A Note on *Aladur*, *Alator* and *Arthur*

The following lines open the Book of Taliesin poem *Kadeir Teyrnon*:

> *areith awdyl eglur*
> *awen tra messur*
> *am gwr <u>dewr</u> awdur*
> *o echen aladur*

> A brief and clear poetic composition,
> poetic inspiration beyond measure,
> concerning a valiant warrior, a protector,
> from the tribe/family/lineage of Aladur.[1]

The poem as a whole is obscure and garbled. Haycock has translated portions of it in her study of Taliesin's questions[2] but there is no satisfactory published treatment of the whole. The first part of the poem continues the description of the hero depicted in lines 3-4 down to line 14, at which point it breaks off and appears to name three men: Teyrnon, Arthur, and (perhaps) Heilyn. This note is primarily concerned with this initial portion of the text – most especially the fourth line *o echen aladur* – and the question of who are both this *Aladur* and the subject of the poem, the hero 'from the family of *Aladur*'.

That *aladur* is not in need of emendation and most likely represents a genuine Welsh personal name was established by D. Ellis Evans, who noted in support of this the place-names *Coedladur* and *Nant Ladur*.[3] So, whence *Aladur*? One good possibility, it can be argued, is that our *Aladur* may, in fact, derive from the attested Romano-British theonym *(Mars) Alator*.[4] This,

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[1] J. Gwenogvryn Evans, *Facsimile and Text of the Book of Taliesin* (Llanbedrog, 1910), pp. 34-5. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the help of Marged Haycock and Chris Gwinn with the interpretation and translation of this poem. An emendation of *deu > dewr* in line 3, which yields better sense, was suggested by Marged Haycock, *pers. comm.* and is followed in the above.

[2] M. Haycock, 'Taliesin's Questions' in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 33 (Summer, 1997), pp. 29, 30, 36.

[3] D.M. Ellis, 'Aladur' in *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, XVI (1954-6), p. 274.

[4] R.G. Collingwood & R.P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain* (Oxford, 1965), nos. 218, 1055.

itself, is an intriguing name. Though the first part of *Alator* is generally agreed to be of native derivation, the ending would look to be perhaps a Latin loan (*-or* or *-ator*). If, as a mixed British-Latin name, it was taken up via the oblique *Alatōrem* (as Welsh *Uuithur*, *Gwythur* from *Uictōrem*, *henadur* from *senatōrem*, *creadur* from *creatōrem*) then the regular result of this would be Welsh *Aladur*.[5]

The nature of this divine *Mars Alator* is not entirely clear, with the name being variously interpreted as meaning 'the hunter' or 'the nourisher'.[6] However, the equation through the *Interpretatio Romana* with the Roman god Mars suggests that he was considered in some ways a war-god. This equation may be more significant than might be assumed. As Olmsted has argued, it could well be a mistake to believe that each attested divine name signifies a new god and that, consequently, there were few or no widely venerated 'Celtic' gods: 'in the case of Gaul and the British Isles, the evidence shows that we are dealing with different names applied to the same deity.'[7] Indeed, Olmsted has made a convincing case for recognizing a genuine 'pantheon', made up of widely known divinities with multiple local manifestations, as is found in Greece, with a pan-Celtic divinity he terms *Vellaunos-Esus* lying behind those British inscriptions in which *Mars* is combined with a by-name of native derivation. As such, *Mars Alator* ought to be seen as not simply a British deity who has been equated with the Roman war-god, but rather a by-name and manifestation of the main martial and protective divinity of the reconstructed pantheon.[8]

The above interpretation of *Aladur* and *Mars Alator* helps elucidate the fourth line of *Kadeir Teyrnon* – in this context the statement that the hero was 'of the family of *Aladur*' appears as an appropriate means of praising

[5] See K.H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953). My thanks to Chris Gwinn for discussion on all of these points, this note being inspired by his initial suggestion of *Aladur < Alator*.

[6] Collingwood and Wright, *Roman Inscriptions*, no.218; G. Webster, *The British Celts and Their Gods Under Rome* (London, 1986), p. 54. See P. Thornhill, 'Al- and Albho-' in *Mankind Quarterly* 41.4 (Summer 2001), pp. 355-397 for some further thoughts and speculations on the etymology of *Al-/Alat-*.

[7] As G. Sopeño puts it, 'Celtiberian Ideologies and Religion' in *e-Keltoi* 6 (2005), pp. 347-410 at p. 350. See G.S. Olmsted, *The Gods of the Celts and the Indo-Europeans* Archaeolingua vol. 6 (Budapest & Innsbruck) for an extensive investigation, and G. Murphy *Duanaire Finn III* (London, 1953), pp. 205-8, for a similar situation in Irish mythology.

[8] Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, pp. 106-09, 111-16, 153-5, 319-48. See also G.S. Olmsted, 'The Irish Correlatives of Vedic Mitra-Varuna, "Le Borgne et le Manchot"' in *Mankind Quarterly* 28.3 (Spring), pp. 211-69 on this deity. *Vellaunos-Esus*'s other by-names help establish his character, including (Olmsted argues) 'the Victory Giver', 'Protector of the Tribe', 'the Strong', 'the Good Fighter', 'Protector of the Fortified Town', and probably 'The Great and Mighty Protector' and 'the Ruler of Battle'.

the valorous subject of the poem, with *Aladur* as a name that presumably retained strong martial associations. One might cite as a comparable usage the claim in *Marwnad Cynddylan* that Cynddylan and his brothers were *canawon artur fras*, 'welps (children) of great Arthur'.[9] If this interpretation of *o echen aladur* is accepted, the question then becomes: who is being so praised in line 3-14? The easiest answer is to look to the title of the piece, *Kadeir Teyrnon*, 'The chair of Teyrnon'. Certainly a *teyrnon* also seems to be named in line 15, at the end of the description of the subject. Nonetheless, in both cases we might read the common noun *teyrnon*, 'a prince', rather than the personal name *Teyrnon*.[10] If so, then the description and praise may, in fact, run on until line 16, with *heilyn* probably being descriptive too, rather than a proper name.[11] As such, the identity of the subject of the poem is open to doubt. Given this, it is suggested below that there may be a better identification for the subject than any Teyrnon – Arthur – with this proposition being supported by evidence both from within and without the poem.

Arthur is explicitly mentioned in *Kadeir Teyrnon* in lines 17-22, immediately after *teyrnon* and *heilyn* are found:

> The third profound [song] of the sage
> [is] to bless Arthur,
> Arthur the blest,
> with harmonious art:
> the defender in battle,
> the trampler on nine [enemies].[12]

This extended reference would seem to make Arthur a significant element in the first part of the poem – indeed, he is named immediately after (or almost so, depending on interpretation) the main descriptive

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[9] I follow here the emendation suggested by Ifor Williams, *Canu Llywarch Hen* (Cardiff, 1935), p. 52, and accepted by R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman and B.F. Roberts, 'Introduction' in *The Arthur of the Welsh. The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 1-14 at p. 5 (*artir > artur*), noting that it seems to be in line with the nature of Arthur in early Welsh literature and a general confusion in the Early Modern manuscript of this poem – see J.T. Koch, '*llawr en asseð*' *"The Laureate Hero in the War-chariot" (CA* 932): Some Recollections of the Iron Age in the *Gododdin*' in *Études Celtiques*, 24 (1987), pp. 253-78 at p. 262 on the latter. J. Rowland, *Early Welsh Saga Poetry: a Study and Edition of the Englynion* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 186, favours an alternative emendation to *arddyrnfras*, 'strong-handed'.

[10] P. Sims-Williams, 'The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems' in R. Bromwich, A.O.H. Jarman, and B.F. Roberts, (edd.), *The Arthur of the Welsh: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 33-71 at p. 52.

[11] As it is taken by J.B. Coe and S. Young, *The Celtic Sources for the Arthurian Legend* (Llanerch, 1995), p. 149.

[12] Translation as Sims-Williams, 'Early Welsh Arthurian Poems', p. 52.

introduction, and his depiction in lines 21-22 echo the portrait painted earlier in the poem of a valorous martial hero. This, on its own, is enough to raise suspicions that Arthur is the subject of the poem, with lines 17-18 and 20 possibly referring both to this and the preceding praise of the unnamed subject of the supposedly 'brief and clear poetic composition' that is *Kadeir Teyrnon*. Such would certainly explain Arthur's introduction into this piece and the nature of his appearance.[13]

Further support for this contention comes from the main description itself. In lines 13-14 we are told that the subject of the poem brought/lead (*i.e.* stole, rustled) 'pale horses' from someone named *gawr nur*, Cawrnur. There is only one other reference to this *Cawrnur*, in the Book of Taliesin poem *Marwnat Uthyr Pen*. In this the early Arthurian character (and probable pre-'Geoffrey of Monmouth' father of Arthur) *Uthyr Pendragon*[14] seems to be narrating his own death-song, relating his deeds and character. Within this 'death-song' Uthyr's Arthurian associations are made very clear as he declares 'I am the one whose champion's feats partook in a ninth share of Arthur's valour.'[15] Given all this, the fact that Uthyr refers to his role in a victorious attack on 'the sons of Cawrnur' immediately before this statement must be seen as significant. The implication, as Sims-Williams has recognized,[16] is that an attack on Cawrnur – probably a giant, Welsh *cawr* – and his sons was a now-lost early Arthurian story, presumably similar in some ways to the killing of the giant Wrnach in *Culhwch* (in which Arthur and his men destroy the Giant's lair and take away 'what treasures they would' – in the present case the spoils perhaps being *Kadeir Teyrnon*'s 'pale horses'?). As such lines 13-14 of *Kadeir Teyrnon* would certainly seem to add weight to the proposition that Arthur is the subject of this poem.[17]

If a reasonable case can thus be built for seeing Arthur as the valorous hero who is 'from the family/tribe/lineage of *Aladur*', that is, potentially, the pagan British divinity Mars Alator, it remains to be wondered what the exact significance of this description is. Primarily, of course, it may well simply be a comparison intended to praise and extol the valour of the subject of the piece. However, recent work on Arthur's nature might

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[13] The alternative is that the triadic introduction of Arthur ('The third profound song of the sage…') may place him in the context of the succeeding lines, in which Taliesin refers to traditional knowledge and asks a number of triadic questions, for example, 'who [are] the three regents, *tri chynweissat*, who guarded the country?'

[14] See especially R. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads* (Cardiff, 1978), pp. 56, 520-3 and Sims-Williams, 'Early Welsh Arthurian Poems', pp. 53-4, 57-8.

[15] J.T. Koch, '*llawr en asseð*', p. 256; Sims-Williams, 'Early Welsh Arthurian Poems', p. 53.

[16] Sims-Williams, 'Early Welsh Arthurian Poems', p. 53.

[17] Marged Haycock has suggested to me that line 6, *ae reom rechtur*, might also be taken as fitting Arthur too, if *reom* is a mistake for *reon* – cf. Bromwich, *Trioedd*, pp. 1-4 and 211 on Arthur's northern court of *pen(ryn) rionyd* etc.

suggest something more than this. In particular, current studies of the 'historical' evidence for Arthur and the nature of Arthur himself make a conclusion that Arthur was primarily the folkloric and mythical martial and protective hero that we find in *Historia Brittonum* §73, *Pa gur yv y porthaur?* and *Culhwch ac Olwen*, both extremely plausible and attractive. In particular, Padel has followed Van Hamel and others in directly comparing Arthur's nature and supposed historicity to that of the Gaelic Fionn mac Cumhaill, in both cases seeing them as non-historical figures falsely historicized by medieval authors.[18]

Padel himself would see such a folkloric and fictional warrior as the 'original' of Arthur, despite the fact that his close analogue Fionn is now generally agreed to have been formerly a pagan deity. Whilst Arthur might have fulfilled essentially the same role as Fionn in Brittonic folklore, proper caution dictates that there is no actual need for him to have emerged in exactly the same manner to fill this position.[19] Nonetheless, there is no necessary *a priori* reason why Arthur might not have been such a figure of genuine mythology. The often cited objection, that a lack of Romano-British inscriptions mentioning Arthur means he cannot be truly mythical, carries little weight, given the lack of inscriptional evidence for many of the presumed deities in the 'Four Branches' and the fact that *Mars Alator*, for example, is only known through the chance-find of a single inscription in the eighteenth century and would not be otherwise recorded (a second inscription is only acknowledged as referring to him through comparison with the earlier one, and would not readily allow his existence to be recognized on its own).[20] Similarly the notion that the etymology of Arthur

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[18] O.J. Padel, 'The Nature of Arthur' in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 27 (Summer, 1994), pp. 1-31; N.J. Higham, *King Arthur, Myth-Making and History* (London, 2002); A.G. Van Hamel, 'Aspects of Celtic Mythology' in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 20 (1934), pp. 207-48. Bromwich has recently expressed considerable sympathy for this position in her third edition of *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads* (Cardiff, 2006), pp. 282-3. I have discussed these issues in my forthcoming *Concepts of Arthur* and in 'The Historicity and Historicization of Arthur', a review article archived at http://www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthur.html.

[19] Padel, 'Nature of Arthur', pp. 19-20. See on Fionn, Murphy, *Duanaire Finn*, pp. lxx-lxxxvi; D. Ó hÓgáin, *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (Dublin, 1988); and D. Ó hÓgáin, *The Sacred Isle: Belief and Religion in Pre-Christian Ireland* (Woodbridge, 1999), pp. 118-27. I am not entirely convinced by Ó hÓgáin's interpretation of the nature of this deity, however – see chapter 7 of *Concepts*.

[20] Collingwood and Wright, *Roman Inscriptions*, nos. 218 and 1055. This objection has been recently made by K.R. Dark, 'A Famous Arthur in the Sixth Century? Reconsidering the origins of the Arthurian Legend' in *Reading Medieval Studies*, 26, pp. 77-95, amongst others. Note also that the god *Esus*, who was one of the three apparently important Gaulish divinities highlighted by the Roman poet Lucan in the 1st-century AD (an importance confirmed by Olmsted, *Gods of the Celts*, who sees him as a pan-Celtic divinity), has actually only one inscription mentioning him

stands in the way of such a situation is far less certain than has often been assumed.[21]

In fact, in the earliest material (such as *Preideu Annwfyn*, *Historia Brittonum* §73 and *Pa gur*)[22] Arthur is regularly associated with the Otherworld, mythical events and former pagan gods. Similarly, Bartrum has noted a widespread superstition against the use of Arthur's name in Wales through to the sixteenth century – like that of the Irish against the use of Cú Chulainn – which, if Padel's interpretation of the four 'Arthurs' who appear in later sixth and early seventh century western Wales and Scotland is correct (which it almost certainly is), was in existence in the sixth century and common all across Britain, implying a widespread and highly interesting concept of Arthur in this period.[23] Without going into too much detail here, it is at least worth considering whether or not there is any reason to think that Arthur may have originally been – like Fionn – some sort of deity, of a martial and protective character. The matter is certainly not capable of proof, but the possibility has to be considered.[24] In light of Olmsted's

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specifically.

[21] See *Concepts*, chapter 5, for a full discussion. If Arthur does derive from *Artorius* it need signify little with regards to historicity, at least, and potentially divinity too, given the tendency for the Romanization of nomenclature, either through wholesale replacement or new suffixes (as seen in both personal and divine names), and even this etymology is open to debate. Cf. T. Green, 'Historicity and Historicisation of Arthur', www.arthuriana.co.uk/historicity/arthur.htm, section 'The Origins of Arthur?'

[22] See, for example, on the dating of these J.T. Koch, 'The Celtic Lands' in N.J. Lacy (ed.) *Medieval Arthurian Literature: A Guide to Recent Research* (New York, 1996), pp. 239-322 at pp. 264-5; B.F. Roberts, 'Arthurian Literature [3] Welsh' in J.T.Koch (ed.) *Celtic Culture, A Historical Encyclopedia* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 124-6 at p. 125. Koch would place *Preideu Annwfyn* in the eighth century on orthographic and linguistic grounds. Roberts would seem to have some sympathy with this position and further suggests that *Pa gur* is indicative of 'the nature of the Arthurian world in Welsh literature of entertainment in the 9th-10th centuries' (p. 125).

[23] Padel, 'Nature of Arthur', p. 24; P.C. Bartrum, 'Arthuriana in the Genealogical MSS' in *The National Library of Wales Journal* 14 (1965), pp. 243-5. See R. Bromwich, 'Concepts of Arthur' in *Studia Celtica* 10/11 (1975-6), pp. 163-81 at pp. 178-9 with regards attempts to have these all named after a historical original.

[24] Further support might come from *Kadeir Teyrnon* itself. The 'blessing of Arthur', which is apparently so important to the wise, may simply mean the praising of Arthur. However, the naming of Arthur as *Arthur vendigat* (MS *vendigan*, emended for rhyme), 'Arthur the blest, blessed Arthur' may be significant, if Arthur is seen as non-historical, given that its other application to a non-historical figure is to Brân (who probably functioned as the Brittonic god of death – J.T. Koch, 'Some Suggestions and Etymologies Reflecting upon the Mythology of the Four Branches' in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, ix (1989), pp. 1-11 at pp. 8-9), with Ford interpreting *bendigeidfran* as a Christianization of *Brân + gwen*, 'the sacred Otherworld Brân', reflecting the 'pagan Celtic sacred notion of *gwyn/gwen*' – P.K. Ford, 'On the

research, *if* Arthur was such a figure, then he would likely be a manifestation of *Vellaunos-Esus* and thus equated with the Roman Mars. In the context of all of this, the potential claim that Arthur (as the subject of the first part of *Kadeir Teyrnon*) was 'from the family/tribe/lineage of *(Mars) Alator*' might be seen as having particular significance beyond the merely laudatory.

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Significance of some Arthurian Names in Welsh' in *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 30 (1983), pp. 268-73 at p. 272.