

## MYTHICAL SOURCES OF PWYLL I: THE HEAD OF ANNWFN AND THE TEMPTATION GAME

### The Riches of Annwfn

The ‘otherness’ of the Ancient South, as seen through the eyes of the mainstream of the Welsh Royal Tribe, expressed itself in the form of various mythological projections, some of which we have touched on above. Inseparable from the identity of the Ancient South was the entire mythology of the Indigenous Underworld of Annwfn and Caer Sidi. It is possible to identify a strong Irish influence in the development of this regional complex, as well as the vestigial memories of a megalithic substrate. But there was another important element to the mutually-influencing complex of associations which defined and qualified the mythological aura of the Ancient South. That was memory of the riches of the Romano-British civilian zone. It is in the legacy of the Roman world on the formation of the material involved where this mythologisation of historical memory can be most clearly exposed.

Archaeology confirms that, in terms of material culture at least, the militarised zone of the Old North would have been rather more spartan than the cosmopolitan heartlands of *Britannia Superior*. Fourth and fifth century southern British rulers, such as Vortigern and his kindred (remembered in Medieval Welsh tradition as ‘the High Born Ones’) seem to have had their centres of power amongst the palatial villas of the Cotswold Hills, with their rich mosaics, coloured glass and steaming bath-houses. It is not hard to imagine the impression such luxuries would make on the warlords from the North. Given the close association that already existed between South Wales and the Indigenous Underworld, it comes as no surprise to find that medieval British conceptions of Caer Sidi or Annwfn were imbued with an added aura of exotic refinement, which contributed both to the imagery and poetic significance of these otherworld locations. Memories of the Romano-British world had left, it would seem, the lingering memory of an ambiance of glamorous artifice and sensuous sophistication,<sup>289</sup> which naturally secured itself within the complex of existing associations related to the Ancient South and the Indigenous Underworld.

Thus, when the Early Medieval bard sang of Annwfn in the Book of Taliesin: he describes a ‘castle of glass’, a ‘revolving island’, a cauldron of ‘deep blue ornament’ with ‘pearls around its rim’. Elsewhere in the Book of Taliesin, a vision of Caer Sidi describes a place where ‘three organs play before a fire’ and ‘a drink sweeter than white wine’, which flows from the fountain above. The inhabitants of this world are invariably clothed in ‘gold brocaded silk’, which was an important signifier of wealth and/or otherworldly origins throughout the Four Branches. These were not the

<sup>289</sup> These associations were undoubtedly reinforced by the establishment of materially-affluent enclaves of Norman civilization (including urban settlements etc), in the Southern and Eastern areas of Wales

trappings of the everyday world of Medieval Wales. The adjective *kyweir* is continually used in connection with this rarified ambience, a word that means ‘perfect’, ‘ordered’ and ‘composed’ in both an adjectival and transitive sense. This was not just a perfect world, it was also a *perfected* one. It was here that the bardic imagination was able to leave behind the rustic squalor of medieval life, and luxuriate in a lavish astral paradise beyond the reaches of the temporal world.

Such conceptions, which were as ambiguous as they were complex, should be understood as the esoteric dimension of this native tradition, rather than its general significance to the population at large. The example of the Indigenous Underworld – *Caer Sidi* or *Annwfn* – is a good case in point. While derived from the tribal-historic sources outlined above, and popularly associated with a literal subterranean world inhabited by a magical indigenous race, its depiction in the *Book of Taliesin* and elsewhere in the bardic tradition hints at a rather more relative, introspective reality. There are signs that, to some within the medieval bardic orders, *Annwfn* was coming to represent a *psychic* experience: the exotic yet sometimes overwhelming effect of the heightened state of consciousness that was the source of magical insight and poetic inspiration (cf. pp 96-97 etc.). The same moral and cultural ambivalence felt by the population at large towards the Indigenous Underworld was extended into this meditative analogy. The fickle allure of the faery magic of *Annwfn* was taken as a signifier by the bardic masters of the compulsive influences emanating from the seductive but dangerous well-springs of the mind, the perilous source of the exalted consciousness of the *arwen*.