

Mountains talk of kings and dragons, the Brecon Beacons.

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Abstract

This chapter turns to the Brecon Beacons in Wales. This is a mountain range of six main peaks shaped into a long winding ridge which geographically defines the border between south and mid-Wales. Named the Brecon Beacons for the practice of lighting beacons on its ridges, the tallest peak is named Pen y Fan, and standing at 886 metres it is the highest mountain in southern Britain. It is joined by a ridge to the west to the second highest peak, that of Corn Du, at 873 metres. To the south of the ridge there is a Bronze Age necropolis, and on the northern side is a glacial lake which hold tales of being an entrance to fairy land as well as having the magical power to recognise the true king of Wales. This chapter approaches the nature of a 'place' as it draws together the diverse threads of local folklore, sky and star movements, the contemporary use of the place of the Brecon Beacons, and the location's larger cultural themes of the dragon of Wales and its links to kingship. With so many diverse layers of mythology and topography, these two twin peaks present what Belden Lane (2001:42) defined as a place that 'talks back', a place that participates with humanity in its expression. Added to this dialogue is the annual movement of the stars against the mythic landscape providing an annual rhythm that fulfils what Sean Kane (1998:46) claims creates the 'song' of a place. The case study slowly reveals that the roof of the Brecon Beacons, rich in its cultural roots, is a place 'singing to itself' and as such draws sacredness or meaning towards it independent of human conscious actions.

Keywords: Place, the song of a place, Arthurian mythology, Brecon Beacons, Welsh Dragon, Draco, stars and constellations.

The Brecon Beacons is a mountain range comprised of six main peaks shaped into a long winding ridge which geographically defines the border between south and mid Wales. At either end of the ridge are mountain ranges; to the west, Black Mountain and to the east the similarly named, Black Mountains. The actual name of the Brecon Beacons is thought to relate to their use of beacon lighting to warn off attacks, a practice still performed today on unique occasions such as the Millennium celebrations. One of these six peaks is the highest in southern Britain. Named Pen y Fan and standing at 886 metres, it is connected by a ridge to the west to the second highest peak, Corn Du, with a height of 873 metres. The two peaks and their joining ridge thus combine to form a 'beam' in the roof of the Brecon Beacons. From this high ridge two U-shaped glacial valleys flow, one running down to the south, called the Tâf Fechan Valley, and the other to the north, containing a glacial lake, Llyn cwm Llwc (Fig.1).

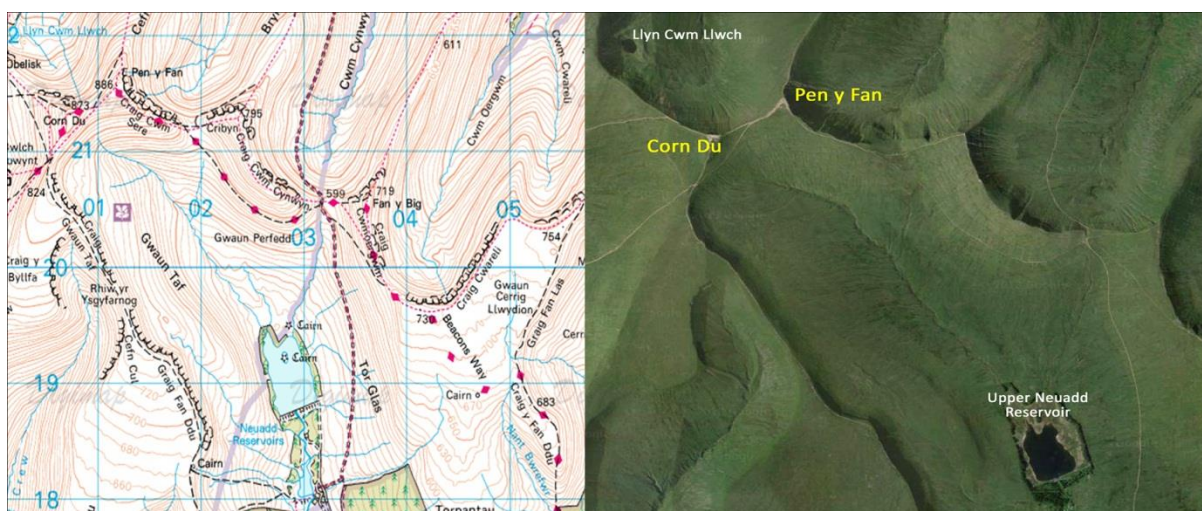


Figure 1. Map of the two valleys that flow northerly and southerly from the twin peaks of Pen y Fan and Corn Du in the Brecon Beacons, South Wales. (Left) the Ordnance Survey map from Digi Maps, showing the Upper Neuadd Reservoir, the contours of the ridge and the small glacial lake of Llyn Cwm Lluch in the top left edge of the map. (Right) The image of the same area from Google Earth.

In 1896 to 1902 a section of the Tâf Fechan Valley was flooded to form the Upper Neuadd Reservoir. The reservoir was built in a rectangular shape with a massive outflow wall across a natural narrowing in the valley (Fig.3 right). Upon this outflow wall there is a plaque proclaiming the date of opening, 10 July 1902, and topped by a 1902 version of a Welsh dragon (Fig. 2). This is not the dragon one normally associates with Wales, for it was only in 1959 that the dragon's image took on its official Welsh form that we know today (Fig. 2 insert).¹

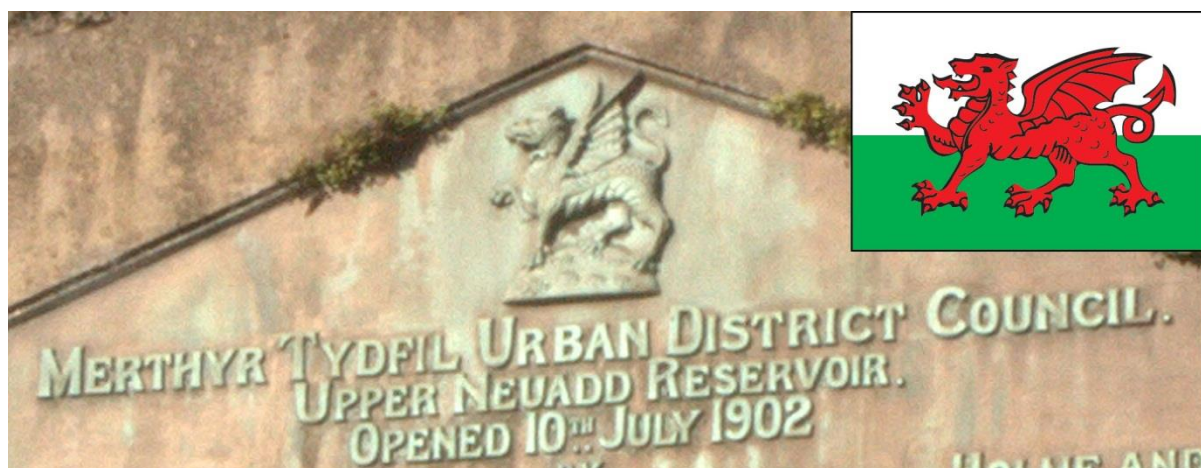


Figure 2. The plaque on the outflow of the Upper Neuadd Reservoir, October 2013, showing a Welsh Dragon image before the emblem was standardised into its national icon in 1959. Insert: the style of the nationalised Welsh dragon. Photo: B. Brady.

¹ Carl Lofmark and G. A. Wells, *A history of the red dragon*, Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 1995), p. 74.

Additionally, in more recent times, the Merthyr Tydfil Angling Association has been given permission to stock the upper reservoir with wild brown trout. This area is now considered to be a premier fly-fishing area, although warnings are given that the trout are rare and extremely hard to catch, with a bag limit of only two per day. According to the fly-fishing website for the area:

Fly fishing is the only permitted method and small imitative patterns are recommended. The trout will not be large and they will not be easy to catch, but it is hard to imagine a more beautiful or more isolated place in which to fish this side of the Scottish border.²

Although the valleys are now mainly home to day trekkers and fly-fishers, these two valleys have, in the past, seen much human activity. Apocryphal stories tell of a Roman road or trail that runs through Tâf Fechan Valley, over the escarpment through to the northern side of the Beacons. Jenny Hall and Paul Sambrook Trysor point out, however, that there is no archaeological evidence of such a road, although they note that there is an old trackway which crosses to one side of the Tâf Fechan Valley and this follows a stream called Nant yr Hen Heol (the Stream of the Old Road).³ Notwithstanding this lack of Roman stonework, the Tâf Fechan Valley and the high ridge between Pen y Fan and Corn Du hold substantial Neolithic and Bronze Age activity. Under or near the water of the Upper Neuadd Reservoir there are at least six cairns or round hut foundations, with some located on a natural island in the reservoir. Those on the island, according to the RCAHM in 1997, have the appearance of sepulchral cairns.⁴ In 2006 this entire grouping of the submerged cairns and those on the island were defined by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust as a round barrow cemetery.⁵ In addition to these structures both Pen y Fan and Corn Du have round barrows on their summits, with the barrow on Pen y Fan containing a bronze horde.⁶ Thus the Tâf Fechan Valley with its high location and its natural raised area of ground — the island in the reservoir — was considered important and probably even sacred by Neolithic and/or Bronze Age people; a place of burial with the peak of Pen y Fan deemed worthy of the gift of a precious horde of metal.

The story of these valleys does not end there, however. At this juncture one could, using the evidence of the ancient metal horde and the Neolithic or Bronze Age cemetery, speculate about the human-bestowed sacredness of the place. Such an argument would, of course, be complemented by the natural liminal nature of mountains for as Christopher Tilley writes,

² 'Fishing in Kite Country'.

³ Jenny Hall and Paul Sambrook Trysor, 'Uplands Initiative Brecon Beacons (East) Archaeological Survey (Part One)', (The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, 2009), (p. 30).

⁴ Wales Royal Commission on Ancient Historical Monuments in, 'An inventory of the ancient monuments in Brecknock (Brycheiniog). The Prehistoric and Roman Monuments Part 1: Later Prehistoric Monuments and Unenclosed Settlements to 1000 A.D.', (London: RCAHM, 1997), pp. 110-111).

⁵ N.W Jones and W.J Owen, 'Prehistoric Funerary & ritual Sites: Eastern Brecon Beacons', (Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, 2006), (p. 26).

⁶ Royal Commission on Ancient Historical Monuments in 'An inventory of the ancient monuments in Brecknock (Brycheiniog). The Prehistoric and Roman Monuments Part 1: Later Prehistoric Monuments and Unenclosed Settlements to 1000 A.D.', (p. 117); Alex Gibson, 'Survey on Pen-y-Fan and Corn Du, Brecon Beacons, Powys, April-May 1990', (National Trust 1990), (p. 6).

mountains are ‘considered to be the dwelling-places of spirits and places where shamans go to practise magic.’⁷ This high ancient burial ground has other features. The ridge between Corn Du to Pen y Fan is orientated at a true azimuth of around 70°, azimuth being the compass bearing measured from due north at 0°. Hence the ridge creates a high horizon which is roughly east-west. If a person stands on the island they therefore will be looking north to see the ridge which thus offers a raised, clear, and well-defined level horizon line at an altitude of around 100.⁸ As a result the view of the stars touching the ridge is clear and sharp with the circumpolar stars, the never setting northern stars, can be seen to skim along the ridge. Thus the natural liminal place of the burial ground and high mountains is added to by being a place special stars can commune with the earth. Adding to this all northern hemisphere stars reach their lowest point in the sky when they are at a bearing of due north. Hence star viewing against the line of the ridge provided an easy marker or reminder of the direction of due north. This feature is one of the threads of meaning in the valley for north is linked to the mythical king of the Britons, Arthur, and indeed by coincidence the ridge and twin peaks are known as Arthur’s Chair.

In 1188 Gerald of Wales in his work, *Journey around Wales*, focused his attention on the glacial lake in the northern valley, named Llyn cwm Llwc. He defined the lake as ‘miraculous’ and gave its location as laying ‘to the south by a range of hills the chief of which is Cadair Arthur, or Arthur’s Chair, so called from two peaks which rise up in the form of a throne.’⁹ This visual phenomenon of a chair is formed by the ridge between the peaks dipping a little below the level of the two peaks, with the peaks taking on the arms of a chair (Fig.3).



Figure 3. Left: The view of Cadair Arthur, October 2013, looking north from the side of the Upper Neuadd Reservoir showing the island on which there is a round barrow cemetery. Right: The view of Cadair Arthur from outside the valley looking north. The wall of the outflow to the Upper Neuadd Reservoir can be seen as the small structure in the middle of the image. Photos: B. Brady.

⁷ Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, (Oxford: Berg, 1994), p. 56.

⁸ All field measurements were taken with a Suunto compass and clinometer by the author in October 2013 on the easterly side of the lake. This altitude measurement is approximated as one cannot now stand on the island.

⁹ Cambrensis Giraldus, *The journey through Wales; and, The description of Wales*, trans Lewis Thorpe, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p. 95.

Gerald explained the link to Arthur and the throne as, ‘This summit is a very lofty spot and most difficult of access, so that in the minds of simple folk it is thought to have belonged to Arthur, the greatest and most distinguished King of the Britons’.¹⁰ The name of Cadair Arthur or Arthur’s Chair persisted on maps until the early twentieth century and is still so named by websites which discuss hiking in the area. This name, however, is by no means unique to these twin peaks. Thomas Green lists at least nine other places, ranging in locations from Edinburgh to Tintagel in Cornwall. Although one can make no claim as to which of these ‘chairs’ is the earliest, many of them appear to be named at dates later than the observations made by Gerald of Wales of Pen y Fan and Corn Du.¹¹ Nevertheless while all have similar topography of a high ridge with raised sides, they do not necessarily have an east-west orientation and so do not observe the northern sky behind the chair.

Having dismissed the folk stories of Cadair Arthur, Gerald detailed the magical qualities of the peaks. He described the peak of Pen y Fan where, ‘On the topmost point of this mountain a spring of water bubbles forth. Its deep basin is square in shape and like a well, but no stream ever runs from it. Trout are said to be found there from time to time.’¹² Gerald considered the mountain a place of magic, a notion supporting Tilley’s link between high places and magic cited earlier. For Gerald this magic was twofold, embracing the deep spring which was like a well which held water that never flowed as a stream, and the periodical presence of trout in this well. Gerald then wrote of the small lake in the northern valley, Llyn cwm Llwc, to which he attributed even greater magical powers. According to Gerald, this lake could at different times turn into rich pasture-lands or become adorned with gardens and orchard while at other times it could be covered with buildings, while groaning horribly when iced over. Yet its central miraculous property lay not in its shape-changing. In the time of ‘the cold winter season’ when water fowl were on its surface, it had the power to recognise the true heir to the kingship of Wales.¹³

Gerald turned this myth into an anecdote. He recounted an earlier story of three men — Milo, Earl of Hereford (f.1139), Gruffydd son of Rhys ap Tewdwr (d. 1137), and Payn FitzJohn (d.1137) — who rode by the lake when it was occupied by water fowl. Milo challenged Gruffydd to let the birds test his claim that the blood of Welsh princes ran in his veins. Gruffydd replied that, since Milo had great power in the country, he should speak to the birds first. Yet neither Milo and Payn could make the birds sing. When Gruffydd claimed loudly that he was the true heir of the ancient Welsh throne, however, ‘all the birds, each according to his kind, beat the water with their wings and began to sing with one accord and to proclaim him master’.¹⁴ For this was a lake that could recognise and announce the true king of Wales and the timing of such announcements was winter, when the water fowl gathered there.

¹⁰ Giraldus, *The journey through Wales; and, The description of Wales*, p. 96.

¹¹ Thomas Green, *Arthuriana : early Arthurian tradition and the origins of the legend*, Lincolnshire: Lindes Press, 2009), pp. 108-109.

¹² Giraldus, *The journey through Wales; and, The description of Wales*, p. 96.

¹³ Giraldus, *The journey through Wales; and, The description of Wales*, p. 94.

¹⁴ Giraldus, *The journey through Wales; and, The description of Wales*, p. 95.

This story of Welsh kingship fits seamlessly into the local name of the ridge and peaks, that of Cadair Arthur, with Arthur being, as Gerald claimed, ‘the greatest and most distinguished King of the Britons’.

Thus stories, folklore, history and legends have gathered around these two mountains making them a ‘thick’ place, one rich with meaning. Tim Ingold has argued that the construction of ‘place’ is where different threads meet and overlap, ‘in which every linear segment serves as a joint, welding together the elements of the pattern into a totality of a higher order.’¹⁵ In the case of these two mountains the components that imply Ingold’s ‘totality of a higher order’ may eventuate, is the ‘welding together’ of the material evidence of sacredness of burials and bronze hordes from the time of pre-history, the topographical features of liminality of the highest mountains in southern Britain, and the evidence in the literature of stories of magic, wonder or ‘other worldliness’ which are linked to the theme of Welsh kingship. These components are sufficient to produce a thick description to a location yet to this potent place, with its emphases on winter, a starry dragon joins the blend.

The Roman sky

Celestial cartography and thus the images within the starry sky have been consistent in Western culture since the Greeks. The constellations of modern western celestial cartography were enshrined in poetry by Aratus in the third century BCE,

Through the two Bears the breathtaking
Dragon meanders like a river, snaking
At great length far and wide, On either side
Of his extent, the Bears wheel with the tide
Beneath them.¹⁶

These poetic images were then immortalised in the first century CE by Claudius Ptolemy in his work, the *Almagest*, where for example he located the constellation of Draco, the Dragon, star by star in the sky defining the position of, ‘the star on the tongue, the star in the mouth, the star above the eye, the star on the jaw, the star above the head...’ and so on listing for the constellation of Draco thirty one stars, their location in the image of the constellation, and their magnitude.¹⁷ The Romans inherited these sky images from the Greeks which became culturally robust as they were a useful set of tools for navigation and calendar matters.¹⁸ Indeed so culturally robust were these Greco-Roman sky images that when they encountered the well-established sky cartography of the Egyptians, the Egyptian cartography was slowly

¹⁵ Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, London: Routledge, 2007), p. 74.

¹⁶ Aratus, *Phaenomena*, trans Aaron Pochigian, (Baltimore, USA: John Hopkins University Press, 2010).L. 45-49

¹⁷ Claudius Ptolemy, *Ptolemy's Almagest*, trans G.J. Toomer, (New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press, 1998).VII 5, III. H44

¹⁸ Bernadette Brady, 'Images in the Heavens: a cultural landscape ', in *The Imagined Sky*, ed. by Darrelyn Gunzburg (Sheffield Equinox Publications 2016)pp. 234-258

lost.¹⁹ Hence when the Romans marched into Wales in 77 CE, so too did their sky.²⁰ Their sky is our sky, one made up of a north celestial pole encircled by the two bears, Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, with the dragon, Draco, curled between them.

Evidence that Greco-Roman cartography had been injected into the Welsh culture can be seen in the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100–1155). In his *Prophecies of Merlin*, he wrote of the world in chaos which he defined by zodiac constellations in disarray, ‘The twins shall surcease from their wonted embrace, and shall call the Urn unto the fountains. The Scales of the Balance shall hang awry until the Ram shall set his crooked horns beneath them.’²¹ Granted, as Mark Williams points out, there is little to no evidence before the time of Geoffrey’s work of the zodiac (and thus Greco-Roman celestial cartography) in Welsh early medieval literature.²² Nevertheless an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Wales, particularly south Wales, in the first century CE was dominated by Roman culture with its Greco-Roman sky. Hence later around the sixth century at the time of the legendary kingship of Arthur, it was this Greco-Roman celestial cartography with its northern bears and dragon that populated the heavens.

Of all the circumpolar constellations Draco traces the longest line through the sky, winding upwards and around the bears. Additionally, a feature of Draco is that at its lowest culmination the dragon’s head points directly downwards and thus its head on, or near, the ground indicates due north. At the latitude of the valley, (51N 53’ 1.8”) if one looks to towards Cadair Arthur the sky dragon will appear to butt its head on or just above the horizon of the ridge, near the peak of Pen y Fan (Fig.4). Draco has maintained this visual orientation despite the effects of precession, the slow shift of the stars against the seasons. Precession is slowly lowering the dragon’s head onto the ridge but over 3500 years the head of Draco has only lowered by 4⁰, with little change to the time of the year when this is seen (Fig.5).

¹⁹ Bernadette Brady, 'Images in the heavens: a cultural landscape', *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 7 (2013), 461-484.

²⁰ Peter Guest, 'The Early Monetary History of Roman Wales: Identity, Conquest and Acculturation on the Imperial Fringe', *Britannia*, 39 (2008), 33-58, 33.

²¹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the kings of Britain*, trans Sebastian Evans, (London: J.M.Dent and Co, 1904), p. 188.

²² Mark Williams, *Fiery Shapes, Celestial Portents and Astrology in Ireland and Wales 700-1700*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 108.

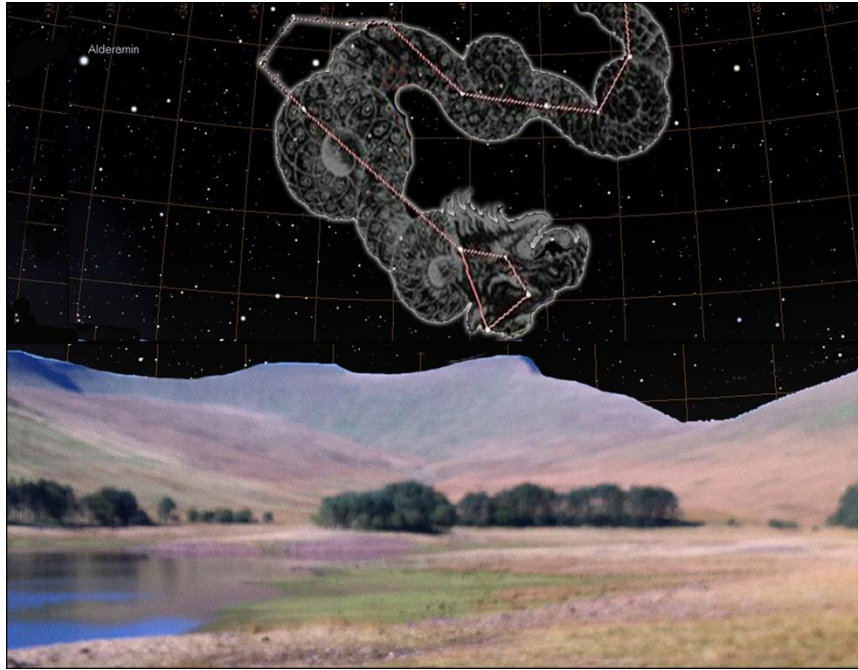


Figure 4. An artistic rendition of Draco at its lower culmination for 1000CE, (indicating due north) over Cadair Arthur from a location adjacent to the reservoir. Image: B.Brady.

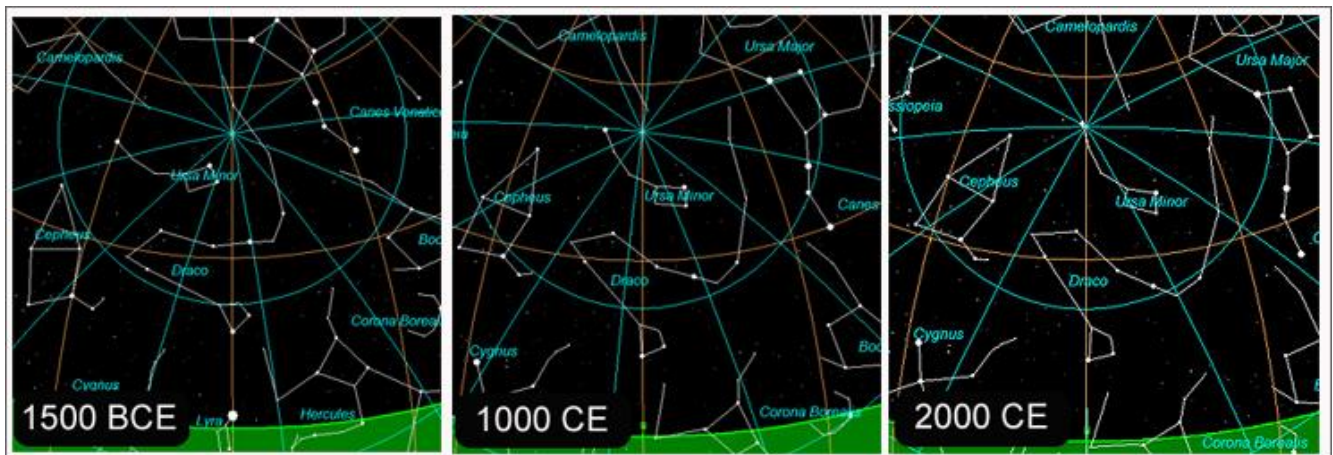


Figure 5 . The lower culmination (azimuth of 0° true north) of Draco for the sun at a depression of 10° below the western horizon (sunset). Left: 1500 BCE, 26 days before spring equinox and the altitude of Draco's head is 17° . MIDDLE: 1000 CE, 17 days before the spring equinox and the altitude of Draco's head is 14° . Right: 2000 CE, 12 days before the spring equinox and the altitude of Draco's head is 13° .

The actual times when Draco will be seen at its lowest culmination, engaging with Arthur's Chair, will depend of the time of the year. Gerald commented that the king-announcing water fowl gathered on this high-altitude lake in 'the cold winter season'. For the Bronze Age, and in Gerald's time, and also for today, Draco will only be seen with its head on the ridge during the winter months (Fig 6). This annual rhythm forms a correlation with Gerald's discussion

on the magical Llyn cwm Llwc which could only proclaim a Welsh king in the winter months, for visually Draco only ‘sits’ in Arthur’s Chair in the winter months and in Wales the dragon is not linked with monsters but instead with kingship.

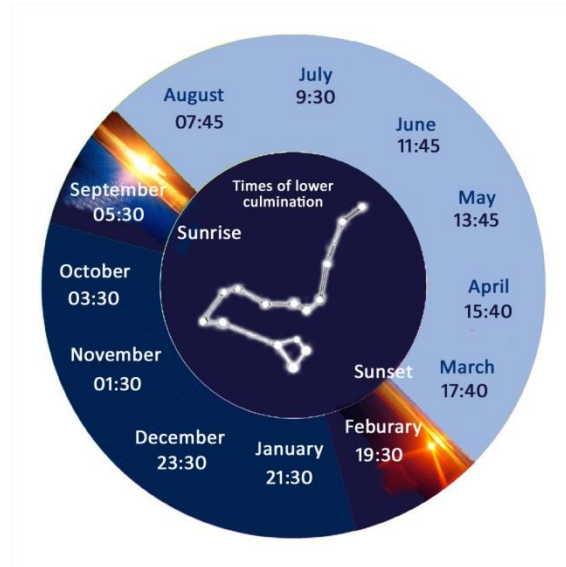


Figure 6. The local mean times to the nearest 5 minutes of the lower culmination of Draco for the year 1000 CE for the fifteenth day of each month (Georgian calendar). Night time is dark blue, while the daylight hours are light blue. Draco’s lower culmination is only visible in the nights of the winter months. This pattern is still applicable today.

The Dragon in Wales

As the Romans colonised Britain, and later Wales, they brought with them the image of the dragon as an icon of military might. In the second century CE, Pat Southern and Karen R. Dixon noted that Roman cavalry adopted the *draco* standard — described as a dragon represented as a flag-like banner that flowed from the top of a pole but in the shape of a windsock so it could capture the air and at times even makes sounds.²³ John Tatlock commented that the dragons of these Roman forces were either coloured red or purple and were used not only in warfare but also in ceremonial ways.²⁴ As the Roman legions and cavalry moved across Britain, they introduced the notion of the dragon as a creature of the air and of military might which should be feared.

Evidence for the Welsh adoption of the dragon stands, according to Tatlock, on uncertain ground.²⁵ Nevertheless, the dragon within Welsh or early British culture was viewed in a positive manner and linked to kingship and military might. In the sixth century the monk, Gildas (c.500–570) wrote a work named *De Excidio Britanniae* (*Ruin of Britain*). This work

²³ Pat Southern and Karen R Dixon, *The Late Roman Army*, London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 126.

²⁴ J. S. P Tatlock, 'The Dragons of Wessex and Wales', *Speculum*, 8 (1933),223-235, 223.

²⁵ Tatlock, 'The Dragons of Wessex and Wales'. 228.

Ronald Hutton considers to be 'the nearest thing that we possess to an account of the sun-Roman period in Britain written by somebody who was part of it'.²⁶ In this work Gildas gave his opinion of a Welsh king, Maglocune, who is believed to be Maelgwn Gwynedd, king of north Wales, and Gildas spoke of him as 'O thou dragon of the island' and then referred to him as 'exceeding many in power' in his role of kingship.²⁷ Furthermore the *Historia Brittonum*, a work of around 800 CE considered to be authored by the Welsh monk, Nennius, described a Red Dragon as the symbol of the British people in their wars against the White Dragon of the Saxons. He wrote of a dream or vision of the two dragons fighting within a pool, 'The pool is the emblem of this world, and the tent that of your kingdom: the two serpents are two dragons; the red serpent is your dragon, but the white serpent is the dragon of the people who occupy several provinces and districts of Britain.'²⁸ Such accounts reinforce the view that the Welsh linked the dragon to their own fighting identity against the invading Saxons.

This Welsh association with the dragon and its link to a warrior king offers an insight into why the Welsh alone in all of Europe maintained a positive view of the dragon. In other parts of Europe the dragon fell victim to the Christian Book of Revelation and became an evil creature associated with Satan.²⁹ Hutton argued that in the early middle ages the dragon throughout most of Europe was considered a 'fire-breathing, flying reptilian monster' which carried off livestock yet, Hutton continued, such an evil creature, in this difficult guise, did not exist in Celtic Britain.³⁰ The dragon as warrior king was instilled in British/Welsh culture quite early and may have been adopted or copied from the Romans as they vacated Wales and Britain and then reinforced against other invading tribes before the sixth century and the arrival of Christianity with its Book of Revelation.

For Celtic Britain, the dragon's kingly association is with Arthur and his father. In the poetic history of Geoffrey of Monmouth, the source of most of the Arthurian legendary material, it is not surprising that Geoffrey names Arthur's father as Uther Pendragon, where 'pendragon' is head dragon.³¹ Arthur's birth was also, according to Geoffrey, foretold by the appearance of the Dragon Star, a type of Celtic star of Bethlehem which appeared in the sky in the shape of two dragons. In the medieval Welsh manuscript the *Mabinogion*, the *Dream of Rhonabwy*, Arthur's sword is described as two fire-breathing serpents that, when unsheathed, produced 'two flames of fire, so dreadful that it was not easy for anyone to look', and he sat upon a 'a chair so large that three armed warriors could sit in it' wrapped in a mantle that bestowed on its wearer the ability to see everyone while being unseen by all.³² Tatlock also reminds us that

²⁶ Ronald Hutton, 'The Early Arthur', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. by Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) pp. 21-35 p. 24.

²⁷ Gildas, 'On the Ruin of Britain', pp. 23-24).

²⁸ Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*, London: [s.n.], 1838), p. 42.

²⁹ Revelation 12:3, 12:9

³⁰ Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan religions of the ancient British Isles: their nature and legacy*: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), pp. 125-126.

³¹ Monmouth, *History of the kings of Britain*, p. 292; Marged Haycock, *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin* Aberystwyth: CMCS, 2007), p. 503.

³² Jeffrey Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, trans Jeffrey Gantz, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 184-185.

Arthur wore a golden helmet sculptured as *simulacro draconis*.³³ All of these attributes have strong sky components; the Dragon star, huge high seats where all can be seen, and golden helmets which could be references to the sun. Hutton suggests that it is entirely possible that the notion of Arthur was a humanisations of ‘pagan god, probably of the sun, who was turned into a human hero after the coming of Christianity.’³⁴ He does add the caveat, however, that nineteenth century authors had the tendency to link mythic heroes to forces of nature. Nevertheless Thomas Green makes the case that the name Arthur has its origins in the Gallo-Brittonic *arto-* ‘bear, warrior and hero’ and he defines Arthur as,

a story-cycle focused on a folkloric Protector of Britain and a peerless warrior, a character of local wonder-tales and the wild parts of the landscape who is intimately connected with the Otherworld.³⁵

Green points out that the brightest star in the northern hemisphere carries the proper name made of the Greek *arktos*, ‘bear’ + *ouros*, ‘guardian, keeper’ means guardian of the bear, or guardian of the north, thus adding to the star or sky theme of Arthur and the dragon.³⁶ Further links between Arthur and the north are seen in an alternative name for Ursa Major as being Arthur’s Wain.³⁷ Additionally there is the fact that the word ‘bear’ was also used in the Greek to indicate the north.³⁸ Whether Arthur was a real figure or a sky phenomenon or a combination of both, it is generally accepted that among his attributes are the dragon, links to the north, and a tendency to dwell in high places, or liminal areas thereby maintaining his otherworldliness.

In returning to the Brecon Beacons, all of these cultural layers reside in the twin mountains and the ridge that joins them. These are, to list them, the very shape of the landscape and its relationship to the movement of the sky, the folklore and tales of kingship which are in sympathy with the sky’s moment which places Draco on Arthur’s Chair only in the winter months. These themes are laid on top of an already liminal place with its burial cairns and two lofty summits. With all these threads, the mountains and the ridge are then moved into a national sphere with the ethno-topography of Cadair Arthur with Arthur being the lost king of Welsh with his attributes of dragons and the north, while the sky adds to this theme by placing the dragon linked to the north and sitting on Arthur’s Chair.

In contemporary thought landscapes tends to be viewed as inert in that it is a place upon which humanity acts. Yet Tilley suggests that such storied landscapes become humanized and encultured as they become saturated with place names which are intertwined with topography and human intentionality and even mythological characters.³⁹ Tilley’s argument can be extended to allow the landscape itself to gain agency, for such a landscape embedded in

³³ Tatlock, 'The Dragons of Wessex and Wales'. 229.

³⁴ Hutton, 'The Early Arthur', p. 28.

³⁵ Thomas Green, *Concepts of Arthur*, Stroud: Tempus, 2007), p. 188.

³⁶ Green, *Concepts of Arthur*, p. 188.

³⁷ Gertude Jobes and James Jobes, *Outer Space: Myths, Name Meanings, Calendars*, New York: Scarecrow, 1964), p. 260.

³⁸ Paul Kunitzsch and Tim Smart, *A Dictionary of Modern Star Names*, Cambridge, USA: Sky Publishing, 2006), p. 19.

³⁹ Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, p. 24.

culture will grow in its potential to influence human activity, even if that activity is believed to be a conscious undertaking by humanity to maintain the place names and stories of the area.

Such is the case for these two mountains and their joining ridge. Recently the area has been made the Brecon Beacons National Park in order to maintain its wilderness, while the whole of the Brecon Beacons has been declared a Dark Sky Area so that the brilliance of the starry sky can be returned to the region. Furthermore, some eight hundred years later, Gerald's story of well and fish is also being reproduced by human activity. The construction of the rectangular Upper Neuadd Reservoir reflects Gerald's magical deep square well. Gerald claimed that no spring flowed from this well is also maintained for the reservoir is a holder of water from which no streams flow, only pipelines and the occasional drainage. Continuing the parallels between Gerald's well and the reservoir is the issue of the trout. Gerald claimed that in the well 'Trout are said to be found there from time to time.'⁴⁰ The reservoir has been stocked by the Merthyr Tydfil Angling Association with brown trout, a fish considered elusive as it rarely rises to a fly so that they can 'disappear' in the reservoir. It is almost as if the Merthyr Tydfil Anglers had intentionally followed Gerald's description of the well. There may also be good reason for the 1902 image of the proud dragon standing at the top of the plaque on the outflow of the reservoir. Placed there with Welsh pride by the reservoir builders, yet this too could be part of the place's voice. The dragon traditionally lives in lonely and desolate spots remote from humankind, lofty with big airy skies but also often near water.⁴¹ If mountains can have agency then these mountains are restoring the habitat of the native Welsh dragon, a creature which can be viewed sitting on Arthur's Chair in the dark winter nights.

There is sacredness as well, the sacredness of a high place and the sacredness of a burial ground, and this sacredness is touchable in its stillness. This place is filled with stillness as a timelessness sits upon it. Being largely deserted, it has a sense of being left alone to its own thoughts. Y-F Taun claims that 'If space allows movement place allows pause.'⁴² And this place requires pause, the fly-fishers have to wait for hours in the stillness as they hunt the elusive fish, hikers pause on the peak of Pen-y-Fan to savour the view and the moment, and even the water is 'paused' held back from its normal eagerness to run down the valley by the reservoir. This is a place still and wild, paused yet alive. It holds many layers of local and national stories and through the helpful hands of eager humans it is expressing the material features of its own story. This place, to use Belden Lane's words, 'demands its own integrity, its own participation in what it "becomes," its own voice.'⁴³

This notion of the 'voice' of a place is described by Sean Kane as 'the song of the place to itself'. Kane considers that this song is created when folklore and nature combine in an

⁴⁰ Giraldus, *The journey through Wales; and, The description of Wales*, p. 96.

⁴¹ Lofmark and Wells, *A history of the red dragon*, p. 24-25.

⁴² Y-F Taun, *Space and place. the perspective of experience*, London: Arnold, 1977), p. 6.

⁴³ Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the sacred: geography and narrative in American spirituality*, Expanded edn, Baltimore, Md. ; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 4.

annual rhythm which ‘preserves a place whole and sacred, safe from human meddling.’⁴⁴ In Kane’s example, the annual rhythm is that of a salmon run up a river which becomes sanctified with local mythology and the salmon, myth and forest, combined as the river’s song, sung not for human ears but for the simply joy of its singing. In the case of the roof of the Brecon Beacons, the natural rhythm that produces the song is the annual winter appearance of the dragon in Arthur’s Chair. Importantly this is independent of whether this is notice or understood or even ‘heard’ by humans. The song that the two mountains and the valley ‘sings to itself’ is a song of dragons, kings and thrones, trout and deep wells.

It is only our ontologies that cast landscape as an inactive canvas. Lane argued that scholarly discourse about sacred place often lacks any basis for appreciating the native traditions that nature ‘talks back’, that it participates in the experiences humans have of it.⁴⁵ With Lane’s arguments in mind the mountains and the ridge of Arthur’s Chair can be considered as, ‘talking back’, and the evidence of this conversation with humanity is suggested in the materialisation of the components of its song, the dragon’s habitat being protected by the human maintained wildness and the human maintained dark skies, the magical stories expressed by the human built deep well, the human stocking of the water with elusive trout, all of which sit in a stillness which is maintained quite instinctually by the human visitors. Humanity is in conversation with these mountains.

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⁴⁴ Sean. A Kane, *Wisdom of the myhtellers*, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press 1998), pp. 46, 50.

⁴⁵ Lane, *Landscapes of the sacred: geography and narrative in American spirituality*, p. 41.

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