave of the hairy man.

The version Jenkins relates to explain the name is a garbled mix of folk-tale motifs familiar from other Welsh, Scottish and Irish sources: stolen food, mischief-making, red greyhounds, chases over the mountains, disappearances, severed hands. In brief, it runs thus: a very long time ago the people of Nant Gwynen were troubled by an unknown and audacious robber, who used to break into their houses during the night, robbing them of their food and other items without ever being seen or heard. The cows and goats were frequently milked dry before morning and often the fattest sheep were stolen from the folds in spite of every watchfulness. One day a shepherd on his way down from the mountain spotted a man covered all over with red hair sitting on a hill above his farmhouse, and concluded that this was the robber. A chase ensued but the hairy man sprang to his feet, leapt like a roe-deer over the rocks and disappeared from sight.

On a subsequent occasion when he was spotted basking in the sun, dogs were set after him but he fled like a hare and the dogs lost him so completely they did not know in which direction to go. A magician was consulted, and he advised the people to seek a greyhound, uniformly red, and this would surely catch him. One was found and brought to Nant Gwynen, but just at the point of its snatching at the

hairy man's heel, he jumped clean over a cliff and was seen at its foot speeding unharmed away. The people came to believe that he must be a demon, and would never be caught. One day, however, when the people of the house had taken a newly-born child to the church to be baptized and the woman of the house was still confined, she heard a sound, saw the hairy man stretching his hand through the door to open it, and picking up a hatchet she struck and severed his hand from his wrist, so that when the people returned they could follow the trail of blood to the cave where he lived, in the inaccessible depths of which he was presumed to have perished from loss of blood, for he was never seen again…

On a drenching December day of the present time, when all the southern flanks of Snowdon were braided with white threads of rushing streams and the water-spirits were garrulous in every cwm, I set off up the Afon Merch, Jenkins' description of the whereabouts of the cave committed to memory. A rocky scramble past a sidelong, broken fall brought me to a long, narrow pool between steep walls that exactly matched it. Down to its swift green water a veil of ivy, leaves glistening, hung to conceal the farthest dark recesses into which a water-spout thundered.

All the old mystery gathered about the place. To arrive here solitary on a winter's afternoon is to find yourself in the presence of the *Uruisg* - the water-sprite, stories of whom recur throughout the Celtic countries; who "haunts lonely places and waterfalls and, according to his

mood, helps or harms the wayfarer. His appearance is that of a man with shaggy hair and beard…"[26]

With Canthrig Bwt, the Afanc and the Hairy Man, what you are encountering may well be aspects of an old, religious response to the land (the presence of water in the cases of the two latter is suggestive), embodied in story and grotesque character, the original significance corrupted and obscure. Some of the detail is obviously later accretion and comment: some of it starts out at you in repeated familiarity; some of it seems to be included from a necessity of the original reason for which the story-teller is not entirely aware. All three have parallels from elsewhere (a fact which might suggest to you a relevance in the Jungian view of the archetypes and the collective unconscious).

With the tales from the realm of faery, it may be legitimate, and is certainly fascinating, to ponder their provenance in terms of ancient and aboriginal encounters. The hero-sagas alchemically transmuted through generations of imaginative elaboration around the memory of troubled and distant events are endlessly enthralling. The truth or basis or degree of historicity of any of them will remain very tenuously approachable, ultimately and essentially undiscoverable. The enabling factor for the survival and increase of all, I would suggest, is the interplay between landscape and affect. It seems appropriate to me that so grand a peak as Snowdon, impacting as powerfully as it does upon imagination and mood, should have such continuing

[26] J.A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, Edinburgh 1911, pp.189-190.

texture of story and belief gathered around it, enabling us still to meet the characters, demons and demi-gods created from human response to landscape down the long ages, bringing us closer in understanding to what we were and - under the veneers of so-called civilization - perhaps still essentially are.

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