This book is about the legendary figures of Merlin and Arthur as depicted in the many original Welsh folktales left out of the widespread accounts of their exploits in English, Latin, and French through which most people know these stories today. But it is also about the survival of the magical arts from antiquity to the Renaissance and the broader cultural world of the Welsh, who were finally conquered and colonized by the Normans and the English during the medieval period but whose language and traditions were never extinguished.

The stories translated here have been culled from a single source, the enormous, sixteenth-century chronicle of Elis Gruffydd, written in his native Welsh. Its more than two thousand pages tell the history of the world from the Creation to the reign of Henry VIII, the author’s contemporary, in exhaustive detail, including feats of the leading figures in histories of Europe. Much of Elis’s masterpiece, however, can be tedious and tiresome for those not interested in the succession of popes or political maneuverings of princes. But tucked away among such political, military, and historical details are wonderful stories from the popular culture of the times that reflect the beliefs and fears of the people, commoners and elites alike, among whom such stories and beliefs circulated. This near-forgotten voice from the sixteenth century offers a treasure-house of sustained exploration of the widespread belief in the powers of magic, necromancy, prophecy, and related mystical arts, with Merlin and Arthur playing prominent roles.
Importantly, this book is also about the survival and adaptation of tradition, as it demonstrates how medieval Welsh thinking about Arthur and his court—a body of legends indigenous to Wales and the Britons who ruled the island before the arrival of the Romans and later the Anglo-Saxons—continued into the sixteenth century, often in ways that combined influences from other countries with the native stories about these most Welsh of heroes.

Elis used a dizzying combination of sources in a variety of languages, not only written works but also folklore, rumor, and hearsay. Crucially, these include not just the French and Anglo-Saxon compilations that today’s readers know best but also the many Welsh folktales never recorded in these foreign collections. Indeed, the versions of the tales that modern readers know all come from nonnative accounts written in foreign languages long after the stories originally circulated—like reading about the Homeric heroes in a Turkish retelling. When you’re reading Arthurian Romances, you’re reading the twelfth-century collection of a Frenchman, Chrétien de Troyes; if you read Geoffrey of Monmouth’s history of the kings of Britain, you’re reading the work of a British cleric writing in Latin. The English Le morte d’Arthur was written by Thomas Mallory in the fifteenth century. Although Elis was writing about the legends and history of Britain from the perspective of a century later, as a Welsh speaker he was privy to long-standing native oral traditions and folktales and to Welsh-language texts no longer extant today.

The general shape of the stories of the births of Merlin and Arthur and their subsequent careers may be broadly familiar to readers, but the treatment of the material here is uniquely Welsh, with many of the details found nowhere else. While Merlin and Arthur are no doubt the most recognizable, there are many other legendary and historical figures of antiquity and medieval Romance who populate these pages. Taken as a whole, these stories have a very high entertainment value and provide a window onto a world that suffered through numerous plagues and near-constant political strife. It was a world that men of the “arts” attempted to tame through prophecy, necromancy, sorcery, astrology, and other forms of magic. This book offers a unique and much-needed perspective on these remarkable characters and the world of medieval Wales.
THE BIRTH OF MERLIN THE PROPHET

The name Merlin, from the Latin Merlinus, is attributed to Geoffrey of Monmouth (Historia regum Britanniae). The Welsh name is Myrddin, also spelled Merddin. It has been suggested that the change from the Welsh form was due to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s concern that English and French speakers might confuse the first part of the name with the French merde (shit), an unhappy coincidence. It is interesting that Elis cannot account for the phrase clas Merddin, one of the early names for Britain in the Welsh triads, in the preceding tale. The Welsh clas refers to a community of men, as in religious orders, so this would seem to mean a community associated with Merlin: prophets, men of arcane powers. The town Carfyrddin, modern Carmarthen, was also thought to be named after Myrddin, though that etymology has been shown to be false.

This story is brutal, with the third daughter unable to escape the fate of her sisters; despite her religious zeal, the devil wins again. Her offspring arrives fully developed and is lowered down in a basket to a holy monk, who raises the child, a beginning reminiscent of the epiphany of Taliesin, who was set adrift in a basket in the water.

(298v) About this time, as authors say, there was a nobleman living in south Wales beside a town called Caerllion-on-Usk, as some of the books hold, but others contend that it was beside a town called Caerfyrrddin that he lived. As the story says, he was a very religious person, and his wife was of (299r) the same noble descent and also
devout. The story says that they had three daughters, all of whom, as the story says, suffered great misfortune, for the devil got each of the two eldest pregnant, one after the other. And so each of them was buried alive, for the law at the time required that punishment for anyone who became pregnant except through marriage. Shortly after this, the father and mother arranged for the third daughter, whose name was Aldan, to enter the temple of Peter the Apostle to take religious vows. The father and mother were so tormented by these events that they died by their own hands, by hanging.

It wasn’t long afterward that Aldan, the third daughter, became pregnant in the temple while keeping her chastity and her vows, through the malice and wickedness of the devil. She was soon brought before the law to be questioned and reveal the truth as to the father of her pregnancy. She told them in so many words how a young man, as it seemed to her, came to her in her chamber when the doors and windows were shut tight, in the dark of the night. “It was he,” said the maiden at last, “who made me pregnant,” telling them about several occasions when she did not know where he came from or where he went. Upon those words, she was sentenced to death, according to the law and custom that held on this island at the time. Present there and listening to the sentence and the judgment on the girl’s life was a man of great sanctity and holiness, whom (299v) the monastery said was a man who knew her mother and father well. And so he petitioned the judge and the legal authority to give him permission to keep the girl until the time came for her to deliver the child. After some discussion, they agreed with the monk. He placed her in a strong tower to keep her, with women and maidsens to tend to her and plenty of food and drink for them and every sort of need that pertained to a woman in her condition, closing the doors tight so that none could come to them and they could not get out. The women were ordered to tend to Aldan and her burden without fail when her time came, instructed to take the child born from her body, wrap him in cloth, and carefully put him in a basket and release him through a hole or window of the tower.

When her time came, Aldan gave birth to a male child, who, the story says, was as hairy as an animal and ready to walk. He was hideous and had an unpleasant look about him that caused one of the maidsens to moan loudly to herself about the appearance of the child, saying, “It’s sad and a pity that someone as pure as your mother should
suffer death for bearing such an uncivilized and unpleasant creature as you are. And in my view and estimation, you are not the offspring of a man, because I have never heard that the natural offspring of a man and a woman is ready to walk the moment he is born, only you.” At these words, so the story says, the child (300r) replied as follows: “Don't be concerned about the punishment of my mother, because I will answer for her and will keep her innocent in this matter.”

This statement greatly shocked the woman and the maidens who were in the room. But anyway, as soon as the woman took care of him and sent word to the monk, she put him in a basket, and with a cord through the window she lowered him to the ground, where the monk was ready to receive him. The monk took him immediately to the house of the justice, who, upon the request of the monk, sent for some of the lawyers to listen to the youth talking as he exonerated his mother, by showing them how one of the evil spirits, the one called the Scoffer, deceived his two aunts one after the other, intending to bring him into the world, and then finally, “as devil he deceived my mother, Aldan, who after long labor brought me into the world.” And then he showed them various signs to convince them that the Scoffer was his father, to the point that they could not go against a single reason that he was giving on behalf of his mother. And from his arguments she got her life back.

Following this, the monk had him baptized and named him Merlin. And then he released Aldan and set her free from her prison and gave her son to her to raise, which she did lovingly thenceforth.

**MERLIN AND THE THREEFOLD DEATH**

*NLW MS 5276Dii*

The motif of a threefold death is well known in folklore the world over and can take many forms. The present narrative is designed to allow Arthur to prove to his court that Merlin's prophecies are real and that he does indeed have the power to foretell the future. What is interesting here is that one of the king's entourage devises a plan to prove the efficacy of Merlin's prophetic powers. The story also accounts for the arcane nature of prophecy and Gildas's role in the difficulty in understanding the meaning of the myriad images designed to cloak the real significance of the prophecies and prophetic dreams of Merlin.
There follow here certain prophecies that Merlin made to Arthur, by whom he was held in high esteem in the early days. Because of that, as the story goes, some of the king's court grew jealous of him, so much so that they convinced the king that Merlin was nothing but an empty-headed fool and that he could no more foretell the future than anyone else. To prove it, one of them told the king in some detail that at the next lodging where the king and his men would stop as they made their way to the north of the island, he would pretend to be ill. The king agreed quickly to the knight's plan. He also let some of his court in on the plan.

And so the king proceeded on his travels from monastery to monastery. At each stop, the first knight to arrive apprised the abbot of the plan, and by the time the king and his court arrived, the knight was lying ill in bed. The abbot grieved bitterly to the king that one of his nobles was sick and likely to die. The king went to look at the man, taking Merlin with him. After spending a few moments with the man, Merlin told the king and the abbot that they needn't worry about the man dying just now, that he would not die in bed from a sickness; rather, that he would die from hanging.

At the next monastery the man was ill with a venereal disease. The king, the abbot, and Merlin all came to look at him. After some time, Merlin told them that the man was not going to perish from a sickness but that he would die of a broken neck. At the third monastery, the man pretended another illness. The king, the abbot, and Merlin came to look at him. Merlin said that the man was not going to die in bed; rather, he would die from drowning. These were three tragic deaths, which not any single man could perish from. According to the story, the news spread throughout the court, and everyone began to be bored with Merlin's prophecies. He soon saw this, and so, as some of the books tell us, he remade many of his earlier prophecies and confused them in such a way that it was difficult for anyone to understand them from that time on. But some of the other books claim that it was the saintly preacher Gildas son of Caw of Britain who confused the prophecies so that it was now difficult for anyone to understand them until he made it clear to them. At the time, Gildas was preaching to the British, whom he saw believing more in the prophecies of Merlin than in the words of God. And that was why he made those prophecies more difficult for anyone to understand.
But it doesn’t make any difference who made them difficult to understand, because most authors agree that it was done to make them unintelligible.

Anyway, the story goes on to say that the aforementioned knight was riding hastily over a bridge when his horse stumbled in its stride, and the knight was thrown over the horse and over the bridge, where one of the knight’s feet was caught, and so he was hanged, and in the fall he broke his neck and fell into the water. And in this way, the knight was hanged, broke his neck, and drowned. In that way he suffered the three deaths. (343r) And thenceforth, men would seek the company of Merlin and his prophecies, even though they were more difficult to understand than before. And the story says that Merlin made many more prophecies at the request of Arthur, as the record will show further on in this work.

MERLIN AND THE DREAMS OF GWENDDYDD

Merlin’s sister, Gwenddydd, appears elsewhere in the early Myrddin poems and in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Vita Merlini. She is at times a prophet in her own right, but in this story she is visited by prophetic dreams and must have them explained or interpreted by her brother. Merlin is depicted here as a type of “wild man,” living in nature, experiencing periods of irrational nature, cautious about food and drink. The relationship between him and his sister also serves as the background for the brilliant novel Gwenddydd by Jerry Hunter, which won the prose medal in the National Esteddfod of Wales in 2010. At the end of the first paragraph here, we glimpse something of Elis’s work ethic: he keeps going with “useless” material only to keep busy!

(395v) According to some authors, there was a man living in the land called Nant Conwy around this time, and his name was Morfryn. But others say that it was Morfryn Frych, prince of Gwynedd, (396r) which cannot be, according to the poems. But anyway, the text says that a man of this name had a son, called Merlin son of Morfran, and a daughter, Gwenddydd. And according to the story, the boy’s mind was unbalanced, because one moment he was irrational and lacking basic sense and the next he’d be in his right mind and would be wise and intelligent.
and ready with answers and good counsel for anything that was asked of him. God had given him the gift of the spirit of prophecy, and these prophecies he would reveal in metrical form when he was in his right mind—and especially to his sister, Gwenwydd. And the writing in front of me says that she was wise and learned and compiled a large volume of his sayings, especially those prophecies that pertained to this island. Some of these follow here in the present work, though there isn’t much useful sense to be gleaned from most of them. Still, to keep busy, I will copy down all those I have seen in writing.

The books tell that this Merlin was so unbalanced in his mind that he refused to live in normal houses, especially during the three months of summer, but rather lived in mountain caves and in huts he made from leaves in the valleys and forests on both sides of the river Conwy. His sister would often visit these sites and places with food for him, which she would leave in a place where he could get his provender when he came to himself. At times, so the story goes, it happened that Gwenwydd experienced certain strange dreams on some nights. These she retained intact in her head until she saw the time and opportunity to relate them to her brother, Merlin. On these occasions she prepared bread and butter with leafy herbs from wheat bread, with various drinks in a variety of vessels, each drink in the state its nature required. So wine was in silver, mead in horn, beer in a wooden mug, milk in a white bowl, and water in an earthen jug. All these she arranged in order beside the food inside the leafy hut where Merlin would come when he was in his right mind, to take his sustenance.

A short while later, as the story says, he returned. Meanwhile, Gwenwydd had hidden inside the leafy hut or cell to listen to his comments. And then, as Gwenwydd relates in some detail, Merlin took up his fine sandwich, to which he addressed a number of stanzas, in which he said that England will not make war everywhere, because you don’t eat a sandwich from the middle. And when he had eaten some of the sandwich, he complained about drink. At that, Gwenwydd appeared before her brother and showed him the order of drinks as she had set them out. Then Merlin asked his sister what sort of liquid was in the bright shining vessel. Gwenwydd replied, saying, “This drink is made from vines of the earth and is called wine.” “Aha,” said Merlin, “this drink is not suitable for me or for my people, because the
nature of this drink is to make the rich who regularly imbibe it here poor.” And then he asked Gwenddydd what sort of drink was in the horn. She replied as follows: “This drink is made from water and honey and is called mead by our (397r) people.” “Aha,” proclaimed Merlin. “Much of this drink is not healthy for me or anyone, because its nature is to make the healthy ill.” And then he asked his sister what sort of drink was in the colorful wood. She answered, saying, “This drink is made from water and grain and is called beer.” “Aha,” exclaimed Merlin, “none of this drink is good for me, for its nature is to steal sense from the wise.” And then Merlin asked Gwenddydd what drink was in the white bowl. She answered, saying, “This drink is created from the output of animals and is called milk.” To which Merlin said, “Indeed, this drink is good for me and my ancestors, because it is natural for nurturing the weak and helping the frail and strengthening the meek and increasing the grit of the strong.” And then he asked what drink was in the earthen jug. Gwenddydd said, “This is one of the four elements and is called water, which the Heavenly Father sent to nurture man.” Merlin then said, “You have spoken truthfully, and this is the one best drink that I’ll drink to slake my thirst till Judgment Day.”

After this, Gwenddydd asked him to listen to her relate some of her dreams to him, dreams she had experienced on certain occasions in the past, asking him to analyze them and show clearly what they meant. And so Merlin asked her to relate the dreams, which follow here in writing in this book.

The First Dream

My loyal and dear brother: last night in my sleep I imagined as if real that I was standing in a big, broad field which appeared to be full of small piles of rocks. And moreover, there were large piles among the small ones. And I could see a great number of people continuously taking rocks from the (397v) small piles and throwing them onto the big piles. And yet despite this I could see neither the small piles getting smaller, no matter what I saw of people making many trips, nor the big piles getting bigger, despite how busily the people were carrying stones from the small piles and throwing them onto the big piles. And from the strangeness of the dream I awoke, but indeed I was not able to get the strange dream out of my mind.
How Merlin explained the dream to his sister

Gwenddydd, my beloved sister, don’t wonder too much about your vision, because you won’t suffer from it. Understand that the field you saw signifies this island, and the small piles represent the farmers of the realm and its laborers at every single level who live legally and win their bread through labor, trusting only in God. The big piles signify the lords of the land of each and every rank and grade. The people you saw carrying the stones from the small piles and throwing them onto the big ones represent the servants or agents of the lords, who are always ready to employ their servants to take away constantly and endlessly what the farmers and laborers have produced, sometimes claiming authority of the law and sometimes by plunder or by outright theft. And inasmuch as you did not see the big piles getting bigger, despite all the activity you saw of people carrying stones from the small piles to the big ones, that demonstrates the wrath of God and his anger, because God will not allow the wealth to be taken away so unjustly to enrich the takers and their heirs. And as you did not see the small piles diminish, even though you saw stones removed from them, that represents the grace of God and his mercy, because great is his power over nobles of every grade as well as over ordinary farmers for their earthly condition. And yet despite this, no matter how much harm the nobles and their minions do to them, the common folk will be neither worse nor poorer, for as much as they lose in that way, God will send them twice as much another way, especially if they suffer such oppression patiently and without complaint and by entrusting punishment and vengeance to the Heavenly Father, to whom the punishment of every evil is fitting and proper, for it is he who ordains the weak and the strong. And indeed, no matter how much the pure of this world may lose, God can furnish the needs of mortal man in this world and of the many pure ones in the world to come. And there you have what your dream signifies.

And after this, she told him the second dream, beginning like this:

My wise and dear brother, I had a second dream. In my sleep I imagined that I was standing in a grove of alder trees of the noblest and fairest that man can conceive or imagine. Then I saw a large group of men
armed with axes approaching. They cut down the alders and struck the wood down from their roots. In an instant I saw that the straightest and most beautiful yew branches one could imagine were growing out of the roots of the alders. And from the wonder of all that I awoke, and from that day to this I cannot get that image out of my mind.

How Merlin explained the second dream, saying as follows:

Gwenddydd, my advice to you is to not be too troubled by the dream, for there is no damage or harm to you from it. The grove of alder trees you saw signifies this island and its ancient people, who are impoverished greatly and especially by the nobility, represented by the alder grove. As (398v) you saw, the alders, the nobility, are all destroyed. But despite that, just as you saw the yew springing from the roots of the alders, so nobles will come from the remnants of their line. At that time, no wealth will remain in the hands of this new generation, whose own offspring will wed below their class, and from these will come forth capable native Welsh, who will endure for a long time after. And there you have the meaning of your dream.

Then she told the third dream, saying as follows:

My dear brother, a third dream came, and in my sleep I saw myself standing on a round, level ground, on which I could see a great number of mounds and lofty shining thrones. And in my mind and my perception, I saw the earth shaking until the thrones fell onto level ground, in place of which, in my mind and perception, there suddenly arose piles of leaves, and on these mounds I could see different kinds of sweet-smelling flowering plants growing. There is great wonder in my heart from that dream ever since then.

How Merlin explained the third dream, saying:

Dear Gwenddydd, don't be concerned in this matter, because the vision will not harm you. The round, level ground represents this island, and the mounds represent the nobles of the island. The earthquake shows that war will come to destroy all the privileged ones, just as you saw the destruction of the thrones. The mounds of leaves which you saw rising
immediately in their place show that their riches will come or descend to ordinary men. The flowers that appear will grow from these powerful evil nobles, perhaps to the fifth generation, and each of these will possess the (399r) hearth of his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather, and then they will disappear like filth from a dung heap. And there you see the meaning of that dream.

And after this she revealed to him how she saw a fourth dream, saying:

Merlin, my brother, I imagined in my sleep one evening that I was standing in an enclosed field of the finest wheat a man might ever see with his eyes. The ears of the wheat I could see fully ripe and the stalks pure green. And I saw a huge infestation of pigs surge through the hedge and break into the field, where they wreaked destruction and devastation on the wheat until it was completely flattened. And then I saw a pack of white greyhounds coming into the wheat field. They ran at the pigs and killed them all. I have not yet recovered from that sight.

How Merlin explained this dream, by saying:

Fair Gwenddydd, don’t worry about this matter, for the field of wheat represents this realm, and the wheat signifies the people, and the ripe grain and the stalks show the men young in age with their hair white at this time, which would indeed be as strange a sight as seeing ears of wheat fully ripe and the stalks not yet strong. And the pigs you saw breaking into the field of wheat indicate that a mighty plague will come to this realm, which will destroy people in the same way as you saw the pigs ruining the wheat. And the greyhounds show that men will come as greyhounds that will avenge the cries of the white-heads against the pigs, which the greyhounds will drive from this land.

(399v) After this she revealed the fifth dream to him, saying:

My brother, I saw this fifth dream. I imagined that I was standing in the middle of an exceptionally large cemetery, which I saw was full of girls or young maids. And I saw that they were all pregnant and near to birthing. And I imagined in myself that the offspring were convers-
ing with one another from their mothers’ wombs. This is a great won-
der in my heart when I think about it.

Then Merlin said, “Don’t let it disturb you,

for the cemetery signifies this island, and the girls or maidens signify
that a world and time will come when matches and marriages are
made among heirs at a very young age. And indeed, everyone even less
of that age and generation will marry very young, and the children
and heirs that are brought forth from these will be full of wickedness
and cunning. And as much as you imagine that the children speak
from their mothers’ wombs, that shows that a child of fifteen years will
be wiser in that time than a man of sixty years at the present time.

This is the end of the dreams.

MERLIN’S PROPHECY AND THE
REIGN OF CASWALLDAN

The form of the name *Caswalldan* is peculiar. *Caswallawn* is well
known in the early Welsh pedigrees and would seem to be a regular
development in Welsh of the Latin name of Cassivelaunus, the British
leader who opposed Caesar’s invasion of the island. Caswallawn
Lawhir was said to be the father of Maelgwn Gwynedd, but in “Maelgwn,
His Wife, and the Ring” (see part 3), the name of Maelgwn’s father is
Caswalldan Lawhir. The d in this name may represent a phonetic devel-
opment in Elí’s northeast Wales dialect.

After the death of Cadfan son of Iago son of Beli son of Rhun
son of Maelgwn Gwynedd, according to the two eloquent authors
Guido and Geoffrey, Caswalldan was crowned the king of Wales in the
year of Christ 635. This was around the first year of the reign of
Dagobert, the king of the Franks. This Caswalldan was, as the story
says, a victorious man who won a number of towns and castles from
the Saxons. Geoffrey says that he was so cruel against the Saxons that
he had many destitute people killed and whenever he came upon a
pregnant Saxon woman he had her womb cut open and the infant she
was carrying cast out. In (411r) this way, with monstrous cruelty, he
overcame Penda, the king of Mercia. Then he took his hosts and went
to war against the West Saxons. Cynwacus raised a great army of his people to oppose him, and after a time he encountered the Welsh king Caswalldan beside an arm of the sea within the West Saxon kingdom. Caswalldan gained the upper hand over his enemy, sending the king fleeing and killing countless numbers of his forces. Then, as the story says, Caswalldan had some throwing machines made to drive the enemy to the sea, and as many as he could seize he held as prisoners. The story then says that he took his forces to western areas and led them from there into the territory of the king of the city of Caer Gan- gen, and after a period of fighting and battles he destroyed him and his kingship. As a result of that, Caswalldan became very proud of himself, to the point that he had an image of himself made in bronze, which he had set in a rock next to the port that is now called Dover, to unsettle his enemies and make them fearful, for that is where the Sax- ons frequently came to land. This is the man of whom the prophet Merlin spoke in his prophecy:

> The wombs of mothers will be split from the place where children are born before their time. In that time there will be great pain upon men which will avenge his wrongs to the needy, and the man who would do those things will cloak himself in a mask of bronze and be seated upon a bronze horse, which will protect the gates of London for a long time.

And as Merlin's prophecy says, Caswalldan had many brass and bronze images of himself made and set in various ports and harbors within the realm, as well as at the gates of the city of Caer Ludd, to make his enemies nervous and fearful. These allowed him to overcome them with his own might, power, and thought and his very own person and likeness, without giving praise or glory to God for the many gifts that God had given him.

And so the wrath of God came upon him and his descendants and his people in the way that Merlin said in his prophecy, because it was within himself that he brought about the vengeance, so that all the wealthy were punished, because the growth of every land failed. And yet despite his worldly fortune, he was unable to either overcome the Saxon peoples or drive them out of the island, as some of the authors have written. And one can imagine that all he wanted to do was win victories over his enemies in towns and on the battlefield and to make them subject to him ever more to satisfy his lust and greed for their
goods and their land rather than settling them in good governance. The chronicles say that he intended to leave the people of the realm without governance and without a godly way of life. Some of them report that he was killed fighting in battle against his enemies, but some of the others say that God punished his body with disease, from which he died, as Guido and Geoffrey say, after he had been the king of this island for as long as forty-eight years.

**CUSTENNIN AND THE RISE OF GWRTHEYRN/VORTIGERN**

The name Custennin was latinized as Constantine by writers such as Bede and Geoffroy of Monmouth. His three sons were Constans (the Simple), Emrys Wledig, and Uthyr Pendragon. The name Gwrtheyrn was latinized as Vortigern; he is credited with having invited the Saxons to come to Britain to aid him in his many battles. Elis refers to the cadre of warriors that Gwrtheyeirn hires to support him as “painted” people. The Romans called the Picts picti, supposedly meaning “painted people,” but this etymology has no modern support.

(288r) Around this time [ad 433], Custennin was crowned the king of this island. He began to reform the temples and sent men to preach the Catholic faith among the Britons. Because of this he was called Custennin Fendigaid, “the Blessed.” The stories about him tell that he had three sons from his queen shortly after they married. The first was Constans, who was simpleminded, and for that reason he was made a monk in a temple in Caerwynt that was called an undignified temple or a temple for the foolish. The other two were Emrys and Uthyr.

Now, at this time there was an adviser to the king and duke and ruler of a people who were called Jesses, who inhabited the land that lies east of Caer Ludd, which today is called Essex. This man, as the story says, was called in Welsh Gwrtheyeirn and in English Vortigern. The story says that he was a man of much deceit and jealousy and very desirous of worldly riches and power and lordship over people. And so he planned night and day within himself how he might secretly (288v) betray the king so that he could gain the crown and rule the kingdom without anyone doubting or suspecting him. In the end, after long consultation with his deceitful friends, he arranged for one of his servants to be dressed as
an envoy from a foreign land and sent with letters to the king. As the
story relates, the king was staying in Caerwynt, and the traitor hastened
there. He was brought before the king, who, as some of the stories relate,
was in a private room. There, the story says, the traitor said he had cer-
tain matters to reveal to the king in private. Thereupon, the king ordered
everyone out of the chamber, although other sources say that the king
left his chamber and went outside to a secret garden to converse with the
evil man. But indeed, it doesn't matter in which of the two places he was,
either in the chamber or in the garden, because all of the authors agree
that the man got the king alone and without any of the king's own men.
The wretch immediately drew his hidden dagger and with it stabbed the
king under his breast, twisting his body to observe him. From that
wound the king died, having ruled as the king of this realm for ten years.
The treacherous hand escaped untouched before any of the king's
attendants thought that he was even half finished with his business.

News of the deed spread all across the country, to nobles and com-
moners, all of whom felt (289r) great sorrow over him, as they were
called upon to do—and especially the courtiers, because of the indiffer-
ence with which they greeted his death. And so, as soon as the bishop of
Caer Ludd got word of what happened to the king, as we have recounted
just now, he supposed that it was some of the king's council and the
powerful ones of the realm who were guilty of that deed. So he took the
two youngest sons of the king, Emrys and Uthyr, and sent them across
the sea to Little Britain, for it was with him that the two boys were being
taught and nurtured, as my author says. Also, he and most of the leaders
of the realm supposed that Gwrtheyrn was guilty of the death of the
king, which was true. But anyway, he had done this deed so secretly and
so deviously that no one could prove anything against him as a con-
spirator in this act. To hide his evil plotting and his wickedness, he told
his council that it was appropriate now for them to take Constans out of
the temple for the foolish and make him the king of the realm. Some of
his council agreed readily, but others did not consent, for they could see
clearly that he was not fit to carry out the responsibilities of a king, owing
to his lack of sense and wisdom. Nevertheless, Gwrtheyrn went to the
temple where Constans was a monk performing religious rites and told
him briefly what had happened to his father and how he was next in line
to be the king and then arranged for him to leave the religious life in
order to take over the rule of the realm. This would be much more
appropriate and more fitting for him because of his birth and nature than remaining in the habit of a monk. Constans replied by saying, “Gwrtheyrn, you have to know that from my childhood until now I have learned nothing but praying to God, and so I am unable to understand anything of the way and manner for a man to perform in words and deeds to take up royal leadership upon himself to accomplish the rule of a realm and to defend it against sundry physical assaults.” And when he had said that, Gwrtheyrn said as follows: “Constans, you must realize that you can gain God’s blessing doing your work in ruling the people of your realm in peace and tranquillity as well as here in the garb of a man of religion.” Constans replied and said, “Gwrtheyrn, you know full well that I haven’t the sense to give answers to nobility and commoners.” Gwrtheyrn answered this, saying, “You don’t have to worry about the needs of the realm, for I will appoint councilors for you from among the wisest and most learned as can be found within the entire realm to deal with the concerns and needs of the governance of the kingdom, so that you will not have any more worry then than you have today.”

In the end, with the flattery and urgency of Gwrtheyrn, Constans left his monastery, gave up his pious ways and his monastic garb, and went with Gwrtheyrn. As some of the books say, he set many nobles of the realm whom he loved, as the Welsh proverb says, to hold to the same path as him, to crown Constans the king of Great Britain. As Geoffrey says, Constans was crowned the king of this island.

Following Custennin the Blessed, Constans his son was crowned king through the sophistry and urging of Gwrtheyrn and the support of most of the nobles of the realm in the year of the age of Christ 444. And as my author says, it was not long after the coronation of Constans before he put all the ruling of the realm into the possession and administration of Gwrtheyrn, to make and remake every single thing as it suited him. Gwrtheyrn took up all of this gladly. To bring about his ideas and intentions, in true cunning he secretly sent messengers to find as many as two hundred of the strongest, youngest, and most accomplished knights that could be found among the painted people to come to him. They came to him gladly. He pronounced them sworn followers and protectors of the king’s person, for he knew perfectly well the nature of these people, who, as the authors say, were a poisonous, volatile people who lusted after minted coin, for which they would mercilessly do any misdeed. The chief or captain of these men was Gwrtheyrn, who gave them plenty, including
gifts of gold and silver and clothing, making them different by far from any of the knights of the kingdom, intending that somehow through their deeds they would kill the king in some mysterious way, by telling these evil men while giving them gifts words like “Men, if I were king of this realm, I would make much more of you than is being done now.” It was words such as these that emboldened the false knights to plot treachery against the king, saying among themselves, “It’s a shame for us to allow and suffer this mere shadow to live and keep such a fine and praiseworthy person as Gwrtheyrn (290v) from the crown. ’Tis better for him to be the king than this shadow of a man with neither thought, memory, or sense to know who was serving him well and who was not.” They also said among themselves, “Without a doubt, there is no one on this island more worthy of wearing the crown than Gwrtheyrn if Constans’s head were off his body.” And after these evil men consulted together about the matter, they agreed to kill the king. So that night they went to the king in his chambers, where they murdered him by cutting off his head. And that is how he died, a simple martyr, having worn the crown for four years.

These accursed men sent the head as a present to the captain, asking him to rejoice and take up the rule of the kingdom and be king. But with cunning, as soon as he saw the head, the story says that he feigned grief and great sorrow over his death. And yet the story shows that he had never been happier in his heart. Some of the writers say that he wept waters from his eyes, more from joy over the death of the king and to hide his wickedness so he could win the goodwill of some of the Britons who suspected him in the death of Custennin. Because of that he had the evil knights seized suddenly and put into a secure prison in the city of Caer Ludd, where eventually he had them all cruelly put to death, as if he himself considered that the deed they had (29Ir) done was extremely grievous. And so the Britons understood that Gwrtheyrn was innocent of all the sins they had accused him of. And not long afterward the leaders of the realm agreed to make him the king.

**GWRTHEYRN AND SAINT GERMAIN**

*NLW MS 5276Dii*

Germain (380–c. 448) was the bishop of Auxerre when he was urged to go to Britain around 430 with Lupus of Troyes to combat Pelagianism.
He later made a second trip to Britain in the company of Severus, the bishop of Trèves.

(294r) At that time, as the two learned authors Phillipus and Antonius write, two holy men came from Gaul to preach the Catholic faith among the Britons and the Saxons. They were called Saints Germain and Lupus. The two authors say that the two holy men arrived near the court of Gwrtheyrn when he was hunting in the country. They (294v) stopped in a village where there were few beds. Because the holy man was not able to find lodging, he walked on until he was beside the king’s court. The king encountered Saint Germain, as the two authors mentioned above relate, who asked the king to get some of his servants to find them a place to sleep in a bed in the town or village near the court. The king abruptly refused, so the holy man and his companion took their rest under the branches in a thicket. It happened that one of the men who cared for some of the king’s animals found them arranging a place to lie down and pass the night. He felt pity and mercy for the situation of Germain and his companion and brought them to his house. Then and there, he slaughtered and dressed the only calf he owned, to give comfort and welcome to the bishop and his companion. Afterward, the holy bishop instructed the man to gather all the calf’s bones and put them in the stall in front of the cow. The man and his wife did that gladly and obediently. Then, the next morning, they found the calf alive. Then, as the legend and life of Bishop Germain Vincent recount, he asked the hospitable man to come with him to the king’s court, which the herdsman happily did. There the bishop had a conversation with the king, in which he asked him why his heart was so hard that he could, in his heart, refuse him lodging. The king did not answer. Then the holy man said, “In the name of the highest Lord, the one eternal God, I order you to go away (295r) and vanish now and leave your court and your kingship to this herdsman, who is more worthy to hold the royal rule than you.” As the legend of the bishop reveals, Gwrtheyrn did that at once, through the power of God. In his place, Germain made the herdsman king. This was in the year of the age of Christ 451 and in the second year of the reign of Clodion, the king of the Franks.

Although this text takes its authority from a holy and saintly man, it still depicts more of wonder than of reality. Also, other writings say that it was with a man called Bule, the king of Powys, that this story
happened with Saint Germain. And since the bishop does not give the name of the herdsman, the man the story says was made king, it's likely that the whole story is fictitious, for his life says that he went to France right after he unseated Gwrtheyrn, which is unlikely to be true, because there wasn't any bishop for baptized Christians in France at that time, nor for faithful believers, as the author Jacobus Renensis says. He was one of the men who brought the Franks to the faith in the year of the age of Christ 499. That was in the fifteenth year of the reign of Clodovius, the king of the Franks.

GWRTHEYRN AND THE FALLING CASTLE

This story marks the epiphany of Merlin, whose arrival into the world is told in “The Birth of Merlin the Prophet.” Gwrtheyrn’s wise men, who are at a loss to explain the falling castle, make up the story of the boy born without a father, which, of course, turns out to be true. Naturally, they encounter Merlin in the city of Caerfyrrddin (modern Carmarthen), whose name the early, folk etymology assumed meant “Myrddin’s fortified town [caer].” While Elis doesn’t necessarily believe in Merlin’s prophecies here, he holds that reading such material is at least better than idleness, in that it encourages reflection and sharpens the intellect.

At this time, the story says that Gwrtheyrn asked for advice from his closest advisers about what was the best thing he could plan and do to protect against the cruelty of the hated enemy. These advisers were mostly British nobles, who, after some discussion, advised him to build a castle in that place to defend against the enemy. And so he set people to work immediately on an open ground or clearing of land, where the diggers will encounter an obstacle, as this work will soon show. In that place, the stonemasons had the foundation dug and the base for the wall all around the site and began to raise the wall to a certain height above the ground. The story says that as much as they raised during the day would fall at night. Because of that, as my author writes, Gwrtheyrn and his wise men were struck dumb. And so he summoned as many philosophers, necromancers, and sorcerers of the arts as he could find throughout the realm, men to whom ordinary people gave their greatest trust, in order to find out through these arts and skilled people (304r) what it was that caused the work to fall at