

THE DRUIDS

Seminar for Celtic Religions module, 9 March 2021

GREEK WRITERS ON THE DRUIDS IN GAUL AND GALATIA

- Aristotle (attrib.), 384-332 B.C.: Druids as barbarian **philosophers** of the Celts and Galatai [Galatia = Anatolia]
- Sotion of Alexandria (attrib.), 2nd cent. B.C.
- Polyhistor, c.105-35 B.C.: Druids among the barbarian **philosophers** of Gaul



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POSEIDONIOS

- c.135–c.51 B.C.: Greek politician, astronomer, astrologer, geographer, historian, mathematician, **ethnographer**
- History of 146–88 BC (52 vols.)
- Book 23: account of Celts, written c. 80 B.C.
- Available only through reconstruction from works of other authors
- J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 (1960)
- Critics include Daphne Nash (1976)

The systematic study and description of peoples, societies, and cultures. *OED* s.v. ethnography.



Bust of POSEDONIUS Museo
Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli

Posidonio, replica augustea (23 ac.-14 dc ca) da originale del
100-50 ac. ca. 6142.JPG, CC BY 3.0

POSEIDONIOS'S DEBTORS

- Athaneus of Naucratis (fl. c. end of 2nd cent. – beg. 3rd cent. A.D.)
- Strabo (64 or 63 BC – c. AD 24)
- Diodorus Siculus (fl. 1st cent. B.C.)
- Julius Caesar (100 BC – 44 B.C.)

'Caesar went to Gaul with Posidonius in his satchel' (Armando Momigliano)

'The similar material in Caësar's *Gallic War* is taken from Posidonius without acknowledgement and with significant and highly debatable omissions and additions' (Tierney 1960, 198)

1. ATHENAEUS OF NAUCRATIS

- Greek rhetorician and grammarian, fl. c. end of 2nd cent. – beg. 3rd cent. A.D.
- Direct quotations from Poseidonios: four out of nine surviving quotations (Nash 1976), 112
- But Poseidonius, in the twenty-third book of his Histories, says – "the Celts sometimes have single combat at their entertainments. For having assembled in arms, they go through the exercise, and make a faint at, and sometimes they even go so far as toward one another. And being irritated by this, if the bystanders do not stop them, they will proceed even to kill one another. But in olden times," he continues, "there was a custom that a hind quarter of pork was put on the table, and the bravest man took it; and if any one else laid claim to it, then the two rose up to fight till one of them was slain. And other men in the theatre having received some silver or gold money, and some even for a number of earthen vessels full of wine, having taken pledges that the gifts promised shall really be given, and having distributed them among their nearest connections have laid themselves down on doors with their faces upwards, and then allowed some bystander to cut their throats with a sword."

By Spiridon Ion Cepleanu - Own work Derivative map, background of Uwe Dederling (File:Turkey relief location map.jpg), CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18717595>



2. STRABO

She said the first time she saw a decapitated head in a dustbin it did not faze her “at all”.
Independent, on Shamima Begum, 14
February 2019

- Greek geographer, philosopher, historian from Asia Minor, 64 or 63 BC – c. AD 24
- five sections attributed to Poseidonios, e.g. on island off the Loire and Celtic head-hunting
- *** In addition to their folly, they have a barbarous and absurd custom, common however with many nations of the north, of suspending the heads of their enemies from their horses' necks on their return from battle, and when they have arrived nailing them as a spectacle to their gates. Posidonius says he witnessed this in many different places, and was at first shocked, but became familiar with it in time on account of its frequency.



By André Thévet - Original uploads comes from Potraits from the Dibner Library of the History and Science of Technology. Updated upload from the original scan from the book André Thevet, Les vrais pourtraits et vies des hommes illustres, chap. 35, page 76, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=581572>

HEAD HUNTING AND THE CULT OF THE HEAD

- The Story of Mac Dá Thó's Pig and Hound (8th cent.): The Champion's Covenant: Ulstermen at Emain

'the hosts of Ulster's valiant heroes were there. As they were seated, it being dusk, and the day drawing towards its close they saw a big uncouth fellow of exceeding ugliness drawing near them into the hall ... The churl's appearance was horrible and ugly ...

"Since you Ulstermen have excelled all the folks of those lands in strength, prowess, valour; in rank, magnanimity, dignity; in truth, generosity and worth, get one among you to give me the boon I crave.

... let whoever of you come who dares, so I may cut off his head tonight and he mine tomorrow night."

- Then the *bachlach* [churl] put his neck across the block. Fat-Neck dealt a blow across it with the axe till it stuck in the block underneath, cutting off the head till it lay by the base of the fork-beam, the house being filled with the blood. Immediately the *bachlach* rose, recovered himself, clasped his head, block and axe to his breast, thus made his exit from the hall with blood streaming from his neck.
- The fourth night the *bachlach* returned, and he was fierce and furious ... "Where is that poor mad mortal that is called Cú Chulainn? ... greatly you fear to die." With that Cú Chulainn sprang towards him and dealt him a blow with the axe, hurling his head to the top rafter of the Red Branch till the whole hall shook. Cú Chulainn again caught up the head and gave it a blow with the axe and smashed it. After that the *bachlach* rose up.
- Cú Chulainn said "... death awaits me, and I would rather have death with honour." (Koch with Carey, 1994), pp. 92-5

3. DIODORUS SICULUS

- Also known as Diodorus of Sicily; Greek historian, author of 40-book *Bibliotheca historica*, fl. 1st cent. B.C.
- no direct mention of Poseidonios
- excerpts of Poseidonios in Athenaeus and Strabo have close parallels in his work, suggesting that he borrowed from the latter two
- Book V: account of the Gauls, mentioning the Druids



HUMAN SACRIFICE

- Philosophers, learned in religious affairs, called Druids
- human sacrifice: 'it is a custom of theirs that no one should perform a sacrifice without a "philosopher"' (Diodorus Siculus)
- Where classical writers are particularly valuable is precisely in areas where their evidence marries with archaeological data: for instance both demonstrate the existence of human sacrifice and of head-collection' (Green 1986), p. 15.

- Gaulish rituals where human body parts have been found, but no clear evidence of human sacrifice in Gaul, whereas there is in Germany and Britain (Goldsworthy 2006), p. 243.
- Germany: enclosures [*viereckshenzen*, quadrangular hills], La Tène period / earlier
- Holzhausen, Bavaria: 'an enclosure with three shafts: one, eight metres deep, with a wooden pole at the bottom surrounded by traces of flesh and blood' (Green 1986), p. 21
- Swanwick, Hampshire, c. 1000 B.C., *ibid.*, and cf.
<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1010833>

ARCHAEOLOGY

- Discovered in 1984
- Lindow Moss, peat bog in Lindow, Wilmslow, Cheshire
- Male, mid-20s, possibly of high social status
- strangled, hit on head and throat cut
- violent, ?ritualistic death



- Gundestrup Cauldron 200 B.C. to 300 B.C. (La Tène / Early Roman Iron Age)
- discovered 1891 in peat bog near hamlet of Gundestrup, Himmerland, Denmark

*** ICONOGRAPHY

- Lucan, *Pharsalia* (61-5 AD), 1.444, 491-5: a Celtic sacred grove near Massalia where three Gaulish gods (Taranis, Teutates, and Esus) received human sacrifice (Koch 2006, p. 1199)
- *Commenta Bernensia* (10th cent. MS held at the Burgerbibliothek, Bern): Expands on Lucan, saying that victims of druidic human sacrifice dedicated to Teutates were drowned
- Described as a deep shaft, well, vat (Koch 2006), p. 1551
- representative of religious enclosures with possible use for ritualistic purposes



INSULAR CELTIC LITERATURE: DEATH OF DIRAMAIT MAC CERBAILL

- ... his druids were brought to Diarmait, and he asked them by what death he would die.

"Killing," said the first druid ...

"Drowning," said the second druid ...

"Burning," said the third druid ...

.....

Áed Dub, standing in the door of the house [thrust] his spear into [Diarmait's] breast until it broke his back. ... The Ulaid outside seized the house, and burnt it over those who were within. **Diarmait went into the ale vat until the ridge pole of the house fell upon his head and killed him.**

The king's body was hacked and burnt apart from his head ... (Koch with Carey, 1994, pp. 202-4)

4. JULIUS CAESAR

- Roman general and statesman, 100 BC – 15 March 44 B.C.
- *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*: on Caesar's wars against Gallic tribes, 58 B.C. – 50 B.C.
- Book VI, chapters 11-20: writes of the Druids



JULIUS CAESAR: CAREER

- coalition with Pompey and Crassus, both former lieutenants: 60 B.C.
- Consul: 59 B.C.
- Pro-consulship, 58 B.C.: acquires Cisalpine Gaul (between Alps, Apennines and Adriatic), until 54 B.C.
- Transalpine Gaul also added: 'springboard for conquests beyond Rome's northwest frontier' (Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Caesar-Roman-ruler/The-first-triumvirate-and-the-conquest-of-Gaul>)
- 390 B.C., Gauls sacked Rome
- 109 B.C., Italy invaded from the north during Cimbrian War (Cimbrian and Teutonic Germanic tribes) ***

WHY GAUL NOT GERMANY?

- Command in his hands for limited time
- wanted to return to Rome with glory and wealth from campaigning
- focus attention on Gaul: 'to bring the whole region under Roman dominion'
- he could reasonably hope achieve this, whereas a German conquest was too large an objective (Goldsworthy 2006, p. 374)

CAESAR, *DE BELLO GALLICO*

- 6.21: The customs of the Germans are very different from those of the Gauls. They have **no druids to preside over religious matters, nor do they concern themselves with sacrifices ...** (Hammond, 1996, p. 129)
- 6.24: There was a time when the Gauls were more courageous than the Germans and took offensive military action against them. Because of their high population density and lack of land, they sent colonies across the Rhine ... [and] seized the most fertile areas of Germany ... [but] [t]hese days they endure the same state of poverty, privation, and hardship as the Germans, and have the same kind of food and clothing ... The Gauls gradually grew accustomed to being defeated, and were beaten in many battles, so now they do **not reckon themselves to be even equal in bravery to the Germans** (Hammond 1996, p. 131)
- 'the main purpose for including the 'Gallic excursus'.... was to justify the decision not to advance beyond the Rhine. This was achieved by accentuating ethnic differences between the *Galli*, to the west of the river, and the *Germani* to the east' (Webster 1999)

THE DRUIDS AND HUMAN SACRIFICE

- Association of druids with human sacrifice: 'propaganda value' to making it seem so (Webster 1999, 13)
- ... they who are engaged in battles and dangers, either sacrifice men as victims, or vow that they will sacrifice them, and **employ the Druids as the performers of those sacrifices**; because they think that unless the life of a man be offered for the life of a man, the mind of the immortal gods cannot be rendered propitious, and they have sacrifices of that kind **ordained for national purposes**. Others have figures of vast size, the limbs of which formed of osiers they fill with living men, which being set on fire, the men perish enveloped in the flames. They consider that the oblation of such as have been taken in theft, or in robbery, or any other offense, is more acceptable to the immortal gods; but when a supply of that class is wanting, they have recourse to the oblation of even the innocent.

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- BG 6.1 – value put on presence at sacrifices: 'If any individual or group of people does not abide by their decision [re. disputes/ crimes], the druids ban them from sacrifices. This is their most severe punishment. Those who are banned in this way are counted among the wicked and criminal: everyone shuns them and avoids approaching or talking to them, so as not to suffer any harm from contact with them ...' (Harding 1996, p. 126)

THE ROMANS AND HUMAN SACRIFICE

- Live burials of Gauls and Greeks: 229, 216, 114 .B.C. (Carver et al 2018), 13
- Romans outlawed human sacrifice in 97 B.C. (Pliny the Elder)
- 'to maintain ... superiority [over other people] the Romans had to mark themselves as more civilized than those other people' (Carver et al 2019), 13
- ritual killing, e.g. of prodigies
- Erasure of human sacrifice from history in multiple cultures; historic incidences 'manipulated into less violent lights or ... portrayed as horrible acts that new generations had the sense to ban or just remove from the record altogether. It was a distortion of history out of pride' (Carver et al 2018, citing Carl Pfluger, 'Progress, Irony and Human Sacrifice' *The Hudson Review* , 48, no. 1 (1905), 67-71)

POST-CONQUEST GAUL: PERSECUTION OF THE DRUIDS

- state proscriptions against druids following Gallic war:
 1. Augustus forbade their religion among Roman citizens
 2. Tiberius: Senate decree against druids, diviners and healers
 3. Claudius: abolition of 'cruel and inhuman religion of the druids in Gaul'
(Webster 1999, p. 11)

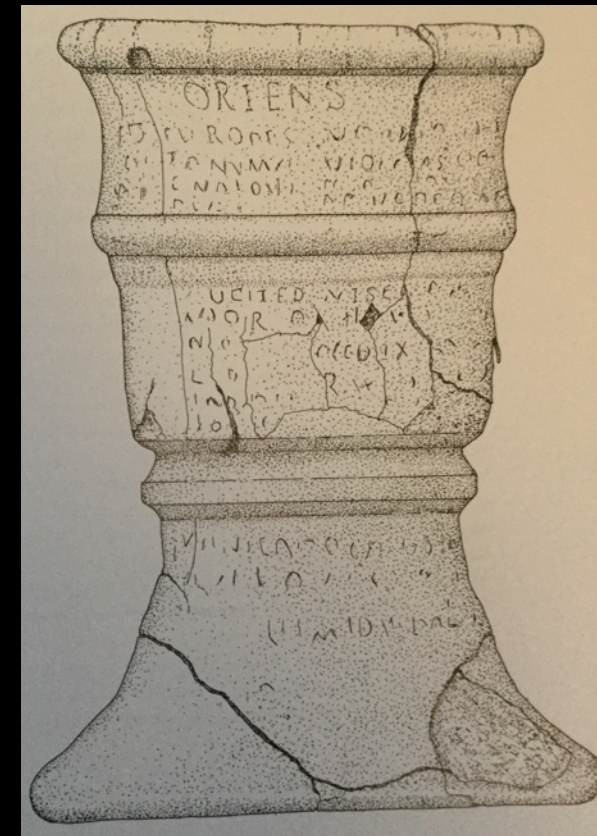
POST-CONQUEST GAUL: CHANGING REPRESENTATION

- 'magicians'; association with secluded places (groves, 'beneath the trees') (Webster 1999, 12)
- Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79), *Natural History*, 16.95:

*** The druids — for that is the name they give to their magicians — held nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and the tree that bears it, supposing always that tree to be the oak.

Having made all due preparation for the sacrifice and a banquet beneath the trees, they bring thither two white bulls, the horns of which are bound then for the first time. Clad in a white robe the priest ascends the tree, and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle, which is received by others in a white cloth. They then sacrifice the victims, offering up their prayers that God will render this gift of his auspicious to those to whom he has so granted it. It is the belief with them that the mistletoe, taken in drink, will impart fecundity to all animals that are barren, and that it is an antidote for all poisons. Such are the religious feelings which we find entertained towards trifling objects among nearly all nations.

- BG: At a certain time of year they sit in judgement in a sacred spot in the territory of the Carnutes, in an area right in the middle of Gaul. Everyone who has a dispute comes to this place from every region, and submits to their decisions and judgements. (Hammond 1996, p. 127)
- 'The association of druids with secluded places ... may be a signifier of the emergence ... of an underground movement' (Webster 1999, 11)
- Discovery at Chartres in 2005 of Roman remains dating to early 2nd cent. AD.
- debris of burnt-out house with underground shrine containing liturgical material (incense-burners – *turibula*, ceramic lamps, sacrificial knife)
- Druidism possibly 'continued subliminally in many Roman towns in Gaul and Britain' (Alderhouse-Green 2017)



Alderhouse-Green 2017, p. 329

AUGUSTUS CAESAR AND EMPIRE-WIDE RELIGIOUS POLICY



- 63 BC–AD 14), first Roman emperor (from 27 BC)
- creation of an Imperial cult, in early years of his rule
- his office and rule divinely approved
- real opposition of Rome to druids came as they began to promote emperor worship and an Empire-wide religious policy (Webster 1999, 13)
- alongside this, proscription of religious groups / practices of old orders

DRUIDS AND ANTI-ROMAN PROPHECY

- Druids became a target for persecution because of their involvement in anti-Roman prophecy (Webster 1999, 13)
- Capitoline temple, burnt down AD69, Year of the Four Emperors, army loyal to Vespasian (69-79AD) entered the city violently
- 'the burning of the Capitol [drove] men to the belief that the Empire's days were numbered. They reflected that Rome had been captured by the Gauls in the past ... Now ... fate had ordained this fire a a sign of the gods' anger, and of the passing of world dominion to the nations north of the Alps. Such at any rate was the message proclaimed by the idle superstition of druidism' (Tacitus, *Histories*, book 4; quoted Webster, 1999, p. 14)



Strabo (64 or 63 BC – c. AD 24)

DRUIDIC ISLANDS?

- Strabo, *Geography*, IV, chapter 4.6:

In the ocean, he says, there is a small island, not very far out to sea, situated off the outlet of the Liger River; and the island is inhabited by women of the Samnity, and they are possessed by Dionysus and make this god propitious by appeasing him with mystic initiations as well as other sacred performances; and no man sets foot on the island, although the women themselves, sailing from it, have intercourse with the men and then return again. And, he says, it is a custom of theirs once a year to unroof the temple and roof it again on the same day before sunset, each woman bringing her load to add to the roof; but the woman whose load falls out of her arms is rent to pieces by the rest, and they carry the pieces round the temple with the cry of "Ev-ah," and do not cease until their frenzy ceases; and it is always the case, he says, that some one jostles the woman who is to suffer this fate.

Tacitus (c. AD 56 – c. 120),
Roman politician and historian

TACITUS, ANNALS, XIV

On the beach stood the adverse array, a serried mass of arms and men, with women flitting between the ranks. In the style of Furies, in robes of deathly black and with dishevelled hair, they brandished their torches; while a circle of Druids, lifting their hands to heaven and showering imprecations, struck the troops with such an awe at the extraordinary spectacle that, as though their limbs were paralysed, they exposed their bodies to wounds without an attempt at movement. Then, reassured by their general, and inciting each other never to flinch before a band of females and fanatics, they charged behind the standards, cut down all who met them, and enveloped the enemy in his own flames.

The next step was to install a garrison among the conquered population, and to demolish the groves consecrated to their savage cults: for they considered it a pious duty to slake the altars with captive blood and to consult their deities by means of human entrails. While he was thus occupied, the sudden revolt of the province was announced to Suetonius.

"Could Llyn Cerrig Bach have been a major focus of Druidical ritual? The presence of objects such as a trumpet, gang chains and so much military equipment suggests that this is not a site solely of local significance. The large numbers of weapons suggest that objects may have been offered before or after battle."

THE DRUIDS AND ANGLESEY

- Llyn Cerrig Bach: 150+ bronze and iron objects discovered in 1942
- e.g. Crescentic bronze plaque (left); also 7 swords, 6 spearheads, blacksmith's tools, fragments of 2 cauldrons, fragments of iron wagon tyres, 2 gang chains, part of a bronze trumpet, animal bones [held at National Museum of Wales, St Fagan's: see https://museum.wales/iron_age_teachers/artefacts/llyn_cerrig_bach/]
- '[I]n the case of Llyn Cerig Bach the resident engineer on the excavation recorded human remains too but these did not appear in the report written by Cyril Fox who did not conduct the excavation': Nigel Cross, 2009 @https://resourcesforhistory.com/celtic_druids.htm



PHILOSOPHY AND THE DRUIDS

- Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170 – c. 235 AD): *Philosophumena* (early 3rd cent. AD)
- Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215 AD), *Stromata* (c. 150 – c. 215 AD)

"Thus philosophy, a thing of the highest utility, flourished in antiquity among the barbarians, shedding its light over the nations. And afterwards it came to Greece. First in its ranks were the prophets of the Egyptians; and the Chaldeans among the Assyrians; and the Druids among the Gauls; and the Samanaeans among the Bactrians; and the philosophers of the Celts"

- Valerius Maximus (1st cent. AD)

- Druids' philosophy close to that of Pythagoras (c. 570 BC – 495 BC) (Koch 2006), p. 612
- metempsychosis: soul could be reborn in animal / human bodies

Strabo: 'Both these and the others [Druids, Bards and Vates] assert that the soul is indestructible, and likewise the world, but that sometimes fire and sometimes water have prevailed in making great changes'

Caesar: 'They wish to inculcate this as one of their leading tenets, that souls do not become extinct, but pass after death from one body to another, and they think that men by this tenet are in a great degree excited to valour, the fear of death being disregarded.'



- *Immram Brain*, late 7th cent. / early 8th cent.

- stanzas 53-4, of Manannán mac Lir:

He will be in the shape of every beast,

Both on the azure sea and on land,

He will be a dragon before hosts at the onset,

He will be a wolf of every great forest.

He will be a stag with horns of silver

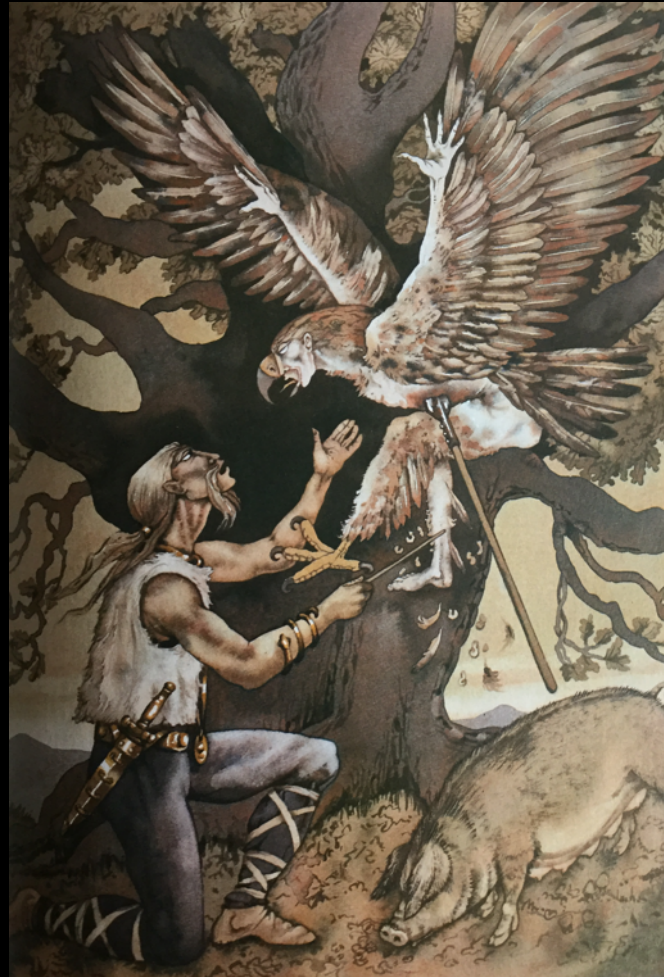
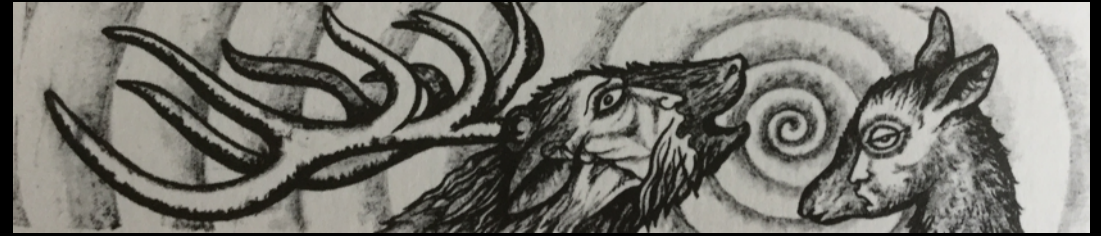
In the land where chariots are driven,

He will be a speckled salmon in a full pool,

He will be a seal, he will be a fair-white swan.

- Pedair Keinc y Mabinogi, fourth branch

- Ystoria Taliesin (16th cent.)



Margaret Jones in Gwyn Thomas, *Y Mabinogi* (Caerdydd, 1996); *Chwedl Taliesin* (Caerdydd, 1992)

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