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## THE DATES OF THE FOUR BRANCHES OF THE MABINOGI

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### ABSTRACT

In a previous issue of this journal, Natasha Sumner of Harvard claimed of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi that the “exact date of composition for the text is not known”; she yet quoted Professor Catherine McKenna, also of Harvard, for the tales as certainly predating the Fall of Gwynedd in 1282. A response to Professor Sumner’s comment thus has three functions. It cites publications on the question from 1897 to 2018; reveals the scholarly disagreement therein; but concludes with evidence to put the tales in the 1120s or early 1130s.

Keywords: Mabinogi, history of Celtic scholarship, dating of medieval texts, the twelfth century.

Despite generations of study, there is still no agreement on the dating of that Welsh national jewel, the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. A survey of what has been said on the matter between 1897 and 2018 has much to reveal. It shows earlier writers often nearer the mark than more contemporary ones, including Professor Natalia Sumner of Harvard, who, in a paper of 2016 (cited at the close), describes the text’s “exact date of composition” as “unknown”.

We start in 1897 with the publisher and folklorist Alfred Trübner Nutt (1856-1910). His writings are nowadays somewhat neglected, but his reasoning on the point was sound. He noted that the earliest manuscript of the text is no older “than the end of the thirteenth century” (this is correct, although not for reasons available to Nutt); but that, if the four tales had been composed after about 1150, “they could not have failed to be influenced” by Arthurian romance. Quoting “the opinion of most experts” on them as pre-dating 1100, he

himself preferred “the eleventh century or early twelfth” (Nutt 1897: 18). I shall argue that Nutt, writing in the age of steel pens and telegrams, knew better than many in the age of tablets and smartphones. In a simple textbook it was then maintained that neither these tales nor the seven others in the White Book of Rhydderch or Red Book of Hergest are “older than the twelfth century” (Morrice 1909: 31-32), which is close to the truth, because the tale of Culhwch and Olwen is (despite recent doubts) of the late 1090s, and its language predates that of the Four Branches.

Sir John Lloyd (1861-1947), the greatest of Welsh historians in this writer’s opinion, went unexpectedly awry on this subject. Considering that “there is little to fix the date of their composition”, he yet considered them not to be “moved far from the age of Llywelyn” the Great (d. 1240). Lloyd was in part misled by the palaeographer J. Gwenogvryn Evans (1852-1930), who regarded fragments in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth 6 (containing the earliest known copies of the Four Branches) as copied in about 1225. (They are now located fifty years or so later.) Nor did he reflect that the text might long predate its oldest manuscript (Lloyd 1911: 692). Sir John Morris-Jones (1864-1929), Lloyd’s colleague at Bangor, evaded the question. He referred merely to the MS Peniarth 6 fragments as copied in about 1225 (Morris-Jones 1913: xxvii).

Sir Edmund Chambers (1866-1954), not a Celticist but a historian of English literature, believed that the Mabinogi’s text “almost certainly antedates” Geoffrey of Monmouth, because the four tales “know nothing” of his Arthurian pseudo-history, published in about 1136 (Chambers 1927: 67). W. J. Gruffydd (1881-1954), in a study with much speculation on origins, was silent on dates (Gruffydd 1928). But progress came soon after with the edition of Sir Ifor Williams (1881-1965). It remains essential, although his views on when the stories were composed have been unfortunate. Williams put them early, to about 1060, on the patriotic (if flimsy) grounds that they unite material from Gwynedd, Dyfed, and Gwent, and that the best time for that was in 1055-63, when the Gwynedd ruler Gruffydd ap Llywelyn had (by violent means) brought almost the whole of Wales under his rule (Williams 1930: xli). It did not occur to Williams that, Gruffydd having conquered Dyfed in 1044, the Dyfed writer posited by Williams as the author might not look kindly upon Gwynedd monarchs (like the admired and respected Bendigeidfran of the Second Branch). It is also hard to explain the presence of French loanwords such as *pali* “brocaded silk” in narratives allegedly from before 1066. Williams’s prestige as a scholar nevertheless meant that his views were long unchallenged. Some in Wales accept them even now.

In a similar way, much can be gleaned from many (but not all) of those writing thereafter. In Cambridge, the Chadwicks were circumspect, declaring that the tales in their present form “cannot go back beyond the eleventh century

at the earliest” (Chadwick and Chadwick 1932: 226). In Wales, the authority of Ifor Williams cut more ice. Hence the following. Two distinguished translators proposed “early in the second half of the eleventh century” as the most likely period of composition (Jones and Jones 1949: ix). In a final book, Gruffydd followed Ifor Williams on language and orthography as proving composition “before the end of the eleventh century, to give a very conservative estimate” (Gruffydd 1953: 6). Back in Cambridge, Williams’s former pupil, Rachel Bromwich (1915-2010), echoed her teacher. She thought the author a South Wales professional storyteller active “probably during the latter half of the eleventh century” (Bromwich 1954: 102). I regard her statement as wrong on every point, instead proposing a Gwynedd layperson as author, who was not a professional storyteller, and who lived in the early twelfth century. More cautious than Rachel Bromwich was Sir Thomas Parry (1904-85). Certain features imply that the stories “were put together about 1060”, even if some scholars regard their “allusions to feudalism” as putting them later (Parry 1955: 70). Sir Thomas did not name the features or scholars, which is unhelpful. R. S. Loomis of New York, citing Ifor Williams, called the Second Branch “an eleventh-century tale” tout court (Loomis 1956: 56).

Proinsias Mac Cana (1926-2004), in a study which remains useful (if needing revision), noted a strange parallel between a Latin life of St Cadog and the Second Branch. Both describe an incident in which horses are mutilated by having their lips and ears cut off. We shall come to implications of this for dating. Mac Cana further cited scholars on the Four Branches for a period “ranging from the early twelfth century” to “the second half of the eleventh” (and especially to around 1060), the latter favoured by Sir Ifor Williams on “the basis of language and orthography”. These views he accepted, even if admitting that language and orthography hardly “lead to precise or conclusive results” (Mac Cana 1958: 158-59, 180-81). He failed to see that, because the Latin life of St Cadog mentioned by him was written by Lifris (of Llancarfan, south Glamorgan) in the early 1090s, the Four Branches will be of the twelfth century, for this reason. The incident of the mutilated horses is of a piece with the violent tone maintained by Lifris throughout his work. In the Four Branches it is quite untypical. Being effectively unknown elsewhere, the episode therefore surely reached the Four Branches from the saint’s life (where it is part of the author’s consistent sadism). The alternative, that Lifris learnt it from the Four Branches, is improbable. Nor, given the motif’s rareness, would it come to each from an independent source. We may add that the saga of Culhwch and Olwen will not antedate the late 1090s either, because its author also knew the life of Cadog. The language of Culhwch and Olwen being more archaic than that of the Four Branches, the latter will thus be of the twelfth century, not the eleventh.

Lectures by Kenneth Jackson (1909-91) may be mentioned for his unhesitating statement concerning the “late eleventh century” on when the Four Branches were composed (elsewhere he was more cautious), as well as his wonderful dismissal of much bogus theorizing. It is a pity that Jackson, despite discussion of the trickster Efnisien in the Second Branch, as also the Latin life of St Cadog (of the early 1090s), failed to mention the theme of horse-mutilation that links the two (if understandably, for it is no “popular tale” but of extreme rarity). Jackson emphasized that the author was not a professional storyteller. The plots of Four Branches being the reverse of “logical and lucid”, their author was assuredly not “an expert teller of folktales” (Jackson 1961: 67, 102, 106, 125-30). Since Jackson knew such storytellers in the Scottish Highlands and West of Ireland, what he said has authority.

Derick Thomson (1921-2012) put the stories in “their present form in the second half of the eleventh century” even if Irish material in the Second Branch, such as the anecdote of an Iron House used to trap giants “may be an addition” of the twelfth (Thomson, D. S. 1961: xi). He fell between two stools, one labelled “views of Sir Ifor Williams”, the other “late borrowings from Irish”. The narratives being by one author, they must therefore be from the twelfth century. There is no reason to regard the Irish loans as interpolations, and we need not placate the shade of Ifor Williams on supposed eleventh-century orthography. One person who courageously rejected Sir Ifor’s arguments was D. Simon Evans (1921-98), who described the story of Culhwch and Olwen as of the later eleventh century, its language being “earlier than that of any of the other sagas” and so placing the Four Branches in the “twelfth century” (Evans 1964: xxx). Although Evans probably knew more about Middle Welsh than anyone else, his verdict is repeatedly passed over. This should not be the case.

When the other tales of the Mabinogion were written is of obvious interest, but is too large a matter for consideration here. Yet it may be alluded to, showing how even a careful scholar like Robert Thomson of Leeds might go wrong with confidence. Echoing Sir Ifor Williams for the Four Branches as before 1100 and Sir Idris Foster for Culhwch and Olwen as no later than 1100, he put the romance of Owain “early in the twelfth century” or “the mid-twelfth” (Thomson, R. L. 1968: xxi, lxxxviii). Williams and Thomson hankered after making these narratives as old as possible. Owain and the two other Arthurian romances do not mainly concern us here, but are surely of the thirteenth century, as we prove below.

D. Simon Evans in 1964 did not accept Ifor Williams’s “eleventh-century” orthodoxy. In the 1970s came a further (if mild) challenge to it from Professor Charles-Edwards, who was sceptical on the value of orthography, but reached similar conclusions from feudal aspects of lordship and society as represented in the Four Branches (Charles-Edwards 1971). His remarks came too late to

change Jackson's cautious "eleventh-century original?" (Jackson 1971: 152). The case was yet noted by Robert Thomson in revising an edition of 1957, where he accepted Charles-Edwards's arguments for "history and comparative Celtic law and institutions" as evidence sounder than orthography, as with (for example) *gwr* in the sense "vassal", or Oxford as a seat of royal government (Thomson R. L. 1972: 42). Charles-Edwards was further noted by Professor Bobi Jones. Despite reference after Ifor Williams to the author as "Ilenor o Ddyfed yn byw tua 1060-1090" [a scholar from Dyfed who lived about 1060-1090], he cited for a later date Simon Evans, Robert Thomson, and Charles-Edwards, quoting the last for the suggestion 1050-1120 (Jones 1973: i).

There are sober comments by Alfred Jarman (1911-98). He listed the following opinions. Joseph Loth in 1889 put all eleven Mabinogion texts at the end of the twelfth century. Nutt in 1910 (in an edition of Charlotte Guest's translation) proposed 1075-1137, when Gruffudd ap Cynan ruled Gwynedd. By 1913 Loth had had second thoughts. The Mabinogi itself cannot be "postérieure à la première moitié du XIIIe siècle, elle doit cependant se placer après la conquête normande" [earlier than the first half of the 12th century, it nevertheless can be narrowed down to after the Norman conquest] of 1066. W. J. Gruffydd, in a Cymmrodorion lecture published in 1914, proposed that the First Branch was composed in about 1000, the Second about 1150, the Third about 1160, and the Fourth about 1050. (The view of the four narratives as by different authors should have long been consigned to the graveyard of scholarship, but has not.) After citing Bromwich, Parry, Mac Cana, Jackson, and others, Jarman quoted Saunders Lewis (1893-1985) for articles appearing in 1969-70 on composition after the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland, and specifically after Henry II's arrival there in 1171. Jarman mentioned as well a 1962 book by Morgan Watkin, who stressed Anglo-Norman aspects of the stories and put them to between the first half of the twelfth century and the middle of the thirteenth (Jarman 1974: 87-88).

After this time occurred a kind of academic exhaustion. Instead of presenting wildly differing views, professional scholars (with honourable exceptions) begin to admit that they know no solution. There are signs of this with Jeffrey Ganz. Although he does not see as "compelling" either of the conflicting answers given by Ifor Williams and Morgan Watkin, he yet thinks the Second and Fourth Branch (set in Gwynedd) more archaic than the First and Third (set in Dyfed), which "betray more evidence of French influence" (Gantz 1976: 21-24). One might suppose that this indicates different authors and times of composition, but Ganz does not go so far. D. Simon Evans thereafter gave a crucial list of French loanwords in the eleven Mabinogion texts. In such early tales as *Culhwch* and the Four Branches they are few. They then increase in number. By the time we come to the Arthurian romances of *Peredur*, *Owain*,

and Geraint, they are so common that “fe ddechreuir benthyca geiriau mwy cyffredin eu hystyr” [words with wider meanings began to be borrowed] (as with cost “expense” and forest “large wood”), here resembling legal texts in the Black Book of Chirk (copied in about 1250) and to a lesser extent religious ones (Evans 1977: ccciv). The implication is obvious. The three late romances are of the thirteenth century and not earlier, despite what is said. That leaves the twelfth century open for the Four Branches.

In contrast to the detail and exactness of Simon Evans is the negativity of Proinsias Mac Cana, who in the same year reached the land of complete doubt. Mac Cana confessed that he could here give no solution. He cited Ifor Williams, Saunders Lewis, and Thomas Charles-Edwards, but concluded that the whole matter “is still very much an open question” and never shifted from this view (Mac Cana 1977: 24). His failure continues with others even now. It has had an inevitable effect on non-specialists; for, if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? Rachel Bromwich, it is true, still spoke of showing how written forms of Welsh texts antedate their oldest manuscripts, “as Sir Ifor Williams as done in the case of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi”; she then referred to the stories somewhat vaguely as “the final result of centuries of previous oral transmission” (Bromwich 1978: lxiv-lxv). This despite the obvious signs of a single author uniting disparate materials. As for Professor Wendy Davies of London, she made almost no use of the tales as historical documents. Her grounds were reasonable. She observed that “there is no agreement amongst scholars as to their origin and their authorship” and that these issues “remain undetermined and pose extremely complex problems” (Wendy Davies 1982: 212). An undated text is of little use to historians, for whom chronology is vital.

It is true that some philologists in this period offered counsel. Once again we have the wise judgement of Simon Evans. In views on the language of Culhwch which command attention, he maintained that there is a “cryn fwllch” [wide gap] between it and the other ten Mabinogion tales: “Mae honno yn fwy cynnar a chyntefig o gryn dipyn na’r lleill” [this is considerably earlier and more original than the others] (Evans 1985: 113). Culhwch, being of just before 1100, puts the Four Branches squarely in the twelfth century. Yet Iestyn Daniel of Aberystwyth, in a comprehensive survey, proposed the years about 1200, on the basis of parallels with Welsh religious texts translated in that period from Latin. He even suggested Cneppyn Gwerthynion as the author, a thirteenth-century friar known for his learning (Daniel 1984-87: 240, 243). But nobody has made anything of this. Amongst the historians, Sir Rees Davies (1938-2005) made admirable use of the texts for subjects as diverse as kingship, governance, bardic itineraries, or links with Ireland. He thereby implicitly accepted an eleventh- or twelfth-century date for them (R. R. Davies 1987: 11, 20, 70, 120-1).

In 1992 appeared the long-expected edition of *Culhwch and Olwen*. It is of great importance. Amongst many weighty opinions in it are these. The text is unique amongst medieval Welsh narratives for “its author’s evident familiarity with the native learning of the Welsh Church”. Second, all the evidence points to composition in “the last decades of the eleventh century, perhaps the turn of the century” and so about 1100 (Bromwich and Evans 1992: lxxix, lxxxix). These statements should be taken seriously. The language of the Four Branches postdates that of *Culhwch and Olwen*. If the latter is of about 1100, the former will be of the twelfth century. It will also have had a lay author and not a clerical one. Later comments from Wales on the author of the Four Branches as an eleventh-century monk or the like hence have no value, for they are not based upon ascertainable evidence.

There are more wise comments (and useful references) on the Four Branches in essays by Brynley Roberts. On dating, however, he follows Charles-Edwards for “the period 1050-1120” (Roberts 1992: 96). As for fragments of the Four Branches in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 6, there is a new and authoritative view. The palaeographer Daniel Huws thinks them not of about 1225, but of the second half of the thirteenth century (Huws 1993: 19). This torpedoes Sir John Lloyd’s belief that they and their narratives relate to the age of Llywelyn the Great (d. 1240).

Sioned Davies of Cardiff University cites Loth, Ifor Williams, Morgan Watkin, Charles-Edwards, Saunders Lewis, Patrick Sims-Williams, and Proinsias Mac Cana, and ends by quoting the last (in the 1992 reprint of his 1977 study) on the matter as “still very much an open question” (Sioned Davies 1995: 8). In quite opposite terms, the present writer has set out arguments for the tales as by an high-ranking author active in Gwynedd and Dyfed between 1120 and 1136 (Breeze 1997: 70-78).

In this same year Dr Daniel proposed that parallels between the mystical text *Ymborth yr Enaid* and the Four Branches perhaps indicated a thirteenth-century date for the latter (Daniel 1997: 28). Sioned Davies meanwhile retreated from her open verdict of 1995, referring on the same page to them as “eleventh-century” and of approximately “1060-1120” (Sioned Davies 1997: 786). Later, in the USA, Catherine McKenna wrote on the Third Branch, but with nothing on chronology (McKenna 1999). Thereafter came considered comments from Brynley Roberts. He comments on the “dual geography” of the four stories, located partly in Gwynedd, partly in Dyfed. There is nothing like this elsewhere in Middle Welsh. (He might have added that their emphasis on the political success and expansion of both Gwynedd and Dyfed is still more remarkable.) Roberts observes too that the tales possess the “hand and voice of a single author”, who had special interest in good government. There is no comfort there for those like Saunders Lewis who split the narratives between different writers.

Finally, he dismisses firmly the quest of Gruffydd and others for a single mythological epic behind the texts (Roberts 2001). One agrees. Nothing has wasted more time for Celticists than this hunt for what cannot be proved.

After Brynley Roberts's satisfying analysis, we consider a volume on early Welsh narrative which is less so. Amongst notions in it is one from Patrick Sims-Williams, advocating the monastic foundation of Clynog Fawr in the Lley Peninsula of Gwynedd as where the stories were put together (Sims-Williams 2001). This despite the 1992 declaration by Rachel Bromwich and Simon Evans on how one Mabinogion narrative alludes to "the native learning of the Welsh Church" and one only, namely Culhwch and Olwen. Sims-Williams puts his money on the wrong horse. The Four Branches are devoid of clerical symptoms. What they show instead (besides a curious emphasis on motherhood and women of authority) is informed knowledge of court life and royal administration. For all that, in analysis of their politics, William Parker of Aberystwyth cited Sims-Williams with approval and posited 1164 to 1197 "as the most likely period of composition", associating the stories with "a Caernarvonshire court sympathetic to the ambitions" of a youthful Llywelyn the Great (Parker 2001-2: 370). Against this one may repeat Nutt's objection of 1897. If the tales are so late, why are they silent on Arthur, a hero endowed with sensational fame by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 1130s? And why do they detail the territorial expansion (eastwards, not northwards) of Dyfed, a subject of scant interest in Gwynedd? Elsewhere Kelley Wickham-Crowley describes the Four Branches as found in "twelfth-century manuscripts and fragments". She misunderstands Simon Evans's 1964 statement on the stories as of the twelfth century, but surviving in thirteenth-century fragments, as also the White Book of Rhydderch and Red Book of Hergest, respectively of the middle and very end of the fourteenth century (Wickham-Crowley 2002: 154).

In 2003, the present writer discussed the windmill episode in the romance of Peredur. Windmills being unknown in Britain prior to 1170, when we have a record of one near Boston, Lincolnshire, he proposed that this text hardly predates the thirteenth century (Breeze 2003). Because it has abundant loanwords from French and the Four Branches have few, the latter will, therefore, be of the twelfth century. In a different vein Dr Daniel then returned to relations between Welsh narrative and religious prose, again proposing that most of the Mabinogion stories, including the Four Branches and the three Arthurian romances, are by the same author as the mystical tract *Ymborth yr Enaid*, "a man possibly identifiable with the little-known thirteenth-century poet and grammarian Cnepyn Gwerthryniôn, who in turn is possibly identifiable with Llywelyn Offeiriad" identified as a cleric active "in the Dominican friary at Bangor, Gwynedd, sometime during the third and fourth quarters of the thirteenth century"; after which Dr Daniel considers whether Culhwch and



Olwen might also have “the same authorship and origin”, if admitting on this score that “it is difficult at present to tell” (Daniel 2004: 147). Whatever one thinks of Dr Daniel’s views, they have had no influence.

Although not directly related to the Four Branches, Simon Rodway’s paper on the tale of Culhwch has implications for them. Working from orthography, he thinks the latter text “cannot be proved to have been composed in its present form any earlier than the middle of the twelfth century” (Rodway 2005: 43). Some might take the opposite as the case. All agree that its language is more archaic than that of the Four Branches; it shows (for example) virtually no influence from French, whereas they do. Dating it to about 1150 would hence push those four tales to the 1180s or later; in which case their failure to mention Arthur, despite the fame bestowed upon him by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 1130s, becomes incomprehensible. Dr Rodway’s investigations do not solve problems. Return the text of Culhwch’s adventures to the late eleventh century, however, and the difficulties evaporate.

In a general survey, the present writer presented the decline of concepts on the Four Branches that derive from Matthew Arnold and, ultimately, the Grimm brothers. They posit a mythological original which is lost except for fragments in the tales, but is allegedly recoverable by imaginative investigation (Breeze 2007). In the same year, John Carey of Cork discussed Irish elements in the tales, but without reference to chronology (Carey 2007). With Sioned Davies we again encounter a strange inconsistency. She thinks the author of the Four Branches “is, of course, unknown” but opines (without citing evidence) that “he may have been a cleric, or perhaps a court lawyer” and that the texts “were first committed to writing between” about 1060 and 1120, even if “nothing is certain”. Diligent searchers will, however, find the admission that “A. C. Breeze, on the other hand, argues that the author was Gwenllian (1097-1136), daughter of Gruffydd ap Cynan, king of Gwynedd” (Sioned Davies 2007: xxvi-xxvii, 239). Professor Davies asserts that the author “is, of course, unknown”, like the date. Stranger is Professor Jenkins’s claim that “The recent claim that the thrilling stories in the ‘Four Branches of the Mabinogi’ were written by Princess Gwenllian around c. 1120-36 has been universally derided, and the work is much more likely to have been undertaken by a cleric in the late twelfth century” (Jenkins 2007: 87). Professor Jenkins cites no evidence as a basis for what he says.

More recent is the statement that the Four Branches “were composed, possibly in Gwynedd, between 1050 and 1120” reappears in a Welsh one (Anon. 2008: 535-26). In contrast is Dr Lloyd-Morgan of Aberystwyth. She speaks of Norman influence actually predating the Conquest, in the form of settlers and traders. Two imports by the latter are due “a small group of French loanwords in the early prose tales *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*” (Lloyd-Morgan

2008: 161). The implication is again of texts antedating 1066. The case for composition between 1120 and 1136 now appears in book form (Breeze 2009). Yet Count Tolstoy puts them earlier than anyone else, placing the four branches respectively in 1018, 1020, 1022, and 1024 or so. He thinks them written at two-year intervals. As for the author, he (rightly) sees “no compelling reason” to view him as a cleric. What evidence we have “points to his having been a secular storyteller”, probably “of gentle birth” (Tolstoy 2009: 471-74, 487). This despite Jackson’s certainty in 1961 that the author was emphatically not “an expert teller of folktales”.

Implications for our subject again come from Professor Charles-Edwards. His paper reveals the hazards of relying upon particular techniques of analysis and excluding others. Citing Simon Rodway’s work on the language and orthography of early Welsh prose, he takes seriously the notion of how Culhwch and Olwen may belong to “the second half of the twelfth century”, even if admitting that this is “open to question” (Charles-Edwards 2010). The implications of his comments are remarkable. The language of Culhwch being older than that of the Four Branches, his views rule out Ifor Williams’s preference for them as of about 1060, or Charles-Edwards’s own of before about 1125 (where his “1125” now seems to oust the “1120” of all previous commentators). The origins of Culhwch are a subject for another paper; but Professor Charles-Edwards’s speculations may be answered by the observation that if Culhwch is of, say, about 1175, then the Four Branches must be later still. If so, their failure to mention Arthur becomes extraordinary, while the three Arthurian romances, with their copious use of French loanwords, will be crowded so much later into the thirteenth century that they become impossibly close to the date of surviving copies of them.

Whatever one’s opinions, the Four Branches now receive more study than at any period in their history, thereby revealing their insider knowledge of (for example) war, politics, court life, royal administration, law, negotiation, diplomacy, and settlement of disputes (Breeze 2011). We also have a full-length study of their Irish element. Despite reference to possible composition by a woman of royal blood in about 1130, what it disproves is more important than what it proves. It demonstrates the weakness of 1050 and 1120 (or 1171) as marking the limits within which the tales were composed. On the other hand, its view of the stories as owing something to the native religious communities of Clynnog (in west Gwynedd) or Llanbadarn Fawr (near Aberystwyth), neither of them actually mentioned in narratives with few allusions to Christianity, is not credible (Sims-Williams 2011: 19, 190-91, 229, 286).

A chapter on the author’s knowledge of British and Irish geography brings out its attention to north-west and south-west Wales, contrasting with a vague but hostile awareness of England, Strathclyde, and Ireland, where the last (with

the River Llinon of the Second Branch as the Liffey, not the Shannon) is effectively the Dublin area (Breeze 2012). A challenge to orthodoxy then came from a Birmingham lecturer in Russian and Soviet History. He thinks that the author was profoundly learned in the literature of the Ancient World, with a skill in astronomy worthy of Manilius. This “highly-educated writer” was (we hear) familiar with Greek, Latin, Welsh, and Irish authors (especially Macrobius), wrote in the 1080s, and may have been Rhygyfarch, based at St Davids and writing a Latin life of St David (Rees 2012: 212, 215).

Scrutiny of rare words in the stories shows close parallels with the poetry of Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd. If sound, it underlines their associations with the court of Gwynedd and the twelfth century (Breeze 2013a). As for the Arthurian romance of Owain, one can still accept Robert Thomson’s belief that its mention of rowel spurs indicates the thirteenth century, when they are first recorded in Britain (on an English royal seal of 1218); a further reference to horse-armour, likewise invented about then, also points to a date after 1220 or even 1230, if well before about 1300, when Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 7 (containing the fellow-romance *Peredur*) was copied (Breeze 2013b). That leaves the twelfth century free for the Four Branches, with its few French loanwords against the many in the three late romances. Despite that, Jane Cartwright of Lampeter, citing detailed work by Simon Rodway and others on orthography as a basis for textual chronology, says on the Four Branches merely that the issue is “problematic” (Cartwright 2013: 32, 40-1).

With much that is said in the new Oxford History of Wales one must disagree. Professor Charles-Edwards therein toys with the idea that the four tales were not “composed by the same person”; this despite Brynley Roberts’s words of 2001 on the “hand and voice of a single author” therein, who had a marked concern for wise government. One also rejects Charles-Edwards’s belief that Sims-Williams has presented “a strong argument for associating the Fourth Branch” with the church of Clynnog, south-west of Caernarfon (Charles-Edwards 2013: 653-5). Clynnog and Beuno, the community’s patron saint, are not so much as mentioned in the story. Nor has it anything on other Welsh saints or ecclesiastical traditions, in contrast to the tale of *Culhwch* (as observed in the edition of 1992). I repeat that what the Four Branches show is not a concern for ecclesiastic privilege and tradition, but one for court life and secular government. On the last, notwithstanding Charles-Edwards’s view that its author lived in Gwynedd, it deals tenderly in its Fourth Branch with the defeat of a Dyfed army by a Gwynedd one. However, Professor Charles-Edwards at least assembles a bibliography and gives an idea on current thinking. This is preferable to Dr Padel’s remark on how most medieval Welsh literature “cannot be dated precisely” (Padel 2013: 11).

A recent work contains surprises. Michael Faletra of Portland, Oregon, speaks of the Four Branches as amongst “the most powerful and memorable texts to emerge from twelfth-century Wales”. In the Second Branch “the islands of Britain and Ireland both lose almost all their male inhabitants to warfare”, so that the narrations reflect “Welsh fears of colonization and cultural genocide” or even of “total Welsh annihilation in the face of Anglo-Norman colonization” (Faletra 2014: 177, 178). There is a truth in this. Faletra breaks new ground on post-colonial approaches to the Four Branches. Nobody in twelfth-century Wales could ignore the Anglo-Norman threat. In the Second Branch the usurper Caswallon seizes Britain; in the Third, survivors come to term with him at Oxford. It is reasonable to relate this to knowledge of Henry I (1100-35). He began issuing writs and the like in the 1120s at Oxford, near the royal hunting-lodge at Woodstock. Henry’s use of Oxford, where he built Beaumont Palace (on a site east of Worcester College), marked an upsurge in the town’s fortunes after decades of economic depression (as pointed out by Charles-Edwards himself in his 1971 paper). It is amongst the strongest evidence for the Four Branches as being of the 1120s or early 1130s, before Geoffrey of Monmouth published his Arthurian fictions.

Later writers underline the persistent doubts and confusion for some on when the Four Branches were written. Carla Skinner’s answer is “at an unknown date but possibly around the end of the eleventh century” (Skinner 2014: 7). Yet the Second Branch’s description of Bendigeidfran as “exalted with the Crown of London” can be understood as a rather up-to-date symptom, not an old one. Belief in an ancient British coronation at Londinium is a fantasy of modern Celticists. No king was crowned at London before Harold in 1066. The tales will postdate that, and surely by some years (Breeze 2015). Natalia Petrovskaia with reason puts Culhwch in about 1100, but still cites Rodway and Charles-Edwards for the later twelfth century as an alternative, despite the fantastic difficulties which this creates for other Welsh prose (Petrovskaia 2015: 144). Natasha Sumner, in a paper quoting much Welsh and US scholarship, declares of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi that the “exact date of composition for the text is not known”, although certainly before 1282 (Sumner 2016: 83). Count Tolstoy, in a large and wide-ranging volume, repeats his conviction that the Four Branches “were composed at the beginning of the eleventh century” (Tolstoy 2016: 162). Most recently, Professor McKenna discusses the tale of Math, citing Ian Hughes’s new edition of it, and including speculation on Gwydion’s role as a poet. But she is silent on questions of date and authorship (McKenna 2017).

Fortunately, two books have appeared which are essential reading as regards dating and the Four Branches. Of direct concern is one by Robin Chapman Stacey of the University of Washington. She refers to a wealth of material from

periodicals and the like up to the time of its publication. At three points the author deals with the matter of dates. With the first, in a passage on “the surprising extent of the legal knowledge displayed by the author” (whose background was surely that of in a secular court), she cites Meinir Elin Harris (without contradiction) on Iorwerth ap Madog or one of his circle as “responsible for the Mabinogi as we have it today”; which would put the texts in the early thirteenth century, when the codex of laws linked with Iorwerth’s name was drawn up at the court of Gwynedd. The second and third points occur in endnotes, one a mere reference to sources, but the other more important because of these comments. Professor Stacey cannot date the stories with precision. The subject is “especially difficult”; she therefore contents herself with references to accounts by Brynley Roberts, Charles-Edwards, Sims-Williams, Sioned Davies, and others. Significant here is her mention of Simon Rodway’s 2007 survey of debate. In short, Professor Stacey has no view on the matter. Like Proinsias Mac Cana in 1977, she sees the affair as unresolved (Stacey 2018: 22-3, 235, 236-7).

As for the second book, The new UWP collection of essays published in January 2019, it is non-committal on the datings of early Welsh prose texts. Simon Rodway, in ‘Culhwch ac Olwen’ (pp. 67-79), states that none of the eleven Mabinogion tales ‘can be securely dated’, although the story of Culhwch is certainly the earliest of them. He thinks that this particular narrative could be ‘as late as the second half of the twelfth century’, putting the ten other tales later still, but prefers to describe its time of writing as ‘an open question’.

Our journey is at an end. The extremes are represented by Count Tolstoy on the one hand, who locates the tales to between 1018 and 1024, and Dr Daniel on the other, who places them (and other Mabinogion tales, including Culhwch and Olwen) in “the third and fourth quarters of the thirteenth century”. That gives a range of 250 years to choose from. Others again think that no certain date is possible, including Sioned Davies, Jane Cartwright, Natasha Sumner, and (in 2018) Robin Chapman Stacey.

Investigators are now free to read the writers mentioned in the present paper, as also the publications which they themselves cite. One is glad to give special credit here to the Welsh scholars D. Simon Evans and Brynley F. Roberts, the first for consistently advocating a twelfth-century date, the second for quietly insisting on a single author, who possessed a unique knowledge of both Gwynedd and Dyfed and a desire for their well-being. It is submitted that there are four points which become certain from such a reading. They are as follows. (1) The language of the Four Branches is later than that of Culhwch and Olwen, itself of the later 1090s. (2) Allusion in the Third Branch to Oxford as a centre of government places the four narratives after about 1120, when Henry I began using the town (until then in a depressed state) as an administrative centre. (3)

Their complete lack of reference to Arthur means that they hardly postdate Geoffrey of Monmouth's sensational Arthurian fictions of the mid-1130s, as argued by Nutt back as 1897. (4) The paucity of French loanwords in them also places them before the three other independent native tales, and considerably before the late Arthurian romances, the latter all being of the thirteenth century (and not its first quarter). On this matter, the French loanwords in these texts listed in 1977 by D. Simon Evans will repay examination.

The conclusion is, therefore, that the Four Branches are not earlier than 1120 or later than the mid-1130s; a judgement consistent with the hypothesis (advanced by this writer since 1997) that they were composed by Gwenllian, a Gwynedd lady of royal blood who married a Dyfed prince and who lived in north-east Dyfed between about 1020 and 1136.

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