An Alternative Interpretation of *Preideu Annwn*, lines 23-28

The following lines are taken from the third awdl (lines 23-28) of the Book of Taliesin poem *Preideu Annwn*, in which a raid on the Otherworld by Arthur is narrated by the legendary Taliesin figure:

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\[
\text{Neut wyl glot geinmyn kerd glywanawr.}
\]

\[
yg kaer pedryfan ymys pybyrdor
\]

\[
ecbwyd amuchyd kymyscetor
\]

\[
gwin gloyw eu gwirawt rac eu gogord.
\]

\[
\text{Tri lloneit prytwen yd aetham ni arvor.}
\]

\[
namyn seith ny dyrreith ogaer rigor.}

I’m splendid of fame: songs are heard
in the four quarters of the fort, stout defence of the island.
Fresh water and jet are mixed together;
sparkling wine is their drink, set in front of their battalion.
Three full loads of Prydwen we went by sea:
save seven, none came back from the Petrification Fort.²

The given translation is that of Marged Haycock, and most recent commentators on the poem have broadly followed her in interpreting this passage.³ In particular, the stanza as a whole is usually taken as a description

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¹ *Llyfr Taliesin*, NLW Peniarth MS 2, f. 26r.8-13 (55.8-15). I should like to gratefully acknowledge here the encouragement provided by Marged Haycock.


of an Otherworld fort whose name derives from Latin *rigor* (‘stiffness, inflexibility, rigidity, numbness’)\(^4\) and in which fresh water and jet are mixed together, presumably to produce fire (illuminating the wine, in line 26?) as is described in Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*.\(^5\) However, whilst the above is certainly a very credible reading, it is not the only possible translation of this passage; the purpose of this article is to demonstrate that not only does an alternative interpretation exist, but that it is at least equally as appropriate and legitimate as the above one.

Such an alternative interpretation has its origins in the uncertainty that exists over the meaning and origins of several of the words contained in lines 23-8. First is the name of the fort, *kaer rigor*. Although Haycock has suggested that seeing it as derivative of Latin *rigor* gives ‘tolerable sense’,\(^6\) she also notes that Latin *frigor, frigus (frigoris)*, ‘cold, coldness’,\(^7\) has been offered as a valid alternative root by Patrick Sims-Williams;\(^8\) indeed, this interpretation of *kaer rigor* has been adopted by John T. Koch in his recent translation of *Preideu Annwn* (‘the Frigid Fort’).\(^9\) Second is the question of the meaning of the whole of line 25. There could easily be a learned reference here to Isidore of Seville’s account of the strange properties of jet, if *echwyd* is taken as ‘water, fresh water’ and *muchyd* as ‘jet’. Nevertheless, it is equally legitimate to take the former as meaning ‘noon, noonday’ and the latter as ‘jet-black’.\(^10\) Such an interpretation has been supported in the past by Kenneth Jackson, amongst others, and would give something like ‘in the four corners of the fort… noonday and jet-blackness are mixed together’: that is to say, this Otherworld fortress existed in some sort of permanent twilight.\(^11\)

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\(^6\) Haycock, ‘Preiddeu Annwn’, p. 72
\(^7\) Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *frigor, frigus*.
\(^10\) Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru s.v. *echwydd, muchudd*.
Given that both readings of these passages appear to be valid, we naturally need to look for grounds on which to discriminate between them. The usual translations do have several points in their favour, chiefly that a learned reference to Isidore of Seville would be an appropriate one for the legendary Taliesin persona narrating the poem to make, and that a translation of *kaer rigor* as the ‘Petrification Fort’ may reference the uncommunicative guardians of an Otherworld fort who appear in the next stanza of *Preiddeu Annwn* (line 32). Nonetheless, although we should acknowledge these strengths, it can be maintained that the arguments in favour of the alternative translations outlined above are potentially more powerful.

Looking first at each of the alternative readings in isolation, two points can be made. One is that a translation of *kaer rigor* as ‘the Frigid Fort’ or similar would accord with documented concepts of the Otherworld/hell. *Annwn* is treated as another name for hell in *Preiddeu Annwn* – it is referred to as *vffern*, ‘hell’, in line 20 – and the idea of a cold hell was certainly present in medieval Wales; furthermore, in Breton tradition hell itself was referred to as *an ifern yen*, ‘cold hell’, and in Irish texts an entrance to hell and/or the Otherworld was considered to be located in the cold far-north. Indeed, the evidence for some Hiberno-Latin literary influence on *Preiddeu Annwn* means that such Irish concepts of the location of hell may have a relevance here which could go beyond the merely comparative. The second is that an interpretation of *echwyd amuchyd kymyscetor* as a reference to the Otherworld fortress of *kaer rigor* existing in a kind of permanent twilight fits with hints, which Roger Loomis long ago drew attention to, that the Otherworld was

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dimly lit in some tales of Welsh origin.\textsuperscript{15} As such, both of these alternate translations would appear to have a reasonable context in insular traditions about the Otherworld and hell.

These translations of line 25 and \textit{kaer rigor} may also work well together and enhance the coherence of the stanza as a whole. It can be legitimately asked whether \textit{kaer rigor}, as ‘the Frigid Fort’, might not actually have been conceived of as located in the cold far-north, paralleling the medieval Irish texts which place the door or entrance to hell there.\textsuperscript{16} Such a notion is certainly not implausible, and if adopted then the translation of \textit{kaer rigor} as ‘the Frigid Fort’ would be supported by (and in turn support) translating line 25 as ‘noonday and jet-blackness are mixed together’. Although this might be seen as a simple reference to the Otherworld being dimly lit, it could also be read as a description of the conditions in such a far-northern frozen Otherworld fortress. Of course, for this to be the case it would require that the author of \textit{Preiddeu Annwn} was familiar with such conditions in the real far-north, in particular the phenomenon of the ‘midnight sun’, that Arctic peculiarity whereby around mid-summer the sun never fully sets and around mid-winter it never truly rises, giving rise to what was described by one medieval traveller as a ‘perpetual twilight’.\textsuperscript{17} The question must therefore be, is this likely?

Pliny, from whom much medieval geography derives, certainly knew of the Arctic peculiarity of the midnight sun (and noonday night), though he seems uncertain about what this meant in practice.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly it is alluded to by Isidore of Seville in his widely used \textit{Etymologiae}\textsuperscript{19} and by Bede, both of whose works are implicitly and explicitly referenced in the \textit{Book of Taliesin} poems.\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, the latter – writing in the early eighth century – appears to not only derive his knowledge of Arctic solar peculiarities from classical sources, but also from actual travellers who had visited the region, referring in his \textit{In Regum xxx Quaestiones} to ‘the stories of the elders and the men of

\textsuperscript{16} Carey, ‘Sun’s Night Journey’, pp. 15-16; see note 13, above.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Etymologies of Isidore of Seville}, p. 294 (XIV.vi.2)
\textsuperscript{20} Haycock, ‘Preiddeu Annwn’, p. 56; \textit{Legendary Poems}, passim.
our time who come from these regions’ and saying of the peculiarity itself
that these men ‘see it happen’.21 Similarly by the late eighth century at
the latest, Irish sea-farers and writers were aware from personal and
reported experience of the unusual light conditions in the far-north too, with Dicuil
relating that some clerics who had visited Thule (Iceland) in around A.D.
795 had told him that, for the days around midsummer, the sun did not
truly set but instead hid itself as if behind a small hill, so that there was no
darkness at night and a person could even pick lice from his clothes in the
resulting half-light.22 In confirmation of an early insular awareness of the
phenomenon we can finally cite the late tenth-century Anglo-Saxon
churchman Ælfric, who not only refers to this but claimed to have observed
something like it himself, saying that to the north the nights are light in
summer ‘as if it was dawn all night long, just as we ourselves very often
saw’.23

It consequently appears that the learned author of Preideu Annwfn,
evertheless he was writing, could have been aware of the midnight
sun/noonday night in the far-north, and potentially also that this produced
not true daylight but rather a strange twilight.24 This is particularly the case

21 Bedae Venerabilis. Opera. Pars II. Opera Exegetica 2, edited by David Hurst
(Turnhout: Brepols, 1962), p. 317. See Fabienne Michelet, Creation, Migration, and
Conquest. Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature (Oxford:
University Press, 2006), pp. 128-29 for discussion and translation.
22 Dicuili Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae, edited and translated by J. J. Tierney
(Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), pp. 74-75 (vii.11-13). That there were
Irish churchmen living on Iceland before the Norse arrived there in the ninth
century now seems reasonably clear. Not only do we have Dicuil’s testimony,
perhaps Bede’s, and the statements to this effect from the Landnámabók and
Íslendingabók – see Gwyn Jones, The Norse Atlantic Saga (London: Oxford University
Press, 1964), pp. 9, 102, 114 – but there also now appears to be some archaeological
evidence for this too: Kristján Ahrsonson, ‘Further evidence for a Columbian
Iceland: Preliminary results of recent work’, Norwegian Archaeological Review, 33.2
preliminary research’, in Vinland Revisited. The Norse World at the Turn of the First
Millennium, edited by Shannon Lewis-Simpson (St John’s, Newfoundland, 2004), 75-82.
23 Ælfric’s De Temporibus Anni, edited by Heinrich Henel (Oxford: Oxford University
24 See generally Haycock, ‘Preiddeu Annwn’, on the author of Preideu Annwfn’s
learning and how this was essential to the character of the legendary ‘Taliesin’. On
the date of this poem, see John T. Koch, ‘gwydanbor, gwydyanbawr, glywbanhor’, Bulletin
of the Board of Celtic Studies, 31 (1984), 87-92; John T. Koch, ‘The Celtic Lands’, in
ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 1456; Green, Concepts of Arthur, pp. 54-55. Cf. Haycock,
given that not only do travellers to and from the far-north appear to be visiting the British Isles from at least the early-eighth century, as noted above, but there is also evidence for the circulation of Bede’s writings and some Hiberno-Latin texts in early medieval Wales, not least from Preideu Annwfn itself and a number of the other Book of Taliesin poems. As such, the idea that the translations of kaer rigor and ecbwyd annuchyd kymysceror argued for here might actually support each other and together reflect a concept of a far-northern frozen Otherworld island-fort does not seem impossible by any means.

One final argument can be offered in support of both the proposed translations and the above interpretation of these, and this stems from a consideration of the nature of the poem as a whole. As has often been observed, Preideu Annwfn is a highly allusive piece: it does not seek to provide a coherent narrative of an Arthurian raid on the Otherworld, but instead alludes to a number of pre-existing stories and episodes which must have been ‘part of the audience’s mental furniture’ – as Haycock puts it – in order that they could have understood the poem and enjoyed it to the full. The most frequently discussed of these is a story of an Arthurian raid on the Otherworld to capture a magic cauldron, which appears to underlie the second awdl. Confirmation of the existence of such an Arthurian tale outside of Preideu Annwfn has often been sought and found in the closely analogous account of Arthur’s expedition to Ireland to seize a cauldron, which is narrated and referenced in Culhwch ac Olwen, Tri Thwls ar Ddeg Ynys Brydain, and the twelfth-century place-name Messur Pritguenn. In the same manner, a story about an expedition to rescue a prisoner called Gweir appears to underlie the first awdl, and the independent existence of such a tale is confirmed by a reference to Gweir as one of the ‘Three Exalted Prisoners of

‘Preiddeu Annwn’, p. 57; Legendary Poems, p. 434.


27 Haycock, ‘Preiddeu Annwn’, p. 55; see also, for example, Budgey, ‘Preiddeu Annwn’, p. 392; Green, Concepts of Arthur, p. 55.

the Island of Britain’ in Triad 52, where he is collocated with both Mabon – who is rescued by Arthur in Culhwch ac Olwen – and Arthur himself. 29

Although attention has tended to focus on the above two tales, this should not however be taken to imply that such originally independent stories and episodes do not underlie the other awdlau too. So, the reference to yr ych brych, ‘the Speckled Ox’, in the fifth awdl ought to be considered another allusion to a pre-existing Arthurian story: this gigantic and presumably Otherworldly beast is also mentioned in the Triads and, most significantly, in Culhwch ac Olwen, where its capture and yoking is one of the tasks that Arthur must achieve. 30 Similarly, the references in the sixth awdl to a silver-headed animal and kaer ochren may well be another allusion to a pre-existing Arthurian tale, if the reasonable connection that has been made between this stanza and Cad Aebren – a conflict whose cause was two animals stolen from Annwn, a greyhound and a white roebuck – can be sustained. 31 Cad Aebren appears in the late manuscript Peniarth 98B as an alternative name for Cad Goddau (the ‘Battle of the Trees’), 32 and this does indeed appear to have been associated with Arthur in some way. In the Book of Taliesin poem Kat Godan, which is concerned with this battle, Arthur is named once, when ‘druids’ or ‘sages’ are commanded to Darogenwch y Arthur; the text here could mean either that they should prophesy ‘of Arthur’ or ‘to Arthur’, but it seems more likely that they are to prophesy to him and that he was therefore present. 33 Furthermore, near the beginning of the poem the ‘lord of Britain’ (Prydein wledic) is mentioned in the context of the battle – the poet claims to have sung before him ‘in the van of the tree battalion/battle of the branchy trees’ (Keint yg kat godeu bric) – and Haycock has argued that this should probably be understood as a reference to Arthur too. 34 Finally, a few lines later we are told that the

30 Culhwch and Olwen, line 593; Trioedd Ynys Prydein, pp. 117-18; Green, Concepts of Arthur, pp. 60-61, 159-60. Although this task is one of those that the author of Culhwch does not choose to tell the full tale of (he only narrates ten of the forty tasks), Bromwich and Evans have suggested that stories may well have existed for many of these untold tasks, similar to those found in Culhwch: Culhwch and Olwen, p. li.
32 Trioedd Ynys Prydein, p. 207.
Otherworld fortress under attack in this battle was called *Kaer Nefenhir*. The significance of this lies with the fact that the name *Kaer Nefenhir* only occurs once more, in *Culhwch ac Olwen*, when Arthur’s porter lists *Caer Neuenhyr Naw Nawt* (‘the fortress of Nefenhyr of the Nine Teeth’) as one of the places that Arthur has conquered in the past, something which strongly suggests that *Cad Goddau* was indeed considered an Arthurian conflict, and that Haycock’s identification of Arthur as the *Prydein wledic* who was at the head of the army of trees in *Kat Godeu* is sound.

In the context of the above, it is perhaps significant that there does in fact seem to have been a tale of Arthur conquering the cold far-north. One of the chief witnesses to this is the *Leges Anglorum Londoniis Collectae*: this briefly relates how Arthur conquered the whole of the Arctic far-north, including Greenland, Lapland and the North Pole. Although the *Leges* was composed c. 1210, the closely related but fragmentary *Insule Britannie* (the earliest manuscript of which dates to c. 1200) indicates that this concept of Arthur probably ante-dated both the composition of the *Leges* and the thirteenth century. The other important evidence for the existence of such a tale is the lost text known as the *Arturus Gesten* or *Gestae Arthuri*, which now only survives in extracts copied by the geographer Gerard Mercator from a lost mid-fourteenth-century work by Jacobus Cnoyen, which in turn

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35 *Legendary Poems*, §5.41-44.

36 *Culhwch and Olwen*, line 126; see further on this passage Green, *Concepts of Arthur*, pp. 64-65 and O. J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 16. Nefenhyr, without the *caer*, is mentioned as a heroic comparison in a poem of Prydydd y Moch, see *Legendary Poems*, p. 170. The connection between *Kat Godeu’s Kaer Nefenhir* and *Culwbw’s Caer Neuenhyr Naw Nawt* is further supported by the fact that in *Kat Godeu* the name *Kaer Nefenhir* was immediately followed by the word *naw* (‘nine’), but this word was then deleted: Haycock, ‘*Cad Goddau*’, p. 298.


paraphrased the *Gestae Arthuri*. From what survives of it in Mercator’s transcription of Cnoyen’s Dutch, this text would seem to have told the tale of Arthur’s conquest of the far-north and included episodes in which he encountered ‘little people’, giants and cities in the lands immediately around the North Pole, before launching two expeditions against the Pole itself. The date of this *Gestae Arthuri* is naturally uncertain given how little of it survives, but its tale accords well with the allusions in the *Leges* and it seems most likely that either the lost *Gestae Arthuri* was the source of the *Leges* or both derive from a common source written in the twelfth century.

The early existence of a story in which Arthur attacked the Arctic far-north cannot, of course, prove that *kaer rigor* and *ebwyd amuchyd kymyscetor* must be translated and interpreted as they have been here. However, it does give us an additional reason, beyond those discussed previously, to believe that such a translation and interpretation would be appropriate. In sum, it can be said that the meaning of the third awdl of *Preideu Annwfn* is perhaps not as certain as the consensus of most recent translations suggests it is. Whilst there is nothing incredible in the usual rendering of this awdl, there are other translations which are equally legitimate. Deciding between these is problematical, given the allusive and often obscure character of *Preideu*...
Annwnfyn, but there are solid arguments that can be advanced in favour of the translations adopted here. Indeed, it is possible that these translations may actually support each other and offer the prospect of seeing the third awdl as more of a coherent whole than has been the case previously, even potentially possessing the same sort of analogues in Arthurian tales and allusions as can be found for the other awdlae of Preideu Annwnfyn.

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