

Taliesin was (i) a Brythonic (Welsh) bard considered as a real 'historical' poet of the post-Roman period in British history;¹ (ii) a much later medieval poet or poets found alongside, and interspersed in the extant work, the major source of the material, manuscript MS Peniarth 2, entitled '*Llyfr Taliessin*'. MS Peniarth 2.² This contains both types of bardic composition thought of or classified as 'historical' and 'legendary'.³ In general the historical verse concerns itself with patronage of the prowess and exploits of local 'kings' or 'tyrants',⁴ i.e., local, territorial leaders holding positions of area control, sometimes in conflict with Anglian (proto-English) expansion from the east, whilst the legendary verse is part of a much later more wider poetic tradition, dating from the post-Millennium centuries, sometimes incorporating fantasy imagery, where the poet is transfigured into something mystical and quite different from the earlier model, who is as much as, if not more so, a chronicler of battle-history and experience than a poet in, for example, in the Wordsworthian genre.

In academic or literary circles these historically distinct styles are sometimes referred to as 'cynfeirdd' ⁵ i.e. 'the poets coming before' or the earlier poets, in contradiction to the 'gogynfeirdd'⁶ (later poets). 'Cynfeirdd', might well be considered a contraction of the contemporary Welsh 'cyntaf beirdd' , i.e. the first bards, or earliest bards. As both authors appear in the same manuscript source, some debate as to which poem belongs to one or the other is not impossible. However, J E Carwyn Williams (1987) sets out a detailed reasoning as to why merely twelve of the collection can be considered as the creation of the earlier author.⁷

Style characteristics of the historic Taliesin exhibit some recurring compositional traits. Rhyme pattern is prominent in a methodology of either a recurring line-ending, as in a repetitive syllable such as 'af' in the Peniarth 2 MS, #39. Or alternatively perhaps assonance interspersed as the verse progresses, as for example in #44, e.g. syllables 'eirch', 'et' or 'eit' embeds itself. (see extracts given below). Such rhyme patterns may have been useful in memorising subject matter if no written text was available to the author. In the later manifestation of Taliesin this disadvantage would

¹ London, British Library, Nennius (circa 800 CE) *Historia Brittonum* ca.1100, MS Harley 3859.[De Regibus Deurorum, 65,]

² National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth: '*Llyfr Taliessin*' is a title given by the owner

³ J E Carwyn Williams, *The Poems of Taliesin*, 1987

⁴ Gildas (circa 500 CE) *De Excidio Britanniae* , Section 3 (the 'epistle')

⁵ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *passim.*

have been less of a predicament as the two authors are separated by a large timespan incorporating developments in many facets of society including a growth in scribal activity. Manuscripts such as *Llyfr Taliesin* give a good indication of the writing skills currently at the time.

Translation and interpretation: due to antiquity of the twelve historic poems, it would be fair to say that a definitive interpretation of these does present a very significant challenge. There have been a series of attempts with obvious differences in the finished result. The style of these varies from a kind of later poetic somewhat romanticised version to more matter-of-fact. For example, the 1915 attempt by J. Gwenogfryn Evans presents the whole of the manuscript into a fairly readable form for the student and wider consumption of the public. But of course he is writing in the shadow of the 19th century Romantics. The ending of, for example, #37, runs as follows in his interpretation:

Eagle of the land ! far-reaching is thy glance.
Thou vowest, on thy lively steed, a cultivated farm, a valuable spoil, to Taliessin⁸

J Carwyn Williams⁹ takes a different approach in that the original text of *Llyfr Taliessin* is scrutinized and separated out prior to publication with a result of dismissing the bulk of the material in favour of twelve examples which seemed, after detailed analysis, to be more contemporary with a 6th century composition in particular the idea of a bard writing a text which emulates the attributes of his patron. These are then further analysed to give some meaning or semantic sense to the 20th century reader, but of course no English translation is offered. A later attempt by John Koch and John Carey dating from 1995 offer English translations of six of the twelve historical items as a more contemporary view to Gwernogfryn Evans' particular poetic outlook.¹⁰

The manuscript: in the case of *Lyfr Taliessin* the text is compacted to maximise the space on the valuable material on which it is written, vellum. The visual effect is unlike contemporary poetic print. As these texts emanate from so-called 'bards', items such as musical instruments with medieval terminology are seen sometimes in the later poems (see example iii below) which distinguishes them from those considered as the 6th century verses which have none that can be distinguished as such. This further suggests a significant chronological gap between the different authorship. Some examples of the manuscript text follow without amended spelling.

⁸ John Gwenogfryn Evans, trans. & ed. *Poems from the book of Taliesin*, 1915, p 115, lines 35-37.

⁹ *passim*

¹⁰ *The Celtic Heroic Age*, 1995.

Ex i

Lleuuyd echassaf
Uryen a gyrchaf
pan del uygwaessaf
ar parth goreuhaf ¹¹

Ex ii

gwr gwiw uch y amlw seirch a rodei meirch y eircheit
Kyt as cronyei mal calet ny rannet rac y eneit ¹²

Ex iii

.... 'wyf bard ac wyf telynawr wyf pibyd ac wyf crythawr'

An attempt at translating this into an approachable English style might follow the couplet below:

*I'm a bard and I'm a telyn-player, I'm a pipist and I'm a crwth-player (crwther / crowther)*¹³

The prominent British chronicler Nennius, in his *Historia Brittonum*, lists the historic Taliesin as one of five major poets of the period when Maglocunas, the great British overlord, ruled in the Gwynedd area of north Wales and surrounding areas. Taliesin is listed along with his peers, Talahaern, Neirin, Cian and Bluchbard, bards of renown among the Britons of the 6th century.¹⁴

¹¹ MS Peniarth 2 #39, phrases 1 - 4

¹² Ibid # 44, closing couplet

¹³ Ibid # 48, p. 72, lines 1,2

¹⁴ MS Harley 3859, De Regibus Deurorum, 65.

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