

Williams, Ifor, 'The Time of the Four Branches', in *Arthurian Literature and Christianity: Notes from the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Meister, Peter; Harbert, Wayne (excerpt trans. ), (NY: Garland Publications, 1999), pp. 3–5.

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ai9X4KzZHYsC&pg=PA3&lpq=PA3&dq=%22The+Time+of+the+Four+Branches%22+williams&source=bl&ots=RO9NmQAhAu&sig=M8IFMxTjhIUd4EQzsWogzMSt88&hl=en&sa=X&ei=jIAyVYPjCoOo7gbC8oAQ&ved=0CCEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22The%20Time%20of%20the%20Four%20Branches%22%20williams&f=false>

TOPICS (my selection)

DATE 'the country in times gone by' No Saxons, Normans, but Romans close by – Caswallon 54 B.C. 'the era immediately before the first arrival of the Romans on the island.' p. 3 Sax Norm Rom out p.4 conflated Beli & Maximus (388 CE)

PAGAN X CHRISTIAN 'the narrator of the Mabinogi knew that it was about the pagan era before Christ ... he succeeded rather well at keeping Christianity out' p. 4.

*Exceptions:* swearing by God/ Lleu's spear made on Sabbaths/scholar, priest and bishop B3/ baptism 'at that time' p. 4.

ARTHUR 'no mention of Arthur at all.' But storytellers knew Arthir fought the Saxons so Arthur did not belong in the stories. No Arthur does not mean the story was completed before Arthur's fame, ditto Saxons, but the storyteller is consistent in their intended period. p. 4.

BAPTISM Williams 150-51. "*Peri a wnaethont bedydyaw y mob, o'r bedyd a wneit ynn*" p. 23. They had the boy baptized, according to the baptism which was done then". Williams – mention of Christian baptism was not appropriate – a consciousness that such beings were rather pagan, although the name of God was in their oaths. To him the chief meaning of baptism was the giving of a name. Every time that baptism is mentioned the emphasis is on the naming, page 75, line 21; page 76, lines 7 and 19; page 83, line 26; and so here.

TRIADS *Trans. note.* Lists arranged thematically by threes, aid for poets, storytellers. Arthur figures prominently.

'The Time of the Four Branches' trans. from Welsh by Wayne Harbert (1999) from Ifor Williams (1881–1965), pp. 3-5.

NOTE 1. This selection originally appeared in modern Welsh in the introduction to the medieval Welsh edition of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi (Pedair Keine Y Mabinogi)*. Section 5, pages xxii-xxiv.

For commentary on this passage (or on this matter), see Sioned Davies 61 (and 34-5).

NOTE 2. Loomis (*Development*) 23. He gives 1849 as the first publication date, and phrases the definition of the genre somewhat differently.

NOTE 3. *The Text of the Mabinogi from the Red Book of Hergest*, 88.

*In 1839 Lady Charlotte Guest began publishing English translations of a medieval Welsh cycle to which she gave the name the Mabinogion ('tales for children'), but which is now called the Mabinogi ('tales of a hero's coming of age').<sup>2</sup> These annotated translations, which she refined and reissued throughout her life, contributed on the one hand to reviving pride in the indigenous Welsh tradition, and, on the other, to understanding the roots of Arthurian literature on the European continent. Whether inherently because of the material itself or secondarily because of the nationalist emphasis in Guest's commentary, a dichotomy between "Celtic" and "Christian" came to be standard in Arthurian commentary on the Mabinogi. In this selection, most of the explicit instances of a Christian presence in the Four Branches are enumerated within the context of an attempt to date the narrative, both with regard to its actual composition and to the age in which the story purports to be taking place. [Presumably a note by Wayne Harbert, trans.]*

Whenever the story was shaped, the narrator situated its events in the past. He did not mention imaginary contemporaries, no matter how much of the coloring of his age is on them, but the old inhabitants of the country in times gone by. There are no Saxons or Normans to be seen anywhere, only Bran, the king of the whole island, with the crown of London on his head. The Romans haven't arrived either, but they are close by. When Brân was in Ireland, the island (Britain] was conquered by Caswallawn the son of Beli, which harks back to Casivellaunos, king of the Britons, who opposed Julius Caesar in 54 B.C. The era of the Mabinogi, therefore, in the mind of the narrator, was the era immediately before the first arrival of the Romans on the island.

p. 4.

The author of the Dream of Maxen<sup>3</sup> conflated matters a bit in making Beli and his sons contemporaries of the emperor Maxen (Maximus), who was killed at the end of the fourth century A.D. (388): and yet, he kept something of the tradition, since Beli and his sons reigned here when the first Romans came to the island. Therefore, the narrator of the Mabinogi knew that it was about the pagan era before Christ that mention was to be made, and, to be fair to him, he succeeded rather well at keeping Christianity out of his material. He failed sometimes, nonetheless. His characters swear on their "confession to God," the spear for killing Lleu is made when people are at Sunday Mass,<sup>4</sup> a scholar, a priest and a bishop come to Manawydan, and he asks for their blessing: a name is given at the occasion of baptism, too, only here he remembered to add that it was the baptism that was done at that time.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, if he failed in these points, he succeeded in keeping Roman, Saxon and Norman out of his story. Some authors are surprised that he makes no mention of Arthur at all. But there would be more occasion for surprise and wonder and blame if he had brought Arthur in. Every storyteller knew that King Arthur was the hero who fought against the Saxons, and how could space be found for him in a story about the natives of Wales in the time before even the Romans had landed? The absence of Arthur from the picture doesn't prove that the story was completed before the story about Arthur became famous, any more than does the silence concerning the Saxons prove its composition before A.D. 400. All that is proved is that the storyteller, in this at least, was consistent in his idea about the era in which his characters lived. But who is responsible for the citations from the Triads in the Four Branches?<sup>6</sup> It can be shown that that person knew a certain amount about Arthur too.

p. 5.

## NOTES

1. This selection originally appeared in modern Welsh in the introduction to the medieval Welsh edition of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (*Pedeir Keine Y Mabinogi*). Section 5, pages xxii-xxiv. For commentary on this passage (or on this matter), see Sioned Davies 61 (and 34-5).
2. Loomis (*Development*) 23. He gives 1849 as the first publication date, and phrases the definition of the genre somewhat differently.
3. *The Text of the Mabinogi from the Red Book of Hergest*, 88.
4. Williams 86.
5. Williams 150-51. (Translator's note: In a note discussing the sentence They had the boy baptized, according to the baptism which was done then" ("*Peri a wnaethont bedydyaw y mob, o'r bedyd a wneit ynn*" p. 23), Williams observes: "... a suggestive sentence. The narrator feels that a mention of Christian baptism was not appropriate somehow in connection with persons like these: that it continued a certain vague remembrance of their antiquity, is doubtless, and a consciousness that such beings were rather pagan, although the name of God was in their oaths. And yet he could not think that there was not something of the sort in their history, or when did they get their names! To him the chief meaning of baptism was the giving of a name. Cf. English christening. Every time that baptism is mentioned the emphasis is on the naming, page 75, line 21; page 76, lines 7 and 19; page 83, line 26; and so here.")

6. (Translator's note: The Triads (*Trioedd*) to which Williams refers here were widely circulated lists of legendary persons and events, arranged thematically by threes under such headings as "Lovers of the Island of Britain," "Minx Concealments and Three Disclosures of the Island of Britain," etc. These were apparently intended to serve as catalogues or indices of bardic lore for the use of poets and story tellers. Arthur figures prominently in these legendary triads. Similar lists existed for other areas of teaming, e.g., law and medicine. The largest and best known collection of legendary triads, *The Triads of the Island of Britain (Trioedd Ynys Prydein)*, has been edited by Rachel Bromwich.]