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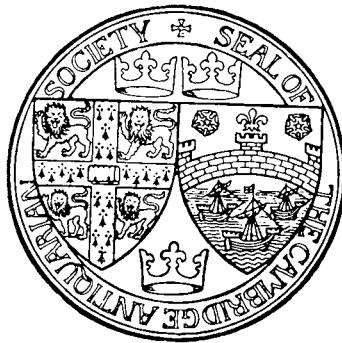
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THE WANDLEBURY LEGEND AND WELSH ROMANCE

GLENYS GOETINCK

Wandlebury hillfort, as an important and interesting site, has attracted its share of scholarly attention, as have the legends connected with it. The most famous of these, recounted by Gervase of Tilbury c. 1211, runs as follows:

A powerful baron and redoubtable knight, one Osbert son of Hugh, was staying with friends in Cambridge. One evening whilst listening to tales being told for the entertainment of the company, he heard that if a warrior were to enter Wandlebury fort alone, at dead of night and cry, 'Knight to knight, come forth,' an opponent would appear to answer the challenge. He did this and, indeed, an opponent appeared before him. They charged, but neither horseman unseated the other. However, Osbert parried his adversary's spear thrust and struck him to the ground with a powerful blow. He sprang instantly to his feet, to see Osbert leading his horse away by the bridle and so he hurled his lance at the baron, pierced his thigh, and disappeared. Osbert was unaware of the wound until later when he was removing his armour. The victory was loudly applauded and the magnificent, fiery, black horse with its black trappings was a source of wonder and admiration to all. At cockcrow the animal broke free, vanished, and was never found again. Although Osbert's wound healed, it opened every year on the anniversary of the combat.¹

Arthur Gray, in a study of the legend, concluded that 'it is apparently drawn from a Celtic source.'² He further observes, 'Gervase does not say that the demonic antagonist

was a Vandal, but I think that that is his suggestion. This too gives a hint that the legend is Celtic not English. Had it sprung from an English source the conquered warrior would certainly have been a Briton.'³ It is interesting, in this context, that the Norman knight is not said to have defeated a Saxon adversary. Gervase may imply that the warrior was a Vandal, or he may avoid any mention of race, sensing the uncertainty of the figure's origin and preferring to leave the decision to his readers. Mr Gray further notes that, 'The common feature of the tales to which the Wandlebury legend is related is the victory of the civilised invader over the representatives of a vanished, inhuman race, primitive inhabitants of the land, and the scene is some monumental work of prehistoric man.'⁴ The victory of Osbert fitz Hugh over his mysterious opponent is more apparent than real. The horse remains captive for only a few hours and then vanishes, presumably to return whence it came, whilst the wound which Osbert sustained from his opponent's lance opens every year on the anniversary of the combat.

The Arthurian scholar R.S. Loomis also took an interest in the Wandlebury legend and noted its resemblance to an incident in the twelfth-century *Lai de l'Espine*.⁵ Here the encounter takes place at a ford, the hero does not voice a challenge, he simply has to be present and waiting at a particular spot on St John's Eve. He unhorses his adversary, but the captured horse escapes when the hero's wife removes the bridle. Loomis' enthusiasm for Breton influences in Arthurian romance led him to the opinion that Gervase's version of the legend was '... a Breton conte which somehow came to be localized at the haunted

1 A more detailed account is given by Arthur Gray 'On The Wandlebury Legend', *PCAS* 15 (1911), 53-62.

2 Art. cit., 53.

3 Ibid., 56.

4 Ibid., 56.

5 'Vandeberes, Wandlebury, and the *Lai de l'Espine*', *Romance Philology* 9 (1955), 162-7.

hill-fort on the Gog Magog hills.⁶ However, as we shall see, there is no need to involve Breton *conteurs* with Wandlebury.

Pierre Lambrechts, in his study of Celtic divinities, sees a link between the Wandlebury legend and Celtic religion. By associating the figures of the Willingham Fen* sceptre, where Jupiter Taranis stands with one foot on the head of a chthonic figure, a giant hill-figure in the Gog Magog hills, and the Wandlebury legend, Lambrechts suggests a connection with the mythology of the jupiter Giant groups: '*Il est possible, comme M. Heichelheim l'a suggéré, que les pétroglyphes des Gog Magog Hills, le sceptre de Willingham Fen et la légende médiévale ont tous traité d'une histoire mythologique préromaine dans laquelle un cavalier, un géant et un cheval, c'est-à-dire les éléments du groupe du chevalier au géant jouaient un rôle.*'⁷

There is little indication at Wandlebury of what the religious beliefs and practices of the British and Belgic Celts who inhabited the stronghold may have been,⁸ but comparison with Welsh literature will show that the origin of the legend is to be found in Celtic tradition, in those tales which tell of the encounter of a hero with the Otherworld power, the male chthonic divinity of Celtic mythology. There is a challenge, sometimes a combat, followed by the hero's entry into the Other World, there to be invested with power through instruction, the gift of weapons or knowledge, or the acquisition of a wife, the territorial goddess of mythology. There is no need to assume Breton origins, the legend survives as part of the folklore of the area where it originated in the religious beliefs of the Celtic inhabitants.

There is an episode in the Welsh romance

Peredur vab Efrawc which clearly illustrates the indigenous, Celtic beginnings of the Wandlebury story. The earliest complete version of *Peredur* is found in the thirteenth-century collection known as *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch*, the *White Book of Rhydderch*. However, it is clear from orthographical evidence that there was a written version in the twelfth century, and the material upon which the romance is based is of far earlier provenance.⁹ As in other mediaeval Welsh tales, many episodes and characters in *Peredur* are but thinly disguised vestiges of Celtic mythology. The episode in question occurs toward the end of the romance and the hero, by following the horseman who had stolen his mount, is led to the place he had long sought, the court of the Otherworld ruler, his uncle. There he is given an explanation for all the strange experiences which have befallen him and, his training complete, he defeats those responsible for the death of his father and regains the power and the domain which had been lost to his family.

Peredur is told,

'Go to the top of the mountain and there thou wilt see a bush. And at the foot of the bush there is a slab. Ask three times for a man to come and joust with thee. . . .' *Peredur* went on his way and came alongside the bush and asked for a man to joust with him. And a black man rose from under the slab with a bony horse under him and huge rusty armour on him and his horse. They fought, and as *Peredur* would throw the black man to the ground, he would leap back into his saddle. And *Peredur* dismounted and drew his sword and at that moment the black man disappeared

6 Art. cit., 166. See also p. 167.

* [The Willingham hoard is indeed a significant collection of Romano-Celtic votive offerings. However, neither in location, miles away and down in the Fens, nor in date is it likely to have any connection with the pre-Roman hillfort at Wandlebury – Ed.]

7 'Contributions à l'étude des divinités Celtiques', (Brugge, 1942), 89.

8 The possible significance of the burials is mentioned by B.R. Hartley, 'The Wandlebury Iron-Age Hillfort; Excavations of 1955–56', *PCAS* 50 (1957), 14–15; Barry Cunliffe, *Iron Age Commu-*

nities in Britain (London, 1974), 292, 298; Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Gloucester, 1987), 126–7. Bruce Galloway, *A History of Cambridgeshire* (Chichester, 1983), 20–21, mentions the Wandlebury legend and the attempts of T.C. Lethbridge to establish the religious beliefs of the inhabitants by relating them to the hill figures he claimed to have discovered.

9 G. Goetinck, *Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends* (Cardiff, 1975), 317; G. Goetinck, *Historia Peredur vab Efrawc* (Cardiff, 1976), x–xi.

with Peredur's horse and his own, so that he did not see them again.'¹⁰

The story in *Peredur* is not so mysterious and spine-tingling as the Wandlebury legend, in fact the author seems to be introducing an element of humour in the rusty armour, the bony horse, and the man repeatedly unseated and leaping back into the saddle, but the similarities are evident. Both combats take place on a hill, with only the two combattants present. The opponent is not of this world, he is remarkably quick on his feet, he is able to disappear and, in the Welsh episode, he is black. In the Cambridgeshire legend his horse is black, whilst in the Welsh romance this may be inferred. In *Peredur* the mysterious opponent is victorious, whilst in the Wandlebury legend Osbert's victory is short-lived.

The Welsh story portrays a classical Celtic *locus sanctus*, situated on top of a hill with a stone slab at the foot of a bush. Later romancers assumed that the warrior had leaped out of a tomb, but it is more likely that the slab in question covers a well or sacred spring, which would better explain the mention of rusty armour.¹¹ The man's huge size, the colours black and red, and his likely connection with water, are all clearly indicative of a chthonic being. Further light may be shed on the probable origins of the Wandlebury legend and the *Peredur* episode by a remark quoted by Pierre Lambrechts and an episode in the Welsh romance *Owein neu Chwedyl Iarllies y Ffynnawn, Owein or the Tale of the Lady of the Fountain*. In an article on the connection of the Jupiter Giant columns with water cults, Lambrechts quotes Adolphe Reinach on the subject of the horse which figures in the groups. 'Enfin, il faut peut-être tenir compte — surtout pour expliquer que le cheval semble s'élancer de terre — d'un autre élément. En Gaule comme en Grèce, les sources jailissantes, comme les flots bondissants, paraissent avoir évoqué l'idée de coursiers écumants.'¹² The Welsh romance, more con-

veniently known as *Owein*, like *Peredur*, contains material of clearly mythological origin and an episode similar to those already discussed.¹³ Listening to tales of adventure at Arthur's court, the hero learns of a particularly interesting challenge, and so he slips away, alone, to submit to the test. He is directed to the place by a huge, uncouth figure whose relationship to the Lord of the Beasts is manifest. He is told to go to the top of a hill and from there he will see a river valley with a huge tree in the middle of it. Under the tree is a spring with a marble slab beside it and attached to the slab is a silver bowl. He must fill the bowl with water and pour it on the slab. Owein does exactly as he is told and immediately a violent hailstorm breaks over the valley. Finally calm is restored and a knight, clad in black armour and riding a black horse, comes galloping toward Owein. They fight and Owein deals the Black Knight a mortal blow, whereupon he turns and rides desperately away, with Owein in pursuit. He follows the Black Knight into the domain of the Lady of the Fountain, the territorial goddess in mediaeval garb, whom he later marries.

The connection of horse and horseman with water is very clear in this episode; the colour of horse and armour is the same as in *Peredur* and the Wandlebury legend; the slab is present, although here it is made of marble and does not cover the spring. The Black Knight is defeated by the hero just as is the Wandlebury warrior, and by following him Owein enters the other World, as does Peredur. An earlier encounter between the Black Knight and Cynon, another of Arthur's knights, had Cynon in exactly the same position as Peredur, unhorsed and forced to make his way on foot. The hill appears also, although in *Owein* the actual sacred place is a plain, with a spring at the foot of a huge tree.¹⁴

The challenge, the dark Otherworld figure, the powerful black horse, the combat and the hilltop, figure in all three episodes. The pres-

10 *Historia Peredur*, 69.

11 *Peredur: A Study*, 120-22. Joseph Loth, *Les Mabinogion* (Paris, 1913), ii, 117 n.l, suggests that the *llech* (slab) was originally 'cromlech qui signifie dolmen, tombeau mégalithique', but this interpretation is unnecessary.

12 'La colonne du dieu-cavalier au géant et le culte

des sources en Gaule,' *Latomus* 8 (1949), 149.

13 See *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London, 1949), 159-61, 163-4.

14 Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), 34, discusses the sacred tree situated in a clearing or on a plain.

ence of water may be inferred in *Peredur*, but it is not mentioned in the Wandlebury legend.* It is clear, however, that the origin of the Cambridgeshire story lies in the Celtic heritage of the area, in tales about the encounter of a mortal hero with a male chthonic divinity. The legend may not have been attached to the hillfort to begin with, but as part of the mythology of the Celts who

lived in the region, it may have been located at another sacred spot on another hilltop. As time passed, as the old beliefs lost their clarity and the fort became a representative of ancient times, a place of mystery and dread, the story of the dark warrior was attached to the place most naturally associated with such a figure, Wandlebury hillfort.

* [Wandlebury, on a chalk hill-top, is naturally water-less — *Ed.*.]

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