

TALIESIN, a bard who sang in the second half of the 6th century

Name: Taliesin
Gender: Male
Occupation: bard
Area of activity: Poetry
Author: Ifor Williams

at the time of the fighting against Ida, king of Northumbria, and his sons, according to a note in [Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*](#). He was a contemporary of 'Neirin,' i.e. [Aneirin](#), the bard of the 'Gododdin.' The chief leader of the Britons in this war was 'Urbgen,' i.e. Urien Rheged ap Cynfarch (see *Cymm.*, ix, 173); three other kings are named, [Rhydderch Hen](#), Gwallawg, and Morgant, who fought with him against Hussa, son of Ida; it is further said that Urien and his sons fought against Deodric, son of Ida. [J. E. Lloyd](#) (*A History of Wales* [↗](#), 163) gives the period of this Theodoric's reign as 572-9, and that of Hussa as 585-92. In 'Llyfr Taliesin,' a Welsh manuscript of c. 1275, there is preserved ancient poetry which was thought to be the work of Taliesin. In this manuscript there is poetry addressed to Urien and his son Owain and an eulogy to Gwallawg ap Lleenawg and also to Cynan Garwyn ap Brochfael, father of the Selyf who was killed at the battle of Chester (613 or 615). These ancient poems number about a dozen, but the manuscript contains many poems which cannot be dated before the 9th and the 10th centuries. The latter must be ignored but a strong case can be made for the older dozen or so; if any of the genuine work of Taliesin has survived it is probably to be found in these.

[J. Gwenogvryn Evans](#) has provided scholars with a fine edition of the manuscript, *The Book of Taliesin* (1910); this is henceforth the definitive text. He went astray badly in his introduction and his notes, but it is well to have a text in which line after line are faithful copies of the original, for there is here a wealth of valuable material for the use of those who wish to study the beginnings of Welsh bardic poetry or even the evolution of the Welsh language in the early period. As more light is obtained on the evolution of the language itself, so there comes new light on the history of the Dark Ages.

One thing is clear by now. To the poet Taliesin of the end of the 6th century have been attributed, wrongly, a number of poems which formed a part of a narrative or tale which was put together in a later age, possibly in the 9th century. The chief character in this dramatic tale is Gwion Bach who swallowed the three drops (containing particular virtues) which flew in the fullness of time from the cauldron of Ceridwen the Witch. Gwion in turn was swallowed by the angered witch and was reborn as a babe described as 'iesin ei dalcen,' i.e. with a beautiful forehead, who knew everything about the past, about the present, and about the future. This is the Taliesin who sang to Elphin ap Gwyddno and it is his exploits which are chronicled in prose and verse in the tale which is called 'Hanes Taliesin' ([Lady Charlotte Guest](#), *The Mabinogion*, iii). He bore no relationship at all to the historical Taliesin but he became much more popular than the latter, as may be seen in references by the 'Gogynfeirdd.' It is easy to apportion the contents of 'Llyfr Taliesin' between the two (except the religious poems). The Gwion Taliesin is located in the Bala Lake district, in [Maelgwn](#)'s court at Degannwy, and in Elphin's court - wherever that was. As to Taliesin the bard there is no certainty. According to his own words he was not one of the subjects of Urien, but he journeyed to the chieftains of the North and stayed there to praise them. It can therefore be assumed that his home was Wales and as a eulogy to Cynan ap Brochfael, king of Powys, the old extensive Powys, was attributed to him there may be some justification for making him a native of Powys - the part of Wales that was nearest to Strathclyde and the most convenient place whence to start on a journey to Elfed ('Elmet,' near Leeds), Gwallawg, Rheged, and Urien. A prehistoric grave mound in north Cardiganshire is called 'Bedd Taliesin'; this would probably be the Taliesin of the medieval tale, not the Taliesin of history.

Author

Sir Ifor Williams, (1881 - 1965)

Sources

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D. W. Nash, *Taliesin, or, The bards and druids of Britain a translation of the remains of the earliest Welsh bards and an examination of the bardic mysteries* (London 1858), 1858

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J. Morris-Jones, *Y Cymmrodor*, xxviii, 1918

Ifor Williams, *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry* (Dublin 1944) (Dublin, 1944)

The translation given in W. F. Skene, *The four ancient books of Wales containing the Cymric poems attributed to the bards of the sixth century* (Edinburgh 1868), cannot be recommended

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Taliesin](#)

Additional Links

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