

Lecture Delivered to the Saint David's Society of Greater St Louis
3 March 2002

FOLLOW THAT PIG!
The Path to Welsh Mythology

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Where can we go to find Welsh mythology? If we look for Wonderland, we follow the rabbit (though in mythological terms, the hare would be more appropriate). If we look for any place in Celtic mythology, we follow the pig.

Perhaps we have come across the famous model of a boar or pig hunt from Celtic Iberia, where it no doubt served some ritual or votive purpose (as we note by the bells on the wagon). Indeed, as noted by Joseph Campbell in his *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, the pig and the boar figure very prominently in mythologies around the world,

Wales, of course, is no exception to this heritage, and we find reference to the gift of pigs in the first branch of the *Mabinogion*. Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, goes out hunting one day. The day apparently just happened to coincide with Celtic New Year's Day (the Irish Samhain – by “coincidence” Christian All Hallow's Eve and All Saint's Day). This was a day on which the portals to the otherworld opened and the people of the otherworld could visit this world; and, with the permission of the otherworld people, those in this world could visit there as well.

As Pwyll was hunting, he noticed a great stag that was being pursued by dogs. These were not just any dogs: They were white with red ears – a sure sign of the otherworld. After the otherworld dogs brought down the stag, Pwyll violated the laws of courtesy by chasing those dogs away and setting his own dogs on the prize.

Then along came Arawn, Head of Annwfn – the otherworld. Arawn required that Pwyll change places with him for a year (until the portal opened again) in order to learn courtesy and also to dispatch a bothersome giant in Annwfn. Although Pwyll took on Arawn's form, he honored the sanctity of Arawn's wife for the entire year. Once the giant was taken care of, Pwyll returned to Dyfed in his proper form, to find that his realm had prospered – and prospered greatly – under Arawn. The liberal laws passed by Arawn were continued by Pwyll, and Dyfed continued to prosper.

Meanwhile, back in Annwfn, Arawn learned how proper and courteous Pwyll had been and also how his realm had prospered as well. He noted, too, that Pwyll was continuing to be a courteous and benevolent leader in this world (they can see us, we just cannot see them). Thus, at the next opportunity and every year after that, Arawn sent Pwyll a gift of pigs.

Now, pigs is good. But they can also be somewhat frightening.

A Welsh woman was driven out of her mind by pigs and gave birth in a pigpen to none other than the famous Culhwch, whose name means ‘pig run’. *Culhwch and Olwen* is the oldest tale written in Welsh and is loaded with mythology. Culhwch's main task was to find Olwen and to

rescue her from her father Ysbaddaden – the Hawthorn Giant. The rescue of the maiden from her giant hawthorn father is a widespread Celtic myth and represents the freeing of spring from the icy throes of winter. Along the way and with the help of Arthur, Culhwch freed the god Mabon, the eternal youth, from his imprisonment as well – thus allowing nature to return to youth and fertility.

This ritual rescue always takes place on the opposite day of the year from New Year's Day – May Day (the Irish Beltaine). At this time, the May Pole is erected to represent two things: From its phallic form, it represents the return of fertility to the earth. But when it is made of hawthorn, it also represents the binding of the Hawthorn Giant – winter. Culhwch did not simply bind the giant; and indeed, that never quite suffices. Rather, he “shaved” or (more precisely) killed the giant, freeing Olwen to marry the hero. Thus, winter dies and the land with its rulers and heroes becomes fertile, at least for another year.

But where are the pigs? Bring on the pigs!

Before facing Ysbaddaden, Culhwch and Arthur must accomplish several tasks; and in this we should note the combined efforts of the ruler and the hero to restore the fertility of the land. One of the tasks – and indeed the central task – was to hunt the great boar Twrch Trwyth and to take the comb, razor, and sheers from between his ears. As we see in symbol stones from the Picts (a people related to the Welsh), the boar and these articles held some special ritual importance for the Britons.

A curious thing took place on this particular hunt, though. The route taken by the great boar was restricted to certain areas in South Wales and Cornwall. By the time *Culhwch and Olwen* was written down, the Britons to the east were already under Saxon domination (though contrary to popular opinion, archaeological evidence shows that they were not replaced). The Welsh writer used this last great boar hunt to map out those areas in the south still under British control. In keeping with the role of mythology, then, this story serves to identify just who these people were who observed the rituals and observances of fertility on May Day by following the route of the pig.

Did I mention that pigs is good? Well, they can be a little too good, it would seem.

Up in Gwynedd, two brothers were plotting a dastardly deed and needed a diversion. In the fourth branch of the *Mabinogion*, the budding young magician Gwydion visited Pwyll in Dyfed and managed through some magical trickery to abscond with a year's shipment of pigs. This led to a war in which Gwydion compounded his guilt by killing Pwyll – a loss felt all over Wales. By all accounts, however, his king, the master magician Math, kept the pigs.

As the story further unravels, Math used some rather sophisticated magic to induce a birth from his sister Aranrhod (who happens to be a great sky deity in her own right). The “small thing” produced was put into a chest and came out after a year as Llew Llaw Gyffes – actually a very traditional god equivalent to the Irish Lugh of the Long Arm and the Celtic Lugus, from whom we get such place names as Lyons and London. Because of a curse placed on him by his mother, Llew could not marry a woman from any of the peoples on earth. So Math created a woman named Blodeuedd from flowers.

Women made of flowers, though, are notoriously fickle, and Blodeuedd took on a paramour who managed to kill Llew in the traditional humdrum way – by piercing him in the back with a spear

made over the course of a year while Lleu is emerging from a bath under an oak bough, with one foot still in the tub and the other on the back of a goat. All right – perhaps, it is not altogether humdrum, but it certainly follows the traditional Indo-European plot, be it Achilles shot in the heel or Siegfried stabbed in the back.

Being a god, however, Lleu could not simply die, but he flew off in the form of an eagle and perched at the top of a tree. There he commenced slowly to decompose, dropping his rotting flesh to the ground beneath. Gwydion, now apparently given his journeyman magician status by Math, went off to find Lleu.

And how did he find him? Of course, he followed the pig.

One special, need-I-say white sow, took off from a farmer's pigpen everyday and came back every evening. Moreover the pig would not eat anything from the farmer. This strange phenomenon prodded Gwydion to follow the pig, and he discovered that she was eating the rotten flesh of Lleu Llaw Gyffes. With the help of a pig that knew that the best food was the food of a god, Gwydion was thus led to Lleu and could then restore him fully to life, and they all lived happily ever after. Well, the paramour was killed, and Blodeuedd became the mother of all owls; but otherwise, they all lived happily ever after.

So if we want to learn about Welsh mythology, we start by following the pig. The pig leads us to the otherworld, it defines the limits of our land while helping to bring in the summer, it leads us to the gods, and it is right tasty to boot. Sometimes, we have to look a bit hard at the story to see the mythological elements – and it helps to be able to compare them with other stories. Sometimes we have to realize that the mythology has changed – as when the white sows lead the Christian saint to the very spot where he should find a church or monastery. But if we wish to earn insights into Welsh mythology, it is the pig that will help us bring home the bacon.