THE ASTRONOMICAL AND ARCHÆOLOGICAL
VALUE OF THE WELSH GORSEDD.

AS a common term *Gorsedd* is used for "throne"; as a specific term it means (1) the stone circle, and (2) the bardic assembly at the circle. The proper Welsh for "throne" is *gorsedd-vaingc*, "*gorsedd*—seat or bench"; so the Welsh idea of a throne is the place of honour in a stone circle. That was once literally the case. Though the chief bard has always been the master of the *Gorsedd* ceremonies, the assemblies were held by the authority of the chieftain, lord, or king, and the business and festal features of the assembly were personally controlled by the lord of the land.

Perhaps the most satisfactory translation is "High Court." From the twelfth century to the present the *Gorsedd* has been the High Court of the Bards. We never hear of any other business transacted except matters that affected the bardic fraternity. But even such a circumscribed *Gorsedd* was never legal without the lord's authority.

There are many lines along which it would be easy to show the genuine antiquity of the *Gorsedd* traditions, and had I nothing more than this to say, I could with confidence invite archæologists to study them. When, however, Sir Norman Lockyer's "Stonehenge" came to my hand, some very obvious facts about the *Gorsedd* appeared at once to the point, and it has been my delight for the last six months to gather such facts together and apply to them the useful instructions given in the work mentioned. The present *Gorsedd* circle consists of twelve stones, 30° apart, with a larger stone in the centre. Outside, on the east, three stones are placed to indicate the solstices and equinoxes to an observer at the centre stone. A reader of "Stonehenge" would at once see that such an arrangement does not look very ancient. The silence of the bards about the February-May-August-November year suggested that something had been omitted in the instructions. All the old plans of a *Gorsedd* I have seen give 30° or so between the sunrise stones, and invariably the plans are contradicted by the verbal instructions accompanying them, in which a solstitial arrangement is insisted upon. Mr. T. H. Thomas, of Cardiff, to whom all Welshmen are grateful for what he has done towards setting the *Gorsedd* aright, kindly sent me a tracing of a *Gorsedd* plan preserved among the Iolo MSS. at Llanover, Mon.

It was the perfect plan that I had been searching for. It was accompanied by another, less perfect. As usual, the verbal explanations contradict the plans. In the perfect plan, which gives both the solstitial and the May years, the directions 30° or so north and south of east are stated to be the solstices, while no verbal explanation is given of the solstice stones. In the other plan the distance between the east stone and the winter solstice stone is stated to be " 30° degrees south." Delightful blunders both!

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The writer, Edward Williams (Iolo Morgannwg), who died in 1826, did not quite understand the plans, but to his honesty as a copyist we are indebted for a very valuable document.

In what I venture to call the perfect plan, the place of honour is given to the May year, the solstitial stones taking a second place. This is the case still in Wales. The chief dates still in our rural life are May Day and All Hallows. The gap in the direction of the sunrise stones suggests a comparison with other circles which show a gap in that direction.

It is evident that our bards give us plans which they seem not to understand. They have not in-

PLAN OF A GORSEDD.

The plan was evidently prepared for the engraver, and the draughtsman signs his name as "T. Jones, Merthyr Tydvil, Sculptit." The numbers given in the plan are not properly explained. A portion of the page is torn, and we have the fragmentary explanations:—"1 Alba—, 2 Alba (also underneath) Alb—, 3 Alban—, 4 y mai(n)—Cadlas neu Cylich C—." Nos. 5, 6, and 7 are not explained. What Alban No. 1 represents is difficult to make out. In the above tracing I affixed No. 1 to the north stone, by way of directing attention to the fact that for a stone there we have an elaborated north sign. No. 1 was probably intended to mark the Alban Eilir and Elfed (the equinox stones). No. 2 fronts the Alban Hevin (summer solstice stones), but that name is written across the head of the May stones. No. 3 fronts the May stones, though on the margin it is "3 Alba—." No. 4 fronts the November stones, but across the head of that alignment is written "Alban Elfed," the bardic name for the autumnal equinox, while on the margin No. 4 is explained by words which seem to be names for the whole group of sunrise stones. The easternmost stone is described as "Alban Arthan," the name of the winter solstice. Between the May and November alignments we have two names, one, "y meini gwynion neu'r Cylich Cyngrair," "the Holy Stones or the Stones of Testimony," the name, in fact, of the circle; the other name is "y Cyntedd," "the Court," the name of the space or gap formed on the east of the circle by the "sun stones." Accompanying another plan, in which names and measurements are also misplaced, we have the following explanatory remarks, which are perfectly correct:—

"The stones forming the circle are termed *White Stones* or *Stones of Testimony*—the circle itself is sometimes called the *white circle*."

"The middle stone, or altar, is termed *Maen Gorsedd*, i.e. *Presidial stone*."

"The stones pointing at the Equinoxes and Solstices are called *Stones of the Sun*. The Bards stand unshod and uncovered within the circle, the Presiding Bard, who must be of the *Primitive Order*, stands by the *presidial stone*. All the other Bards attend around, standing near the *white stones* or periphery of the circle."

"This is the bard's English, in which language he used to hold his own in the presence of the great Pitt, Dr. Johnson, and the notabilities of his time. My references to the sources of these *Gorsedd* plans are "Llanover Iolo MSS., vol. x., p. 267, and vol. xix., p. 160." "Holy," not "white," is the meaning of *gwyn* as applied to the *Gorsedd* circle.—J. G.

vented them. So far as I know, there is no megalithic monument in Britain exactly like a proper Welsh *Gorsedd*, that is, it is no copy of any existing monument. On the other hand, the similarity between it and existing circles is most striking. There is a circle of nineteen stones, with one stone much larger inside, at Boscawen-un, and nineteen is rather a common figure in such circles in Cornwall. A circle of twelve stones roughly divided the year into months, and one of twenty-four

into "fifteen-nights," as the Welsh for "fortnight" signifies, with a gap left in the east to welcome the sun on the chief days of the year, for the nineteen stones are separated, except on the east, by 15° . I have noted that when the stones of a circle are separated, in the plans, by 30° , the circle is complete, as space is provided for a May-November alignment. But providing a splayed avenue for a solstitial arrangement necessitated a reduction in a circle of twenty-four stones to nineteen, and in the two plans I have referred to, where the circle consists of nineteen stones, there is no inner circle of twelve stones described. It is significant that in the conventional instructions the number of stones forming a Gorsedd circle is not definitely fixed. The most remarkable thing in the Welsh Gorsedd is its similarity to our prehistoric circles, while the evidence at no point suggests that it is a mere archæological "restoration" of the primitive circle.

Since the subjugation of Wales to the English throne, an all-round Gorsedd has never been practicable. The Tudor sovereigns issued commissions for Gorsedds, but with power only to set the bardic order aright. In the bardic traditions, however, we have descriptions of a Gorsedd as the High Court of Parliament of every State unit. The unit of government was the *cwmwd*, comot, corresponding roughly to some large country parishes. Places called Gorsedd, Eisteddva, Henllan, often Llan and Eglwys, were such local Gorsedds. There was also a High Court for all the units which formed a lordship or principality, and we read of stated places of inter-State Gorsedds, when Wales was divided into three principalities, namely, North Wales, South Wales, and Mid-Wales.

But such an all-round State Gorsedd became impossible about the time the straight history of Wales begins, just as the earliest codes extant of the Welsh laws take us back to the time when they were rapidly becoming obsolete. The bardic traditions, however, describe such impossible things, even to minute details. So the laws give us much of the history of Wales that is otherwise nebulous.

Even more than the ancient codes of Welsh laws, the bardic traditions of the Gorsedd are the most formally authenticated of any Welsh literature. Since the tenth century the former have had to take care of themselves, apparently, but the bardic traditions were always recited at every proper Gorsedd. From the twelfth century to the first quarter of the nineteenth we have accounts of a series of great Gorsedds (or Eisteddvod, the same thing), every one of which was convened for the chief purpose of re-codifying or otherwise dealing with the bardic traditions. The voluminous body of traditions in question grew out of such assemblies. There was usually one bard head and shoulders above the others, who, of his own accord or by request, would prepare a statement which would be approved at a Gorsedd convened by the lord, as at Caerwys by Queen Elizabeth, and become afterwards the law of the fraternity. After long intervals, and especially after great disturbances in civil government, such revising Gorsedds became necessary, and that they were held for such a purpose, in very adverse circumstances, witness the conservatism, persistence, and vitality which are still much in evidence in the Welsh bardic order. We have nothing so well and faithfully guarded in Welsh literature as our bardic traditions.

The very latest instructions which our present bards observe in erecting a Gorsedd circle were recorded at a time when some said the winter solstice was on December 9 and some on December 10. I men-

tion this because some would have it that these instructions were invented by a Glamorgan bard about the beginning of the last century, who knew the solstice to occur on December 21!

True or false, there is no question of the formal authentication of these traditions, and that is a great step gained. But could these traditions be deliberate inventions after all, guarded and handed down by the bards as such? There is nothing to warrant such a remark. To invent such things the bards would have to be expert historians and archæologists. They were neither the one nor the other, and in their time scientific history and archæology were hardly in existence. Sometimes the bard-redactor indulges in history, and he always blunders in names and dates. But even the poor bits of history are found to be genuine traditions, and may be true enough except as to names, places, and dates. For instance, we are told that the bardic order, and every other order, was established by a man named Prydain (Britain), who was born on the vernal equinox, and every New Year's Day was Prydain's birthday. Students of Rome and Egypt will note this, though, I believe, some in the past have looked upon this tradition as a conclusive proof of the utter worthlessness of bardic history.

As to archæology, it is some study of that science which led me to look into these traditions for collateral evidence. The following are instances. We are told that Arthur caused the system of the Round Table (the Gorsedd, in fact) to be written on plates of tin and brass, and deposited at Gelliwig (Pendennis?) in Cornwall. I am not aware that such bronze tablets have been found there, and it is a mystery how the bards knew of such a medium of writing. But such plates have been found in ancient Gaul on which the Coligny Calendar is inscribed, dating about the beginning of the Christian era.

The bards tell us of an important festival which has wholly disappeared, except possibly in the form of "house-warming," the Hob Feast, *Gwyl Bentan*, "the feast of a fire back, which takes place when five fire back stones have been raised, so as to constitute a dwelling station."

There is one feature of the bardic lore that invites confidence apart from historical and archæological allusions. It is a fine unconsciousness, such as is never found, I believe, in faked, forged, or invented histories. It betrays itself in two ways. On the one hand, the necessity of proving or defending whatever history or tradition he records never occurs to the bardic scribe. From period to period we have simply a record, stamped by a Gorsedd authority, of accepted truth or sound lore. On the other hand, he never troubles himself about Druidism as such. He tells us, in passing, that there was something of the kind in the time of Julius Cæsar. Very seldom the term Druidism is used, and then not for what Cæsar knew as such, but for the actual teaching of the bards. He never troubles himself over the question of a Druidical succession from Cæsar's time to the present. It is over-consciousness in handling the bardic traditions that has worked havoc with them within the last century. Fortunately, however, our materials have a downward limit of date to the sixteenth century, before hardly anybody thought of arguing the matter.

Within the last fifty years a special effort has been made to "restore" the Gorsedd. Until lately its preservation was very much a local matter, in which the bards of Glamorgan have been most faithful. Now, however, it is a distinctly national institution.

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