MAGICAL BIRDS AS A LINK BETWEEN THE *MABINOGION* AND OTHER CELTIC LITERATURE: FACTS AND FANCIES

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Abstract

The birds of Rhiannon are named in two different tales in the *Mabinogion*, although not in the two branches of the *Mabinogi* in which Rhiannon herself is a central character, and there is a reference to similar, but unnamed, birds in another. There are also claims that they are mentioned by name in two other medieval works of Welsh literature that are entirely independent of the *Mabinogion*. This dissertation examines these assertions and analyses the problematic nature of claims made concerning them. It then attempts to find an explanation for these claims, based on close examination of contemporary written sources and early translations and commentaries. These birds are also often used as supporting evidence for regarding Rhiannon as equivalent to either Epona or Macha or both, or for considering them all to be reflexes of the same Celtic goddess Rigantona. This work examines the evidence for this, and tries to trace associations between various goddesses and magical birds back to their primary sources, to weigh up whether they are sufficient to aid in such an identification. It then goes on to consider some of the magical birds from the *eachtraí* and *immrama* and other early Irish literature, and discusses to what extent these can be seen as part of the same tradition as the birds of Rhiannon. It concludes by suggesting possible further lines of enquiry, including the examination of the birds of Cliodhna and indeed other factors in the tales concerning Rhiannon and Cliodhna, such as their courtships with Pwyll and Ciabhán respectively, to attempt to discern any relationship between or common origin for these two otherworldly women.

Introduction

Little information concerning the birds of Rhiannon has survived to the present day, and yet their place within the Welsh folklore tradition tends to have been taken for granted. In spite of there being few medieval references to them, many claims have been made concerning their powers and attributes. As is the case with some other Celtic otherworldly beings or artefacts, it can be difficult to distinguish evidence-based statements from speculation, especially as scholarship in this field has not always been entirely rigorous. This essay attempts to sort the wheat from the chaff, to trace back some of the assertions concerning these birds to their first appearances, and to weigh up whether the evidence of medieval manuscripts is sufficient to support all that is claimed.

The *Mabinogion* is a collection of eleven tales, preserved in complete form in the Red Book of Hergest, and also, with some gaps, in the slightly earlier White Book of Rhydderch. These two manuscripts are dated respectively to between 1380 and 1410 and between 1300 and 1350,[1] and are each anthologies of copies of earlier manuscripts, so that the tales within them did not originate at the same time. The first four tales, known as the 'Four Branches of the *Mabinogi'*, are, however, thought to derive from a single cycle of tales: they feature the same colophon;[2] share some attitudes, themes, and narrative structures;[3] and are believed to be 'the coherent and unified work of a single artist.'[4] Scholars tend to place the first written form of these

[1] P. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 2; S. Davies *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. ix.
[2] A. Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), p. 68.
[3] F. Winward, 'Some Aspects of the Women in the *Four Branches*' in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997), pp. 78–82.
[4] J. Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*' in *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1974* (1975), p. 250.

Four Branches in the eleventh or twelfth century, on linguistic and contextual grounds. Charles-Edwards is reluctant to commit himself too precisely, but after considering the views of other scholars feels that the date of their composition cannot be much later than 1100,[5] and Breeze believes them to have been written down early in the twelfth century.[6]

As it is likely that the written form of these tales was the culmination of a long oral tradition, some experts believe that they had changed considerably during centuries of oral transmission. There had been plenty of time for disparate stories about some of the characters or even about different people to have become merged; for various elements or incidents that were once an integral part of the plot to have been lost; and for the original story arc to have been overlaid by other material. Glyn Jones talks of 'a fusion of a mass of different tales, themes and traditions',[7] and Gruffydd pioneered an archaeological approach to the *Mabinogi*, attempting to excavate below these accretions to pare back down to the originating kernel of the stories.[8]

Although there is much in these tales that is thoroughly grounded in the reality of life in medieval Wales, particularly in geographical, social, and legal terms, there are also many otherworldly elements. These are treated pragmatically, without explanation, as if the medieval audience listening to these tales would have taken their existence, their powers, and any constraints upon their effect for granted. Thus is it that, when the birds of Rhiannon are first mentioned in the 'Second Branch of

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[5] T. Charles-Edwards, 'The Date of The Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*' in *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1970* (1971), pp. 287–8.
[6] A. Breeze (1997), p. 63.
[7] G. Jones, 'Early Prose: The Mabinogi' in *A Guide to Welsh Literature,* Vol. 1, ed. by A. O. H. Jarman and Gwilym Hughes (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 192.
[8] W. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon: an Inquiry into the Origins of the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1953), especially pp. 10–13.

the *Mabinogi'*, or in 'Culhwch and Olwen', we are told the effect that they will have upon their hearers, but nothing about their habitat, history, or why and in what way they are associated with Rhiannon. It is likely that the audience for the oral tradition that was recorded in the *Mabinogion* would already have been familiar with these birds, perhaps from a variety of tales that have not been preserved. A one-sentence summary of the features of the birds that were most salient to the circumstances of the tale would therefore be sufficient to bring to mind a whole body of knowledge concerning them. This would also probably have been true of contemporary audiences to whom the first written manuscripts were read.

There is therefore very little surviving information about the birds of Rhiannon. There are no tales which feature the birds and Rhiannon together, nor is there an origin myth for the birds, or a story that would indicate the precise nature of their connection with Rhiannon. In Chapter One, this essay examines the references to these birds within the *Mabinogion*, and investigates whether we can glean any further significance about them from these tales.

It is claimed that the birds of Rhiannon occur in two contexts within medieval Welsh literature that are entirely separate from the *Mabinogion*. This is important, as these references double the number of times these birds are mentioned, and these sources are considered as independent evidence for their existence, and for their association with Rhiannon. However, both of these attributions are problematic in some way. These claims are considered and the works quoting them analysed in Chapter Two of this essay, to try to track them back to their originating sources. An attempt is made to find either evidence to support them or a reason to refute them. A possible explanation for the appearance of each of these claims is developed.

In spite of there being few and sparse references to the birds of Rhiannon in medieval Welsh literature, and in spite of there being no surviving evidence of the nature of the link between them and Rhiannon herself, these birds are sometimes used as contributory evidence to support a claim that Rhiannon and other Celtic horse-goddesses can be identified with each other, or considered as reflexes of the same earlier goddess. These goddesses are considered in turn, and claims concerning their accompanying birds are examined and traced back to their sources in Chapter Three. This permits an analysis of whether and to what extent the birds can be relied upon to support identifying one goddess with another in this way.

There is a rich and varied body of medieval Irish literature that contains references to magical birds with similar properties to the birds of Rhiannon, although not in the same terms, nor in most cases attributed to or associated with a specific person. Chapter Four considers the birds described in some of the Irish *eachtraí* and *immrama*. There are marked differences between the way that magical birds are described in those tales set in pre-Christian Ireland, and those that recount a theologically motivated journey after the arrival of Christian monasticism, and this chapter also discusses how this affects the parallels that can be drawn between these Irish birds and those described in Welsh literature.

Chapter Five considers whether the Irish tradition of magical birds can contribute to our understanding of the Welsh tradition in any way, and what the existence of such similar birds can tell us concerning a Celtic appreciation of the qualities of birds in general. It goes on to summarise the findings presented in this essay, and suggests avenues for further research on these fascinating creatures and the implications of the

prevalence of magical birds in early Celtic literature in general, and of the birds of Rhiannon is particular.

Literature review

This dissertation will consider magical birds and the contexts in which they appear in Welsh and Irish medieval literature. This work will focus on some of the tales in the *Mabinogion* for its Welsh input, and on *Serglige Con Culainn* and some of the *eachtraí* and *immrama* for their Irish counterparts. Existing research on these works will be analysed and compared, and claims made concerning references to such birds in other works, and concerning their wider significance, will be examined, in order to establish to what extent these birds indicate a relationship, rather than coincidence. This essay will consider whether magical birds and their attributes in one work or body of literature have influenced others and if so, in what way. It will also discuss putative links between magical birds in literature and those in iconography, in order to decide whether they support claims for relationships between the goddesses they accompany or not.

Four books contribute greatly to an understanding of the *Mabinogion*, and help to situate it within the context of Welsh literature. They mention the magical and otherworldly elements within the work, although this is not their specific focus, and help to situate these elements within a wider context.

Firstly, Davies' translation of the *Mabinogion*,[9] together with her introduction and endnotes, offers alternative perspectives on the background to the characters and events. Secondly, Bollard's translation of the Four Branches[10] and the accompanying photographs and geographical notes anchor these tales within the landscape of Wales, giving a wider appreciation of their subtleties. The afterword contains an excellent examination of the themes and relationships between the branches.

[9] S. Davies (2007).
[10] J. Bollard, *The Mabinogi: Legend and Landscape of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 2006).

MacCana's essay *The Mabinogi*[11] also explores these themes, and considers the eleven tales of the *Mabinogion*. An earlier book by Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*,[12] has a great deal of further analysis of these four tales. However, whilst these four texts provide essential background and analysis of the *Mabinogion*, none of them specifically collates or considers magical birds, nor do they examine the relationship between these tales and Irish literature.

The *Lebor na hUidre* is an important early written Irish text. It is a compilation manuscript which dates from the late eleventh century, perhaps annotated and added to in the early twelfth century,[13] although its language suggests that it is a copy of an earlier text, or is recording oral material from considerably earlier. Within this work, the *Serglige Con Culainn* is a seminal text for its discussion of the status of the hero Cú Chulainn, and for its presentation of the power balance between men and women, and between this world and the other, in early medieval Ireland.[14] Birds with magical powers who visit Ireland from the Otherworld are the inciting incident for the sickness of Cú Chulainn, and for his subsequent adventures. I shall use the translation by Leahy.[15]

'The Corpus of Electronic Texts' (CELT),[16] administered by University College, Cork, is an invaluable digital resource of many Old and Middle Irish manuscripts, including in many cases an English translation. Dillon's *Early Irish Literature*[17] also

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[11] P. MacCana, *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1977).
[12] S. Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1993).
[13] R. Best, 'Notes on the Script of *Lebor na hUidre*' in *Ériu*, Vol.6 (1912), pp. 162-3.
[14] J. Findon,'Gender and Power in *Serglige Con Chulainn* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*' in C. Ireland and M. Tymoczko, eds., *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), pp. 47–61.
[15] A. Leahy, trans., 'The Sickbed of Cuchulain' in A. Leahy, *Heroic Romances of Ireland* (London: David Nutt, 1905), pp. 51–85.
[16] Available at https://celt.ucc.ie//
[17] M. Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

has translations or retellings of the more familiar of these tales, and includes some explanation and analysis. Although the conclusion that Jackson reaches in *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*,[18] an expansion of a lecture he gave in 1964, has been criticised by later scholars, it analyses early Irish literature with considerable erudition, and provides a useful overview of some of the themes that permeate various tales, such as heroism, relationships between men and women, and between a lord or chief and those who owe him fealty, and the law and how those who transgress it should be punished. The present study seeks to examine this information in the light of what we can learn about magical birds, something that Jackson does not specifically address, as his focus is the antiquity of the tales and whether they carry information about Iron Age Ireland within them.

There are several instances of birds that are or were human, or that share human characteristics such as speech or song, in the *immrama* (Irish voyage tales) and *eachtraí* (Irish adventure tales). As well as the primary sources and the translations of these on the CELT digital library, *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature*,[19] edited by Wooding, is a useful starting point in considering birds. Wooding's own essay within this collection, 'Monastic Voyaging and the *Navigatio*',[20] considers the Christian nature of St Brendan's voyage, and sees the islands visited by St Brendan on a regular annual circuit, including the Paradise of Birds, as reflecting the liturgical calendar which underpins their journey. Others, including Jackson and Spaan,[21] are convinced that this work and this island, and

[18] K. Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[19] J. Wooding, ed., *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: An Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014).
[20] J. Wooding, 'Monastic Voyaging and the *Navigatio*' in J. Wooding, ed. (2014), pp. 226–45.
[21] D. Spaan, *The Otherworld in Early Irish Literature* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1969).

hence the significance of the birds and their human characteristics, references an earlier tradition. Clancy's essay[22] in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature* also underlines the liturgical nature of these tales, and points out links between the settings and actions of the various birds in them to the crucifixion and to the holy communion. Spaan, however, in his tables distilling characteristics of the various locations and their inhabitants in the *immrama*, highlights that a major feature of the birds, in each of the six tales he analyses, is their speech, and that in four cases this takes the form of magical song. Spaan does not link this characteristic to that of the birds of Rhiannon, as he does not consider Welsh literature at all, but his findings and the tables presenting them give the current essay a starting point for doing so.

Sims-Williams' book, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*,[23] is a seminal work in this field. As well as considering links between these two bodies of literature from a historical, linguistic, and folkloric point of view, Sims-Williams considers the antecedents of some of the characters in early Irish tales.

Jankulak and Wooding's collection of essays, *Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages*,[24] contains much that is of interest. Carey's essay[25] compares the Welsh Brân son of Llŷr with the Irish Bran son of Febal, which may have implications for links between the otherworldly birds that feature in texts about these men. Jankulak's

[22] T. Clancy, 'Subversion at Sea: Structure, Style and Intent in the *Immrama*' in J. Wooding, ed. (2014), pp. 194–225.
[23] P. Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[24] K. Jankulak and J. Wooding, eds., *Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007).
[25] J. Carey, 'Bran son of Febal and Brân son of Llŷr' in K. Jankulak and J. Wooding, eds. (2007), pp. 168–79.

essay[26] considers shared characteristics and characters between Ireland and Britain, and MacCana[27] provides a useful comparative overview of Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages.

There is therefore a comprehensive scholarly body of work concerning medieval Welsh literature, and an equally erudite set of texts about early Irish literature. There has also been a great deal of research into the influences that may have helped to shape each nation's folktales and heroes, and the cross-fertilisation that may have occurred between them. While such research considers in great detail the language, themes, and characters of various Welsh and Irish stories, there is no work that directly considers and compares otherworldly birds between the two bodies of literature, and this current essay seeks in part to fill this gap.

[26] K. Jankulak, 'Carantoc alias Cairnech?: British saints, Irish saints, and the Irish in Wales' in K. Jankulak and J. Wooding, eds. (2007), pp. 116–49.
[27] P. MacCana, 'Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages: an Overview' in K. Jankulak and J. Wooding, eds. (2007), pp. 17–45.

Chapter One: The birds of Rhiannon in the *Mabinogion*

When the survivors of the war in Ireland return to Britain, in the Second Branch of the *Mabinogi*, they are serenaded as they rest and feast for seven years at Harlech by three birds. When Bendigedfran prophesies that this will happen, he explicitly calls them the 'birds of Rhiannon'.[28] It is clear from the context that the men are in an otherworldly space, and the text explicitly states that all other songs are harsh compared to this singing, and that these birds have the magical property of sounding as clear as if they are very close, even though they are seen to be some way off over the sea.[29] Although not explicitly linked to the birds, while they are singing the warriors are not aware of how much time is passing, nor are they sad, in spite of the sorrows they have just lived through.

The birds of Rhiannon are explicitly referenced in one other tale within the *Mabinogi*. In 'Culhwch and Olwen',[30] it has been prophesied that the giant Ysbaddaden will die on his daughter Olwen's wedding night, and he is therefore understandably most reluctant to give his permission for her to marry. When he cannot reasonably refuse Culhwch's proposal, he therefore sets a series of tasks that he believes are impossible, stating that only when Culhwch has achieved them all will he be allowed to marry Olwen. One of these tasks is to acquire the birds of Rhiannon, so that they might sing for Ysbaddaden on his last night, to soothe him with their magical powers. He reminds his audience that they 'wake the dead and lull the living to sleep'.[31]

[28] S. Davies (2007), p. 32.
[29] Ibid., p. 33.
[30] Ibid., pp. 179–213.
[31] Ibid., p. 196.

Although this is the only other reference in the *Mabinogion* which explicitly links these magical birds to Rhiannon, it is not completely unproblematic. This particular task does not appear at all in the text of the Red Book of Hergest, one of the two original manuscripts that we have of the tale, and in the White Book of Rhydderch there is no further information than that it was one of the tasks set; we do not follow our adventurers as they seek the birds, nor do we hear whether the task was ever completed.[32] The White Book of Rhydderch does not contain the whole of the tale,[33] so it is possible that the original story followed up on the introductions of these birds. Nevertheless, the incompleteness of this task means that we cannot glean further information about where and in whose company or possession the birds are to be found.

It seems clear that the birds sought by Ysbaddaden in 'Culhwch and Olwen' are the same as those heard at Harlech in the Second Branch, as not only are both sets of birds identified with Rhiannon, they also have similar powers. We thus have an association between magical birds and Rhiannon in two very different tales, which, it is believed, were from somewhat different periods. Breeze dates 'Culhwch and Olwen' to the eleventh century, and the Four Branches to the first half of the twelfth century.[34] Charles-Edwards agrees with Watkins and MacCana,[35] whom he quotes, that on linguistic grounds it is certain that 'Culhwch and Olwen' pre-dates the Four Branches.[36]

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[32] R. Bromwich and D. Evans, *Culhwch and Olwen: An Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992) pp. 126–7, note 632.
[33] Ibid., p. ix.
[34] A. Breeze (1997), p. 63.
[35] A. Watkins, and P. MacCana, 'Cystrawennau'r Cyplad mewn Hen Gymraeg' in *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* xviii (1958-1960), pp. 1–25.
[36] T. Charles-Edwards (1971), pp. 287–8.

In spite of the explicit association of these birds with Rhiannon in these two tales, they do not feature at all in either the First or the Third Branch, in both of which Rhiannon is a main character. As these are the only two tales concerning Rhiannon to have survived, there is therefore not a single extant mention of birds in connection with her when she herself is under consideration. If their appellation of 'the birds of Rhiannon' is to be taken at face value, therefore, it would be helpful to be able to justify this omission, or at least to find a plausible reason for it.

Some scholars believe that, by choosing to marry Pwyll and living permanently in this world, Rhiannon loses her otherworldly powers.[37] It is certainly true that she seems unable, in the First Branch, to counter the lies of the women who claim that she has killed her own son, except by trying to persuade them to tell the truth, and by promising that they will not be punished if they do so. In the Third Branch, she is unable to free herself or Pryderi from the spell that binds them fast to the fountain in the magical fort. This woman at the mercy of her servants, or impotent before magic, seems different to the confident Rhiannon who was able to manipulate Pwyll into following her himself from Gorsedd Arberth, and who could ride a horse apparently at a slow pace that could not however be caught;[38] or from the self-possessed Rhiannon who was able to provide a stratagem and a magic bag to trick Gwawl.[39] This shift in her abilities does indeed suggest that she has become entirely of this world, and no longer has the magical powers she would previously have possessed. We know that living in this world is not sufficient for a character from Annwn to lose their powers, as Gwydion and Math both retain their otherworldly skills, in spite of living here. If it is indeed the act of choosing to marry Pwyll instead of Gwawl

[37] See, for example, S. Davies (1993), p. 77.
[38] S. Davies (2007), pp. 9–10.
[39] Ibid., pp. 12–4.

that is the determining factor in Rhiannon's case, and if she knew that this would be the result of her choice, her decision to seek out Pwyll is all the more remarkable.

On the other hand, McKenna[40] relates the story of Pwyll to the Celtic Sovereignty Tale, a key element of which is that a man with ambitions for a throne may claim his kingship by marrying a goddess, after which the goddess suffers a change in fortune when not with her royal spouse. McKenna quotes examples of an aged hag who appears young and beautiful, but only when her husband is present, or a mad woman who is restored to sanity when with her husband. McKenna acknowledges that we are not, in the First Branch, made aware of a change in Rhiannon's condition of this kind, but rather that the loss of dignity she suffers by being treated as a beast of burden is linked with the loss of her child. As MacCana,[41] whom she quotes and who has made a particular study of this theme within Irish literature, explains, Irish Sovereignty tales emphasise not only the need for the goddess to marry the aspirant to the throne, but also to give birth to his heir and hence the future ruler, so the loss of her son may be the determining factor in her loss of face and perhaps of powers.

To what extent either of these two theories hold good in Rhiannon's case, we shall probably never know. MacCana does point out elsewhere[42] that the Welsh Sovereignty traditions cannot be traced as completely as he has traced the Irish ones because there is little surviving Welsh narrative from the centuries preceding the Four Branches. Nevertheless, it is plausible to hypothesise that Rhiannon's change of status from unmarried inhabitant of the Otherworld to wife and mother in this one

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[40] C. McKenna, 'The Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll*' in C.W. Sullivan III, ed., *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays* (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), pp. 303–30.
[41] P. MacCana, 'Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Early Irish Literature Part I' in *Études Celtiques* Vol 7:1 (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1955–1956), pp. 85-8.
[42] P. MacCana (1977), p. 116.

may have had considerable repercussions for her. Could it be, therefore, that the magical birds associated with her are lost to her, once she is no longer an inhabitant of the Otherworld, and no longer has the powers associated with it? This might explain why there is a tradition of magical birds being associated with her, and yet, when we meet her, firmly in this, rather than the other, world, she is not accompanied by them, nor is there any mention of them.

In 'Owain, or The Lady of the Well',[43] one of the three Welsh Romances that form part of the *Mabinogion*, Cynon tells Owain of an adventure from which he has recently returned. One of the minor features of his travels was that some birds alighted on a great tree beside the well, and sang more beautifully than any birds of this world.[44] Owain determines to follow in Cynon's footsteps so that he, too, might see the wonders of which Cynon told him, and on his way he, too, sees and hears these birds,[45] as indeed does Arthur himself when he goes, together with his company, to seek Owain.[46] There is no explicit claim that these are the birds of Rhiannon, and in fact they are described as a flock, whereas in the Second Branch we are told that exactly three birds came and sang in Harlech.[47] Nevertheless, Davies compares these birds with the birds of Rhiannon in the Second Branch and in 'Culhwch and Olwen', and points out that birdsong is often associated with the Otherworld.[48] It does therefore seem that at the very least this tale is referencing the same tradition of magical birds.

[43] S. Davies (2007), pp. 116–38.
[44] Ibid., p. 120.
[45] Ibid., p. 122.
[46] Ibid., p. 129.
[47] Ibid., p. 33.
[48] Ibid., p. 254, note 120.

Whether or not these three tales are all talking about the same birds, it is clear that there is here a tradition of otherworldly birds, whose song is beautiful and who possess magic powers associated with healing and with sleep. We have no information at all about the origin of these creatures, and we have seen that the association between these birds and Rhiannon within the *Mabinogion* is problematic: they and she never appear at the same time, or even within the same tale, although in two cases they are called the birds of Rhiannon.

Chapter Two: The birds of Rhiannon elsewhere in Medieval Welsh Literature

There are claims of two other references to 'the birds of Rhiannon' in medieval Welsh literature. Although these are both outside of the context of a tale, and the birds are not accompanied by Rhiannon herself, it is tempting to see them as shoring up an uncertain link between Rhiannon and the birds. This may not, however, be as straightforward as it at first sight appears.

Much is made by various authors and scholars of a triad that explicitly references the birds of Rhiannon. 'There are three things,' says a Welsh triad, 'Which are not often heard: the song of the birds of Rhiannon, a song of wisdom from the mouth of a Saxon, and an invitation to a feast from a miser'. This triad, in varying translations, is quoted by Guest[49] and Squire;[50] the latter uses it to supply evidence independent of the *Mabinogion* that these otherworldly birds belonged to or were closely associated with Rhiannon. Squire's wording is re-quoted and on occasion referenced in many other works, scholarly and less so, but he himself gives no source for it. Moreover, this triad does not feature in the seminal work on the Welsh triads, Rachel Bromwich's *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain*.[51]

In the preface to this work, Bromwich states that it comprises a complete collection of the triads in Welsh from medieval manuscripts, collating those that appeared in the Black Book of Carmarthen, believed to have been written before and around 1250;[52] in Peniarth MS. 16, dated to between the mid-thirteenth and the mid-

[49] C. Guest, *The Mabinogion* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1877), p. 363.
[50] C. Squire, *Mythology of the Celtic People* (Twickenham: Senate, 1998), p. 273.
[51] R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads,* Second Edn (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1978).
[52] Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, <www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/the-middle-ages/theblackbookofcarmarthen/>

fifteenth centuries;[53] in the White Book of Rhydderch, from the mid-fourteenth century;[54] in the Red Book of Hergest, from the late fourteenth century;[55] in Peniarth MS. 47, dated to the mid-fourteenth century;[56] and in Peniarth MS. 50, *c*. 1445.[57] There is some, but incomplete, overlap between these manuscripts, so that a particular triad may be present in several of them or in only one, and Bromwich includes tables cross-referencing occurrences between manuscripts. In all, her work is the result of research in all the extant medieval Welsh manuscripts, and includes all those triads for which there is a medieval source.

That the triad quoted, but not referenced, by Squire is not included in Bromwich's tome is problematic. Fortunately, Guest[58] does include a footnote, informing us that it is one of the triads published by Jones and Morganwg, in Welsh, in *Myvyrian Archaiology*, vol 3,[59] in a section entitled *Trioedd y Cybydd* (The Miser's Triads). This text tells us that 'Tri pheth nid mynych y cefir [sic] eu clywed: cân adar Rhianon, cân ddoethineb o ben Sais, a gwahoddiad i wledd gan gybydd'. This volume contains a great deal of miscellaneous material, all claimed in the title to have been collected from ancient manuscripts, but although some parts are extracts of known works, others do not seem to exist in earlier recensions. Some of the triads in this volume are variants on triads from the medieval manuscripts listed above and

[53] Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, 'Finding Aid – Peniarth Manuscripts Collection' (Aberystwyth, 2017), <https://archives.library.wales/downloads/peniarth-manuscripts-collection.pdf>, p. 10.
[54] Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, 'Finding Aid – Peniarth Manuscripts Collection' (Aberystwyth, 2017), <https://archives.library.wales/downloads/peniarth-manuscripts-collection.pdf>, p. 7.
[55] 'Welsh Prose, 1300–1425' by School of Welsh (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2013), <www.rhyddiaithganoloesol.caerdydd.ac.uk/en/tei-header.php?ms=Jesus111>
[56] 'Welsh Prose, 1300–1425' by School of Welsh (Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2013), <www.rhyddiaith ganoloesol.caerdydd.ac.uk/en/tei-header.php?ms=Pen47i>
[57] Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, 'Finding Aid – Peniarth Manuscripts Collection' (Aberystwyth, 2017a), <https://archives.library.wales/downloads/peniarth-manuscripts-collection.pdf>, pp. 21–2.
[58] C. Guest (1877), p. 363.
[59] O. Jones and I. Morganwg, *The Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales: Collected out of Ancient Manuscripts,* volume 3 (London: Gwyneddigion Society, 1807), p. 245.

thus included in the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, often expanded, presumably by Morganwg himself, to include more detail, whilst others do not appear elsewhere. Morganwg claimed that these were taken from his own collection of early medieval manuscripts, but although this collection has since been donated to the National Library of Wales and has proved to be an invaluable resource,[60] they do not include any of these extra triads in any hand other than Morganwg's own, and these are therefore widely believed to have been fabricated by Morganwg himself.[61] Indeed, the National Library of Wales gives their date as '1807, as near as can be ascertained',[62] which is the date of their publication by Jones and Morganwg.[63]

In the preface to the second edition of her work on the Welsh Triads, Bromwich[64] references her own earlier article[65] in which she says, 'The additional 42 triads, for whose formation Iolo was himself responsible, contain much curious matter, perhaps including folk-lore which was still orally current during his lifetime.' Bromwich generously suggests therefore that, although Morganwg fabricated these triads, he at least may have based some of them on a genuine oral tradition. Others are not so kind; Jenkins calls Morganwg a famed scholar and a forger,[66] and Constantine calls him Britain's most successful Romantic forger.[67] It is, however, perhaps unfair to judge him by modern academic standards: indeed, Jarvis points out that Morganwg

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[60] Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, 'Finding Aid – Iolo Morganwg and Taliesin ab Iolo manuscripts and papers' (Aberystwyth, 2017b), p. 5.
[61] See, for example, G. Williams, *Iolo Morganwg* (Caerdydd: 1956) <yba.llgc.org.uk/en/s-WILL-EDW-1747.html> [accessed 4 March 2018], as well as the authors referenced below.
[62] Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru (2017b), p. 99.
[63] O. Jones and I. Morganwg (1807).
[64] R. Bromwich (1978), p. xii.
[65] R. Bromwich, 'Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Myfyrian Third Series' in *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1968 part II), p. 301.
[66] G. Jenkins, *The Foundations of Modern Wales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.387
[67] M. Constantine, *The Truth against the World: Iolo Morganwg and Romantic Forgery* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), back matter.

worked within an environment where genuinely scholarly Celtic Study sat side-by-side with an attempt to provide a theory of origins based largely on conjecture.[68]

Although, therefore, this triad is widely quoted, and is often assumed to carry the weight of the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, endorsed by scholars such as Squire and Guest, it is not possible to use it as a medieval source for the birds of Rhiannon, nor to see it as giving evidence external to the *Mabinogion* for their existence.

Squire also discusses the other reference to the birds of Rhiannon purportedly from early Welsh literature, but outside of the *Mabinogion*. He tells us that they were one of the treasures owned by Manawydan and Pryderi when they were joint rulers of the Otherworld.[69] This is at first glance a plausible statement: being respectively Rhiannon's second husband and her son, it does not seem impossible that they should end up owning the birds ascribed to her. There is also a certain pleasing symmetry in claiming that they should have jointly ruled the Otherworld or some part of it, as Pwyll, who was Rhiannon's first husband and Pryderi's father, had many years earlier ruled in Arawn's stead in the Otherworld for a time.

However, Squire gives no source for making this claim. He appends it to a statement that a poem by Taliesin attests to these two men holding this position and owning the Cauldron of Inspiration. This statement is footnoted to poem xiv of the Book of Taliesin, and the casual reader might be forgiven for assuming that this poem is the authority for including the birds of Rhiannon as well as the cauldron amongst the treasures of Manawydan and Pryderi; indeed, many less scholarly authors have done so, so that various new-age Celtic books and websites state that a poem by Taliesin

[68] B. Jarvis, 'The Welsh Cultural Background' in G. Jenkins, ed., *A Rattleskull Genius: The Many Faces of Iolo Morganwg* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), p.30.
[69] C. Squire (1998), p.273.

ascribes both the cauldron and the birds to these two men while they were ruling the Otherworld. This is not the case; the poem does not mention the birds of Rhiannon, and in fact although it mentions Ceridwen's cauldron, it does not state that Manawydan and Pryderi own it, nor that they are rulers of the Otherworld. Indeed, Skene's translation of line 11 asks, 'Shall not my chair be defended from the cauldron of Ceridwen?' and there is no further mention of the cauldron. Then, line 47 states 'It is known to Manawyd and Pryderi.'[70] The poem is not easy to understand, containing a multitude of allusions and euphemisms, so that one could be forgiven for entertaining some uncertainty as to what the 'It' in question refers to, but surely not to a cauldron some thirty-six lines earlier. Indeed, the most likely candidate, and the one suggested in Skene's notes on this poem, is the *Caer Siddi* referred to in line 45, where the author apparently has his chair.[71] Indeed, the translation quoted by Squire himself in another book agrees that this is the case.[72]

This particular poem is an important one because of this reference to the *Caer Siddi* that is a central concept in '*Preiddeu Annwn*'. This is another, more widely known and very beautiful, poem that contains obscure references and language, so that the intended meaning always seems just beyond our grasp.[73] It certainly contains references to a cauldron that belongs to the head of Annwn, and it seems to suggest that Pryderi, this time with Pwyll, his father, rather than with his stepfather, held sway in *Caer Siddi*, and that they were in some way responsible for Gwair being imprisoned there. Although the allusions are capable of various interpretations, this

[70] W. Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales,* Vol. I (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1868a), pp. 274–6.
[71] W. Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales,* Vol. II (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1868b), p. 404.
[72] C. Squire, *The Mythology of the British Islands* (London: Blackie and Son Ltd, 1905), pp. 312–36.
[73] S. Higley, *Preiddeu Annwn: The Spoils of Annwn* (The Camelot Project, 2007).

idea resonates with the First Branch. In that text, Pwyll ruled Annwn for a year, and here, in '*Preiddeu Annwn*', we have him and his son Pryderi in a position of power in Caer Siddi, which could be an allusion to an otherworldly place. It would therefore make sense, as the poem refers to a wondrous cauldron belonging to '*pen Annwn*', for Squire to claim that Pwyll and Pryderi were the keepers of the cauldron. However, Squire footnotes a different poem entirely, and says that it allocates Manawydan and Pryderi to that role. Moreover, Pwyll's year as *pen Annwn* was, according to the *Mabinogi*, before his marriage to Rhiannon, and hence before the birth of their son Pryderi. This joint stewardship of *Caer Siddi* cannot, therefore, refer to the same tenure in the Otherworld that forms the first episode in the First Branch; it can only have occurred some years later.

In '*Preiddeu Annwn*', as in poem xiv, the description of the cauldron is in a different verse from the reference to Pwyll and Pryderi, and there does not seem to be a direct link between them. Even if this could be considered as supporting evidence for an association between Pryderi's family and Annwn, and for a cauldron being kept there, it does not mention the birds of Rhiannon, and thus does not help to corroborate Squire's claim concerning them.

There is, however, one other possibility, if we allow that Squire may have made an intuitive leap in trying to understand the facts behind the mysticism in Taliesin's poetry. In poem xiv, which he footnotes concerning the cauldron, the line immediately following the mention of Manawydan and Pryderi reads '*Teir oryan y am tan a gan recdi*.' As is often the case with Taliesin, experts disagree concerning the precise meaning of this sentence. Skene translates it 'Three utterances, around

the fire, will he sing before it,'[74] and the way this and the neighbouring lines are phrased in English makes it clear that the 'it' in this and the preceding line refer either to *Caer Siddi*, or to his chair in *Caer Siddi*. On the other hand, Higley, in a footnote to her article on '*Preiddeu Annwn*', translates this line 'Three (musical?) instruments play before it around a fire',[75] and discusses Taliesin's seat of honour in *Caer Siddi* as being the location referred to by 'it'. Although Higley's translation only dates from 2007, long after Squire made his claim concerning the birds of Rhiannon, it is possible that Squire had read or heard a similar translation, as well as that of Skene. He could have seen from these two versions, if he had not already been conversant with the concept, that the Welsh verb *canu* means both to sing and to play a musical instrument. Squire would also have been conversant with the allusive nature of Taliesin's poetry, and the many obscure references within it to tales with which contemporary audiences would have been familiar, but which have not survived. This particular poem, like '*Preiddeu Annwn*', refers to characters still known to us today from the *Mabinogi*, and some of the events mentioned call to mind episodes within it. Perhaps, therefore, Squire read in these three otherworldly melodies an allusion to the famous three musicians in that work: the birds of Rhiannon.

This is very speculative; Squire does not argue this case or even present it, merely stating that Manawydan and Pryderi owned the birds of Rhiannon when they were joint rulers of the Otherworld. Whilst such tenuous reasoning might possibly explain Squire's statement, it cannot support its veracity. Furthermore, as Squire does not actually footnote his statement concerning the birds of Rhiannon, it is possible that

[74] W. Skene (1868a), p. 276.
[75] S. Higley (2007), footnote 18.

his source is not this particular poem at all. However, as there is no claim regarding ownership of these birds in any of the other works in the Book of Taliesin, and as this work is the only source Squire gives in this paragraph, it is hard to see his claim as in any way substantiated.

Whilst, therefore, it is perhaps plausible that Rhiannon's second husband and her son should end up as joint owners of her birds, there appears to be no source for this, apart from Squire himself and those who quote him, and certainly no surviving Medieval source.

It therefore seems that, in spite of the importance that these birds have assumed in defining characters and events within the *Mabinogi* and beyond, we have no reliable Medieval sources for them outside of the *Mabinogion*.

Chapter Three: Magical Birds that Accompany Celtic Horse-Goddesses

We have little contemporary information concerning Rhiannon outside of the *Mabinogi*. By the time that we meet her, she is already a character who is choosing to wed a mortal, and we have seen that some scholars believe that this or later events may cause her to lose at least some of her otherworldly attributes. There is general, although not universal, agreement that Rhiannon is a horse-goddess, or that she is based on or derived from a goddess with a particular interest in or skill with horses. It is outside the scope of the current essay to examine the evidence for this in detail, but various scholars have analysed factors such as Rhiannon's magical horsemanship when she first meets Pwyll and the form that her punishment takes when she is believed to have killed her infant son, to support this hypothesis.[76] There are other Celtic women who are particularly associated with horses, and it is tempting to equate them one with another.

Koch sees Rhiannon's name as indisputably derived from Rigantona,[77] a reconstructed early Celtic horse-goddess, and Ford takes it for granted that this is the case.[78] Green sees close links between Rhiannon in Wales, Epona in Gaul, and Macha in Ireland,[79] and Bloomfield and Dunn see in the story of Rhiannon in the First Branch a '… recognizable reflex of a myth concerning the goddess Rigantona', and that in this Rhiannon corresponds to Epona.[80] Duggan asserts that 'Rhiannon's

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[76] F. Winward (1997), p. 80; A. Welsh, 'The Traditional Narrative Motifs of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*' in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies 15* (1988), pp. 56-7; S. Davies (2007) pp. 230–1, notes 11 and 17.
[77] J. Koch, ed., *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia,* Vol. IV (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-Clio, 2006), pp. 1499–1500.
[78] P. Ford (2008), p. 5.
[79] M. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* (London: Routledge, 1992a), pp. 187–8.
[80] M. Bloomfield and C. Dunn, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989), pp. 82–3.

magic horse-riding and the association of her son with the colt …' reveal that she is a reflex of Epona.[81]

Nevertheless, if these various personages do stem from the same source, there is a gap of well over a thousand years between the time when Rigantona would have flourished and Rhiannon's appearance in written form in the Four Branches, with occurrences of Epona and Macha falling between the two in chronological terms. It is not surprising that tales and characteristics should change over such a long period, and in this case there is the added challenge that the surviving evidence for these goddesses is of very different types, so that it is not possible to compare like with like when trying to decide to what extent one served as a model for, or influenced the development of, another. It is also, however, tempting to focus on one shared characteristic as evidence that two personages are actually one and the same, or at the very least closely related, and to dismiss their differences as embellishments or losses due to the passage of time.

Although, therefore, some scholars are content to equate Rhiannon with earlier Celtic horse-goddesses mainly on the basis of horse-related attributes and incidents, there are others who would prefer supporting evidence of a different nature to shore up this identification. Whereas Davies confidently asserts that 'Rhiannon, with her equine associations, is to be equated with Epona',[82] MacCana believes that what evidence we have invites speculation rather than any confident conclusion.[83] He suggests that the *Mabinogi* is a 'close and complicated narrative which reveals only tantalising glimpses of the underlying mythology', and believes that the resonances

[81] J. Duggan, *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 215.
[82] S. Davies, 'Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales' in *The Celtic World*, ed. by Miranda Green (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 788.
[83] P. MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: Hamlyn Publishing, 1970), p. 83.

of Rigantona, Epona, and Modron in the character of Rhiannon in the *Mabinogi* demonstrate that 'the medieval story-teller is pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret'.[84]

Hutton goes considerably further; he asserts that there is absolutely no ancient evidence for a cult of Rígantona, and he is sceptical of the identification of Rhiannon with Epona, saying that we have insufficient evidence to make such a claim, as all they have in common is a horse.[85] He further quotes Hemming's research into medieval European literature to show that steeds that move at uncanny paces are found elsewhere, and are merely an indication of the '… general deceptiveness of enchanted realms.'[86] Moreover, Hemming relates that having to be ridden or act as a beast of burden is a punishment that was not only widespread in literature of the time in general, but was actually a penalty in medieval Europe.[87] Hutton therefore not only does not believe that Rhiannon is a reflex of Epona; he also does not feel that we even have enough evidence to claim with any certainty that Rhiannon was a horse-goddess or that she was particularly associated with horses. He points out that we have a great deal of literary, iconographic, and contextual evidence to support Epona's close links with horses, and that the allusions in the *Mabinogi* that have been read as suggesting that Rhiannon was also a horse-goddess are unsatisfactory in comparison. He believes that it was not until the 1880s that scholars seeking ancient traditions began the work of turning Rhiannon into a pagan goddess, and that all the speculation concerning where she fits in a purported Celtic pantheon is a fruitless

[84] Ibid., p. 83.
[85] R. Hutton, *Pagan Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 366.
[86] Ibid., p. 366.
[87] J. Hemming, 'Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in *Pwyll*' in *Western Folklore,* Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 19–40.

distraction from considering what these medieval texts would have meant to their intended audience, and what was understood by them at the time.[88]

Wood also believes that late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholarship must be considered in the context of their times. She explains in the article that she wrote as an introduction to a new edition of Squire's *Mythology of the British Islands* that turning Celtic otherworldly inhabitants into gods and goddesses was a romantic era attempt to fit Celtic mythology into the Graeco-Roman mould, rather than a reflection of the medieval belief system that existed in the British Isles.[89] Although current thinking is more willing to examine medieval Welsh and Irish societies and depictions of the Otherworld in their own terms, rather than by trying to make them match a Classical view that is no longer considered necessarily superior, the Romantic ideology so caught the popular imagination that there is a resistance to letting go of it. Besides, there is much in the work of Romantic era scholars that is valuable and that laid the foundations for the research that has taken place since; the difficulty lies in such factors as assuming that every character who has otherworldly traits must be considered a god or goddess.

MacKillop proposes a view that combines elements of the above opinions. He suggests that Epona's cult as a horse-goddess could have arrived in Britain with Roman cavalry units, and that the connection with horses caused her attributes and those of Rhiannon, hitherto an entirely separate woman and perhaps not considered a goddess, to become somewhat merged as tales and antecedents were passed on.

[88] R. Hutton (2013), pp. 366–7.
[89] J. Wood, *Early Celtic Scholarship and the Romantic Celt* (Ware, Hers: Wordsworth Editions, 2000)

Later, a similar mixing could have occurred with these stories and those featuring Macha.[90]

A close correlation between Rhiannon and a woman from a different tradition would therefore be strengthened by their having had other characteristics in common, in addition to their affinity with horses. This is especially important as there have been many cultures where horses were valued, and thus where people or gods with connections with horses were revered, and so an association with horses is insufficient to demonstrate a common inheritance. A characteristic that is often considered in respect of Rhiannon is her association with magical birds.

Epona was a goddess very much associated with horses. Her very name derives from a Proto-Celtic word for a horse (*epos* in Gaulish),[91] and because of this etymology, and because many examples of statuettes and bas-relief panels depicting her have been found in what was once Gaul,[92] she is believed to have originally been a goddess of the Gauls. Although there is iconography that may date from considerably earlier, the oldest representations of her that can be securely dated occur in contexts from the first century CE, and situated in the Alesia region of eastern Gaul; at this time, of course, Gaul was already under Roman rule.[93]

Uniquely for a Celtic deity, Epona was adopted, complete with name and prime attribute, that of a horse or horses, by the Romans, by whom she became particularly associated with stables, cavalry, riders, and other equine contexts, and spread throughout the Empire. Her cult seems to have particularly resonated with the

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[90] J. MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.167–8.
[91] M. Green, 'The Gods and the Supernatural' in *The Celtic World*, ed. by Miranda Green (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 479.
[92] J. MacKillop (1998), pp.167–8.
[93] B. Cunliffe, *The Celtic World* (London: BCA, 1992), p. 76.

Roman military, especially cavalry units, for she is found along the frontiers of the empire,[94] often in stables or other horse-related contexts. Indeed, her cult seems to have been brought to Britain by Roman cavalry units; there are depictions of her and inscriptions to her at northern forts where such units were stationed.[95]

There are many small sculptures and bas-relief panels depicting her, always riding or accompanied by horses, but we also have inscriptions in Latin in a variety of contexts. She became so much a part of Roman cultural tradition that there are references to her in works of Roman literature. In 'The Golden Ass', Apuleius' protagonist sees a statue of Epona in a small shrine within a stable, 'devoutly garlanded with freshly picked roses';[96] and Winkle suggests that Apuleius uses Epona as a metaphor for Lucius' transformation into an ass, and later places Isis at the point of his re-transformation back to a man;[97] a clue to the relative regard in which these two goddesses were held in Roman society. In his Eighth Satire, Juvenal talks in disparaging tones of a man of whom he says, 'The only goddess he swears by, even at Jove's high altar, is Epona, whose picture you'll find daubed on the doors of his reeking stables' (Green's translation).[98] Green further quotes Highet,[99] whose analysis suggests that Epona being of Gaulish origin resulted in her being viewed as a 'barbarous horse-goddess' by Roman society, much loved only by grooms and muleteers. All of this evidence supports Epona's importance as a deity associated with horses, and revered by those Romans who were working with them or to whom

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[94] R. Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (London: BCA, 1991), pp. 216–7.
[95] Ibid., p. 217.
[96] Apuleius, *The Golden Ass,* trans. by P. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Book 3.27.
[97] J. Winkle, 'Epona Salvatrix?: Isis and the Horse-Goddess in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*' in *Ancient Narrative* Vol. 12 (Groningen, Netherlands: Barkhuis, 2015), pp. 74–6.
[98] P. Green, trans., *Juvenal, The Sixteen Satires* (London: Penguin Classics, 1967), p. 182.
[99] Ibid., p. 190; G. Highet, *Juvenal the Satirist: A Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 115 and p. 273.

they were important, although perhaps rather despised by the nobility and intelligentsia.

There were several legendary characters in Irish mythology named Macha, but there is one who is particularly associated with horses. She had otherworldly attributes, including the ability to out-run any horse, and, like Rhiannon, she herself selected her human mate, in this case the farmer Cruind. She brought fertility to his land and herself became pregnant, imposing only one condition upon her husband: that he should never talk about her to anyone else. At the horse festival, Cruind could not help boasting that his wife would be able to run faster than the King of Ulster's own horses, and the king demanded proof of this. When Macha was brought before him, she pointed out that she was in labour, and asked if the required race could wait until after she was delivered, but he would not allow this. She won the race against his horses, but died giving birth to twins just afterwards. In revenge for the king's intransigence towards her, as she died she cursed the Ulstermen for nine generations to suffer labour pains when under threat.[100]

It can thus be seen that, in spite of the centuries that separate them, Epona, Macha, and Rhiannon share one major attribute: their association with horses. This is not, however, sufficient to equate one with another, to suggest that one derived from the other, or to claim that they must all have descended from a common ancestor. The importance of horses in terms of carrying people, being beasts of burden, drawing carts, wagons and chariots, and as a food source, have ensured that there have been deities associated with them since mankind first appreciated their value. Although, therefore, Rhiannon, Macha, and Epona are all associated with horses, the fact that

[100] D. Smyth, *A Guide to Irish Mythology* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996), pp. 105–7.

the links are rather different in each case allows the possibility that they arose entirely independently of each other. Each of the three has some otherworldly characteristics, and they each share a gender, and moreover they were revered in three countries that are close together and all spoke Celtic languages. Nevertheless, there are a great number of Celtic goddesses, who are not all considered to be reflexes of the same personage. To strengthen an identification of Rhiannon, Epona, and Macha with each other, therefore, scholars have searched for other shared indicators.

There is already an additional association between these three personages concerning fertility. We have seen how important Rhiannon's motherhood was, and how dire the consequences when she was deprived of her son. Macha, too, was pregnant at the time of the story that made her famous, and her twins became heroes in Ireland, as Pryderi did in Wales. We have no knowledge of whether Epona had children, but many of her depictions show her with fruit, bread, a sheaf of grain, or a cornucopia, suggesting that she could promote fertility of the land, as Macha did for her husband's farm.

For all three women, this fertility was inextricably linked with horses. Several representations of Epona show her accompanied by a foal, as well as a horse, and sometimes the mare is suckling her foal. She is often seen flanked by a pair of horses, reminiscent of the twins associated with Macha. Rhiannon's own fertility is linked to that of a horse, for we learn that every year Teyrnon's mare gave birth to a foal which was stolen by the same otherworldly force that took Rhiannon's baby. Macha gave birth to her babies immediately after a race where she was made to assume the role of a horse, and when Rhiannon lost her baby, she, too, was called

upon to act as a horse, by carrying any visitors who required it into court on her back. These links are suggestive of a deeper connection than a simple association with horses, and they encourage us to look for other evidence that these women are related in some fashion.

Another possible shared characteristic of these various Celtic goddesses is their connection with birds. It is all too easy to note that Epona is sometimes depicted with birds, and that Macha, too, has avian connections, and assume that these birds correspond to the birds of Rhiannon, claiming this connection as further evidence that these three women are based on the same original person.

However, we need to be cautious. Horses and birds share characteristics such as speed, and hence of carrying communications. Henderson discusses the evolution of Mercury as a fleet of foot messenger of the gods, with avian characteristics, in this light,[101] and Simek details illustrations on fifth-century gold bracteates and ornamental helmet plates from Scandinavia, which depict Odin on horseback or standing by a horse, accompanied by flying birds.[102] A goddess with a particular interest in horses could therefore be depicted with other symbols reflecting their qualities, so that bird and horse associations may not be totally independent of each other.

Moreover, birds seem to have held a particular fascination for the Celts, perhaps because these creatures are at home in the liminal space between worlds.[103] They therefore crop up in all sorts of contexts: as well as the birds considered in the

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[101] J. Henderson, 'Ancient Myths and Modern Man' in *Man and his Symbols*, ed. by Carl Jung (London: Aldus Books, 1964), p. 156.
[102] R. Simek, trans. by Angela Hall, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Martlesham, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2008), p. 43 and p. 164.
[103] M. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art* (1992b), pp. 143-4.

present essay, there are myriad examples of particular or otherworldly characteristics being associated with birds in Celtic literature. In Ireland, and also in Gaul, ravens and crows accompanied goddesses of war and destruction, or could be such a goddess transmogrified,[104] and their appearance during or before a battle was seen as a portent of death;[105] the crane often accompanies a god on Gaulish monuments, and seems in some cases to have been perceived to be a transformed human, which may explain the Insular Celtic and Gaulish taboo against eating cranes;[106] and the duck is particularly associated with the Gaulish goddess Sequanta, although statuettes incorporating ducks have also been found in Britain,[107] to give but three examples. There are also birds that are actually shape-shifted people, of this or the Otherworld, where the metamorphosis may either be voluntary or imposed by someone else or some external force. Thus we have Lleu becoming an eagle and Blodeuedd being changed into an owl in the Four Branches;[108] the Children of Lir being turned into swans by their jealous stepmother;[109] and Étain and Midir changing themselves into swans to escape from Étain's husband, the High King Eochaid Airem.[110]

Indeed, Ross tells us that 'The varied and various sources for a study of Pagan Celtic beliefs, iconographic, literary and folklore, combine to stress the cult significance and the superstitious popularity of birds. The concept of the bird as an otherworld agent … is a recurrent and persistent theme.'[111]

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[104] P. MacCana (1970), pp. 86–90.
[105] M. Green (1992b), p. 143.
[106] J. MacKillop,(1998), p. 97.
[107] M. Green (1992a), pp. 212–4.
[108] S. Davies (2007), pp. 61–3.
[109] CELT, *Oidheadh Cloinne Lir*; Translation, CELT, *The Fate of the Children of Lir*.
[110] CELT, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*; Translation, CELT, *The Destruction of Da Dearga's Hostel*.
[111] A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition*, Cardinal Edition (London: Sphere Books, 1974), p. 365.

Being accompanied by an unspecified bird is therefore insufficient evidence to support the claim that two goddesses are related or are reflexes or the same ancestral being. Given the special place that birds hold within Celtic culture, it is necessary to examine the birds of Rhiannon and those associated with other horse-related goddesses more closely, to see if there are similarities between them that point to a common origin for their association with the woman or goddess in question, rather than simply deriving from a shared tradition that is independent of their equine connection.

A close examination of birds accompanying Epona in this light makes it very difficult to see them as a factor suggesting she is a close relation of Rhiannon. It is, of course, not easy to draw parallels, given that there only remain literary descriptions of the birds of Rhiannon, and only carvings of birds associated with Epona; there is not a single inscription or literary reference that mentions birds. Nevertheless, it is clear from the descriptions in each of the three tales from the *Mabinogion* considered in Chapter One that, although their species is not named, the birds of Rhiannon are above all songbirds, and indeed in each case their magical qualities are related to their singing. In two of the three descriptions, that in the Second Branch and that in 'Owain, or The Lady of the Well', the birds are also seen flying, and are thus associated also with the air, a liminal space that is not entirely of this world.

This is not the case with Epona. Whilst there is plenty of varied evidence of her association with horses, including many bas-relief panels and statuettes of her with horses, shrines to her being found in stables, and descriptions of her worship in works of literature, as described above, there are neither inscriptions nor contextual

clues that suggest an association with birds. Close study of the available iconography reveals the extent of the disparity between her association with horses and her claimed link with birds. Espérandieu made an exhaustive study of Gaulish stone work, including that related to Gaulish figures or mythology but found elsewhere, and he identified over three hundred extant statuettes, sculptures, and bas-reliefs depicting Epona or inscribed with her name.[112] Almost all show her with a horse or with two horses, and some also show other artefacts, such as a cornucopia, some fruit, or a sheaf of grain, that suggest a link with harvest, agriculture, or fertility or plenty in some way. Amongst these over three hundred depictions, only one shows a creature that may be a bird: a bas-relief panel, found at Alt-Trier in what is now Luxembourg, which shows her seated side-saddle on a horse, with two animals curled up on her lap. Although the panel is worn, Espérandieu states that these are 'probably a dog and a crow' (my translation).[113] Whilst Espérandieu's photo of the panel, reproduced here as Figure 1, does not show this creature with any clarity, the sketch by Reinach,[114] see Figure 2, very definitely shows it to be a bird, possibly of an appropriate size and shape to be a crow.

[112] In É. Espérandieu, *Recueil Général des Bas-reliefs, Statues et Bustes de la Gaule Romaine,* Tomes I - XI (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1907–31).
[113] É. Espérandieu, *Recueil Général des Bas-reliefs, Statues et Bustes de la Gaule Romaine,* Tome Cinquième (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1913), p. 345.
[114] S. Reinach, 'Epona: La Déesse Gauloise des Chevaux' in *Revue Archéologique* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1895), p. 181.

Figure 1: Espérandieu's photo, No. 4219

Figure 2: Reinach's sketch of this panel

There is a second possible pictorial link between Epona and birds; as it was only found recently, and is on a metal dish, it is not included in Espérandieu's catalogue of Gaulish carved bas-reliefs, statues, and busts. It forms part of the Roman hoard from Mount Rudnik, in present-day Serbia. As well as Roman coins, this hoard contains some silver paterae, one of which bears the inscription 'Epona', whilst another depicts a woman with a colt on the handle, and a third shows a person on horseback, and also two animals believed to be ducks.[115] There are no pictures of these artefacts in the public domain as yet, but from the description, it is possible that this is an additional but very tenuous association between Epona and birds.

A further claimed link between Epona and birds concerns the geographical location in which the objects in question are found. Ross draws attention to the several bas-relief panels that are undoubtedly of Epona and a horse or horses found in what is

[115] M. Sisa-Vivek et al, 'Hoard of Roman Coins and Silver Dishware from Patrijanec' in *Opuscula Archaeologica* Vol. 29 (2005), pp. 236–8.

now Luxembourg, and to the two or three statuettes found in the same country that depict a female figure, interpreted as a mother goddess, accompanied by two or three birds, although not by a horse. She suggests that finding Epona in the same region as a goddess associated with birds could support the identification of Epona with those Celtic horse-goddesses who have known links with birds, such as Rhiannon. Ross further points out that there is in the same broad region an Urnfeld figurine of a woman accompanied by birds, although again not by a horse, from the Bronze Age, and speculates that this may imply that the concept of a raven-goddess who is also associated with horses may therefore pre-date the Celts and have been incorporated into tradition from this earlier time.[116] This is interesting, but highly speculative. As none of the depictions of a woman with birds also shows a horse, or vice versa, it is rather stretching the evidence to interpret it as supporting any link between these two animals in the repertoire of any particular goddess. In the absence of inscriptions or other written information, the only clue that a certain depiction may be of Epona, rather than of any one of a number of other goddesses whose territory coincided with hers, is the presence of a horse. None of the Luxembourg statuettes even occurs in the same archaeological context as any of the Epona bas-reliefs, nor is there any other reason to believe that they depict the same person; in Luxembourg, as elsewhere, it is likely that more than one female character was revered.

It can thus be seen that it is very difficult to shore up an identification of Rhiannon with Epona by appealing to their association with birds. Rhiannon is associated with three flying songbirds, and at best Epona is, on one occasion each, seen with a pair

[116] A. Ross (1974), pp. 314–7.

of ducks waddling on the ground or with a single crow on her lap, neither of these birds being noted for their song.

It is equally difficult to use avian companions to consolidate a putative link between Macha and Rhiannon. As has been discussed, Rhiannon's birds are songbirds, and are associated with beneficent qualities; helping humans to forget their troubles, lulling them to sleep, healing or soothing them. Macha, on the other hand, has no link with birds in the basic tale outlined above. Because there are two other characters in Irish mythology named Macha, and because the Macha of the horse race was later named as one of the Morrigans, a trio of Irish war-goddesses, it is difficult to be certain which Macha is being referenced in later tales. However, those that are related to the vengeance she exacts for having been made to race when in such a vulnerable condition, and those that reference her as one of the Morrigans, associate her primarily with corvids; capable of transmogrification, the Morrigans often appear together as three crows on the battlefield.[117] There is no tradition of this or any other Macha being associated with any other type of birds.

Although the number of birds here suggests a link with the magical birds of Rhiannon, that they are corvids makes it clear that they are no songbirds, so once again they are missing the prime attribute of the birds in the *Mabinogion*. Additionally, Macha's birds, whether they are Macha and her companions in her other form or merely associated with her, are harbingers of or reminders of war, destruction, or forceful assertion of authority.[118] This is the antithesis of the birds of Rhiannon, which bring soothing, healing, sleep, or peace.

[117] P. MacCana (1970), pp. 89–90.
[118] Ibid., pp. 90–1.

As an aside, it should perhaps be noted here that there are closer links between Epona and Macha in this respect. Both have at least some association with crows, although in Epona's case, as detailed above, only in one bas-relief panel, and also not just with horses, but with horse races. Macha, indeed, had to race against horses, and is sometimes depicted starting horse races, and Epona carries a mappa, a cloth for starting a horse race, in several of the depictions of her.[119] Both also may have had an association with fertility of the land; as shown above, Epona is often shown carrying symbols of a plentiful harvest, and Macha brought fertility and plenty to Cruind's farm.

It must be said that the absence of a correspondence in terms of accompanying birds between Rhiannon and Epona and between Rhiannon and Macha does not mean that they are not derived from the same goddess. It does, however, suggest that those who use birds to bolster such a link are moving beyond the evidence into the realm of speculation.

[119] M. Green (1992b), p. 22; É. Espérandieu, *Recueil Général des Bas-reliefs, Statues et Bustes de la Gaule Romaine,* Tome Dixième (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1928), pp. 11–12.

Chapter Four: Irish otherworldly birds

Magical birds appear in many of the Irish *eachtraí* (adventure tales) and *immrama* (voyage tales). On the whole, an *eachtra* records an adventure undertaken for a specific reason, set within a mythological context or recounting supposedly historical events from a period where evidence of their veracity is scarce. There is therefore generally a goal, and the journey is merely the way of getting to the place where this objective can best be met. An *immram*, on the other hand, tends to be set within a Christian context, and the act of travelling itself is a large part of the reason for undertaking it; by setting out in a small boat on the sea and trusting to God, the participants hope to discover something about themselves, about God, or about the relationship between the two.

These differing goals have consequences for the amount of detail recorded about objects or marvels seen on the way. There is a tendency in the *eachtraí* to pass rapidly over whatever does not impact upon the objective of the voyage, so that descriptions of incidental occurrences and marvels encountered can be rather sparse. Only characteristics required by the storyline tend to be referenced, so that even where magical birds are seen, very little information is given, unless it is relevant to the main thrust of the narrative. The *immrama*, on the other hand, are less concerned with a linear plotline and are therefore more inclined to allow themselves to be side-tracked into long descriptive passages, especially of the wonders that the voyagers see on their journey. Whilst this means that the birds that appear are often more fully described, the symbolism has been Christianised to the extent that it can be harder to draw parallels between them and either the birds of the *eachtraí* or the birds of Rhiannon.

Nevertheless, the many references to magical birds that occur in these tales recounting holy voyages undertaken by early Irish Christians is telling in itself. They were surely not included in these tales purely for the Christian symbolism to which they purport to draw attention; scholars believe, on the contrary, that birds were such an enduring and readily understood part of pagan Irish imagery that incorporating them within the monastic journey tradition would have resonated with the readers or hearers, and might even have lent these works an older and more accepted authority. The widespread nature of avian symbolism within early Irish folk tales and mythology would certainly have facilitated the transference of ornithological motifs into a Christian context.[120]

The general plan of a Christian *immram* was that a person or group of people would set out with a particular spiritual purpose in a small boat and visit a succession of islands, and would, at the end of their journeying, achieve their goal. It is the act of journeying itself that tends to be the defining part of achieving some sort of enlightenment, rather than the nature or inhabitants of the places visited, although these may contribute additional insights. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the characters undertaking these voyages or their motivations; a consideration of the birds that make their appearance will suffice for current purposes.

The 'Voyage of Bran' (*Immram Brain*) is the earliest extant *immram*, dating to the seventh or early eighth century.[121] It is an interesting tale, representing in some respects a bridge between the *eachtraí*, which in general are set in a mythological past, and the Christian-era *immrama.* It is set within a pre-Christian Ireland, and

[120] A. Ross (1974), p. 365.
[121] J. Koch, ed. (2006), p. 959.

includes characters and topography from the mythological cycles, such as Monindán (otherwise known as Manannán) mac Lir and *sidhe* (otherworldly mounds). Much of the framework of visiting the pre-Christian Irish Otherworld also permeates this tale, such as the different rate at which time passes: a man who spends what seems to be but a year or two in the Otherworld, and who then returns to his native land, turns to ashes upon stepping onto the soil of Ireland, as his body ages in one moment to account for the many hundreds of years that have passed in this world.[122] Nevertheless, the birth of Christ is prophesied within the text, and the sin in the Garden of Eden is lamented, making it clear that it was actually framed within a Christian context.

There are two separate occasions when birds feature in this text. The language is poetic, and the meaning is sometimes elusive, but the otherworldly woman tells Bran of her home, the island of Emnae, where, when the little birds of Imchiuin sing, people gather together, and health, happiness, and joy pour over them.[123]

'Immram Máele Dúin' references birds on several islands, in the air between islands, and even under the sea. None of these bear close resemblance to the birds of Rhiannon, but their abilities variously to direct Máel Dúin and his companions to food sources, to renew themselves from old age to youth, and to lead Máel Dúin's coracle when the inhabitants are lost, suggest that they belong to a tradition of magical, otherworldly, birds.[124] This is also the case with the birds in *'Immram Snédgusa ocus maic Rialga'*, who delight and soothe the travellers with their songs, and who have the additional quality that the tree on which they alight to sing never

[122] CELT, *Immram Brain*, verse 290; K. Meyer, trans., *The Voyage of Bran* (Cambridge, Ontario: Medieval Irish Publications, 2000), p. 10.
[123] CELT, *Immram Brain*, verses 19 to 22; K. Meyer, trans. (2000), p. 4.
[124] W. Stokes, trans., 'The Voyage of Mael Duin' in *Revue Celtique* Vol. 9 (1888), pp.447–95.

decays. The Christianisation process is demonstrated by their choice of music, for they are singing psalms and canticles.[125] The fact that they appear in a flock, that they alight upon a particular tree, and that their music has this effect on their listeners, are all rather reminiscent of the qualities of the birds, discussed earlier in this essay, that were heard by three successive travellers in 'Owain, or The Lady of the Well'.

The earliest manuscripts we have of the *'Nauigatio Sancti Brendani'* date from the tenth century, and, unusually for such an early document, we have a multitude of copies, many of which were found on the continent, in what is now north-eastern France and Belgium. Written in Latin, it is clear that they are all copies of the same much earlier document. It contains sufficient material to assist in dating its composition, and on grounds relating both to historical events described within it and to the claimed lineage for the saint, Dumville contends that it was first written down no later than 786.[126] Carney is more circumspect, but agrees that it cannot date to later than the very early ninth century. He furthermore uses contextual, geographic, and linguistic details to build a convincing case that it must have been written by a man of Irish descent, who spent all or much of his life in Ireland; an important point, if it is to be considered as embodying elements of the Irish oral or mythological tradition.[127]

It is very much a Christian voyage of spiritual discovery, in which a group of monks allow God and his messengers to direct their course across the ocean. During the first

[125] CELT, *Immram Snédgusa ocus maic Rialga*, lines 19–22; W. Stokes, trans., 'The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla' in *Revue Celtique* Vol. 9 (1888), p. 21.
[126] D. Dumville, 'Two Approaches to the Dating of *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*' in J. Wooding, ed. (2014), pp. 127–32.
[127] J. Carney, 'Review of *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*' in J. Wooding, ed. (2014), pp. 49–51.

year of their journey they allow themselves to be carried hither and thither by whatever winds and currents it may please God to send them, visiting each island that presents itself on their course, and staying until a messenger tells them that it is time to move on. At the end of that year, they are told to revisit the same places in the same order, and to stay for the same periods of time, so that they celebrate each of the Christian festivals in the same location as they did during the previous year. This continues for seven years. Thus it is that the Atlantic Ocean and the islands within it that they visit become a kind of metaphor for the liturgical calendar.

They spend the period from Easter to Pentecost each year on the Paradise of the Birds. Here there is a flock of birds, which alight on a particular tree, whose singing is such that it soothes troubled souls, helps the weary to sleep, and delights those who hear it, refreshing them and renewing them. There are clear parallels here with the other birds we have been considering, and once again, in number, in effect, and in location, alighting on and then singing on a tree, they resemble more closely the flock in 'Owain, or The Lady of the Well' than the three birds of the Second Branch. However, the *Nauigatio* is very much a Christian work with a religious message, and hence the birds do not simply sing; as in some of the Irish-language *immrama*, they recite psalms and sing anthems and praise-songs.[128]

Spaan has drawn up tables summarising the otherworldly characteristics of six *immrama*, comparing and contrasting the motives for the journeys, the types of people met on the islands visited, the marvels seen, and the categories of enchantment that typify the Otherworld in each tale.[129] So prevalent are magical

[128] D. O'Donoghue, *Brendaniana: St. Brendan the Voyager in Story and Legend* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1893), pp. 104–78.
[129] D. Spaan (1969), pp. 321–6.

birds in the Otherworlds of the *immrama* that he has a separate category for the characteristics of those encountered. In each of the six cases he considers, their utterances are symbolic of the Otherworld in some way, and in four cases this takes the form of magical song with otherworldly powers. Summing up the appearance of various symbolic elements in the *immrama*, he tells us, describing the Irish Otherworld, that '… the song of its birds has power to banish grief and lull the wounded to sleep' and that Otherworldly music in general can '… evoke at will not only sleep, but also … hold a hero entranced for as long as a year.'[130] These descriptions are remarkably similar to explanations of the powers of the birds of Rhiannon in the *Mabinogion*.

Although these details from the *immrama* present a pervasive background of an Otherworld in which birds regularly feature and resemble to some extent those found in medieval Welsh literature, there are even closer parallels in two of the more secular tales. The 'Adventures of Tadg mac Cian' is a story forming part of the Ossianic Cycle (sometimes known as the Fenian Cycle) of Irish mythology,[131] and '*Serglige Con Culainn*' is part of the Ulster Cycle,[132] and hence both are set in about the first century BCE, in a pre-Christian heroic age. Although the tales were, as far as we know, only committed to writing after the Christianisation of Ireland, many scholars see them as recording a long oral tradition, and they may also therefore date to before the arrival of Christianity in Ireland.

'Serglige Con Culainn' is one of the tales in the compilation manuscript, '*Lebor na hUidre'* (The Book of the Dun Cow), which dates from the late eleventh and early

[130] Ibid., p. 235.
[131] J. MacKillop (1998), pp. 185–7.
[132] Ibid., pp. 338–9 and pp. 372–4.

twelfth century, although the language suggests that two considerably earlier, now lost, manuscripts, each containing slightly different versions of the tale, were combined as they were copied, or perhaps were copied by two scribes, each using a different source manuscript, who alternated or interpolated details of the tale.[133] In this story, Cu Chulainn sees two beautiful birds, joined by a gold chain, flying overhead. He shoots at them, intending to offer their feathers to his wife for decoration. He misses twice, although he is so skilled with both bow and sling that this has never happened before. He eventually succeeds in slightly wounding one of them, and they then visit him in female human form, for it appears that they are in fact Fand and Li Ban from the Otherworld. Their appearance is the instigating incident for a whole series of adventures for Cu Chulainn in the Otherworld.

There are, in this case, only two magical birds, and they are actually transmogrified women, which is not the case with the birds of Rhiannon (as far as is known). Furthermore, the events in *'Serglige Con Culainn'* are told in the Irish way, with a totally different style to the *Mabinogi*, and the society within which the events take place is much earlier and very different to the measured, cultured setting of the Four Branches. Nevertheless, there is much within this series of adventures that is reminiscent of the First and Second Branches. Cu Chulainn goes to the Otherworld at the request of Labraid the king, to fight the enemies that the king himself cannot kill, reminding us of the reason for Pwyll's journey to Annwn at the very start of the First Branch. Cu Chulainn is under some obligation to accept this request because he shot at and wounded an otherworldly creature, in this case a woman while she was in avian form, much as Pwyll needed to redeem himself for having transgressed against

[133] R. Best (1912), pp. 167–9.

Arawn by allowing his own dogs to feed upon the stag brought down by Arawn's otherworldly hounds. In the First Branch Pwyll is enchanted into the likeness of Arawn, so that no-one will know that he is not the king, and he is even given permission to lie with Arawn's wife until the end of the year, when his battle with Arawn's enemy will take place. Labraid does not give Cu Chulainn his own wife, but sanctions the wish of her sister, Fand, to sleep with him, her own husband, Manannán mac Lir, having deserted her, until he has undertaken his task. Unlike Pwyll, Cu Chulainn does not resist this temptation. After he has fulfilled his obligations to Labraid, he returns to this world, and Manannán returns to Fand. Cu Chulainn and Emer, his wife, are then each given a potion of forgetting, so that he does not remember having been unfaithful or indeed remember Fand at all, nor she having been jealous.

Although these similarities in the Irish and Welsh tales are interesting and possibly significant in themselves, more relevant to the current essay are the special powers possessed by Li Ban and Fand when in their avian form. Like the birds of Rhiannon, these birds sing as they fly, and their song soothes men to sleep, and can heal Cu Chulainn of his sickness.[134]

As discussed in Chapter Three, Epona and Macha are the goddesses most often suggested as parallels for Rhiannon on the basis of their association with horses, but magical birds accompanying them do not contribute substantially to this identification. Nevertheless, birds do suggest links between Rhiannon and another Irish mythological character.

[134] A. Leahy (1905), pp. 51–85.

According to MacKillop,[135] the Irish Goddess Cliodhna had three brightly coloured birds, that ate apples from an otherworldly tree, and that sang so sweetly that their music could heal the sick and put the troubled soul to sleep. Cliodhna, sometimes written in English as Cleena, appears in several early Irish tales, but the story describing her birds is recorded in the 'Book of Lismore', a compilation manuscript dated to the early fifteenth century. It comprises a selection of texts copied from earlier manuscripts, including the tenth century 'Book of Monasterboice', that have since been lost.[136] One of the tales in this book is the *'Eachtra Thaidg meic Chéin'*, in which Cliodhna is the ruler of a part of the Otherworld visited by Tadg mac Cian.[137] O'Grady's translation, the 'Adventures of Tadg mac Cian', recounts that Tadg and his companions spend some time in this otherworldly realm, during the course of a journey they undertake after most of their people have been slaughtered during or abducted after a battle in Ireland. Here they meet Cliodhna, whose three birds sing sweetly and soothe the travellers. She allows her three birds to travel on with them, that their singing might ensure that the travellers know no grief or sorrow after the terrible events they have lived through, and might soothe them from the loss of their companions. While in her realm, they are not aware of the passage of time.[138]

Although there is much about the tale and the context that is different, there are very clear parallels between the circumstances in which Tadg and his companions are soothed by these birds and those surrounding the appearance of the birds of Rhiannon in the Second Branch. Both tales tell of a small group of people who have lost most of their companions during the course of a terrible battle in Ireland; in both

[135] J. MacKillop (1998), pp.80–1.
[136] CELT, *The Book of Lismore: MS description, edition and history*.
[137] S. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica I-XXXI: Irish Text* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1892a), pp. 342–58.
[138] S. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica: A Collection of Tales in Irish: Translation and Notes* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1892b), pp. 394–5.

cases they find themselves in an otherworldly space; a prediction is made, that magical birds will soothe them, and this prediction comes true; the birds are three in number; and they are in both tales unaware of time passing while the birds are singing. Additionally, in further tales about her, Cliodhna, like Rhiannon, chooses her own husband, who is a mortal, and she ventures from the Otherworld to his land to be with him, prepared to give up her otherworldly attributes to do so, in spite of her family having other marital plans for her.[139] Although her courtship with Ciabhán does not end as well as that of Rhiannon and Pwyll, it does support the clear parallels between the two tales.

Although these individual examples from the *eachtraí* and *immrama* each represent minor incidents in the stories of which they form part, collectively they build a picture of magical birds as an important characteristic of the Irish Otherworld; so much so, indeed, that scholars are able to speak of the general features of these birds. MacCana refers to the 'wondrous birds who figure in almost all accounts of the Happy Otherworld and who lull men to sleep with the soothing sweetness of their music', for example.[140] Additionally, Cliodhna presents a series of interesting parallels with Rhiannon, and the birds ascribed to each of them support some form of cross-fertilisation of ideas at the very least.

[139] J. MacKillop (1998), pp. 80–1.
[140] P. MacCana (1970), p. 55.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

The birds of Rhiannon are only explicitly referenced in two places in the *Mabinogion*, although there is a third tale in which birds with similar properties appear. From the facts presented in Chapter Two, it is likely that these are the only allusions to such birds in connection with Rhiannon in those medieval Welsh manuscripts that have been preserved. This is not to say, of course, that these are the only times the birds were mentioned, for it is likely that far more texts have been lost over the course of the intervening centuries than have survived.

The Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* themselves provide us with ample clues that they were once part of a rich and extensive body of literature. Each of the Branches seems to weave together threads from different tales, and to take prior knowledge of some of the characters and earlier episodes involving them for granted.[141] Indeed, people and events from the Four Branches are also referenced in the poems of Taliesin, some of which may have been written down centuries earlier than the recensions of the *Mabinogion* that have survived to the present day. Throughout the *Mabinogion*, there is much that is unsaid, for the intended audience would have been familiar with the world within which these tales were situated. It is therefore entirely possible that there once existed stories that explained where these birds came from, how they came to be associated with Rhiannon, and why she and they had apparently parted company before her courtship with Pwyll; it is not possible that she only acquired them after the events described in the *Mabinogi*, for they are referred to in

[141] See, for example, J. Bollard (1975), pp. 252–3; R.M. Jones, 'Narrative Structure in Medieval Welsh Prose Tales' in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies, Oxford, 1983*, ed. by D. Evans, J.Griffiths and E. Jope (Oxford: D.E. Evans, 1986), p176–8; W. Gruffydd (1953), p. 23.

connection with her in the Second Branch, which is situated chronologically between her two marriages.

Nevertheless, the extent or details of the stories that existed in the oral tradition cannot be known, nor is it possible to tell whether earlier versions of these tales were ever written down. In spite of the work of Gruffydd[142] and those who have continued his research, using various methods to try to dig down through the accretions to the original kernel of each Branch, theories concerning the antecedents of the characters and magical items that play a role in the *Mabinogi* are likely to remain just that. What is known, and has been demonstrated in Chapter Four, is that, in spite of only being available today in Wales within the *Mabinogion*, this particular type of magical birds was not an isolated phenomenon. It has been shown that a rich and varied symbolism was associated with otherworldly birds throughout early Irish literature, of which there is far more still extant than of the Welsh tradition. In particular, birds that sing sweetly, and that have healing, soothing, and sleep-inducing powers, permeate tales involving the Otherworld in Irish literature, whether set in a pre-Christian Iron Age or in the religious voyage tradition. It is even likely that such birds could, in Ireland as well as in Harlech in the Second Branch, be used as indicators that the characters or action have somehow entered an otherworldly space.

Within the Celtic tradition in both Wales and Ireland, three was a number that was rich in significance and symbolism. The *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* and the three-fold Morrigan have already been mentioned in this essay; MacKillop adds that a list of all Celtic instances of triplism would fill many pages, and cover all periods from pre-

[142] W. Gruffydd (1953).

history to late medieval times.[143] It is not therefore surprising that three magical songbirds could have had an especial meaning, and it is perhaps purely for this reason that both Rhiannon and Cliodhna were associated with precisely three birds. On the other hand, it is possible that one of these characters provided inspiration for some facets of the tales involving the other, or that both were ultimately derived from the same much earlier tale. These two otherworldly women had more in common than their birds, as was shown in Chapter Four, so some form of cross-fertilisation of ideas, at the very least, is likely.

Sims-Williams has written a seminal work examining parallels in early Irish and Welsh literature, and investigating possible routes of contact and influence.[144] He considers Irish influences on place names in various works of Welsh literature, including 'Culhwch and Olwen', and is most informative on characters who appear in both bodies of literature, sometimes under slightly different names. He also examines parallel properties of items, such as cauldrons, that crop up in both Wales and Ireland, but he does not make reference to these magical birds, nor to the parallels in tales concerning Cliodhna and those about Rhiannon. Ross provides a useful and detailed description of the importance and significance of birds in Celtic literature, and indeed describes both the birds of Rhiannon and those of Cliodhna, but does not consider possible routes of transmission or putative common inheritance.[145]

This is a field that would bear further research. Although there have been attempts to situate Rhiannon more securely within a wider Celtic context by linking her birds to

[143] J. MacKillop (1998), pp. 364–5.
[144] P. Sims-Williams (2011).
[145] Ross (1974), pp. 337–41.

those purported to accompany other goddesses with links to horses, such as Epona and Macha, Chapter Three has shown that their accompanying birds are in one case too infrequent, and in both cases too dissimilar to Rhiannon's, to provide supporting evidence for such connections. If, however, Rhiannon's association with horses is placed to one side, the similarities between her life and that of Cliodhna suggest a common inheritance. In addition to the material in Chapter Four above, it is interesting to note that on only one occasion does Cliodhna appear with her birds, and although they are securely referenced as belonging to her, during the course of that tale she sends them away from her home to accompany Tadg mac Cian. If the part of the story set within the realm she ruled had not survived, the body of work referencing Cliodhna would include descriptions of her courtship with Ciabhán and her decision to leave the Otherworld to marry him,[146] and tales of an otherworldly power sweeping her curragh away and drowning her as she slept, after Ciabhán left her there to go hunting.[147] As well as their soothing of Tadg, the birds of Cliodhna would feature in the tale of 'Ilbrec of Ess Ruadh',[148] where their singing is more beautiful than any the company have heard before. There would, however, be no stories that referenced the woman and the birds together, and this is much the situation that prevails with Rhiannon.

There are so many manuscripts in Old and Middle Irish that have been preserved to this day that cataloguing and indexing those held by some institutions is not yet complete, and there are many that have not as yet been fully translated.[149] Whilst the

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[146] A. Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha De Danaan and the Fianna of Ireland* (London: John Murray, 1905), Book IV, Chapter XII.
[147] S. O'Grady (1892b), pp. 199–201.
[148] A. Gregory (1905), Book IV, Chapter VII.
[149] See E. Fitzpatrick, *The Catalogue of Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy: A Brief Introduction*, Revised Edition (Dublin: The Irish Academy, 2003) for an indication of the difficulty of this process;

broad contents of these texts is generally known, there may yet be additional details about Cliodhna to be gleaned from tales in which she has but a subsidiary role. She is not a principal character in any of the stories referenced above; one is focussed on the adventures of Tadg mac Cian himself, another concentrates on Ciabhán, and the third on Caoilte's visit to Ess Ruadh. There is therefore no opportunity to appreciate the rich personality and character development that the First and Third Branches provide for Rhiannon; any further information about Cliodhna could therefore deliver valuable insights into her character and life, and assist in making a link with Rhiannon either more or less plausible. Additionally, the translations of all three manuscripts that contain allusions to Cliodhna or her birds, and that are referred to above, date from the late nineteenth or very early twentieth century. Not only have there been considerable developments in scholarship since then, there is also the disadvantage that the renditions in English are rather stilted and can be difficult to understand. Furthermore, Lady Gregory's main aim was to make more widely accessible the tales of a proud and rich Irish heritage, and she has thus in some, although not all, cases synthesised information from different manuscripts and existing translations within the same story, so that her work provides a telling of a tale in English, rather than an exact translation of any one version of it. A specialist who could supply a rigorous academic approach and a fresh yet accurate translation to these Irish manuscripts could do much to bring these stories alive for a modern audience and to enable connections to be made, as Sioned Davies, John Bollard and others have done for the *Mabinogi*.

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and the list of available manuscripts at CELT, 'Irish Texts' for an indication of how many as yet lack a comprehensive written translation.

Chapter One discussed various theories concerning the possibility that Rhiannon lost her otherworldly powers upon her marriage to a mortal, or upon the loss of her son, and suggested that this could explain why her magical birds are therefore no longer associated with her. However, taking account of the close parallels in tales concerning Cliodhna suggests an alternative reason for the lack of birds accompanying Rhiannon, in spite of them being ascribed to her. It has already been shown that the writing down of the *Mabinogi* was the culmination of a long oral tradition, during the course of which tales may have been combined or altered, or minor details lost. Indeed, as discussed by Gruffydd and later by Jones,[150] there is evidence in the similar introductory formula at the start of the First Branch and at the beginning of the episode where Pwyll first encounters Rhiannon that they were once two separate tales. It is entirely possible that part of the evolving of the stories of the *Mabinogi* before they were written down has led to an inconsistency regarding the timing of her association with the birds. The events of the Second Branch, where the birds of Rhiannon feature, take place some years later than those of the First Branch, for the infant Pryderi has become a man, and just before the Third Branch, when he offers his mother, Rhiannon, in marriage to his comrade in arms, Manawydan. Yet she is not associated with the birds in either the First or the Third Branch, in both of which she is a main character. It is entirely possible that one of the once-separate stories that were combined to form the First Branch, or another that has also been merged into it, originally featured the birds associated with her in the Second Branch, or led us to assume that she left them behind in the Otherworld when she came to court Pwyll. After Cliodhna generously allowed her birds to accompany Tadg and his companions to soothe and heal them after the trauma they had suffered

[150] R.M. Jones (1986), p178; W. Gruffydd (1953), p. 23.

during the course of a battle in Ireland, she is never again accompanied by them. They are not explicitly given away, but subsequent stories feature either Cliodhna or the birds, never both. Could it be, if the development of the Irish and Welsh tales has influenced each other, that allowing her magical birds to soothe the Welsh survivors of the war in Ireland entailed their loss to Rhiannon, too?

As well as investigating in this manner the links between magical birds in medieval Irish and Welsh literature, a potentially fruitful field of further research would be to dissociate Rhiannon from her almost universally claimed role of horse-goddess, and re-examine her without it. It was shown in Chapter Three that Ronald Hutton, a historian rather than a specialist in literature, is unconvinced by this assumption, and that the evidence he quotes from Hemming's research in an entirely different field implies that this role could be unfounded. Even MacKillop's more moderate view suggests that Rhiannon may not have been considered as a goddess at all until she was overlaid with characteristics that applied to Epona. When Wood's views, discussed also in Chapter Three, are taken into consideration, it can be seen that Romantic era attempts to align the Celtic Otherworld and its inhabitants with a Classical pantheon may have led to a distorted image of what Medieval Celtic literature actually has to say on the subject. Rhiannon, Gwydion, and Math may all have had powers that originated in their links with the Otherworld, but they do not fit the mould of gods and goddesses as they were envisaged by the Greeks and the Romans.

Instead of trying to distort the extant information about Rhiannon, Epona, Macha and the entirely speculative Rigantona, in order to make them correspond to one another, it would be useful to take a fresh look at Rhiannon and what is known about

her from the *Mabinogi* without the pre-conceived view of her as a horse-goddess. This might permit the establishing of parallels and connections that hitherto have not been made, because the assumption of horse-goddess has been so strong that characters who have no equine associations have been discounted. Letting go of the Romantic imperative to graft Graeco-Roman deity systems onto Welsh mythology, and thus divesting Rhiannon of the obligation to be a goddess in the Classical sense, could lead to fresh insights that honour the rich worldview of medieval Wales in its own right.

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