

Okay, so to recap, last week we looked at lyric poetry, which is the kind of poetry that focusses on personal feelings in response to religion, nature and love. (SLIDE 2) Sometimes we find it in individual works by anonymous poets, like the Irish monks, or it might be the work of poets who are known to us, like Dafydd ap Gwilym.

Or sometimes the poetry is placed in the mouth of a character from a prose saga, like the Irish figure of Suibne Geilt who was driven insane and lived as a wild man. Or it might be part of a story which was clearly well known to the audience, even though no prose text has actually survived, as in the case of the Welsh 'saga' poetry spoken by Heledd and Llywarch Hen, which relates to the loss of Welsh territory to the Anglo-Saxons.

So this week we're moving on to heroic poetry, or battle poetry (SLIDE 3). Some of this is very early too. Dafydd's lecture talks about the poems attributed to Aneirin and Taliesin, and there's more on this in chapter one of his book - it talks about the setting of some of the early poetry in north Britain rather than Wales, and the debates over how old it really is. I should emphasize that there's also debate over whether these poems really were the work of poets called Aneirin or Taliesin.

But whoever wrote them, they are certainly old and important.

I don't want to reiterate what Dafydd has said in his lecture and book, but I'd like to talk a bit about what we mean by heroic poetry and specifically the heroic ideal.

(SLIDE 4) Firstly, though we can certainly call this a feature of early Celtic literature it is also found elsewhere. It's in ancient Greek, Homeric literature - in the Iliad's account of the Trojan war, for example. And it's in Anglo-Saxon and Norse literature too. It reflects the kind of values that were likely to be prevalent in any kind of early society that was dominated by an aristocratic warrior elite.

Personal honour was paramount, first of all. The desire to win the approval of your lord and peers and avoid disgrace at all costs. Loyalty to the lord was all-important – so, *personal* loyalty, more than loyalty to your country or land. Courage in battle was the most important male virtue - and this poetry is all about men, of course.

Winning fame was the greatest goal – even at the cost of dying, if that meant you would gain immortality. And immortality could be ensured, as they saw it, by the praise of poets.

Lastly, there is a very common juxtaposing of the contrasting attributes of courage and ferocity in battle, and generosity or even geniality in the feasting-hall.

These values crop up very often, in some form or other, in early Welsh poetry and later court poetry, but they're expressed most strongly in the Gododdin. A.O.H. Jarman described the Gododdin in fact as the *only* complete and full-length exposition of the heroic ideal in Welsh literature. And in Irish we'll come across it in the Heroic or Ulster cycle, when we come to look at prose next week.

But to focus for now (SLIDE 5) on the Gododdin. This is a long poem or collection of poems in the thirteenth-century book of Aneirin. Two different scribes, who we call A and B, wrote in the manuscript using two different sources. So we actually have two different versions of a lot of the stanzas, though not all were represented by both scribes. The B scribe's text uses a very old spelling system which suggests his source was as old as the ninth or tenth century.

The poem is broadly about a great battle at Catraeth or Catterick, in modern-day Yorkshire, between the warriors of the north British kingdom of Gododdin, based at Edinburgh, and Angles of Deira and Bernicia. This context would date it to around the year 600.

(SLIDE 6) Some scholars would argue that the Gododdin was indeed composed at that time, and that it is not really a Welsh poem at all, but was instead composed in Brythonic, the early form of Welsh spoken throughout much of Britain. It could have been preserved in the kingdom of Strathclyde, which lasted longer than the Gododdin kingdom, and also transmitted to Wales. There it would have been valued as part of the literature relating to what was regarded as a golden or heroic age of the northern kingdoms. And promoted as such by Welsh rulers who claimed descent from rulers of the Old North.

Others argue that those same rulers would have had an interest in creating an epic of that golden age, and that it is no older than the ninth or tenth century. So it's open to debate whether the Gododdin is a genuine commemoration of the battle and its warriors, or a later epic composed in part for political ends.

Those are things to bear in mind if you want to write your essay on the Gododdin, and there's similar considerations in the case of the Taliesin poems we'll get to later. You can favour either position of course, but it'll be best to state in your introduction which standpoint you're taking, and make clear that you know about the other view.

But anyway, back to the heroic ideal (SLIDE 7). And the key points of personal honour, personal loyalty – it really is all about the individual – a desire for immortality through fame, and the juxtaposition of fierceness in battle and generosity and geniality towards your own people, especially in the feasting-hall. You can look out for these things in your reading –

they crop up a lot. But for now, I'll show you some examples from the Gododdin, which as I said is where these are expressed most strongly and consistently in Welsh literature.

(SLIDE 8) So here's a famous and particularly grim extract, concerning a warrior called Isag. And you can see the deliberate contrast – he's modest and liberal with the gracious mead-drinking, but there's no retaliation when he strikes a blow – in other words he's killing or incapacitating his enemy with one blow. That line 'His sword resounded in the heads of mothers', *Seiniesyd ei gleddyfym mhen mamau*, has been discussed quite a bit, in the context of modern poetry concerning the horrors of war. As Dafydd says in his book, I don't think we can interpret this as meaning that the poet is expressing any pity for the young men his hero kills, or their mothers. The poet's purpose is to glorify the hero; the line is essentially another way of saying how terrifying he is to enemies and how great his fame is. But the line does at least suggest an awareness of the wider cost of war. That's how I see it anyway. And of course, whether or not the poems are genuine in the sense of being elegies for people the poet knew, all the medieval Welsh or Brythonic poets would have been exposed to the realities of war in one way or another.

Okay, so going back to the idea of mead (SLIDE 9). As well as praising the generosity of the heroes themselves with their mead, in the Gododdin we also get this idea of the hero receiving mead from his lord, Mynyddog, in the feasting hall and then repaying him for it by fighting in battle. So here we have the line 'they paid for their mead feast with their lives'. And there is some wonderful rhyme and alliteration that emphasizes the meaning: *Gwerth eu gwledd o fedd fu eu henaid*. So the words *gwerth* and *gwledd*, meaning 'payment' and 'feast', are in a sense linked together by alliteration, and *gwledd* and *medd*, meaning 'feast' and 'mead', are linked together by internal rhyme.

And I've added another similar line that Dafydd discusses in his talk, and which expresses the same idea in a more roundabout way: 'Fresh mead was their feast, and it was poison', *Glasfedd eu hancwyn, a gwenwyn fu*. This word *glasfedd* contains that same word *medd*, mead – the first letter has changed or mutated because it's been used to make a compound with *glas*, meaning fresh or bright. And again, the internal rhyme emphasises the meaning as *ancwyn* 'feast' rhymes with *gwenwyn* 'poison'.

Do look out for mead, *medd*, in particular, in your reading. It crops up a lot.

(SLIDE 10) Here's a similar example with wine, as a hero called Gwefrfawr shows his worth in return for wine from the cup. And also in the first line is another important thing to look out for, which is the comparison of the hero to a savage beast - a 'wolf in fury', here, *blaid ym maran*. And in the other quote another hero is full of anger and 'three times fiercer than a savage lion', *Tri gwaeth ffrawdd ffrawddus lew*. Another point with the first quote is the blood on the hero's cheek – so he's been wounded but has such courage that he is still attacking. And yet another thing that crops up a lot in the Gododdin and in later poetry is the wearing of adornments. (SLIDE 11) The brooch or *cae* was probably a kind of clasp to secure a cloak at the shoulder. And the torc (*torch*) was a kind of neck ring worn by the Iron Age Celts, though the Romans wore them too as trophies or a kind of medal of bravery, and the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings also had them. In the poetry the references to torques or brooches show on the one hand that the hero came from the privileged classes – the poets were always very keen on praising and recording noble ancestry. And they also suggest, indirectly, that he was brave, because by wearing these treasures in battle he would have been making himself a target for the enemy, by showing himself to be a leader or high-status warrior, and by presenting the opportunity for spoils of war.

(SLIDE 12) And here's a longer quote which illustrates a large part of what the poem is about – praise of a warrior, in this case called Marchlew, and specifically praise of his prowess in fighting with his various weapons. Marchlew is on horseback - another hallmark of the aristocratic warrior. He has an excellent horse - no one overtook him. The poet explicitly states that he had a privileged upbringing - not with burdens or suffering. But he has a fierce sword-stroke, scattering javelins in battle. And then, again, we have the juxtaposition of generosity, with wine in this instance, and savage killing. And at the end we have quite a common comparison of a warrior as a reaper, suggesting that he was cutting down a lot of enemies and also that he is doing so freely, with little resistance. And the point of the unsettled weather is that with rain threatening you would reap even more quickly.

(SLIDE 13) And here's some more ways in which the poet uses weapon imagery. In the first 'there was flight before the resounding of his shield', so again he is an object of terror, and

there did not return of his shield as much as his hand could grasp. So the idea is, he is so brave that he keeps fighting against great odds even as the shield defending him is battered and broken away so there is almost nothing left. Damage to shields is a very common shorthand used by poets to convey courage, but this is the most extreme example.

Again, in the second example, bloodstains on weapons symbolise the fierceness of fighting, and the hard-earned experience of the warriors

And in the third, a warrior is praised as either having flaming steel, that is, probably, a sword that is fast moving and bright and dangerous like fire, or as *being* flaming steel. A figurative sword himself, in other words. The use of weapons as metaphors or symbols to represent courage or ferocity is another very common thing in both the heroic and praise poetry.

So as I said, the Gododdin is probably the most uncompromising expression of the heroic ideal in Welsh. We'll meet some similar ideas next week when we look at the Irish Heroic or Ulster Cycle. But here's a foretaste. (SLIDE 14). As Ciaran Carson says in his introduction to his translation of 'The cattle-raid of Cooley', *Táin bó Cúailgne*: 'The young Cú Chulainn overhears a prophecy 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."' So he rushes to take up arms, and the warning, when he does so, that 'the life of such a warrior would be short, means nothing to him. His death will be his salvation.'

We do find some more nuanced views of courage and warfare, of course.

Dafydd talks in his book about the Llywarch Hen poetry (SLIDES 15–17), which is thought to date from between the eighth and tenth century, so might be from the same period as the Gododdin, or might be more recent. But the historical setting is similar – still in that 'heroic age', in inverted commas, when the Welsh were fighting the Angles or Anglo-Saxons for territory, but in this case in Wales rather than the Old North.

The most famous poem is probably the one where Llywarch Hen laments his lonely old age, after the death of his sons but my favourite is in the form of a dialogue between him and one of his sons, called Gwên.

So as we discussed last week this is regarded as a saga poem - that is, it tells part of a story, which in this case isn't embedded in a long prose text, as some Irish saga poems are, but is

associated with other poems involving the same characters. And the context is that Gwên has been away for a long time, it seems, but is being reunited with his father and will help him defend their homeland. Llywarch urges his son to go and keep watch at the ford, but there is a sense of bad feeling between them – unrealistic expectation on the one hand, and reproach on the other. This young hero, Gwên, sees the value of keeping watch and intends to fight hard and bravely, but he does not seek death.

This difference in attitude probably reflects the differing genre – in the saga poetry there is more room for meditation and characterisation (and dry humour sometimes, as in the last line of ‘Gwên and Llywarch’). It may also be that, over time, poets developed more sophisticated views towards the place of warfare in society, but this shouldn’t be overstated. The heroic ideal continued as a thread running through praise poetry for a very long time, as discussed in the next lecture.