

# Early heroic or battle poetry and the 'heroic ideal'



Spear-fighting on the Aberlemno stone (Aberlemno 2),  
Angus, 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century

# Lyric poetry

- Focus on feelings in response to religion, nature and love
- Many genres – individual poems, and poems related to prose sagas or well-known stories (Suibne, Heledd, Llywarch Hen...)
- Vivid description of the natural world, often as mirror for human feelings or circumstances

# Heroic/battle poetry

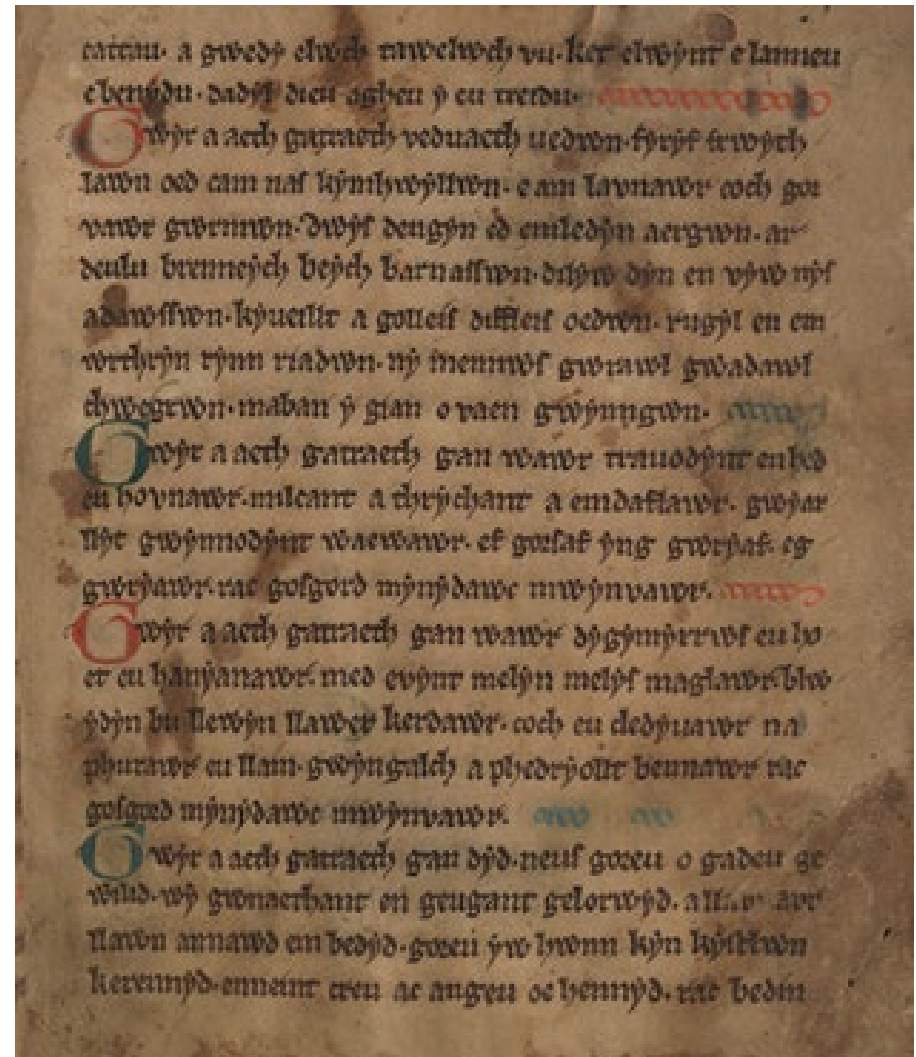
- Aneirin, 'Y Gododdin'
- Taliesin's 'historical' poems, e.g. to Urien Rheged

# The heroic ideal

- A feature of Celtic literature but also in ancient Greek, Anglo-Saxon, Norse...
- Aristocratic warrior society
- Importance of personal honour
- Loyalty to your lord and courage in battle
- Winning fame leads to immortality (ensured by poets' praise)
- Ferocity in battle & generosity in the feasting-hall
- Expressed particularly strongly in 'Y Gododdin' and the Irish 'Heroic Cycle' or 'Ulster Cycle'

# ‘Y Gododdin’

- the Book of Aneirin, mid-13c
- two texts, A and B, written by different scribes from different sources
- B has archaic orthography (spelling system), probably deriving from a source dated 9c/10c
- so we have two versions of some stanzas!
- Warriors of the North British kingdom of Gododdin, based at Edinburgh, fighting at Catraeth against the Angles of Deira and Bernicia (c.600)



# ‘Y Gododdin’

- A Brythonic poem, composed in the Old North and preserved in Wales to commemorate a lost golden or heroic age?
- Or a later, Welsh composition conjuring the essence of that age?

# The heroic ideal

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# Ferocity & generosity in 'Y Gododdin'

The renowned Isag ...

Like the flowing sea was his demeanor  
for modesty and liberality  
and the gracious drinking of mead.

Where his weapons struck there was no retaliation,  
he never wavered, never faltered.

His sword resounded in the heads of mothers.\*

Wall of battle, he was praised, the son of Gwyddno.

\*Seiniesyd ei gleddyf ym mhen mamau

Jarman, *Aneirin: Y Gododdin*, ll. 303-10

# Payment for mead

Warriors charged, leaping forward together,  
short-lived, drunk over the clarified mead,  
the retinue of Mynyddog, renowned in battle,  
they paid for their mead feast with their lives\*

\*Gwerth eu gwledd o fedd fu eu henaid

II. 338-40

Fresh mead was their feast, and it was poison  
Glasfedd eu hancwyn, a gwenwyn fu

I. 79

# Courage and ferocity: Animal imagery

Wearing a brooch, in the forefront, **a wolf** in fury,  
the generous torqued warrior gained amber beads.  
Of great worth was Gwefrfawr in return for wine from the cup,  
He repelled the attack with blood down his cheek.  
Caeog, cynhorog, **blaid**d ym maran,  
Gwefrawr goddiwawdd torchawr am ran...

ll. 49-52

Three times fiercer than a savage **lion**,  
Bubon acted, full of anger.  
Tri gwaeth ffrawdd ffrawddus **lew**,  
Bubon a woreu, bardew

ll. 945-6

# Courage, torcs and brooches!

Wearing a brooch, in the forefront, **a wolf** in fury,  
the generous torqued warrior gained amber beads.  
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Caeog, cynhorog, **blaidd** ym maran,

Gwefrawr goddiwawdd torchawr am ran... ll. 49-52



**The Snettisham Great Torc (Iron Age)**  
Gold alloy torc with ornamented terminals  
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

# Horses, swords, (throwing-)spears

Bu gwir mal amceuddai Cadlew,  
Ni ddeliis meirch neb Marchlew.  
Heesid waywawr yng nglyw  
I ar llemenig llwybrdew.  
Cyn ni faged am fyn, am borth,  
Dywal ei gleddyfal yn ei orth.  
Heesid onn o bedryollt ei law  
I ar feiniell fygedorth.  
Yd rannai rhygu ei rywin,  
Yd laddai â llafn fraith oeithin.  
Fal pan fêl medel ar freithin  
Y gwnâi Farchlew waedlin.

It was true as Cadlew spoke,  
no one's horses overtook Marchlew  
He cast spears in battle  
from a bounding, wide-tracked steed.  
Although his rearing was not with burdens, with  
suffering,  
His sword-stroke was fierce in his battle-  
station.  
He threw spears from the grasp of his hand  
From his steaming slender bay horse.  
The most lovable one distributed his plentiful  
wine,  
He slew with a blade, blood-stained and  
savage.  
As a reaper strikes in unsettled weather  
So Marchlew would cause blood to flow.

# Weapon imagery conveying warrior attributes

Rhag godwrf ei aesawr godeched...

Maint a gaffai ei law nid atgoriai ohonaw,

there was flight before the resounding of his shield ... there did not  
return of it as much as his hand could grasp

ll. 957-9

Coch eu cleddyfawr, na phurawr / Eu lläin ...

red were their swords, may their spears never be cleansed

ll. 104-5

Gŵr ffrwythlon fflamddur rhag esgar

He was a man of vigour with flaming steel against the enemy.

ll. 720

## Ciaran Carson (introduction to *The Táin*):

The young Cú Chulainn overhears the druid and seer Cathbad pronouncing that if a warrior took up arms on that day, his name would endure in Ireland as a byword for heroic deeds, and that stories about him would be told forever.

Whereupon Cú Chulainn rushes to the king and asks him for arms ... The druid's corollary when he sees him taking up arms, that the life of such a warrior would be short, means nothing to him. His death will be his salvation.

# Gwên and Llywarch (ed./trans. Jenny Rowland)

*Teneu fy ysgwyd ar asswy fy nhu  
cy bwyf hen as gallaf  
ar rodwydd forlas gwiliaf*

*Na wisc wedy kwyn. na vit vrwyn dy vryt.  
llem awel chwerw gwenwyn.  
amgyhud vy mam mab yt wyf.*

*Neut atwen ar vy awen  
yn hanuot. o un achen.  
trigwyd oric elwic a wen.*

*Llym vym par llachar ygryt  
armaaf y wylyaw. ryt  
kynnyt anghwyf duw gennyt.*

[*Llywarch*]:

Thin is my shield on my left side.  
Although I may be old, I can do it:  
I will keep watch at Rhodwydd Forlas.

[*Gwên*]:

Do not arm after dinner; let your thoughts not  
be heavy.  
Sharp is the wind; bad feeling is hurtful.  
My mother tells me that I am your son.

[*Llywarch*]:

I know in my heart  
that we spring from one stock.  
You are tarrying a precious while, Gwên.

[*Gwên*]:

Sharp is my spear, bright in battle.  
I intend to keep watching on the ford.  
Although I may not escape, God be with you.

*[continued on next slides...]*

*O diegyd ath welif  
oth ryledir ath gwynif.  
na choll wyneb [gwr] ar gnif.*

*Ny chollaf dy wyneb trin wosep wr  
pan wisc glew yr ystre.  
porthaf gnif kynn mudif lle.*

*Redegawc tonn ar hyt traeth.  
ech adaf torrif aruaeth.  
kat [agdo] gnawt ffo ar ffraeth.*

*Yssit ym a lauarwyf.  
briwaw pelydyr parth y bwyf.  
ny lauaraf na ffowyf.*

*Medal migned kalet riw.  
rac carn cann tal glann a vriw.  
edewit ny wnelher ny diw.*

[Llywarch]:

If you escape, I will see you.

If you are killed, I will lament you.

Do not lose the honour of a warrior despite battle  
hardship.

[Gwên]:

I will not lose your honour, battle-ready man,  
when warriors arm for the border.

I will suffer hardship before I will yield ground.

[Llywarch]:

Running is a wave along the beach;  
soon intentions break —

?a scant protection in battle — frequent is fleeing by big  
talkers.

[Gwên]:

I have that which I speak about.

There will be breaking of shields where I am.

I will not say that I will not flee.

[Llywarch]:

Soft is the swampy ground: firm the slope.

The edge of a bank gives way beneath the hoof of a white  
steed.

A promise which is not fulfilled is useless.

*Gwasgarawt neint am glawd caer.  
a minneu armaaf.  
ysgwyf [brwyf] briw. kynn techaf.*

*Y corn ath rodeis di vryen.  
ae arwest eur am y en.  
chwyth yndaw oth daw aghen.*

*Yr ergryt aghen rac angwyr lloegyr  
ny lygraf vym mawred.  
ny duhunaf rianed.*

*Tra vum .i. yn oet y gwas draw.  
a wisc o eur y ottoew  
bydei re ruthrwn y waew.*

*Diheu diweir dy waes.  
ti yn vyw ath dyst ry las.  
ny bu eidyl hen yn was.*

[Gwên]:

Waves spread out around the bank of a fortress,  
and I intend  
that there will be a broken, shattered shield  
before I retreat.

[Llywarch]:

The horn which Urien gave you  
with its band of gold around its mouthpiece —  
blow on it if you come to have need.

[Gwên]:

Despite battle-horror before the warriors of  
England  
I will not mar my greatness.  
I will not awaken maidens.

[Llywarch]:

When I was the age of the youth over there  
who wears his spurs of gold  
it would be swiftly that I rushed to the spear.

[Gwên]:

Certainly your assertion is true:  
you are alive and your witness slain.  
No old man was a weakling in youth.