

KING ARTHUR

“To know the myths is to learn the secret of things.
In other words, one learns not only how things came
but also where to find them and how to make them
reappear when they disappear.”

Mircea Eliade 1907-1986

It was Christmas Day in the year AD 495, the place *Caer Llion* upon *Usk* in Gwent, [Caerleon in south-east Wales], the royal family's favourite holiday destination. Shapely as a salmon and graceful in a long shimmering silk dress, a crown on her head, Queen Gwen sat beside her husband King Owein.

Gwenhwyfar had borne four sons to Owein: Cyd was eldest, Llaky arrived next, followed by Archie then Amhar who was still a boy. Both parents were in their thirties, their sons seated and standing around them, worthy sons, tall, handsome and upright, their mother and father's pride and joy.

Under massive smoke stained roof timbers of the King's great hall, the King's court had assembled for the festive occasion. A side of ox cooked slowly over the log fire in the middle of the hall. Small sparks flew as the spit was turned. The layer of rushes on the floor had been renewed, giving off a refreshing woody scent as the guests walked from the decorated doorway to choose a bench seat. An hundred guests had ample space to sit beside the oak refectory table laden with food and drink.

The royal couple's guests dined well on meat and wine, the walls resounded with laughter and revelry. Graphic tales were told of past battles won against enemies of the Cymry, adventures in far-away places, of sea voyages made to distant northern lands of ice and snow, of southern lands where hot winds blew sand clouds from horizon to horizon.

A choir of minstrels sang songs of praise to honour Owein the Bear, Arthur the King, Arthur the Emperor, ruler of prosperous Britannia, the last stable Province of the Western Roman Empire.

Summer in 495 had been good for the Christian Cymry. Earlier in the year, a pagan Saxon force landed on a southern beach, intent on pillage and plunder. At Emperor Arthur's command, Legions from the Cymru Provinces assembled, warriors came from Ystrad Clydd, from Rheged and Kernow, the Midlands, from Cymru in the west and Powys at the centre. Five Legions marched south from Viroconium to meet the pagan invaders.

Stationed on a hill south of the city of Bath, Arthur directed his forces. The Battle of Bath began, the Cymry fighting in the Roman tradition with military skill and strong discipline. In line abreast, with long shields giving each man full protection, their lances prodded forward. Many an invader fell mortally wounded, his journey to Valhalla begun. The Saxon foe wildly wielded heavy battle axes. Woe betide a Cymry warrior cleaved by such a weapon. Fortunes waxed and waned.

"Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ on his shoulders for three days and three nights, and the Cymry were victorious," recorded Gildas the monk in AD 540. After three days of combat, the Christian Cymry prevailed and the pagan Saxons were soundly defeated.

Emperor Arthur's court Bard composed a saga telling of the three day Battle of Bath. Known by the name "*The Dream of Rhonabwy*", the saga is a tale told in glowing Celtic allegorical terms of colour and movement, tension and stress, fighting death and injury, heroism and stoicism.

The Emperor rose to his feet. Impressive in long robes, a crown on his head, he addressed the assembly, "I invite all those present at this Christmas feast to adjourn to Caer Llion amphitheatre, there to hear my Bard's first telling of *The Dream of Rhonabwy*".

Nobles and commoners alike walked the short distance from Kings great hall to the Roman site. Held aloft by servants, torches flickered and flared in gentle breezes, lighting the way.

On this particular night in December, as if ordered by the prayers of the entire population, balmy airs came to Caer Llion amphitheatre. The royal family, serried ranks of nobles and Legion

commanders, bishops and counsellors, churchmen and women, soldiers and squires, artisans and the common people seated themselves on the semicircular tiers of seats, comfortably wrapped against the night airs. People of all ages and status were there to witness *The Dream of Rhonabwy*, an account of the Battle of Bath fought six months before.

Twm the court Bard came forward and stepped upon the dais, facing the assembled audience. Dressed in long flowing robes of a style reminiscent of a Roman senator, his strong voice rang out as he addressed the gathering,

Everyone was eager to hear this, the first telling of *The Dream of Rhonabwy*.

THE DREAM OF RHONABWY

The Telling of The Tale

“Emperor Arthur arose early that summer’s morning in the year of our Lord 495, preparations already made for his departure from the royal palace at Viroconium. Accompanied by his counsellors, he led his commanders and Legions as they marched south from Powys to fight the foes of the Cymry.

You should know that Prince Madawg had been appointed regent while the Emperor was away. The Prince remained in the city, his mind troubled by the rebellious actions of his brother Iorwoerth. To prevent further trouble, Madawg sent out search parties to find his sibling. He appointed Rhonabwy to lead one party that included two companions, Cynwrig Frychgoch from Mawddwy and Cadwgawn Fras from Machynlleth.

One evening the three travellers sought lodgings in Powys. They arrived at an old hall, smoke filled black and dirty. Given bread and cheese to eat, they had watered milk to drink. Rhonabwy’s two companions slept on a straw bed, flea infested with dirty covers.

Rhonabwy chose a magically endowed yellow ox skin spread on a raised dais. As soon as he lay down he slept and began to dream.

Rhonabwy dreamt they travelled south to *Rhyd y Groes*, Stony Ford, a crossing place of the river Severn. Soon after arriving near the river, Rhonabwy heard a loud noise, a far greater commotion than ever he had heard before. A mile from *Rhyd y Groes* on either side of the road, they saw tents and pavilions and a great host. From the river bank, Rhonabwy and his companions saw Emperor Arthur. Next to him on one side was Bishop Bedwin [representing the Imperial Roman Church] and on the other side Gwartheygydd son of Caw [of the Celtic Christian Church].

Arthur called for and was presented with his mighty sword *Caledfwlch* its hilt decorated with entwined gold serpents. Emperor Arthur's servitor red-headed Eiryn Wych ap Peibyn brought a golden chair, placing it on a white mantel with magic properties - a person wrapped in the mantel was invisible to those beyond - yet he could see everyone else.

At the Emperor's command, Eiryn brought in the board game and play pieces for the game Kings Geese [*gwyddbwyll*]. Each corner of the silver board was lit by precious stones, the play pieces fashioned from gold.

Kings Geese was a game of strategy, careful planning and forethought, a war game for two players. The Emperor seated himself on the chair with Owein next to him and invited Owein to play Kings Geese. They began their first game.

From this point in the telling of *The Dream of Rhonabwy*, detailed descriptions of the dress and accoutrements of messenger squires are strongly emphasised. This allegorical technique conveyed special meanings to the audience listening to the story.

The Squires

As Arthur and Owein played the first game of Kings Geese a squire from Powys approached.

Selyf ap Cynan White Shank came from a red and white pavilion tent topped by a black serpent emblem with eyes and tongue

bright red in colour. Selyf had curly yellow hair and blue eyes. Dressed in a yellow brocaded silk tunic and coat, with speckled leather buskins and gold buckles, his heavy sword had a gold hilt. Its scabbard was of black leather with a burnished copper tip.

Seemingly ignoring Emperor Arthur, the squire greeted Owein and asked him to have the Emperor call off his 'bachelors and squires' who were harassing Owein's 'ravens'. Arthur knew what Owein was thinking and ignored the request, saying to Owein, "Play thy game." The squire returned to his pavilion.

Finishing the first game and starting the second, Arthur and Owein were approached by Gwgawn Red-Sword from the Midlands, an auburn haired squire from a bright yellow pavilion with an emblem of a bright red lion at its top. The squire was dressed in a long yellow brocaded silk tunic, white leather hose, and black leather buskins with copper buckles. He carried a huge sword in a red deerskin scabbard tipped with gold. He greeted Owein, apparently ignoring Arthur. Saying that Arthur's squires were wounding Owein's ravens, Gwgawn Red-Sword asked they be called off. Owein asked Arthur to call off his men. In reply Arthur said, "Play thy game." The second squire returned to his pavilion.

The second Kings Geese [*gwyddbwyll*] game ended and they began another.

Some distance away they could see a very large spotted yellow pavilion with the image of a golden eagle at the top. The image had a jewel in its head. A third squire approached, Gwres ap Rheged, with crisp yellow hair he was dressed in a green brocaded silk mantel clasped with a gold brooch on his shoulder. Gold clasps secured the speckled leather shoes on his feet. Noble looks, a white face with ruddy cheeks, matched his hawk like eyes. He held a thick speckled yellow spear in his hand with a newly sharpened head and a conspicuous standard.

The squire was in a rage. He approached the two players and greeted only Owein, telling him his ravens had been slain or wounded by Arthur's men. Owein asked Arthur to call off his men but Arthur's reply to Owein was, "Play, if thou wilt."

Dismissing squire Gwres ap Rheged, Owein told him to raise the standard, go to the highest point where the battle was most fierce, “and let it be as God wills.” The ravens recovered their magic powers and launched a fierce counter attack. Heads were lopped off, men gashed and wounded. Arthur’s amazement was as great as Owein’s.

A weary and ill-tempered fourth squire Blathaon ap Mwrheth of Kernow approached riding a dapple-grey horse. Both rider and steed were arrayed in foreign armour. The youth had a gold hilted sword sheathed in a green scabbard tipped with Spanish laton*. His sword belt was of black furry leather with an ivory clasp. On his head was a fearsome looking gold helmet topped with the image of a yellow-red leopard and two ruby eyes. His hand held a long spear with a green shaft, the top portion of which was red with blood. The squire greeted only Arthur, saying that Owein’s ravens were slaying his bachelors and squires.

Arthur asked Owein to call off his ravens. Owein responded, “Play thy game.” The rider returned to the battle and the players heard a great commotion, men shrieking and ravens croaking.

[to be continued]

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