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Medieval Welsh Literature and Pre-Christian Deities

Ronald Hutton

University of Bristol

LESS than two decades after Lady Charlotte Guest first brought medieval Welsh literature to the attention of a wide English-reading public with the publication of *The Mabinogion*, Matthew Arnold famously voiced the opinion that the stories she gathered under that title embodied figures and concepts drawn from ancient pagan religion. He declared that the 'very first thing' to strike a reader was 'how evidently the medieval story-teller is pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret'.¹ Attempts to uncover that secret, from tales in *The Mabinogion* and other Welsh works of the early or high Middle Ages, have continued ever since. In recent years there has been a tendency to suggest a slightly later date for the compilation of the most relevant of the texts concerned than was hitherto customary. *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, the Four Branches (or Strands) of the Mabinogi, are now generally assigned to the twelfth century.² Simon Rodway has placed *Culhwch ac Olwen* in the same period, and Marged Haycock has suggested that the 'mystical' poems from the Book of Taliesin generally seem to derive from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, especially the latter.³ Brynley Roberts has guessed that the Triads of the Isle of Britain, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, were first compiled somewhere between 1000 and 1200, though given more detail in subsequent centuries.⁴ None of these ascriptions, however, are secure. 'Pa gur yv y porthaur?' ('What man is the gatekeeper?'), the most relevant for the present subject of the poems in the Black Book of Carmarthen, has been allotted a possible date around

¹Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London, 1867), pp. 60–61. ²A consensus summed up in Catherine McKenna, 'Revising Math: Kingship in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', *CMCS*, 46 (Winter 2003), 21–22. ³Simon Rodway, 'The Date and Authorship of *Culhwch ac Olwen: A Reassessment*', *ibid.*, 49 (Summer 2005), 21–44 (cf. T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Date of *Culhwch ac Olwen*', in *Bile ós Chrannaib: A Festschrift for William Gillies*, edited by Wilson McLeod and others (Bridgend, Perthshire, 2010), pp. 45–56); Marged Haycock, *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin* (Aberystwyth, 2007), pp. 1–40. ⁴Brynley F. Roberts, 'Culhwch ac Olwen, the Triads, Saints' Lives', in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, edited by Rachel Bromwich and others (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 80–81.

1100 or a little later by Patrick Sims-Williams, assigned to the period between 900 and 1100 by A. O. H. Jarman, and to the eighth century by John Koch (followed by Thomas Green).⁵

This degree of uncertainty has obvious implications for the process of attempting to detect pagan themes and figures in the literature: the earlier that a piece can be dated, the more plausible it normally is that such relics of a preceding period might be preserved. It also renders impossible the setting of the different pieces in a secure chronological succession, so that the development of characters and actions can be traced between them. Furthermore, the stories and personalities found in the texts must in at least most cases have been in existence for an entirely unknown and unknowable span of time before the existing literary works were created. In view of all these difficulties it is not surprising that there has been no sustained and coherent recent discussion of the issue of pagan survivals in them. The purpose of this paper is to invite such a discussion, by considering the treatment of four key figures, or kinds of figure, within the literature: Mabon son of Modron; Nudd and Lludd; the characters known variously as Lleu or Lluch; and Rhiannon. It will trace the development of a scholarly orthodoxy concerning each, and then examine the foundations of that orthodoxy.

MABON SON OF MODRON

Mabon son of Modron, features most prominently in *Culhwch ac Olwen*, as a child taken from his mother when three nights old. On the surface, his name means 'the son of the mother', but the *-on* ending is derived from *-onos* and *-onā*, Celtic suffixes especially associated with divinities. It may therefore be read as 'the divine son of the divine mother'.⁶ He is fated to be a great huntsman, whose services are needed by Arthur, and so Arthur's followers discover him imprisoned in a fortress, from which they release him. This identity would accord with the entry on him in the poem *Englynion y Beddau*, 'Stanzas of the Graves', from the Black Book of Carmarthen, as 'Mabon son of Mydrion the swift'. It also fits his characterization in a triad as one of the Three Exalted Prisoners of Britain, and he reappears as a

⁵Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems', in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, pp. 38–39 (cf. pp. 35–36); A. O. H. Jarman, 'The Arthurian Allusions in the Black Book of Carmarthen', in *The Legend of Arthur in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to A. H. Diverres*, edited by P. B. Grout and others (Cambridge, 1983), p. 108; John T. Koch, review of *The Arthur of the Welsh, Speculum*, 69 (1994), 1127; Thomas Green, *Concepts of Arthur* (Stroud, 2007), passim. ⁶See Eric P. Hamp, 'Incidence of Gaulish Divine Names in *-on-*', *Studia Celtica Japonica*, 4 (1991), 71–72. It may not have been obvious in the Middle Ages that Modron derived from 'mother' since the old word for 'mother' had been replaced in Welsh by *mam* (Patrick Sims-Williams, pers. comm.).

counsellor of Arthur in the prose tale *Breudwyd Ronabwy*, 'Rhonabwy's Dream'. In addition a Mabon son of Melit features in *Culhwch*, apparently as a separate personality, and in 'Pa gur?'. One of them is presumably the Mabon who features in two of the poems in the Book of Taliesin as an impressive warrior, but it was apparently Mabon son of Modron who became a character in Continental Arthurian literature as Maboun, Mabouz, and Mabonagrain, because of the associations of each with imprisonment.⁷ His mother Modron has an apparent independent existence in a Triad as the daughter of Avallach and mother of two famous children by the hero Urien. In the Book of Taliesin poem 'Kat Goddeu', she features in a list of names by which a magician swears or conjures.

In 1888 one of the great pioneers of Celtic philology, Sir John Rhys, declared that Mabon had been the god Maponos or Maponus, and Modron the goddess Matrona, deities attested in Roman Britain and Gaul: his argument was based on the linguistically solid derivation of the Welsh from the Celtic names.⁸ He repeated this in subsequent work, and it was taken up, in the first half of the twentieth century, by three major scholars of literature and ancient religion, spanning the Western world: Alfred Holder, William John Gruffydd, and Roger Sherman Loomis.⁹ Loomis pronounced the linkage to be the key example of the pagan roots of Arthurian romance, and made the single major contribution to it in this period, by identifying Modron with notable fairy women in Welsh folklore so as to turn her into the original of the figure of Morgain La Fee in the developed Arthurian cycle. This enabled him to argue that she had been a major character in early Welsh mythology. In the second half of the century, the equation of the Mabon and Modron of literature with the Maponos and Matrona of archaeology was accepted by other eminent figures in the study of medieval literatures: Idris Foster, Jean Frappier, Kenneth Jackson, Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman, and Proinsias Mac Cana.¹⁰ In the 1970s, Eric Hamp argued that the word *Mabinogi* itself meant 'the material or doings pertaining to (the family of)

⁷References in Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Shrewsbury School MS 7 and the Breton Lays', *CMCS*, 60 (Winter 2010), 39–80 (pp. 58–59). ⁸John Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion* (London, 1888), pp. 28–29. ⁹*idem*, *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* (Oxford, 1891), pp. 41, 212, and 294; Alfred Holder, *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz*, II (Leipzig, 1904), cols 468–70; W. J. Gruffydd, 'Mabon ap Modron', *Revue celtique*, 33 (1912), 452–61; Roger Sherman Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (New York, 1927), p. 4, and 'Morgain La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses', *Speculum*, 20 (1945), 183–203. ¹⁰Idris L. Foster, "'Culhwch and Olwen" and "Rhonabwy's Dream"', in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, edited by Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford, 1959), p. 37; Jean Frappier, 'Chrétien de Troyes', *ibid.*, p. 168; Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961), pp. 128–29; Rachel Bromwich, *Trioeidd*

the divine Maponos', though this is now usually rejected in favour of the view that it means 'a story of youth'.¹¹ Bromwich suggested that the goddess Matrona might lie behind the medieval Welsh saint Madrun, an idea enthusiastically extended by Daphne Brooke.¹² Specialists in the Roman period were initially wary of the linkage of the deities with the medieval names, but that was changed by the publication of Anne Ross's great work on religious iconography in 1967, which enthusiastically promoted it.¹³ As a result, when Robin Birley discovered a relief of a god at the Hadrian's Wall fort of Chesterholm (Roman Vindolanda) in the 1970s, and plausibly identified him as Maponos, he proposed that a nameless relief of a seated goddess, found nearby, was possibly one of Matrona.¹⁴ The equation of the deities with the literary figures was then accepted by three more leaders of the field, Graham Webster, Garrett Olmsted, and Miranda Aldhouse-Green.¹⁵ Since the beginning of the new century, it has remained a standard feature of commentaries on Welsh literature, repeated by (amongst others) Thomas Green, James MacKillop, Jessica Hemming, Bernard Mees, and Sioned Davies.¹⁶

All that is needed to clinch the idea is a set of ancient inscriptions

Ynys Prydein, second edition (Cardiff, 1978), pp. 433–35 and 458–60; Jarman, 'Arthurian Allusions in the Black Book', p. 108; Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London, 1970), pp. 32–34. ¹¹Eric P. Hamp, 'Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1972–75, pp. 243–49; Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford, 2007), p. ix. ¹²Daphne Brooke, *Saints and Goddesses* (Whithorn, 1999). *Madrun* would derive from a pronunciation *Matrōna* (versus *Modron* < *Mātrona*); Carn Fadrun in Wales (SH2835) may thus correspond to Mons Matrona in the French Alps (cf. Delphine Acolat, 'Prophylaxie et syncrétisme, quelques témoignages de cultes d'altitude en Gaule romaine', in *Romanisation et épigraphie: études interdisciplinaires sur l'acculturation et l'identité dans l'Empire romain*, edited by Ralph Häussler (Montagnac, 2008), pp. 111–26). ¹³Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), pp. 270–71. For earlier examples of caution, see Ian A. Richmond, 'Roman Legionaries at Corbridge', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, fourth series, 21 (1943), 208–10, and Eric Birley, 'Maponus, the Epigraphic Evidence', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, third series, 31 (1954), 39–42. ¹⁴Robin Birley, 'Vindolanda-Chesterholm 1969–1972', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, fifth series, 1 (1973), 114–15. ¹⁵Graham Webster, *The British Celts and their Gods under Rome* (London, 1986), pp. 76–78; Garrett S. Olmsted, *The Gods of the Celts and the Indo-Europeans* (Budapest, 1994), p. 381; Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (London, 1986), p. 73; eadem, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (London, 1992), p. 140; and eadem, *Celtic Goddesses* (London, 1995), pp. 64–66. ¹⁶Green, *Concepts of Arthur*, pp. 56–240, passim; James MacKillop, *Myths and Legends of the Celts* (London, 2005), p. 35; Jessica Hemming, 'Ancient Tradition or Authorial Invention? The "Mythological" Names in the Four Branches', in *Myth in Celtic Literatures*, edited by Joseph Falaky Nagy, CSANA Yearbook, 6 (Dublin, 2007), p. 89; Bernard Mees, *Celtic Curses* (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 13–18; Davies, *Mabinogion*, p. 270.

identifying Maponos as son of Matrona: but not a single one exists. In lieu of that, inscriptions and icons in which the two of them are associated together would be almost equally persuasive, but again, there are none. They have in fact no connection with each other at all, save that in the medieval Welsh texts. Matrona is the easier of the two deities to characterize: she was the tutelary goddess of the River Marne, in what is now north-eastern France and was part of the Roman province of Gaul. Her sanctuary was at its source.¹⁷ There is no trace of her presence in Britain; but then, few deities are more difficult to transport than those associated with particular local features of geography. Loomis made an attempt to get round this problem, which influenced subsequent writers such as Bromwich, by identifying her with the triple goddesses known as the Matronae, who had a much wider range.¹⁸ Some caution, however, is required here. The Matronae, also known as the Matres or Matrae, were certainly venerated across Western Europe, including the more romanized parts of Britain, the Hadrian's Wall zone, and some of the towns. These literal Mother Goddesses were apparently associated with protection, nurturing, abundance, and prosperity, and the epicentre of their popularity was in the Rhineland. It may well have been military units from there that introduced their cult to Britain, where all but eleven of more than fifty certain or probable dedications to or images of them were in forts or made by soldiers. More rarely, single images appear of a goddess with the same attributes. They were not however associated with Matrona of the Marne, nor with rivers in general, and indeed the form 'Matronae' for their name is not attested in Britain. Nor were they ever definitely placed in a relationship with Maponos, or with any other divine son.¹⁹ As the name 'Matrona' generically means 'Divine Mother', it is a perfectly logical one to be applied to a British goddess — and yet the Modron of medieval Welsh remains the only evidence that such an application was ever made.

Maponos himself is a more complex figure, neither his exact nature nor his point of origin being known. Most of the known dedications to him are in northern Britain, with three references to him in central France: but the British material was all either explicitly provided by soldiers (mostly high-

¹⁷The best details are provided in Holder, *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz*, II, 468–70, and Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 361–62. ¹⁸Loomis, 'Morgain La Fee', p. 199; cf. *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, edited by Bromwich, p. 458. ¹⁹Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, Chapter 3; and *Celtic Goddesses*, pp. 106–16; Webster, *British Celts*, pp. 63–66; Sylvia Barnard, 'The Matres of Roman Britain', *Archaeological Journal*, 142 (1985), 237–45; Ernst A. Philippson, 'Der germanische Mütter- und Matronenkult am Niederrhein', *Germanic Review*, 19 (1944), 81–142; F. Haverfield, 'The Mother Goddesses', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 15 (1892), 314–36.

ranking and from one unit, the Sixth Legion), or located in the military zone.²⁰ The Gaulish material which bears his name — a lead votive tablet, a potter's stamp, and a sacred spring or well — all seems to have civilian associations, so it may be that military occupation carried his cult to Britain.²¹ His attributes are hard to judge because all of the known images of him are badly damaged, but the officers in Britain almost always identified him with the Roman god Apollo, and specifically with Apollo as Citharoedus, patron of music. The Gaulish tablet treats him as a general protector, and perhaps a healer, and was found with votive objects associated with healing cults, another of Apollo's functions. Nowhere does the iconography associated with Maponos seem to refer to the personality of Mabon in *Culhwch*, as a talented and agile hunter. Anne Ross sought to supply this deficiency by pointing out that on the altar dedicated to Apollo Maponos from Ribchester, Lancashire, there is a carving of a huntress-goddess.²² She is, however almost certainly Diana, Apollo's twin sister who was the divine patroness of wild animals and those who hunted them: she also features on one of the three altars dedicated to the god from Corbridge and the relief thought to represent him from Chesterholm. The second goddess who appears on the Ribchester altar, and whom Anne Ross thought might be Modron, would be Leto, the mother of Apollo and Diana, if the conventions of Roman statuary were followed.²³ The carving is too worn for any significant details of it to be established.²⁴

It may therefore be suggested that there is no decisive evidence for the identification of Mabon son of Modron with the god Maponos who is actually attested in the archaeology, and that it should certainly not be made with the confidence and certainty with which it has commonly been presented. Simply to suggest that the cults of Maponos and Matrona were

²⁰*The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, 1, edited by R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright (Oxford, 1965), nos 583, 1120–22, and 2063; C. A. Ralegh-Radford, 'Locus Maponi', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, third series 31 (1954), 35–38; Eric Birley, 'Maponus', pp. 39–42; Robin Birley, 'Vindolanda-Chesterholm', pp. 113–15; W. Thompson Watkin, *Roman Lancashire* (Liverpool, 1883), p. 131; I. A. Richmond, 'The Sarmatae, Bremetennacum Veteranorum and the Regio Bremetennacensis', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 35 (1945), 27–29, and 'Roman Legionaries at Corbridge', pp. 208–10.

²¹Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, p. 381; Birley, 'Maponus', pp. 39–40; P.-Y. Lambert, 'La tablette gauloise de Chamalières', *Études celtiques*, 16 (1979), 141–69. ²²Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 465–66. ²³*ibid.*, p. 277. ²⁴The carvings concerned are discussed in Birley, 'Maponus', pp. 39–40; Birley, 'Vindolanda-Chesterholm', pp. 113–14; and Richmond, 'Roman Legionaries at Corbridge', pp. 208–10. The altars are now in the Great North Museum, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and the Lancaster Museum.

much more widespread and more popular in pagan Roman Britain than the evidence suggests, and had a different nature, or to presume that the identities of both deities altered radically during their transmission into literature, would be to dismiss rather than address the problems of the archaeological record. In the present state of that record it seems impossible to prove that the Mabon and Modron of the literature originated as the Maponos and Matrona of the epigraphy. The undoubted linguistic relationship between the names is a puzzle rather than a means of saying anything useful about either Roman Britain or medieval Wales.

It is possibly easier to suggest a further reason (additional to linguistics) why many scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries should have so readily identified Mabon and Modron with pagan deities. The answer may lie in one of the major themes in attitudes to the ancient world during that period: the belief, which developed in the mid-nineteenth century and flourished for most of the twentieth, that prehistoric Europeans had venerated a single great goddess, identified with the earth, fertility, and motherhood. This theme first appeared among poets, and spread from them to experts in every period of prehistory and subsequently to historians and philosophers of religion, and psychologists. It remained more or less orthodox until the 1970s, when it began to collapse among archaeologists for lack of any convincing evidence.²⁵ Such a figure clearly satisfied a deep need in the modern imagination. The belief in her pan-European existence, under different names, occasionally played an explicit part in the readiness of some of the authors cited above, such as Anne Ross, to emphasize the identity of Modron as 'the Great Mother'. It may have lain behind that of many of the others (especially Loomis), though its influence on scholarship in general has now almost disappeared.

NUDD AND LLUDD

Nudd makes an appearance in Welsh literature in one of the Book of Taliesin poems, 'Aduwyneu Taliesin', with the single salutation 'fair is Nudd, a leader, a lord like a wolf'.²⁶ Mostly, however, he is offstage, as the father of two more considerable characters in that literature, Gwyn and Eder. Both were to have a significant subsequent cultural career, Eder in Arthurian romance and Gwyn as a major superhuman personality in late medieval Welsh poetry and hagiography and modern Welsh folklore.²⁷ Nudd's importance lies elsewhere, in the manner in which modern scholarship has

²⁵Ronald Hutton, 'The Neolithic Great Goddess: A Study in Modern Tradition', *Antiquity*, 71 (1997), 91–9. ²⁶*Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin*, edited and translated by Haycock, no. 3, line 5. As pointed out in her note (p. 98), this may refer to a different personage, Nudd Hael. ²⁷Gwyn has in fact a modern reputation

bracketed him between two other figures with whom his name is cognate. One is the Romano-British god Nodens, Nodons, or Nudens, who is attested in Lancashire and Gloucestershire, and especially the latter where he had a major temple site at Lydney in the Forest of Dean. The other is Núadu, who features in medieval Irish literature as king of the Túatha Dé Danann, a supernatural race most of whom have generally been identified by scholars with former Irish pagan deities. He appears mainly in one text, *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, as having lost an arm in combat, and so disqualified from ruling, as custom demanded a sovereign without blemish. He was restored to the kingship when the divine physician Dían Cécht made him a silver arm, gaining him the nickname *Argetlám*, 'of the silver arm (or hand)'. There is, however, another character in Welsh medieval tradition whose epithet echoes this, Lludd Llaw Ereint/Eraint, 'Lludd Silver Hand', who appears in *Culhwch*. He features there as a separate person from Nudd, because his daughter is wooed by Nudd's son Gwyn; and there is a passing reference to him in the same tale as one of the Three Doleful Prisoners of Britain. In neither case is his epithet 'Silver Hand' explained. Somebody of the same name, though not the same associations or epithet, features as one of the protagonists of *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*, 'The Story (or Meeting, or Contention) of Lludd and Llefelys', a prose story in *The Mabinogion*. This Lludd is the ruler of Britain, seated at London, the name of which is said to derive by various stages from his own. There are also passing references to Lludd in the 'Stanzas of the Graves' and in one of the poems in the Book of Taliesin. Two more of the latter poems, 'Gwawt Lud y Mawr' and 'Ymarwar Llund Bychan', associate a person of that name with prophetic poetry.

It was, once more, Sir John Rhys who merged these Lludd figures with the names Nodens, Nudd, and Núadu, as the last two indeed derive philologically from the first, and inflated this composite figure into 'the Zeus of the Celts' and 'the greatest divinity of these islands'. He gave this deity the restored name of *Nūdons Lāmargentios, and apparently deduced his Zeus-like persona from Núadu's medieval position as king of the Irish gods.²⁸ In the 1920s the ancient cult of Nodens was given a higher profile by the re-excavation of the temple at Lydney by Mortimer and Tessa Wheeler, and the collation of the new data with that unearthed by nineteenth-century

of his own as a pagan deity turned into a medieval hero, but a much less prominent one than the characters treated in detail here, and so he has not been included among them. For a study of his legendary persona, see Idris Ll. Foster, 'Gwynn ap Nudd', in *Duanaire Finn*, III, edited by Gerard Murphy, Irish Texts Society, 43 (Dublin, 1953), pp. 198–204. ²⁸John Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, pp. 125–33; *Studies in the Arthurian Legend*, pp. 337–44; and *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1901), II, 445–49.

excavations. The Wheelers concluded that he had been a composite deity, with different attributes. One of the most important was healing, a conclusion based on the discovery of: a small bronze arm of the kind found elsewhere in the Roman Empire as medical votive objects; an occultist's stamp; a bone figurine of a woman with hands on waist, of a sort found at Continental healing shrines; more than 320 bone and bronze pins; nearly 300 bracelets; and fifteen figurines or carvings of dogs. The pins and bracelets matched offerings left at such places of healing in Italy and Greece, and the Wheelers emphasized that at a few Greek and Italian locations dogs were associated with the cult of Asklepios, the Greek god of healing. The probability was also argued that Nodens was a sun god, because of the discovery at Lydney of a fragment of bronze showing such a deity in a chariot. He was also given a role as a water deity, as a pavement in the temple had a frieze of sea monsters and fish, as fishermen and tritons were engraved upon another bronze fragment, and as more tritons were found at the ends of the design of the solar divinity. Finally, he was thought to have been a god of hunting and fishing, because of a linguistic analysis made in an appendix to the Wheeler's report. This was the work of the finest available philologist, J. R. R. Tolkien, who concluded that the names Nodens, Núadu, and Nudd were indeed all 'highly probable' derivations from a Celtic stem *noudons, *noudos or *noudus. Lludd, he thought, could 'conceivably' be related. The only similar verb-stem that he could find was the Germanic *neut-, meaning 'catching' or 'acquiring'. Tolkien therefore argued that Nodens had been most probably a god of hunting and catching, which is why the loss of his hand, mentioned in Irish tradition, would have been so especially disabling.²⁹

The identification of Nodens and Núadu was subsequently accepted in the remainder of the twentieth century by Jan de Vries, Garrett Olmsted, and F. Le Roux. That with Nudd as well was repeated by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh and John Darrah, while Idris Foster, Anne Ross, and Proinsias Mac Cana accepted that with Lludd in addition.³⁰ In the past thirty years two exciting and original authors have shown a particular interest in Rhys's composite

²⁹R. E. M. Wheeler and T. V. Wheeler, *Report on the Excavation of the Prehistoric, Roman and Post-Roman Site in Lydney Park, Gloucestershire* (Oxford, 1932); Tolkien's appendix is on pp. 132–37. Whatever the other problems of his reasoning, it is perfectly true that Lludd could derive from Nudd under the influence of the epithet in *Llaw*. ³⁰Foster, "Culhwch and Olwen", p. 37; Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative', in *Irland und Europa*, edited by Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 304–5; Jan de Vries, *La religion des Celtes* (Paris, 1963), pp. 108–12; Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 390–93; Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1977), p. 79; John Darrah, *Paganism in Arthurian Romance* (Woodbridge, 1994), p. 154; Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 48 and 230–33; F. Le Roux, 'Le Dieu-Roi Nodons-Nuada',

god. One, John T. Koch, noted that Lydney, in an Old English source of the year 972, was *Lidaneg*, 'Lida's Island', which 'may readily' be explained as a borrowing from a Proto-Welsh word **Lyd*, direct ancestor of *Lludd*. He therefore argued that Nodens, Nudd, Núadu, and Lludd were all derived from an Iron Age god with the reconstructed name of **Nōdons Argantolāmos*, a divine king who was maimed and so disqualified from rule, to the detriment of his realm.³¹ The other was John Carey, who concluded by upholding the hypothesis developed by Rhys and elaborated by the Wheelers and Tolkien, of Nudd, Lludd, Nodens, and Núadu as derivations from the same multi-faceted deity. In Carey's reading, this figure became a divine ancestor, a shining royal warrior presiding over wild nature, society, and the Otherworld.³² The general concept of an identity between Nudd, Nuadu, and Nodens continues, moreover, to feature occasionally in works on Celtic literatures, being mentioned in passing, for example, in Bernard Mees's recent study of curses.³³

An evaluation of this tradition may best begin with the material from Lydney, and with the famous report on it published by the Wheelers. In concluding that the temple was the seat of a single complex cult, the Wheelers considered and rejected as less likely the possibility that more than one divinity had been venerated there. This possibility was raised by the structure of the building, with a triple shrine and what looked like a system of side-chapels, but was viewed unfavourably because of the lack of apparent parallels.³⁴ Since then, however, other temple complexes have been excavated in the English West Country which suggest that different cults could indeed be carried on within the same site. At Lamyatt Beacon in Somerset, another temple with aisles and alcoves which might accommodate the respective deities, the main statue was to Mars, but statuettes of Hercules, Mercury, and Minerva were also recovered. The religious complex at Nettleton Shrub in Wiltshire was dedicated to Apollo Cunomaglus, apparently another pairing of a Roman and a British god. The cult of Apollo brought in his sister Diana, but there were also dedications to the Roman gods Silvanus and Mercury and to the Gaulish goddess Rosmerta, whose cult had been transplanted to the Cotswold area.³⁵ It was because of this new

Celticum, 6 (1963), 425–54. ³¹John T. Koch, 'The Loss of Final Syllables and Loss of Declension in Brittonic', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 30 (1983), 231–33, and 'A Welsh Window on the Iron Age: Manawydan, Mandubracios', *CMCS*, 14 (Winter 1987), 41. ³²John Carey, 'Nodons in Britain and Ireland', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 40 (1984), 1–22. ³³Mees, *Celtic Curses*, p. 41. ³⁴Wheeler and Wheeler, *Report*, p. 43. ³⁵W. J. Wedlake, *Excavations of the Shrine of Apollo at Nettleton, Wiltshire* (London, 1982); Roger Leech, 'Religion and Burials in South Somerset and North Dorset', in *Temples, Churches and Religion: Recent Research in*

context, and the range of cultic associations found at Lydney, that the very prominent archaeologist of Roman Britain, Graham Webster, concluded in 1986 that the Lydney temple had housed a multiplicity of deities, even though Nodens was the most important.³⁶ This poses obvious problems for any attempt to reconstruct the nature of that god from the finds at the site.

Such a reconstruction could best begin with actual dedications to him. He was identified with the Roman deity Mars, which immediately has implications, as Mars was a general protector-figure, especially in war and farming. He was not, on the other hand, traditionally associated with the sun, water, healing, or kingship. There are no known images of Mars Nodens, though two statuettes of him from Cockersand Moss in Lancashire, now lost, were recorded in 1718; they struck an observer in that year as having the normal, military, attributes of the Roman Mars.³⁷ Their existence leaves open the question of whether Nodens was a divinity especially associated with Lydney or had a wider distribution. The dedications to him at Lydney, two of which address him as Nodens alone and one of which twins him with Mars, take the form of votive plaques. One is a classic curse tablet, asking for misfortune to strike the thieves of a ring belonging to the dedicatee. Two others record offerings made in payment of vows. None refers specifically to healing; the context seems one of general aid and protection by the god. The dogs which feature so prominently at the site could have been symbols of healing, hunting, or general guardianship. The images there which refer directly to water — the frieze on the pavement and the design on the bronze fragment — may have been incidental decorations rather than referring directly to the associations of the temple. The other fragment, showing the god in the chariot, is certainly an icon of a solar deity, Apollo or Helios, displayed in terms of the classic Roman iconography for such a being. Four horses draw the chariot, the god wears a cloak and a solar crown, and he is attended by winged cherubs. The tritons at either end indicate the journey of the sun between opposite sides of the world's encircling ocean; they are, again, not evidence for an aquatic deity. If the decoration was at all relevant to activities at the temple, then it is further evidence of a cult there separate from that of Nodens.³⁸ More such evidence is provided by the discovery of a stone statuette of a goddess, carrying a cornucopia as a sign of abundance.³⁹ The bronze arm which has been taken as a medical votive may have held a small round object, such as an apple: in which case it would have had nothing to do with healing, and have been part of a statuette, perhaps of

Roman Britain (Oxford, 1980), p. 332; the finds from Lamyatt Beacon are kept in Bristol City Museum. ³⁶Webster, *British Celts*, p. 38. ³⁷*Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, edited Collingwood and Wright, nos 616 and 617. ³⁸*ibid.*, nos 305–7; Wheeler and Wheeler, *Report*, pp. 39–43. ³⁹*ibid.*, p. 68.

Venus.⁴⁰ The abundance of pins and bracelets are sure signs that worshippers expected, and thought that they had received, favours from the divine power resident in the temple; but how far they referred to specific forms of human activity, and how far they were directed at Nodens alone, cannot be said. As for the name of the site, 'Lydney' could derive from two Anglo-Saxon words as well as a Celtic and Anglo-Saxon one: *lidan-eg*, 'sailor's island', would provide it perfectly well.⁴¹

It may therefore be suggested that there is nothing on present evidence to connect Nodens and Núadu except the undoubted fact that the names are cognate: none of the associations that can be recovered for the former make any reference to the distinctive features of the medieval legend of the latter. As John Carey has pointed out, there is more to connect Núadu with the Lludd of the tale of *Lludd a Llefelys*: both are benevolent kings of a vanished age, who are aided against preternatural foes by an ally from outside their court or kingdom.⁴² The details of their respective stories, however, are completely different. The most striking suggestion of a direct relationship is the epithet 'Silver Hand' applied both to Núadu and to one of the characters called Lludd. Carey, however, himself provided a possible alternative explanation for the latter: that it occurs only in one text, *Culhwch*, which is notable for containing slightly distorted Irish names, such as Cnychwr mab Nes for Conchobar mac Nessa, Forcos mab Poch for Fergus mac Róich, and Coruil Beruach for Conall Cernach.⁴³ It would be (just) possible for the epithet of Núadu to have likewise been transplanted to Wales in that story, and attached to a different personality. Núadu and Nud were fairly common personal names in early medieval Ireland and Wales, respectively, but what connection this has with the fictional characters, and how and whether they do relate to each other, seem at present to be questions incapable of convincing solution.

LLEU OR LLUCH

Of the characters called Lleu, Llwch, Lloch, or Lluch, by far the most prominent is Lleu (later Llew) Llaw Gyffes, 'The ?Bright (Boy) with the Skilful Hand', who is one of the protagonists of the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi, as a handsome prince who suffers various tribulations before becoming ruler of Gwynedd. His adventures earned him appearances in

⁴⁰*ibid.*, pp. 41–42. ⁴¹Patrick Sims-Williams, pers. comm., referring to Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, fourth edition (Oxford, 1960), p. 308. Sims-Williams also points out that Tolkien had considered connecting the name Lydney with Lludd but did not publish the suggestion; see Carl Phelpstead, *Tolkien and Wales: Language, Literature and Identity* (Cardiff, 2011), pp. 55–56.

⁴²Carey, 'Nodons in Britain and Ireland', p. 15. ⁴³*ibid.*, p. 17.

Triads as one of the Three Golden Shoemakers and Three Red Ravagers of the Island of Britain, leader of one of its Three Faithless Warbands, and owner of one of its Three Bestowed Horses. He has entries in 'The Stanzas of the Graves' and one of the Book of Taliesin poems,⁴⁴ both referring to his reputation as a fighter. A Lluch Llavynnauc appears in 'Pa gur?' as one of Arthur's warriors, and his name could mean 'Lluch of the Wind-like (or Striking) Hand', or 'Lluch Equipped with a Blade'. Two other texts feature characters with similar names as companions of Arthur. One is the Book of Taliesin poem *Preiddeu Annwn*, which seems to mention two swordsmen called Lluch Lleawc, 'Lluch the Death-Dealing', and Lleminawc, perhaps itself a by-form of Llavynnauc. The second text is *Culhwch*, where Arthur's warband includes Llwch (or Lloch) Llawwynnyawc, 'Llwch of the Striking hand' and his sons 'from beyond the ?Tyrrhenian Sea', and 'Llennleawc Vydel', 'Llennleog the Irishman'. These latter names are not all securely identified. 'Lluch Lleawc' may translate instead as 'the flashing sword of Lleog', or 'the flashing sword of the death-dealing one', while 'Llennleawc Vydel' could be unpicked as 'Llên Leawc Wyddel', 'Irishman who reads literature'.⁴⁵ 'Lleminawc' may not be a name, but just the adjective 'fierce', applied in context to a warrior's hand, or an epithet, 'the leaping one'.⁴⁶ Andrea Budgey has suggested that both 'Lluch' and 'Lleminawc' in *Preiddeu Annwn* could be epithets for Arthur himself.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Lleu Llaw Gyffes, Lluch Llavynnauc, and Llwch/Lloch Llawwynnyawc all seem to be proof against such doubts, and the last two characters are probably the same.⁴⁸ Readers of this article who are not familiar with Celtic philology, such as archaeologists, may find it helpful to appreciate that, in the context of dense poetry, terms such as these can be taken as proper names or as adjectives used as ordinary nouns: hence the degree of uncertainty in interpretation.

The trail that was to lead these characters into an association with pagan deities began in France in 1884, when one of that nation's leading authorities on Gallo-Roman religion, Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville, linked together

⁴⁴The poem in the Book of Taliesin (p. 35, lines 24–66) is *Kadeir Kerrituen*, edited and translated by Haycock, *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin*, no. 10, lines 5–7. ⁴⁵Marged Haycock, "'Preiddeu Annwn" and the Figure of Taliesin', *Studia Celtica*, 18/19 (1983–84), 62 and 70–71; eadem, *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin*, pp. 443–45 (note on no. 18, lines 18–19). ⁴⁶Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, 'Arthur in Early Welsh Verse', in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, edited by Loomis, pp. 16–17. ⁴⁷Andrea Budgey, "'Preiddeu Annwn" and the Welsh Tradition of Arthur', in *Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples*, edited by Cyril J. Byrne and others (Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1992), pp. 395–96. ⁴⁸On the above names see Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 159–64.

four hitherto separate figures or places. The first was the Irish god Lug(h), the most prominent of the male members of the Túatha Dé Danann in Ireland's medieval literature, and their leader after Núadu resigned the kingship for a second time. The second was the unnamed god whom Julius Caesar had called the most popular of all in Gaul, and equated with the Roman Mercury. The third were a set of deities called Lugoves, mentioned in dedications across a wide span of Western Europe. The fourth consisted of the ancient name for the city of Lyons, *Lugudunum*. D'Arbois de Jubainville suggested that all testified to the existence of the cult of a major deity called Lugus, who was venerated by the whole family of ancient peoples which scholars by his time were identifying as the Celts. As one of the clinching pieces of evidence for this hypothesis, he pointed out that the major festival of Roman Lugudunum had been on 1 August, which was also the date of the major Irish seasonal feast of Lughnasadh, which seemed to derive its name from Lugh.⁴⁹ His suggestions were immediately criticised by a compatriot, H. Gaidoz, who cast doubt on the reality of the links involved, but d'Arbois de Jubainville ignored his protests, and went on to suggest that Gallo-Roman personal names, such as Julia Luguselva, also echoed that of the pan-Celtic Lugus.⁵⁰ Other French scholars rapidly supported his theory, such as an anonymous contributor in 1889, who suggested that the name of Lugus also underpinned those of the later cities of Leiden and Laon and the Carolingian towns Lucdono and Lugdono in Maine.⁵¹ It should be stressed here that none of these linkages are impossible: the problem is that they were rapidly accepted as fact rather than attractive hypotheses.

By the end of the 1880s British scholars were also starting to accept and incorporate them in their studies, and the most enthusiastic of these was, predictably, Sir John Rhys.⁵² It was he who injected it into the field of medieval Welsh literature, by declaring that Lleu had been the Welsh name for Lugus, 'one of the most widely spread of Celtic deities'. The solid linguistic fact behind this conclusion was that a British or Gaulish name Lugus would indeed yield Lleu, and that the latter is a perfect cognate for Lug. He identified Lugus particularly as a sun-god, partly because of the meaning of Lleu as 'fair-haired' or 'shining' and partly as a result of Max Müller's very influential school of thought which regarded most ancient mythology as a reflection of solar cults. His other contribution to the

⁴⁹H. d'Arbois de Jubainville, *Le cycle mythologique irlandais et la mythologie celtique* (Paris, 1884), pp. 137–96, passim. ⁵⁰H. Gaidoz, 'A propos des Lugoves', *RC*, 6 (1883–85), 487–90; H. d'Arbois de Jubainville, 'Luguselva', *ibid.*, 9 (1888), 267–68. ⁵¹Anon., 'Le dieu irlandais et le thème gaulois Lugu-', *ibid.*, 10 (1889), 238–43. ⁵²Another influential example was Alfred Nutt, *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail* (London, 1888), p. 184.

evolving tradition was to point to Lleu's identity as a Golden Shoemaker and link it to an inscription to the Lugoves at Uxama in Spain, made by a member of the local guild of shoemakers. He believed that this was a further proof that both personalities were the same god.⁵³

The association of Lugh, Lleu, the Lugoves and Roman towns with names commencing in *Lug-* or *Luc-*, as evidence of a pan-Celtic god, remained an international scholarly orthodoxy throughout the twentieth century.⁵⁴ There were disagreements over details: Joseph Loth, for example, found Rhys's connection between Lleu's career as a shoemaker and the Spanish inscription absurd, though W. J. Gruffydd, Jan De Vries, and Proinsias Mac Cana approved it.⁵⁵ In general, however, the tendency was for the model to gain further accretions. Roger Sherman Loomis added the other characters in the Welsh literature whose names are discussed above to that of Lleu, as memories of the god Lugus. He pointed out, in particular, the manner in which the possible translation 'Lluch of the Striking Hand', corresponded to the epithet *Loinnbhéimionach* or *Lonnbémnach*, 'of the Fierce Blows', often applied to Lug in the Irish texts. From this he suggested that Lugus ultimately lay behind characters such as Lancelot and Lot of Orkney in the Arthurian romances.⁵⁶ Rachel Bromwich agreed that *Llawwynnyawc* and *Lonnbémnach* are partly cognate, and emphasized the similarity of Lleu's epithet, 'with the skilful hand' to another of those applied to Lug, *samildánach*, 'equally skilled in many arts'.⁵⁷ Kenneth Jackson apparently found evidence of the cult of the same god in Roman Britain, by pointing out that the Roman name of the later city of Carlisle, *Luguvalium*, was named after somebody called Luguvalos, 'strong as the god Lugus'.⁵⁸ He went on to suggest that the Welsh personal names Llywelyn and Llywarch derived

⁵³Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, pp. 383–431, and *Studies in the Arthurian Legend*, pp. 97, 130, and 222. ⁵⁴Apart from the authorities mentioned below, see Holder, *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz*, II, 308–43; Edward Anwyl, *Celtic Religion in Pre-Christian Times* (London, 1906), p. 37; J. Loth, 'Le dieu Lug, la terre mère et les Lugoves', *Revue archéologique*, 23 (1914), 205–25; Myles Dillon, *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago, 1948), p. 51; Foster, 'Culhwch and Olwen' and 'Rhonabwy's Dream', p. 34; Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 48; Webster, *British Celts and their Gods*, pp. 33–34; J. T. Koch, 'The Laureate Hero in the War Chariot', *ÉC*, 24 (1987), 276, and 'Some Suggestions and Etymologies Reflecting upon the Mythology of the Four Branches', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 9 (1989), 2; Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 116–19; John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Andover, MA, 1999), p. 13. ⁵⁵W. J. Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff, 1928); J. Loth, 'Le Mabinogi de Math vab Mathonwy d'après W. J. Gruffydd et la méthode en Celto-mythologie', *RC*, 46 (1929), 272–300; Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, pp. 27–29; De Vries, *La religion des Celtes*, pp. 58–62. ⁵⁶Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, pp. 92–96. ⁵⁷Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 421. ⁵⁸Kenneth Jackson, 'On Some Romano-

from Lugus, and emphasized the undoubted fact that Lug and Lleu were cognate forms of that god's name.⁵⁹ Meanwhile Continental scholars were identifying more and more urban centres with ancient or medieval names that seemed to derive from that of Lugus. The list eventually reached eighteen, most in France but a few extending eastwards to Liegnitz in Silesia.⁶⁰ At the same time many more personal names from Roman Gaul and Spain were declared to have the same derivation, as were the medieval Irish names *Lugaid* and *Luignech*.⁶¹ By the 1970s the presumed cult of Lugus, stretching from Ireland to central Europe, was an important component of a belief in a unified Celtic ethnic and cultural province which extended over the same area.⁶²

At the end of the century, some aspects of that cult were called into question. In the 1990s, the whole concept of a unified Celtic province, as a basic assumption of studies of the Western European Iron Age, was challenged by some British archaeologists. These criticisms have had considerable impact on their discipline, and a significant amount on scholars of literature and art, especially in Britain and North America.⁶³ From the 1990s, also, questions began to be raised, in passing, about the lack of actual dedications to Lugus across most of his presumed range, including Britain.⁶⁴ In 1996 Bernhard Maier launched a direct attack on the equation of Caesar's 'Gaulish Mercury' with Lugus, which, in the process, raised some doubts about the importance of the latter. He pointed out that inscriptions to him were rare and that the place names related to him need not have any such connection. Indeed, Maier found that two-thirds of the towns apparently named after Lugus were only attested from the tenth century onward, and some might even have been named after the 'great' Lugudunum which

British Place-Names', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 38 (1948), 57. ⁵⁹idem, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), pp. 39, 414, and 441. ⁶⁰D. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names* (Oxford, 1967), p. 221; Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 308–12. For a recent revised list of a possible sixteen ancient names plus *Lugiso* and *Lougidounon*, see Patrick Sims-Williams, *Ancient Celtic Place-Names in Europe and Asia Minor* (Oxford, 2006), p. 86. ⁶¹ibid.; Antonio Tovar, 'The God Lugus in Spain', *BBCS*, 29 (1982), 591–99. ⁶²Tovar, cited above, uses the apparent presence of dedications to Lugus in Galicia as proof that the ancient Galicians can be regarded as Celts. ⁶³Classic works in the (large) revisionist canon include Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention* (London, 1999), and John Collis, *The Celts: Origins, Myths, Inventions* (Stroud, 2003). From an equally large literature of response, landmark contributions include Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Celtomania and Celtoscepticism', *CMCS*, 36 (Winter 1998), 1–35, and Barry Cunliffe, *Europe Between the Oceans 9000 BC–AD 1000* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 229–407, esp. pp. 354–63. ⁶⁴Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford, 1996), p. 327; Hemming, 'Ancient Tradition or Authorial Invention?', p. 102.

became Lyons.⁶⁵ None of these developments, however, made a fundamental questioning of the traditional model, and although the latter has not been so commonly restated in mainstream Celtic or archaeological studies in the 2000s, it has featured in the work of Thomas Green, Bernard Mees, Patrick Sims-Williams, and James MacKillop, as something still securely established.⁶⁶ Perhaps it is time to take a more searching look at it.

The construct of a major pan-Celtic god called Lugus would have been proven beyond any doubt if dedications to him were found across his alleged range, and especially at those places which supposedly came to bear his name. As Maier has stated, that is not the case. This being so, it may be worthwhile to consider more closely the linguistic issues at stake in the names of the places concerned. Experts have already discussed the possible meanings of *Lugus* itself, with the purpose of establishing the nature of such an apparently popular and important deity. Their suggestions have included the reconstructed words **lugos* or **lugo*, meaning a raven or dark in hue, **lugiom*, **leugh*, **lough*, or **lugh*, meaning an oath or vow, or **leuk* or **luk*, signifying light or bright.⁶⁷ It is entirely possible that these terms, or some of them, lie behind the place-names hitherto linked to Lugus, and associate the settlement concerned with their qualities. In the case of Lyons itself, such an association was made explicitly in Roman times, because its symbol was the raven or crow. The foundation myth of the city held that a flock of these birds had appeared at the moment that work upon it began, and coins and medallions struck there showed its animating spirit, or Genius, as accompanied by them.⁶⁸ The fact that its greatest annual festival fell upon the same date as the Irish Lughnasadh is almost certainly a coincidence, for the classical texts are again explicit in providing a full and alternative explanation for the timing of the feast. It was instituted by the Roman prince Drusus, at the formal establishment of the city as a Roman colony, on the anniversary of the final victory of the reigning emperor, Augustus, over his political enemies.⁶⁹

It is time to look more closely at the assumed cult of Lugus itself. There

⁶⁵Bernhard Maier, 'Is Lug to be Identified with Mercury?', *Ériu*, 47 (1996), 127–35. For criticism see the review of Maier's *Die Religion der Kelten* (Munich, 2001), by Jürgen Zeidler, *ZCP*, 55 (2006), 220–21. ⁶⁶Green, *Concepts of Arthur*, pp. 58–59; MacKillop, *Myths and Legends of the Celts*, p. 34; Mees, *Celtic Curses*, p. 44; Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 7. ⁶⁷Discussed in De Vries, *La religion des Celtes*, pp. 58–60; Tovar, 'The God Lugus in Spain', pp. 591–92; and Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 116–19 and 308–16. It needs to be emphasized that some of these derivations are more likely than others: **leuk*, for example, cannot work apparently (Mark Williams, pers. comm.). ⁶⁸De Vries, *La religion des Celtes*, pp. 58–60; Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 322. The foundation myth is in pseudo-Plutarch, *De Fluviis*, 6.4. ⁶⁹A full discussion and sources may be found in J. F. Drinkwater, *Roman Gaul* (London, 1983), pp. 19 and 111–13.

is in fact not a single definite dedication to him by that name. Instead there is the Spanish one from Uxama, and another from the Gallo-Roman town of Aventicum, now Avenches in Switzerland, to the 'Lugoves'.⁷⁰ The name form here is clearly plural, and there is no indication of the nature of the deities concerned: as Gaidoz said long ago, they could be goddesses, the type of divinity most often found in multiples. In addition there is an inscription in Celtiberian at Peñalba de Villastar in Spain, which seems to contain (twice) the name 'Luguei' (dative), but the meaning of it is still contested. Less controversial are the dedications on three altars from Galicia, also in Spain, which render the name of the deities concerned as 'Lucoubu Arquien', 'Lucubo Arquienob', and '[Lucub]u Arquienis'.⁷¹ The form is, again, plural, referring to deities, this time apparently male, called the Luci or Lucus. They may be the same as those apparently honoured in the same dative plural form as 'Lucubus' in an inscription from Nîmes in Provence, but the latter lack the defining second name of the Galician set.⁷² How they relate to the Lugoves, let alone the Irish Lug, is simply not known, though Celtiberian orthography did not distinguish between /g/ and /k/, so that 'Lugobis' could easily be rendered 'Lucoubu' or similar. John T. Koch has tried to address the problem of the apparent paucity of dedications to Lugus by suggesting that he was either closely associated with or equivalent to a different deity, Belenos, who is certainly well attested in Continental European inscriptions. His evidence for this was Jackson's hypothetical derivation of the Welsh name Llywelyn from an ancient compound of the two divine names, **Lugu-belinos*.⁷³ The derivation is certainly linguistically viable, but Jackson himself did not think it certain. Moreover, there seems to be no other reason to associate the two gods, and no conclusive evidence of the cult of Belenos in Britain. He was the principal male deity of Noricum, the Roman province roughly corresponding to modern Austria, and dedications to him are also found in northern Italy and Gaul.⁷⁴ No definite British examples are known, although the related personal name Bellinus occurs twice, in each case in the northern military zone where it may credibly have belonged to foreign personnel.⁷⁵

What can be salvaged from all this confusion are the cognate relationship between the names Lug and Lleu and the similarity of their epithets, which

⁷⁰The epigraphy is described in Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 308–11; Tovar, 'The God Lugus in Spain'. ⁷¹Fully discussed by Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 308–9, and Tovar, 'The God Lugus in Spain'. ⁷²Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, p. 309. ⁷³John T. Koch, 'A Swallowed Onomastic Tale in "Cath Maige Mucrama"', in *Ildánach, Ildirech: A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana*, edited by John Carey and others (Andover and Aberystwyth, 1999), pp. 75–76 and n. 32. ⁷⁴Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 32. ⁷⁵Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 472.

do seem to be beyond coincidence. Patrick Sims-Williams has drawn attention to the negligible influence of the literature of medieval Ireland on that of Wales, in comparison with that in Latin and French.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, he still emphasizes that the Welsh used the Irish material as a quarry for analogues and made references to names and subjects taken from it. That is precisely what is at stake here: the epithet 'Llaw Gyffes' could well fall into this category. Such a borrowing process would, to take a classic example, make sense of the name of the main character in the Third Branch of the Mabinogi, Manawydan son of Llyr, which has long been recognized to correspond exactly to that of the Irish sea god Manannán Mac Lir. At the same time the personalities and actions of each are completely different. Long discussions have been held by scholars over this problem,⁷⁷ but a borrowing of the Welsh name from the Irish, with an almost complete dissociation of context, would certainly provide a plausible answer. While this process could explain the epithet of Lleu, however, it does not account for the cognate relationship between his name and that of Lug: the problem now is that the relationship cannot be simply and confidently explained in terms of a proven pan-Celtic cult of Lugus. How it can be explained is an open question: Patrick Sims-Williams, in the most recent study of the relationship between medieval Irish and Welsh literature, has emphasized that cognates are not in themselves proof that the reconstructed names were part of a common inheritance from a shared Celtic language. They might have been, but they may have been borrowings across the Irish Sea in the early first millennium A.D., before the relevant sound-changes had separated the linguistic forms.⁷⁸ The stories about Lug and Lleu Llaw Gyffes contain many more dissimilarities than points in common. Lleu certainly has a number of characteristics that suggest that, like Lug, he is more than merely human, but that is true of many of the royal or aristocratic personages in the Four Branches and *Culhwch*. These are wonder tales, in which apparently human characters frequently possess magical abilities, or other superhuman characteristics, and the line between the natural and the supernatural is constantly blurred.

⁷⁶Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Mediaeval Welsh Literature', in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, edited by Dorothy Whitelock and others (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 235–57; and idem, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*. ⁷⁷For developing views over time, see Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llyr* (Cardiff, 1958), pp. 122–29; Koch, 'Welsh Window on the Iron Age'; Hemming, 'Ancient Tradition or Authorial Invention?', pp. 94–95; and Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*, pp. 11–12. ⁷⁸ibid., p. 11.

RHIANNON

Finally, there is the figure of Rhiannon, perhaps the most famous female character in the whole of medieval Welsh literature. She is the heroine of the First Branch of the Mabinogi, is mentioned in the Second, and is one of the main characters of the Third. She makes her first appearance as a beautiful woman in golden silk, riding a white horse which appears to move slowly but cannot be overtaken by any mortal steed. She courts and marries Pwyll, prince of Dyfed, helping him overcome various obstacles in the process, and is a bountiful queen. Fresh problems await her, however, when first she has trouble in conceiving a child, and second, that child is stolen by a magical foe just after its birth. Her attendants avoid punishment for allowing this, by blaming the child's apparent death on Rhiannon, who suffers the penalty of having to carry strangers into her court upon her back for seven years. She is saved by another lord, Teyrnon, who defeats a monster who has been stealing his foals at birth, and in the process rescues Rhiannon's child, which had been taken by the same thief. Teyrnon correctly identifies the boy as Rhiannon's son, brings him to Dyfed, and proves her innocence. The boy, Pryderi, becomes prince of Dyfed on the death of Pwyll. In the Second Branch Rhiannon's name features in connection with three marvellous birds, which are said to be hers and give comfort and forgetfulness of cares with their song. In *Culhwch* these creatures are explained further, with the information that they wake the dead and lull the living to sleep. In the Third Branch, Pryderi gives the dispossessed heir of Britain, Manawydan, his patrimony of Dyfed as a realm, and with it the hand of his mother Rhiannon, who agrees to the marriage on meeting Manawydan. She then shares in the subsequent woes which afflict Dyfed's people at the hands of a vengeful magician, being made to wear the collars of asses until she and all the rest are rescued by her husband.

The process of converting Rhiannon into a pagan deity began, predictably, with Sir John Rhys, who declared in 1888 that Pwyll had been a 'Celtic Zeus' (like Nudd), Rhiannon a goddess with access to both upper and lower worlds, and Pryderi (following Müller's ideas again) a sun god.⁷⁹ A further major contribution was made by Rhys's compatriot and an equally formidable scholar, Sir Edward Anwyl. Between 1897 and 1906 he published a pair of works in which he argued that the names Rhiannon and Teyrnon could have derived from a pair of reconstructed Celtic originals, **Rīgantona* and **Tigernonos*, signifying respectively 'Great (or Divine) Queen, and 'Great (or Divine) Lord'. He suggested that Pryderi had originally been their child and not Pwyll's. The influence of the concept of a

⁷⁹Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, pp. 497–503.

Great Mother Goddess was explicit in Anwyl's thought.⁸⁰ In the pairing of Rhiannon and Teyrnon with those presumed names, moreover, another staple of nineteenth-century history of religion came into play: a concept of primeval cosmology as depending on a pair of mighty deities, whose mating engendered and preserved the world. This had been developed at the end of the eighteenth century, by an alliance of British and French authors, and reached its most famous expression in the work of Charles Dupuis, the religious ideologue of the French Revolution.⁸¹ It was to exert an influence over reconstructions of ancient belief for a couple of hundred years. A few years later another Welsh academic entered the field, William John Gruffydd, who developed Anwyl's idea to merge the figures of Rhiannon and Modron into one great goddess, called both **Rīgantona* and *Matrona*, and make her the mother, with **Tigernonos*, of the god Maponos. Forty years later he separated the two again, to suggest instead that they had originally been different goddesses in similar myths, which had become conflated.⁸² He had done so partly because of the impact of a final strand which had been added to the developing tradition regarding Rhiannon, this time supplied by a Frenchman. This was Henri Hubert, who in 1925 pointed to her strong equine associations and suggested that she could be equated with the Gallo-Roman goddess of horses, Epona.⁸³

In the late 1960s, Anne Ross reinforced this compound interpretation by suggesting that Epona was occasionally shown, on the Continent, with the Matres, and might perhaps be identified with them as a mother goddess. She repeated, as fact and not speculation, the idea that Rhiannon had been an (or the) equivalent British figure, and pointed to the White Horse carved into the chalk scarp above the English village of Uffington (which has indeed been proved to be of Late Bronze Age or Iron Age date) as probable evidence for her cult.⁸⁴ In the 1970s a new component was added to the developing tradition, which derived from quite a different source. In the early twentieth century, scholars of medieval Irish literature had become interested in, and sometimes disturbed by, the apparent promiscuity of the legendary Irish queen, Medb Chruachna, who had a succession of husbands or lovers. In

⁸⁰Edward Anwyl, 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *ZCP*, 1 (1897), 288–89, and *Celtic Religion in Pre-Christian Times* (London, 1906), p. 43. ⁸¹The founding texts of this tradition are William Jones, *On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India* (London, 1784); Pierre, Baron d'Hancarville, *Recherches sur l'origine, l'esprit et les progrès des arts de la Grèce* (Paris, 1785); Richard Payne Knight, *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (London, 1786); Charles Dupuis, *L'origine de tous les cultes*, 3 vols (Paris, 1795). ⁸²W. J. Gruffydd, 'Mabon ap Modron'; and *Rhiannon* (Cardiff, 1953), pp. 66–67 and 90–108. ⁸³Henri Hubert, *Divinités gauloises* (Macon, 1925), pp. 187–90. ⁸⁴Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 286–410, *passim*.

1928 Tomás Ó Máille proposed that she had actually been a goddess of sovereignty, to whom each king was ritually married.⁸⁵ This was embraced and augmented by other experts in the literature, becoming rapidly combined with the prevalent disposition to belief in a universal great mother goddess associated with the earth and a divine couple whose union produced and upheld the cosmos.⁸⁶ During the 1950s the idea reached its full development. Many other figures and episodes in the literature of medieval Ireland were interpreted as representing the symbolic union of a king with a goddess who conferred on him the right to rule his land. It had also become believed that pagan Irish rulers had acted out this sacred marriage as the vital part of their inauguration ceremony, as a regional variation of a very widespread ancient ritual celebrating cosmic sexual union between feminine and masculine to which the Greeks had given the term 'hieros gamos'.⁸⁷ In 1970 Jaan Puhvel suggested that the sacrifice of a horse had been part of a royal consecration rite common to all Indo-Europeans, which included the sacred symbolic union of king and goddess. This, he continued, made female deities associated with horses, such as Epona and Rhiannon, especially likely to have been sovereignty goddesses as well.⁸⁸ In the case of Rhiannon, this idea was developed further four years later by Thomas Charles-Edwards, who had accepted that the ritual marriage with the goddess of his country was one enacted by 'Celtic' kings in general. He pointed to the way in which Rhiannon's marriage to Manawydan had brought the latter a kingdom, concluding that Rhiannon alias **Rīgantona* was 'identical or equivalent with' Epona, as a goddess who conferred sovereignty.⁸⁹ This was swiftly repeated by experts in medieval literature as prominent as Proinsias Mac Cana in Ireland and Patrick Ford in America, and was a standard component of the interpretation of Rhiannon through the 1980s and 1990s.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Tomás Ó Máille, 'Medb Chruachna', *ZCP*, 17 (1928), 129–46. ⁸⁶ R. Thurneysen, 'Präverbales *toich* im Irischen?', *ibid.*, 18 (1930), 108–9; and 'Zur Göttin *Medb*', *ibid.*, 19 (1933), 352–53; T. F. O'Rahilly, 'On the Origins of the Names *Érainn* and *Ériu*', *Ériu*, 14 (1946), 7–28. ⁸⁷ D. A. Binchy, 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara', *ibid.*, 18 (1958), 113–58; Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Aspects of the Theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature', *ÉC*, 7 (1955–56), 76–114 and 356–413, and 8 (1958), 59–65. ⁸⁸ Jaan Puhvel, 'Aspects of Equine Functionality', in *Myth and Law Among the Indo-Europeans*, edited by Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley, CA, 1970), pp. 159–72. ⁸⁹ T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Native Political Organization in Roman Britain and the Origin of *MW brenhin*', in *Antiquitates Indogermanicae*, edited by Manfred Mayrhofer and others (Innsbruck, 1974), pp. 39–45. ⁹⁰ Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1977), pp. 57–58; Patrick K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley, CA, 1977), pp. 8–26, *passim*; Catherine A. McKenna, 'The Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll*', *BBCS*, 29 (1980–82), 35–52; Laura S. Oaks, 'The Goddess Epona: Concepts of Sovereignty in a Changing Landscape', in *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire*, edited by Martin Henig and

Over the past few decades, cautionary notes have been sounded at moments about aspects of the tradition of treating her as a former pagan goddess. John T. Koch has pointed out that there is absolutely no ancient evidence for a cult of **Rīgantona* and **Tigernonos*. This, however, only led him to conclude that it was a localized phenomenon, perhaps of the important Catuvellauni tribe in south-east Britain; this harmonized conveniently with his own contention that Manawydan had originally been a historical prince from that region, Mandubracios. He went on to term it 'essential' to recognize Rhiannon as a manifestation of the 'Celtic Sovereignty Goddess', not only because of her two successive marriages to rulers of Dyfed but because she seems to live in her prime for over a century. Indeed, he declared that she provides 'clear evidence' of the common Celtic status of the sovereignty legend.⁹¹ Juliette Wood, however, has cast doubt on the link between Rhiannon and Epona, pointing out that in the case of the former horses are associated with punishment and in the latter with empowerment, while Epona is never shown as a mother.⁹² Jessica Hemming has recently gone much further, finding (as shall be seen) folkloric and historical explanations for motifs in the story which had been ascribed to pagan mythology. She points out that **Rīgantona* and **Tigernonos* form a 'suspiciously tidy' pair, whereas the deities of Celtic-speaking peoples did not tend to have matched names, and that Teyrn is not the consort of Rhiannon and has no supernatural attributes. She has also challenged the concept of Rhiannon as a sovereignty goddess, pointing out that she does not confer Dyfed on either of her husbands: Pwyll is already prince there when he marries her and Pryderi gives the realm to Manawydan, not Rhiannon. She still, however, accords the latter a good chance of being derived from ancient paganism.⁹³ At the same time the traditional interpretation of Rhiannon as the horse goddess **Rīgantona* has been restated during the present century, in the work of Sioned Davies and James MacKillop.⁹⁴

Perhaps it is time to take a more comprehensive look at the evidence for such a derivation, starting with the aspect of sovereignty. There is absolutely

Anthony King (Oxford, 1986), pp. 77–83; Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, pp. 48–53. ⁹¹ Koch, 'A Welsh Window on the Iron Age', pp. 33–34 and 45. For a summary of criticisms of the equation of Manawydan with Mandubracios, see Hemming, 'Ancient Tradition or Authorial Convention?', pp. 84–86. Another objection to the equation was made by D. Ellis Evans, 'Some Remarks on the Study of Old Celtic Proper Names', in *Indogermanica et Caucasica*, edited by Roland Bielmeier and Reinhard Stempel (Berlin, 1994), pp. 306–15. ⁹² Juliette Wood, 'The Horse in Welsh Folklore', in *The Horse in Celtic Culture*, edited by Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones (Cardiff, 1997), pp. 168–73. ⁹³ Hemming, 'Ancient Tradition or Authorial Convention?', pp. 87–89. ⁹⁴ *Mabinogion*, edited by Davies, p. 230; MacKillop, *Myths and Legends of the Celts*, p. 79.

no doubt that Irish literature, from the eleventh century (at latest) until the twentieth, has contained a concept of the land as being personified in a divine female figure, who calls for champions and confers legitimacy on kings. It is entirely possible that this figure descends from pre-Christian belief and ritual, but perhaps it is worth emphasizing how much this hypothesis is a back-projection from the medieval texts. Máire Herbert has traced the first known appearance of the sovereignty goddess to a pair of prose tales produced in the early eleventh century to uphold the claims to supremacy of the established Uí Néill dynasty against the challenge being mounted to it by that of Brian Bóruma. She questions whether the belief ever functioned in a historical as well as a literary setting, but still upholds the idea that it was a 'mythic model of royal rule' shared by 'the Celtic world' and many other ancient cultures, based on the 'hieros gamos' between the goddess of the land and its sovereign. In support of this she cites the frequency in Gallo-Roman iconography of paired deities whose partnership suggests fertility and prosperity, and the foundation story of the Greek colony of Massilia (now Marseilles). This was identified as clinching evidence for the pan-Celtic nature of the sovereignty goddess by T. F. O'Rahilly in the 1940s, and relates how the daughter of a Gallic chieftain chose to marry a newly-arrived Greek instead of her intended native bridegroom, so giving him a claim to the land.⁹⁵

Gallo-Roman deities, however, do not usually occur in female-male pairings, and there is no evidence that any which do were concerned with sovereignty. The Massilia legend is not one of a goddess conferring the land on an incoming Greek, but of marriage into a native dynasty providing him with a right to it. The historical record cited in the past as evidence for a 'hieros gamos' at the inauguration of Irish kings is an account by the twelfth-century author Giraldus Cambrensis of the consecration of the contemporary rulers of the Cenél Conaill. This involved the coupling of the new king with a white mare in the presence of his people, after which it was killed and he bathed in its broth and ate some of its flesh.⁹⁶ This account has been a mainstay of earlier theories linking kingship inauguration, horse sacrifice, and a sovereignty goddess, including that of Puhvel. It was, however, recorded by a foreigner, as gossip picked up from the Anglo-Norman

⁹⁵Máire Herbert, 'Goddess and King: The Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland', in *Women and Sovereignty*, edited by Louise Olga Fradenburg (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 264–75; O'Rahilly, 'On the Origins of the Names Érainn and Ériu'. Between them these cite the relevant ancient and medieval sources. ⁹⁶*Giraldus Cambrensis in Topographia Hibernie: Text of the First Recension*, edited by J. J. O'Meara, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Section C, 52, no. 4 (1949), 113–78 (p. 168).

settlements in Ireland concerning native people on the far side of the country. The Cenél Conaill royal family at this period had long been devout Christians, who had supplied (among other leading churchmen) twelve abbots of Iona, and it is hard to accept this sensational story as if it were an objective piece of ethnography. There was in fact not one single polity in the whole of ancient Europe and the Near East in which kings are recorded as being installed by a rite of marriage with a goddess: proponents of one such as Jaan Puhvel have had to go as far as India to find a possible such case. The 'hieros gamos' identified by the Greeks was, instead, a ritual in which humans either symbolically mated with a deity or else took the parts of deities and mated symbolically with each other. All the cases concerned, from Babylon and four places in ancient Greece, are based on accounts so dubious that it is difficult to tell whether they took place in actuality; and none concerned royal consecration.⁹⁷ When putting his theory of an Indo-European horse-goddess of sovereignty together, Jaan Puhvel noted apologetically that he was taking a 'calculated risk in awarding so much primacy to the Celtic material', which is itself medieval and not ancient.⁹⁸

These cautions strip away most of the need to connect either Epona or Rhiannon with sovereignty.⁹⁹ The next step is to ask what connection those two goddesses may seem to have with each other. There is no doubt concerning the popularity of Epona across most of the northern Roman Empire, as she is recorded from Britain to Hungary and south as far as Rome itself and Africa: over two hundred undoubted images of her survive, and thirty-three inscriptions. There is equally little concerning her association

⁹⁷They were listed, with source references given for each, and connected and given the status of a major and widespread rite, by James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged edition (London, 1925), pp. 142–46. It was apparently Frazer who ensured the modern fame and prominence of the rite as a major component of ancient paganism: his concepts of ancient religion are in general now rejected by historians. Frazer was, however, operating in cultural ground already prepared for the idea by the established tendency to reduce primeval religion to a union of a great goddess and god. For an updated overview, see Kees W. Bolle, 'Hieros Gamos', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vi, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York, 1987), pp. 317–21. The best evidence for a symbolic union between king and goddess is from ancient Mesopotamia, as part of the New Year festival, but even here it is not entirely solid: Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite* (Bloomington, 1969). ⁹⁸Puhvel, 'Aspects of Equine Functionality', p. 168. ⁹⁹Oaks, 'The Goddess Epona' made a determined attempt to clinch the identity of Epona as a tribal goddess of sovereignty, but her evidence consists of the Irish literature and one highly speculative reading of the images on the Gundestrup cauldron. Richard Bradley has recently delivered a crushing rebuke to attempts to use that particular artefact as a means of interpreting Iron Age culture: *Image and Audience: Rethinking Prehistoric Art* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 22–25.

with horses, the breeding and welfare of which were her special concern, whatever wider functions she may have had. The distribution of her cult makes it certain that she was a Gaulish and not a Roman deity in origin, though she became much loved by the mounted units of the imperial army stationed along the northern frontier.¹⁰⁰ The problem with associating her with Rhiannon is that the epicentre of her popularity was too far to the east, in what is now eastern France and western Germany, and Britain was very much on its periphery.¹⁰¹ There are only two dedications to her recorded in the province, and both are from forts in the northern military zone. One of them merely puts her near the end of a list of deities favoured by soldiers; the other, now lost, was commissioned by a trooper from a cavalry unit.¹⁰² From the lowland civilian zone, there is a probable bronze figurine of her allegedly found in Wiltshire and possible fragment of a stone statuette of her from the Roman colony of Colchester. An item of metalwork from Nottinghamshire has an almost certain engraving of her, but this is from a military context again, as it is the cheek-piece of a helmet. A wooden statuette found at Winchester in the 1970s may possibly be her, having some of the attributes sometimes given to her cult figures, a key and napkin, but not any of the others, including horses, her definitive companions on the Continent which appear on the other British items discussed here.¹⁰³ None of this suggests a widespread cult of her among the Romano-British population that might have left memories to outlive Roman rule.

There remains the possibility that Rhiannon derived not from Epona but from a similar horse goddess of the native British. Against it may be emphasized the fact that there is no definite evidence of one, to parallel the huge amount for Epona on the Continent. Instead there are three clay figurines of horses, manufactured in the Allier region of Gaul and imported into Britain, recorded from the Romano-British cities that are now Canterbury, London, and Wroxeter. The last two were found with pipe-clay 'Venus' figurines, also imported from Gaul, which are usually viewed as religious in nature. None

¹⁰⁰The classic catalogue of material relating to her is René Magnen and Émile Thevenot, *Épona* (Bordeaux, 1956); for updates, see Claude Sterckx, *Éléments de cosmogonie celtique* (Brussels, 1986), pp. 9–54; and Katheryn M. Linduff, 'Epona: A Celt among the Romans', *Latomus*, 38 (1979), 817–37. ¹⁰¹For a recent German dismissal of the equation of Epona with Rhiannon, see Gerhard Bauchhenß, 'Epona — Archäologisches zu einer gallorömischen Göttin', in *150 Jahre 'Mabinogion': Deutsch-walische Kulturbeziehungen*, edited by Bernhard Maier and Stefan Zimmer (Tübingen, 2001), pp. 11–22. ¹⁰²*Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, edited by Collingwood and Wright, nos 1777 and 2177. ¹⁰³Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 286–87; M. R. Hull, 'An Epona Sculpture in the Colchester and Essex Museum', *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, 19 (1930), 198–99; Martin Biddle, 'Excavations at Winchester, 1971', *Antiquaries Journal*, 55 (1977), 299 and 335–36.

of the horse figurines, however, have a certain context of use or can be linked confidently to any deity.¹⁰⁴ The now unique Uffington White Horse has been cited as evidence for an Epona-like goddess, as noted above, but it has no rider or attendant figure.¹⁰⁵ Horse riders are, by contrast, often found on late Iron Age British coins, all from the south-east of the island, as symbols of authority, but all seem to be male warriors.¹⁰⁶ Irish medieval literature has been pressed into service, once more, to provide evidence of a parallel horse goddess in that island which might encourage belief in a British one, in one of the characters which feature in it called Macha.¹⁰⁷ She appears, however, not as a divine patroness but as the pregnant wife of an Ulster chief, forced to race against horses to display her fleetness of foot. On perusing all the literature in favour of an Iron Age British horse goddess, cited above, it turns out that the most consistent piece of evidence provided is the figure of Rhiannon herself; at which point the argument becomes circular.

That Rhiannon has close and repeated equine associations is perfectly clear, but there may be other explanations for these. Her arrival on horseback in golden silk immediately identifies her as royalty or aristocracy, and the magical pace of her steed (and its white colour) indicates that she comes from an Otherworld. Jessica Hemming has pointed out that magical steeds that move at uncanny paces are found elsewhere in medieval literature, and indicate the general deceptiveness of enchanted realms: though this of course does not itself disqualify her from being a goddess. She has also established that Rhiannon's punishment, of being ridden, was both a motif in international folk tales and an actual penalty, usually represented in the symbolic form of wearing a saddle, for offenders in tenth- to thirteenth-century Europe.¹⁰⁸ In the Third Branch of the Mabinogi, her longevity is just another

¹⁰⁴The scholar who identified them as a group suggested that they were evidence for a British cult of Epona or a native horse-goddess, both of whom he viewed as aspects of a universal ancient mother goddess, but in doing so he was very much imposing a received model on them: Frank Jenkins, 'The Horse Deity of Roman Canterbury', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 77 (1962), 142–47. ¹⁰⁵By Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, p. 83, as well as Ross, cited above. ¹⁰⁶Derek Allen, 'Belgic Coins in the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age of Britain', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 24 (1958), 51, believed that an image upon a single coin showed a female riding side-saddle in the fashion of most Continental representations of Epona. This is not absolutely certain from the illustration provided, however, and John Creighton, *Coins and Power in Late Iron Age Britain* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 102, has shown that it actually derives from a Roman portrayal of Augustus. ¹⁰⁷In Oaks, 'The Goddess Epona', p. 82; Puhvel, 'Aspects of Equine Functionality', p. 167; Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, p. 287. See now Gregory Toner, 'Macha and the Invention of Myth', *Ériu*, 60 (2010), 81–109, according to whom 'Macha as the horse-like fertility goddess is a late invention' (p. 90); Toner rejects 'all the accounts that interpret Macha as a fertility or tutelary goddess' (p. 106). ¹⁰⁸Jessica Hemming, 'Sellam Gestare: Saddle-Bearing

reminder that she is not quite human, and her second punishment, of wearing asses's collars, may merely hark back to her first. Andrew Welsh has carried out an analysis of 230 traditional motifs in the Four Branches, and found that only a fifth could be classified as 'Celtic', as opposed to occurring internationally; none of these feature in the relationship of Pwyll and Rhiannon.¹⁰⁹ All that remain for consideration are Anwyl's reconstructed names, **Rigantona* and **Tigernonos*. Jessica Hemming has recently emphasized that Rhiannon and Teyrnon occur together in no other texts and may have been invented by the author of the Four Branches.¹¹⁰ If the possibility of this be conceded — and it is a matter which only linguistic experts can determine — then what of other medieval names which also embody the numinous *-on* suffix, such as Mabon and Modron?

CONCLUSION

Should the arguments presented above be accepted, then conclusions may be drawn from them that range along a spectrum. The most moderate and gracious is to suggest that the pagan antecedents traditionally asserted for the characters in question should now be regarded as merely one, though a still plausible and interesting, interpretation of the evidence. Its only stricture is that they should not be repeated with the dogmatic or uncritical confidence that they were commonly accorded in the twentieth century. A more severe one would be to acknowledge that there is possible linguistic evidence for the survival of names of ancient deities into the literature, but that no inferences can be drawn from them about the nature of their original cults or the manner by which those were transmuted into literary characters. The most extreme and aggressive mode of concluding would be to propose that the interpretation of these characters in terms of pagan origins be abandoned as essentially incapable of proof, unless new and strikingly better evidence for it appears. This would still commend pioneers such as Rhys, but for bold and imaginative proposals which have not, in the event, been underpinned by more solid and less equivocal data, even though well over a hundred years

Punishments and the Case of Rhiannon', *Viator*, 28 (1997), 45–64; and 'Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in *Pwyll*', *Western Folklore*, 57 (1998), 19–40.

¹⁰⁹Andrew Welsh, 'The Traditional Narrative Motifs of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*', *CMCS*, 15 (Summer 1988), 51–62. ¹¹⁰Hemming, 'Ancient Tradition or Authorial Invention?', pp. 87–88. A poem of c. 1100 in which Teyrnon is arguably connected with Rhiannon is discussed by R. Geraint Gruffydd and Brynley F. Roberts, 'Rhiannon gyda Theyrnon yng Ngwent?', *Llên Cymru*, 13 (1974–81), 289–91. Andrew Breeze ('The Name of Teyrnon Twrf Liant', in *Perspectives on Celtic Languages*, edited by Maria Bloch-Trojnar (Lublin, 2009), pp. 111–18) argues that the hero's name *Teyrnon* was simply derived from the name *Nant Teyrnon* (now *Llantarnam*), meaning, he suggests, 'valley of lords'.

have now passed since they were first made. It would suggest that even more weight be now given to an alternative tradition of scholarship, as venerable as the other and much more prominent since the 1970s: of attempting to understand what the texts concerned would have signified to the medieval audiences for whom, in their existing forms, they were designed: such an enterprise has been carried on in recent years by, amongst others, Catherine McKenna and Sioned Davies.¹¹¹ This essay does not, however, recommend for its readers the point, if any, that they should occupy on that spectrum of response. It merely attempts to encourage a further debate over the problems that it has considered, within and between the different constituencies — literary scholars, archaeologists, and non-academic authors — who are concerned with the subject.¹¹²

¹¹¹McKenna, 'Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll*', and 'Revising Math'; Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. ¹¹²I am very grateful indeed to Jessica Hemming for reading this paper in advance of submission and to Mark Williams and Patrick Sims-Williams for acting as formal readers of it on behalf of the journal. All of them made suggestions and criticisms which have greatly improved it.