


7-9-2014

Caer Brythwch and Brythach and Nerthach in 'Culhwch and Olwen'

Andrew Breeze

Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, abreeze@unav.es

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/jlo>

 Part of the [Celtic Studies Commons](#), [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#), and the [Indo-European Linguistics and Philology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Breeze, Andrew (2014) "Caer Brythwch and Brythach and Nerthach in 'Culhwch and Olwen'," *Journal of Literary Onomastics*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/jlo/vol3/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Literary Onomastics by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

Caer Brythwch and Brythach and Nerthach in *Culhwch and Olwen*

Andrew Breeze

University of Navarre, Pamplona

IN THE *MABINOGION* TALE of Culhwch and Olwen, datable to the 1090s, Arthur's porter Glewlwyd Mighty Grip presents the hero to the court. He does so with a rodomontade on places that he has seen (but none with Culhwch's equal), which includes the declaration "in Africa was I, and in the islands of Corsica, and in Caer Brythwch and Brythach, and Nerthach" (Jones and Jones 98). Glewlwyd's speech, which is meant to dazzle the assembly, has surely dazzled modern scholars. They have said this. Sir Idris Foster, writing on how Arthur's gate-keeper boasts "of his journeys to the ends of the earth," cited R. S. Loomis for the "clear Irish parallels" in *Bricriu's Feast* to Glewlwyd's speech (Foster, "*Culhwch and Olwen* and *Rhonabwy's Dream*," 31-43). He later wrote in similar terms on a similar address in the medieval Irish tale of the *Second Battle of Mag Tuired* or *Moytura* (Foster, "*Culhwch and Olwen*," 65-82). Editors of the text, repeating this, agree further with B. F. Roberts on the "resounding but meaningless invented names" of Glewlwyd, including the Caer Brythwch and Brythach and Nerthach discussed here (Bromwich and Evans 59). Dr. Padel follows them, discerning adventures "invented by the author purely for rhetorical effect (*Lotor and Fotor*), so as to display his own learning or verbal dexterity" (Padel 16). Professor Davies likewise describes these and other places as "unknown and probably invented" (Davies 261). An essay by Professor Charles-Edwards does not mention the passage, but makes the interesting speculation that the author of the saga was a poet, of the eleventh or twelfth century (Charles-Edwards, "The Dating," 45-56). We shall return to this. Finally, Professor Sims-Williams pours cold water on the notions of Loomis and Foster that Glewlwyd's speech owes something to Irish. He notes that country-listing "is an elemental form of entertainment that can be paralleled elsewhere – for example, in the Old English poems *Widsith* and *Solomon and Saturn II*," so that a link with *Bricriu's Feast* "may be coincidental." Yet he still speaks of "impossible places visited," as if the toponyms itemized were deliberate nonsense (Sims-Williams 135-6).

A waspish critic might feel of the above scholars that, since they are unable to explain the forms, they maintain authority by calling them intentionally "meaningless," "invented," and "impossible." The purpose of this paper is in any case to prove the opposite: that they are meaningful, borrowed, and probable. The writer has said as much on Glewlwyd's Caer Se and Asse, Sach and Salach, and Lotor and Fotor. Though corrupt, these can yet be shown to refer to Syracuse in Sicily, Arachosia in Afghanistan, and the river Ottorogorra east of the Ganges. They all figure in the geographical introduction to Orosius's *History*, evidently a source for *Culhwch and Olwen* (Breeze, "Orosius," 203-9). Kissing the hand of his old teacher, much as Brutus did that of Caesar, the writer therefore admits that, when Sir Idris Foster spoke of Glewlwyd's "journeys to the ends of the earth," he was quite right.

So now we have three more of Glewlwyd's toponyms. He declares, "I have been in Europe and Africa, in the islands of Corsica, in Caer Brythwch and Brythach, and in Nerthach" (Ganz 138). Because Europe, Africa and Corsica are all found in the world-survey that prefaces Orosius's history, another look at it may discover Caer Brythwch and Brythach and Nerthach. The first was thought to be a stronghold, like "Caer Se ac Asse" or Syracuse in Sicily, and the others may be too. We may thus advance with some confidence. Because Orosius names few Roman cities, analysis of his text is likely to reveal the places listed by Glewlwyd.

Of our three philological nuts, the easiest to crack is the last. As it stands, "Nerthach" resembles no city-name from the Roman Empire. It must be corrupt, being assimilated to Welsh *nerth* "strength." Nevertheless, a few moments of thought will suggest an emendation. It converts

“Nerthach” into a famous ancient toponym, that of Carthago or Carthage, on the coast of North Africa. This *urbs antiqua, dives opum, studiisque asperrima belli* is known elsewhere in Welsh. It is referred to in *Dehw y Byd*, which tells how it was founded by Dido, destroyed (and later rebuilt) by the Romans, and had defensive walls seventeen cubits thick (Lloyd and Owen 124). In poetry it figures in the Book of Taliesin, in verses on Saints and Martyrs of Christendom, with the line *A Chartago Mawr a Minor*, “And Carthage the Great and Cartagena” (Haycock, *Blodengerdd*, 253). It was at the former in March 203 that Saint Felicity, Saint Perpetua, and others suffered by being fed, alive, to animals, the survivors then being killed by soldiers (Dronke 1-17). So the name of Carthage was potent. As regards “Nerthach,” the Book of Taliesin line suggests how corruption might have happened. An original *a Charthago* “and Carthage” might be miscopied as “a Narthago,” and thereafter be “corrected” to “a Nerthach,” but still retain assumed original *-rtha-*. The error has precedents. Rivet and Smith list a similar one in the Ravenna Cosmography’s “Manulodulo” for *C(b)amulodunum* or the Roman city of Colchester, Essex (Rivet and Smith 202).

Carthage was not far from Corsica (certainly known to Glewlwyd) and Syracuse, and all three places are named within a few lines by Orosius, in the order Carthage, Syracuse, Corsica, as readily seen in the Old English text (Bately 20, 21, 208). That talleys with a process of corruption “a Charthago > a Narthago > a Nerthach”, with misreading of *b* (not, one may notice, *C*).

If “Nerthach” was *Carthago Magna* or Carthage, what of the rest of *yGhaer Brythwch a Brythach a Nerthach*? Since Welsh *nerth* “strength” created havoc on one toponym, Welsh *Brython* “Briton” presumably did its worst on the others. One notes that, while the Red Book of Hergest has “Brythach,” which editors and translators invariably prefer, the White Book has “Brytach.” Again, a little thought suggests this is to be preferred, as the *lectio difficilior*. So “Brytach” may perhaps be discovered in another Roman city, not far from Glewlwyd’s Corsica and (it seems) Carthage. Now, in the same sentence that Orosius refers to Carthage, he names as well Hadrumetum or Adrumetum. This bustling seaport, capital of its province, lay sixty miles south of Carthage. Since Orosius mentions it in the same breath as he does Carthage, it perhaps explains “a Brytach.” The initial vowel of “Adrumetum” might easily be separated in Welsh to give “a Drumetum”; that might further be corrupted with omission of letters to “a Drutum”; then “a Brutum” and “a Brytum”, the result being, with patriotic colour, the “a Brytach” and thereafter “a Brythach” of the White and Red Books. Hadrumetum and Carthage were near each in ancient Tunisia; they occur together, in this order, in Orosius and the Welsh translation of *Imago Mundi* (where the passage is from Orosius via St. Isidore of Seville); there need be no surprise in seeing restored *Adrumetum a Charthago* or *a Drumetum a Charthago* or *a Drutum a Charthago* behind *a Brytach a Nerthach*. It is true that reading of *d* for *b* is unusual. Nevertheless, we may perceive here the survival of *r* and back vowel, together with the White Book’s single *t* in the process of seeing *Adrumetum a Charthago* as behind *a Brytach a Nerthach*.

There is still *yGhaer Brythwch* to be accounted for. Here we would have not only miscopying but misidentification, with St. Isidore’s *Etymologiae* and *Dehw y Byd* indicating what apparently happened. Hadrumetum was in the province of Byzacium, where a Libyan or Phoenician place-name provided medieval scholars with splendid opportunities, not only to misspell it and confuse it with Byzantium, but to take it as itself a city. *Imago Mundi* thus thoroughly misinforms its readers on the province of *Bisace, a duabus urbibus dicta, id est Adromeus et Bizantium*, the sense being further obscured in the Red Book’s *Dehw y Byd*, where a confused scribe has simply left a gap in the text; the White Book’s copyists had stouter hearts, and give *Biscancium*, var. *Basantinum* (Lewis and Diverres 44, 45, 96, 97). Even good manuscripts of Orosius have the variants “Buzazium,” “Bizachium” and “Bazacium” (Bately 208). It appears, then, that Byzacium “the city” (with the spelling “Bizantium”?) lies behind *yGhaer Brythwch*, where corruption has almost reached irrecoverability, though minuscule “Biz-” may even so be perceived behind the Welsh “Bry-” of our text (and *t* survive from a variant).

This would be the more easily done, since *z* in minuscule script had a descending tail, as in the eleventh-century Psalter of Rhygyfarch (Denholm-Young plate 7). A later scribe might take that as *y*.

If the above arguments can be accepted, Glewlwyd's "I have been in Europe and Africa, in the islands of Corsica, in Caer Brythwch and Brythach, and in Nerthach (*yGhaer Brythwch a Brythach a Nerthach*)" may be restored to "I have been in Europe and Africa, in the islands of Corsica, in the City of Byzacium, Hadrumetum and Carthage (*yGhaer Bizacium, Adrumetum a Charthago*)." These three places in the western Mediterranean go well with Corsica, also in the western Mediterranean, and also listed by Orosius.

The possibilities by which medieval scribes might corrupt ancient place-names are manifold. Without knowledge of a source, many forms would rest beyond recovery until the end of time. Yet those competent in textual criticism will surely assent on two points: that copyists assimilate the unintelligible to the familiar, and yet leave groups of letters that may aid retrieval of an original reading. In an earlier paper, I argued that the Book of Taliesin's "Sicomorialis" might be read as *Nicomedialis*, of Nicomedia (in what is now north-west Turkey). The city was long famous, but not to one Welsh writer, who apparently associated the form with "sycomores" or fig-trees (Breeze, "Cruxes," 149-53). Elsewhere, the Book of Taliesin's "Siryael" can be confidently restored as *Cilicia*, the coastal region north of Cyprus (Haycock, *Legendary Poems*, 412). Letters have here been changed almost beyond recognition, and yet, as with "Sicomorialis," the retained order of consonant and vowel may indicate the correct reading (with the termination here and elsewhere being the most unstable part). Recalling these instances, we may see a *Charthago* "and Carthage" behind Glewlwyd's *a Nerthach* "and Nerthach." That allowed, consecutive reasoning may then tease out what lies behind the forms written with it.

If the above holds water, we shall hear less in the future of Glewlwyd's place-names as being deliberately "meaningless," "invented" and "impossible." We shall also hear less of Irish influence. What we have instead is contact with the ancient Mediterranean, and specifically with North Africa. The learned aspect of *Culhwch and Olwen* is thereby underlined. It is thus difficult to see the author as a professional poet (as Professor Charles-Edwards imagines). His knowledge came instead from the cloister, where he was at home in Latin. Sir Ifor Williams, in a typical deflation, doubted whether Gildas's strictures on priests overfond of "scandalous tales" meant they were addicted to reading Horace and Vergil. He thought they were "much more likely to be tempted by the jolly tales told by Welsh bards, the far-off originals of our *Mabinogion* and heroic romances" (Williams 51-2). The debt of *Culhwch and Olwen* to Orosius must shift authorship of that particular "jolly tale" to one trained in the schools, who wore a tonsure and knew the tug of a cord round his waist. He may have been a cleric at Tyddewi, like Master John of Saint Davids in the later twelfth century, author of various poems in the Black Book of Carmarthen (Breeze, *Mary of the Celts*, 131-8). As such, he contrasts sharply with the author of other *Mabinogion* tales, evidently secular in their provenance, despite persistent attempts to locate them in a Welsh monastery (Breeze, *Origins*, 37-8; Sims-Williams 286; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 653-5).

References

- Bately, Janet, ed. *The Old English Orosius*. EETS ss. 6. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.
- Breeze, Andrew. *The Mary of the Celts*. Leominster: Gracewing, 2008.
- Breeze, Andrew. "Cruxes in 'The Saints and Martyrs of Christendom'." *Studia Celtica* 42 (2008): 149-53.
- Breeze, Andrew. *The Origins of the "Four Branches of the Mabinogi"*. Leominster: Gracewing, 2009.
- Breeze, Andrew. "Orosius, the Book of Taliesin, and *Culhwch and Olwen*." *Studia Celtica* 45 (2011):

203-9.

- Bromwich, Rachel, and D. Simon Evans, eds. *Culhwch and Olwen*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992.
- Charles-Edwards, Thomas. "The Date of *Culhwch Ac Owen*." *Bile ós Cbrannaibb: A Festschrift for William Gillies*. Ed. Wilson McLeod, Abigail Burnyeat, Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, T.O. Clancy, and Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh. Ceann Drochaid: Clann Tuirc, 2010. 45-56.
- Charles-Edwards, Thomas. *Wales and the Britons 350-1064*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.
- Davies, Sioned, trans. *The Mabinogion*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Denholm-Young, Noël. *Handwriting in England and Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1954.
- Dronke, Peter. *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Foster, I. Ll. "Culhwch and Olwen and Rhonabwy's Dream." *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History*. Ed. Roger Sherman Loomis. Oxford: Clarendon, 1959. 31-43.
- Foster, I. Ll. "Culhwch Ac Olwen." *Y Traddodiadd Rhyddiaith yn yr Oesau Canol (Darlithiau Dewi Sant)*. Ed. Geraint Bowen. Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1974. 65-82.
- Ganz, Jeffrey, trans. *The Mabinogion*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.
- Haycock, Marged, ed. *Blodeugerdd Barddas o Gannu Crefyddol Cymnar*. n.p.: Cyhoeddiadau Barddas, 1994.
- Haycock, Marged. *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin*. Aberystwyth: CMCS, 2007.
- Jones, Gwyn, and Thomas Jones, trans. *The Mabinogion*. London: Dent, 1949.
- Lewis, Henry, and P. Diverres, eds. *Dehw y Byd*. Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1928.
- Lloyd, Nesta, and Morfydd E. Owen. *Drych yr Oesoedd Canol*. Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1986.
- Padel, O. J. *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000.
- Rivet, A. L. F., and Colin Smith. *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*. London: Batsford, 1979.
- Sims-Williams, Patrick. *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.
- Williams, Ifor. *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1944.