

The First Legend of Merlin: Vortigern's Castle

Martin Edwardes, November 2002

The legends of the Arthurian cycle have been subject to continuous revision over the centuries, the most famous of which is Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (probably written in the early 15th century). That work will not be considered here, as it is mostly an exposition of Plantagenet aspirations and moralities.

The Arthurian legends we know today are in large part rewritings of earlier stories and mythic relationships. Although clearly descended from the Druidic Bardic culture of pre-Roman Britain, the stories have been rendered palatable to the early Celtic and English Christian churches. The Arthurian cycle is traditionally placed in the second half of the fifth century, and it expresses an indigenous Celtic aspiration against the Anglo-Saxon invaders of that time. It is a tribute to the mythic quality of the stories that they have been adopted by those invaders as part of their own legendarium.

The Merlin-Vortigern myth considered here was summarised by Rutherford (1978) as follows:

According to the 9th Century Nennius, Horsa fell in the ensuing battle, but as his compensation Vortigern gave Hengist the Isle of Thanet. It was not sufficient, and the Jutes became ever more importunate, until the hapless Vortigern realized he was fighting, instead of only Picts and Scots, the Jutes as well. Too tired for war, he fled westwards and built himself a citadel in Wales.

It is at this point, that according to Nennius, the first of the major characters of the Arthurian story makes his entry. Determined to make his citadel impregnable at all costs, Vortigern consulted his magicians. They advised him to enlist the benevolence of the gods by sacrificing an orphan child and burying this body in the foundations. The victim finally selected was, says Nennius, a little boy called Ambrosius, the Welsh form of which is 'Emrys', son of a Roman couple of consular rank.

The boy saves himself by displaying a gift for prophecy so spectacular the king reprieves him. Three centuries after Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth gives substantially the same account, but with one significant change: the child-victim's name has become Merlin, or in Welsh "Myrddin".¹

Rutherford shows we have two written sources for the legend: Nennius, writing in the 9th century, and Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing in the 12th century. However, Nennius acknowledges the earlier source of Gildas, who wrote in the late 7th or early 8th centuries. Of the characters in the story, Hengist and Horsa are attested in other, unrelated tales; so, at the least, they represent a composite of Anglo-Saxon leaders, and may be actual historical people. Vortigern is probably a composite character, the name coming from *fawr* (*great*) + *tygwy* (meaning something like *chief*), but he is nonetheless usually considered as probably historical. Merlin is the only character which has no direct historicity, but he may be a merging of a 5th century hero, Emrys, and a 6th century bard, Myrddin, both of which are separately attested historically.

However, Rutherford's tale has been stripped of all mythic significance in an effort to cast his book as a historical account rather than a mythic or social commentary. A more measured view of the legend as a legend comes from Whitlock (1978):

How the Red Dragon became the emblem of Wales is explained by the legend of NANT GWYNANT, near Caernarvon. The Romano-British king, Vortigern, decided to re-fortify an Iron Age hill fort at Dinas Emrys, near Snowdon, but the building materials he assembled by day disappeared by night. He consulted his soothsayers who declared that the site must be sprinkled with the blood of a boy born to a virgin. The boy eventually discovered proved to be the equal of all the magicians, for he was none other than Merlin. He told the king that beneath the hill was an underground lake in which two dragons, one red and one white, were asleep. When

¹ Ward Rutherford, *The Druids and Their Heritage*, p147.

the lake was drained, the dragons awoke and began to fight. After a long and fierce conflict the red dragon, representing Wales, beat the white one, representing the Saxons, and so the delighted Welsh adopted the red dragon as their emblem. The king never did manage to build his castle on Dinas Emrys so he settled for one on neighbouring Nant Gwynant instead.²

This version, though, is still missing certain parts of the myth. To be fair, this account is concerned with the dragon aspect of the story - it is part of a section on “*Dragons, water beasts, giant worms, cockatrices and other monsters*”. A fuller account, still from a historical point of view, is given by Senior (1979):

The retreating king [Vortigern] made for the fastnesses of North Wales, that bulk of scrub and crag which was to be the last-stand refuge for later independent princes too, and there, under Snowdon, he tried to build a castle. But as much as he built during the day disappeared during the night. The king consulted his wise men – an implication, perhaps, of the heathen, perhaps Druidical surroundings of the story – who directed him to sacrifice on the spot a boy without a father. Suddenly we are into myth. The world in which one negotiates with invaders has rolled away, and that in which the mystery of supernatural conception and the ritual of child-sacrifice are dominant themes replaces it.

Messengers, the Nennius story continues, were sent out. In the south of Wales they found a boy who claimed to have no father, and they brought him north to Snowdon. Confronted on the hilltop with his imminent death, he demanded to question the wise men. What was it, he asked, that was hidden under the paving on the hill's summit? They did not know, but he did. There was a pool there. They opened the paving, and found the pool. And what was in the pool? he asked. To their ignorance he replied that there were two containers; on separating the containers they would find a wrapping – literally a ‘tent’ between two ‘vases’; and in the wrapping two serpents, one of them white, the other red. All this was discovered as predicted, and when they then unfolded the cloth and released the serpents he told them also what would happen next. The serpents began to fight each other, the white one at first winning, and then, after the third near defeat, the red one recovering and finally driving out the white. The king and his magicians stood astonished as the prophetic boy explained all this to them. The pool, he told them, was the world, the tent Vortigern's kingdom. The two serpents were the dragons of two nations, the red one that of the natives of Britain, the white one the invading Saxons. In the end, he said, our people will drive out the Saxons and send them back to where they came from. But as far as Vortigern was concerned, there was no future for him on this hill. It was he, the boy, who should have control of the castle to be built there. He gave his name then: Ambros.³

This version gives a whole new set of significances to the legend. First, the sacrifice of the child was not to make the fortress impregnable but to stop it from falling down. Second, the child was not to be an orphan, or born of a virgin, but a boy without a father. The other significant events of the myth are also present: a hidden pool, two gourds or vases; the tent or wrapping cloth; the two dragons, one red and one white; the prophecy of Emrys-Merlin; and the confounding of the wise men by a pre-pubescent youth. Although this extract does not name the site of the castle, it is mentioned later by Senior, in the following extract:

In the centre of the summit plateau of Dinas Emrys is a deep hollow, almost a glade, boggy and tangled with clumps of reed. During the excavations, a square depression in this miniature marshy valley was found to be a man-made pool, a cistern, probably cut during the early-Roman period of the hill's occupation; pre-Ambrosius, pre-Vortigern, and certainly long pre-Nennius and Gildas. On the banks of this pool and over an area of the pool where it had silted, a paved stone platform was discovered, thought, this time, to belong to the Dark Age period. Under the circumstances one can hardly resist the speculation that paving would have covered the whole pool and the rest of it had been removed by Vortigern's

² Ralph Whitlock, *In Search of Lost Gods*, p30.

³ Michael Senior, *Myths of Britain*, pp67-69.

magicians in their earlier excavations carried out under the direction of Emrys-Merlin.⁴

Here we see that the myth is based around a real pool, which probably had cultural significance long before the legend began. As this pool has been enshrined in legend and associated with magical events, it is likely that this is a site of ancient ritual significance. The name of the place (Dinas Emrys - the fortress of Emrys or Merlin) is also significant. There appears to be no sign of a fortress having been built there, and a boggy hollow would seem to be both a foolish and unhealthy place to build one. It may be that the modern name is a phonological replacement of the Welsh word *Dinas* (fortress) for the more appropriate word, *dineis* (strange).

However, the myth of a pool with two dragons is more ancient than the Arthurian cycle. An example occurs in the Mabinogion, in *The Tale of Lludd and Llevelys*:

‘The second plague in your realm,’ said Llevelys, ‘is a dragon. A dragon of another race, a foreign one, is fighting with it and struggling to overcome it, and therefore your dragon screams horribly. This is how you can see for yourself: when you arrive home measure the length and breadth of the island, and where you find the exact centre have a pit dug; in the pit place a vat full of the best mead that can be made, with a silk sheet over the vat, and guard all this yourself. You will see the dragons fighting in the shape of monstrous animals until they finally rise into the air as dragons, and when they have wearied of their horrid and frightening combat they will sink onto the sheet in the form of two little pigs; they will drag the sheet to the bottom of the vat, and there they will drink the mead and fall asleep. When that happens you must wrap the sheet round them and lock them in a stone chest, and bury them in the earth within the strongest place you know of in the island. As long as they are within that strong place no plague will come to Britain.’⁵

The earliest text of the Mabinogion still extant dates from about 1325, but this is only the remaining trace of a long tradition. In written form it is believed to go back to at least the 6th century, and in the spoken, bardic form it is likely to be much older. It is probable, therefore, that the fourteenth century text encapsulates a much more ancient Celtic Briton mythic structure; and the tradition of warring dragons associated with a pool would seem to be a part of that structure. However, the Mabinogion and Arthurian tales are closer than that. When the two little pigs had fallen asleep:

Lludd wrapped the sheet round them and locked them in a stone chest in the most secure place he could find in Eryri, and thereafter the place was called Dinas Emreis.⁶

It is tempting to say that the dragons freed by Emrys-Merlin are the same dragons imprisoned by Lludd, but *The Tale of Lludd and Llevelys* follows *The Dream of Maxen* in the Mabinogion, implying (in the historicity that the fourteenth-century writer overlaid on the text) that Lludd came after Maxen. Maxen is traditionally identified with Magnus Maximus, a Roman soldier who was declared Emperor by the British legions in 383CE. He conquered Gaul, Hispania and Northern Italia before being captured and beheaded in 388CE. For the Lludd legend to precede the Dinas Emrys legend the overlaid historicity indicate that it would have had to happen between 388 and about 450CE. While this is certainly possible, it is also reasonable to consider the Lludd story as the telling of a much earlier mythic fragment, and the Emrys-Merlin story to be a mirror-image of that mythic fragment: Lludd brings peace by burying the dragons in a chest; Emrys-Merlin digs them up to vanquish one of the dragons and thus bring peace. The spectacularly wrong prediction (that the Romano-Celtic Britons would drive out the Anglo-Saxons) clearly shows this to be a cultural aspiration rather than a historical record.

However, one final feature of the Dinas Emrys story is still missing, and this appears in the following extract. In this case the full story is given, from Vortigern’s flight into Wales to Merlin’s prophecy:

⁴ Michael Senior, *Myths of Britain*, p74.

⁵ *The Mabinogion*, pp131-132.

⁶ *The Mabinogion*, pp132-133.

At last he took the advice of his wizards, who told him that he ought to build an exceedingly strong tower, since he had lost all his other castles. He searched everywhere to find a suitable place, and at last came to Snowdon. Here he assembled a great gang of masons from various countries, and ordered them to build the tower. The stonemasons began to lay the foundations, but whatever they did one day was swallowed up by the earth the next, so they did not know where their work had disappeared to. Vortigern, when he heard about this, once more asked his wizards to tell him the reason for this. They said that he must search for a boy who had never had a father; and when he had found him, he should kill him and sprinkle his blood over the mortar and the stones. This, they said, would make the foundation of the tower hold firm.

Messengers were sent everywhere to look for such a boy. When they came to Carmarthen, they saw some lads playing before the gate: they sat down, weary with travel, and looked round them in the hope of finding what they sought. Towards evening, a couple of youths whose names were Merlin and Dalbutius suddenly quarrelled; and as they argued, Dalbutius said to Merlin: 'What a fool you are to think you are a match for me! I come from royal blood on both my mother's and father's side, but no one knows who you are, because you never had a father!' At this the messengers pricked up their ears, and asked the bystanders who this Merlin might be. They told them that no one knew his father, but that his mother was daughter of the king of Dyfed, and that she lived with the nuns in St Peter's Church in that same city.

The messengers hurried off to the reeve of the city, and ordered him in the king's name to have Merlin and his mother sent to the king. When he learnt of their errand, the reeve at once sent Merlin and his mother to Vortigern for him to do whatever he wanted with them. And when they were brought into his presence, the king received the mother with due respect knowing that she was of noble birth. Then he asked her who the father of her son might be.

She replied: 'On my soul, my lord king, I know of no man who was his father. All I can tell you is that once, when I and my attendants were in our chambers, someone appeared to me in the shape of a handsome young man, who embraced me and kissed me and stayed with me for some time. Then he suddenly vanished and I never saw him again: he often spoke to me when I was alone, though I never saw him. When he had haunted me in this way for a long time I conceived and bore a child. This is the truth, my lord king, whatever you may make of it; I know of no one who is the father of this boy.'

Amazed by her words, the king asked for Maugantius to be brought; and when the latter had heard the story from first to last, he said to Vortigern: 'In books and histories written by wise men I have found that many men have been born in this way. Apuleius says that there are certain spirits between the moon and the earth, which we call incubi. Their nature is partly human, partly angelic, and they take on the shape of men at will and associate with mortal women. Perhaps one of these appeared to this lady and is the father of the youth.'

When Merlin heard all this, he came to the king and said: 'Why have my mother and I been summoned here?'

Vortigern answered: 'My wizards have declared that I should seek out a boy who never had a father, because when I have sprinkled his blood upon the foundation of the tower I am building it will stand firm.'

Merlin said: 'Summon your wizards and I will show that they are lying.'

The king, amazed at his words, summoned his wizards so that Merlin could confront them. Merlin said to them: 'Don't you know what is preventing the foundation of this tower from being laid? You have advised that it should be built with mortar mixed with my blood, to make it stand securely. But ask yourselves what is hidden under the foundation, which prevents it from standing?' The wizards were frightened and said nothing.

Then Merlin (who was also called Ambrosius) said: 'My lord king, call your workmen and get them to dig, and you will find a pool under the tower that prevents it from standing.'

They did this, and a pool was indeed discovered.

Then Merlin Ambrosius again questioned the wizards: 'Tell me now, you liars and flatterers, what is under the pool?' But they were all dumb and said not a word. He said to the king: 'Order that the pool is to be drained; in the bottom you will find two dragons asleep.' The king did so, since Merlin had been proved right about the pool; and once more, to his astonishment, he found that it was as Merlin said. And after that, Merlin prophesied the future history of Britain, to the amazement and bafflement of his hearers.

When Vortigern had listened to him, he wanted to learn what his own fate would be; and Merlin's answer was as follows:

'Escape from the fire of the sons of Constantine, if you can! At this very moment they are fitting out their ships; at this very moment they are leaving the coast of Brittany and sailing out into the open sea towards Britain, which they will invade. They will defeat the accursed Saxons, but before that they will besiege you in a tower and set fire to it. It was your actions that brought this fate upon you when you betrayed their father and invited the Saxons into Britain as your bodyguard; they will come over as your executioners. Two deaths await you, and I cannot tell which of them you will escape. The Saxons will lay waste your kingdom and will try to kill you. And Aurelius and Uther Pendragon will invade your lands seeking revenge for their father's death. So take refuge if you can. Tomorrow they will land at Totnes. The Saxons will suffer bloody injuries: Hengist will be killed, and Aurelius Ambrosius will be crowned king. He will reign in peace and will restore the churches, but he will die of poison. His brother Uther Pendragon will succeed him, but his reign will also be cut short by poison. Your descendants will be there when this happens, and Uther's son Arthur will revenge his father!'⁷

The missing piece is that Emrys-Merlin does not meet Vortigern alone, he is in the company (and solidarity) of his mother.

So we have a real place, Dinas Emrys, with a real pool, and a cast of characters which appear to have historical analogues. But the story itself is mythic, unless belief in live dragons is permitted. We have a blood sacrifice called for, and the death of one of the dragons then acts as a surrogate for the death of Emrys-Merlin (the initiate). We have a two part cycle of light (the white dragon) and blood (the red dragon). And, while the victory of the red dragon should permit the castle to be built, no work is done and no castle raised: Vortigern is forced away from Dinas Emrys, which then becomes identified with Emrys-Merlin. There is also the solidarity of the females (the mother and the initiate) being victorious over the camaraderie of the males (the wizards and Vortigern), and there are the incidental features of gourds and the tent, both images of secret, secluded places. In addition, the pool itself, the heart of the mystery, is hidden and has to be uncovered. The sleeping (silent) dragons are juxtaposed with the fighting (noisy) dragons, and the fight itself should turn the castle site from a raw (unbuildable) state to a cooked (solid and safe) state. However, the victory of the red means that the site remains undeveloped and does not move from the mystical realm into the mundane. This failure to "cook" properly is a punishment on Vortigern for his failure as a leader, which is in turn linked to the fact that he took the sister of his people's enemies (Rowena, sister of Hengist and Horsa) as his wife. Instead of aligning with his blood (the Britons) during the dark time he aligns with his wife's kin - the Saxons, who are the white dragon.

Finally, there is the issue of food. Although this is not directly mentioned in the Arthurian stories, there is mention in all of the versions given here of the Saxons ravaging the land and causing starvation and want. In the Mabinogion it is much more explicit: the fighting dragons are one of three plagues. The first is the invasion of the Corannyeid, who can hear everything, which means that conversation must cease or secrets be revealed; the second is a terrifying scream heard every May Eve in every house in Britain (this is the dragons fighting); and the third is the carrying off of all food in the palace every night, regardless of how much is laid up during the day. Thus we have an end to normal discourse, external noise, and hunger as the three plagues.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to place the legend of Merlin and Vortigern firmly in the tradition of lunar, matrifocal myths.

⁷ Richard Barber, *Myths and Legends of the British Isles*, pp59-61.

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