

Introduction to Celtic Literature

Early Welsh Heroic Poetry

Editions

Ifor Williams, *Canu Aneirin* (1938, 1961)

Ifor Williams, *The Poems of Taliesin* (1968)

John T. Koch, *The Gododdin of Aneirin: Text and Context from Dark-Age North Britain* (1997)

Translations

Kenneth Jackson, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (1969)

A. O. H. Jarman, *Aneirin: Y Gododdin, Britain's Oldest Heroic Poem* (1988)

John T. Koch and John Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age* (4th ed. 2003)

Studies

A. O. H. Jarman, *The Cynfeirdd: Early Welsh Poets and Poetry* (1981)

Jarman and Hughes (eds), *A Guide to Welsh Literature, vol 1* (1976), chaps 1-V

Brynley F. Roberts (ed.), *Early Welsh Poetry: Studies in the Book of Aneirin* (1988)

Manuscripts

Book of Aneirin (later 13th century)

Book of Taliesin (early 14th century)

Dating

This is still controversial. Aneirin and Taliesin are referred to in *Historia Brittonum* as Welsh bards of the late 6th century, but how much of their genuine work has survived is a matter of debate. Twelve poems in the Book of Taliesin are thought to be the work of the 'historical' bard (as opposed to the legendary figure of the same name). Most scholars agree that the corpus of just over 1,000 lines in the Book of Aneirin contains a core of 6th-century verse, with corruptions and later accretions.

Location

Gododdin was the name of a Brythonic tribe occupying a territory in Northern Britain with its centre at Din Eidyn (Edinburgh) on the Firth of Forth. It is also the title of Aneirin's poem celebrating a raid by Gododdin warriors on Catraeth (Catterick in North Yorkshire).

Taliesin was court poet of Urien, lord of the kingdom of Rheged to the south of Hadrian's Wall (modern Cumbria). The region depicted in the early poetry is known in Welsh tradition as the 'Old North' (*Hen Ogledd*).

Themes

Taliesin and Aneirin provide complementary views of the two sides of the heroic ethos.

Taliesin's eight poems in praise of Urien present him as the ideal king to whom his warriors owe allegiance to the point of death in battle.

Aneirin's Gododdin is divided into short stanzas each focusing on an individual or group of warriors, celebrating their heroic deaths and ensuring their fame. The ritual drinking of mead in the feasting hall symbolizes the heroic pact, since the lord's generosity had to be repaid with the warrior's life.

A stanza from the Gododdin (in modern Welsh orthography):

Gwŷr a aeth Gatraeth oedd ffraeth eu llu;
Glasfedd eu hancwyn, a gwenwyn fu.
Trichant trwy beiriant yn catâu –
A gwedi elwch tawelwch fu.
Cyd elwynt lannau i benydu,
Dadl diau angau i eu treiddu.

Men went to Catraeth, swift was their host;
Fresh mead was their feast, and it was poison.
Three hundred fighting according to plan –
And after jubilation there was silence.
Though they went to churches to do penance,
The inescapable meeting with death came to them.