Caerlaverock, the Battle of Arfderydd and Myrddin Poetry

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This paper explores connections between Caerlaverock and early medieval Welsh literature and legend.

Llywarch Hen

Llywarch Hen is a significant character in early Welsh poetry linked with the 'Men of the North': these were the Britons (i.e., the Welsh) of what is now northern England and southern Scotland who lived in the sixth and seventh centuries, and who feature prominently in medieval Welsh poetry and legend. Llywarch is a tragic figure who is the speaker of a series of early Welsh poems dealing with themes like old age, grief, and fate.

During the nineteenth century, a 'tradition' emerged that Caerlaverock took its name from somebody called Llywarch, possibly related to Llywarch Hen, on the basis that the second element of Caerlaverock looks vaguely similar to Llywarch's name.[1] The idea was amplified when it was endorsed in W. J. Watson's still much-referenced work on Celtic place names in Scotland.[2]

However, the suggestion is not grounded in the name's phonology. The name Llywarch derives from Old Welsh *Loumarch* < **Lugu-markos*. By the twelfth century, the *Lou-* element of the name was usually reduced to a schwa in Welsh (like the vowel in English 'the'), and so came to be spelled *Llyw-* (or sometimes *Llow-*, to reflect the continued rounding of the vowel before the /w/).[3] As Alan James explains, there would be no reason for the vowel in the first syllable to develop into the /lav/ or /law/ of Caer<u>lav</u>erock.[4] Kenneth Jackson was similarly sceptical of the Llywarch etymology.[5] Overall, it would be best to lay aside the Llywarch etymology for Caerlaverock as being based on nothing more than spurious antiquarian speculation.

The Battle of Arfderydd

There is, however, a much more plausible literary link between Caerlaverock and the sixth-century Battle of Arfderydd. Before examining that link, it is first necessary to emphasise the nature of our sources for this battle. The battle is not attested in any sources written at the time of the battle or even shortly afterwards. The earliest source that mentions it is a tenth-century Welsh chronicle, which did not have access to contemporary sources for British events of the sixth century; such events were added to the chronicle solely on the basis of legend. Thereafter, the Battle of Arfderydd features in a variety of medieval and early modern Welsh texts that are fundamentally literary, rather than historical, in nature. This is not to say that the battle did not happen; but insofar as it is now possible for us read and learn about it, it is an event in medieval Welsh literature concerning the 'Men of the North' and the prophet Myrddin, not an event that can be perceived against the backdrop of real sixth-century politics and warfare.

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[1] Edwards 1832, 366; the tradition is rejected by Groome 1882-5, vol. 1, 209; Groome 1894-5, vol. 1, 209, but the etymology with the name 'Llywarch' is supported by Egerton Phillimore in Owen 1892-1936, pt 3, 209, n. 1.

[2] Watson 1926, 367-8.

[3] For details of the phonological development, see Jackson 1953, 384, 414, 441-2.

[4] James 2026, 2.

[5] Jackson 1977, 47-8.

As just mentioned, we first hear about the battle in a tenth-century Welsh chronicle (the 'A-text' of '*Annales Cambriae*'), which merely mentions that *bellum Armterid* ('the Battle of Arfderydd') occurred in a year roughly approximating to 573.[6] The chronicle itself does not provide dates explicitly, but modern editors have assigned indicative dates to the events based on the overall structure of the chronicle.[7] We get more detail about the battle in a late thirteenth-century version of the same chronicle (the 'B-text' of *Annales Cambriae*), which describes it as follows:

> Bellum Erderit inter filios Elifer et Guendoleu filium Keidiau, in quo bello Guendoleu cecidit; Merlinus insanus effectus est.
>
> The Battle of Arfderydd between the sons of Eliffer and Gwenddolau son of Ceidio, in which battle Gwenddolau fell; Merlin was driven mad.[8]

Here we are told about the two opposing sides of the battle: the sons of Eliffer on one side, and Gwenddolau son of Ceidio on the other. These people are known from medieval Welsh genealogies concerning the legendary 'Men of the North', who supposedly lived in the sixth and seventh centuries. When approaching such genealogies, we should bear in mind that they effectively exist to illustrate the stories, not to provide historically reliable information about the sixth century (thus more like a family tree in a copy of *Lord of the Rings* than in a history textbook!). One particular genealogical text, known as *Bonedd Gwŷr y Gogledd* ('Lineage of the Men of the North'), surviving in an early fourteenth-century manuscript, shows a special interest in the personnel involved with this battle, and it presents the two sons of Eliffer, called Gwrgi and Peredur, as the cousins of Gwenddolau.[9] It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the deaths of Gwrgi and Peredur are recorded in both of the Welsh chronicles mentioned above as the next British event of significance following the battle, seven years later; Gwrgi and Peredur were probably considered to be participants in the battle as early as the tenth century.

We are also told that Merlin was driven mad in the battle, but not who Merlin was fighting for. By the thirteenth century, the name form 'Merlin' had been popularised by Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of the Arthurian legend, written around 1138. However, in early Welsh sources, the same character is called 'Myrddin' rather than 'Merlin'. (It is generally thought that Geoffrey changed the name to 'Merlin' for the benefit of his French-speaking Norman readership, who would have seen the French word *merde*, meaning 'excrement', in Welsh 'Myrddin'!) As discussed in **Myrddin Poetry**, below, the early Welsh poetry in the voice of Myrddin makes it clear that Myrddin fought on the side of Gwenddolau in the battle.

Since the 1860s, the location of the Battle of Arfderydd has generally been agreed to be Arthuret parish in Cumbria, north of Carlisle and just to the south of the westernmost stretch of the modern Anglo-Scottish border.[10] Aside from the plausible correspondence of the name forms, there is startling evidence for the identification in a text from medieval Scotland. Several stories from medieval Scotland survive

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[6] Gough-Cooper 2016, 9.
[7] Phillimore 1888, 155.
[8] Gough-Cooper 2016, 9, with my punctuation and translation.
[9] Guy 2020b, 428, sections 5-6.
[10] Skene 1866. For a recent reaffirmation, see Breeze 2020, ch. 3. It was actually Robert Vaughan of Hengwrt in the seventeenth century who first identified Arfderydd as Arthuret: see Vaughan 1796, 516.

concerning a certain Lailoken, who is portrayed as a wild man of the woods and a prophet. The stories correspond in interesting ways to stories about Myrddin from medieval Wales, and it is likely that Lailoken and Myrddin are, in some sense, versions of the same character. The same seems to be implied by references to Myrddin as *llallogan* and *llallawg* in certain medieval Welsh poems: epithets which seem to be versions of the name 'Lailoken'. One of the stories about Lailoken concerns his interaction with St Kentigern, patron of Glasgow Cathedral, and it is likely that this story originated in a medieval *Life* of St Kentigern. In the story, Kentigern asks Lailoken how he came to be wandering in the wilderness, and Lailoken replies as follows: 'It was I who caused the death of all those slain in that battle on the plain between Lidel and Carwannock; it is a battle well remembered by the people of this country'.[11]

Walter Bower's fifteenth-century *Scotichronicon* incorporated a version of the same episode about Kentigern and Lailoken, and there the battle is said to have happened 'in the plain that lies between Lidel and Carwanolow'. These places can be located on a modern map and confirm the identification of Arfderydd with Arthuret: Lidel is the Liddel Water, and Carwannock/Carwanolow is Carwinley farm in Arthuret parish. Moreover, medieval forms of the name Carwinley suggest that the name was originally Brittonic *cair* ('fort', or perhaps 'stockade-farm'[12]) + the personal name 'Gwenddolau'.[13] This appears to indicate a relationship between the local toponomy and the battle, since the place name seems to commemorate the leader who died in the battle. We shall consider the significance of this below in relation to Caerlaverock. We might also briefly note that the name Arfderydd itself probably means something like 'fervent weapon(s)'; Breeze has plausibly suggested that the name originally pertained to the local stream that still forms the northern boundary of Arthuret parish,[14] though it is entirely possible that the name originated instead as a description of the battle, which became reified as a name. (Alternatively, Ifor Williams suggested that *Arf-* should be connected, not with Old Welsh *arm* < Latin *arma* 'weapons', but with Old Irish *airm*, 'place'.[15]

Caerlaverock

The Battle of Arfderydd occurred some 30 miles east of Caerlaverock, so where does the latter fit in? The possibility that Caerlaverock had a role in the Arfderydd story rests on our interpretation of one of the Welsh literary triads. A 'triad' was a literary form that grouped three items, often characters or events in the literary triads, under a single epithet. It may have functioned as a kind of mnemonic device, but over time triads developed literary qualities of their own. Medieval Welsh triads usually exist in large collections of triads, the best known of which is *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* ('The Triads of the Island of Britain'), a text which probably originated in the twelfth century. For the most part, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* concern people and events from medieval Welsh literature, and the legendary 'Men of the North' naturally loom large. To provide a sense of the flavour of *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, below is the text and translation of triad 29, part of which concerns the Battle of Arfderydd:

[11] Following the translation in Goodrich 1990, 5. Both Lailoken stories are translated at 5-11.
[12] Compare James 2025, vol. 2, 49.
[13] Jarman 1959, 26 and n. 4; compare Armstrong et al. 1950-2, vol. 1, 52-3.
[14] Breeze 2020, 32-4.
[15] Armstrong et al. 1950-2, vol. 1, 51-2.

> Tri Diweir Deulu Enys Prydein:
> Teulu Catwallaỽn mab Catuan, a uuant seith mlyned y gyt ac (ef) yn Ywerdon; ac yn hynny o yspeit ny ouynassant dim idaỽ, rac goruot arnadunt y adaỽ;
> A'r eil, Teulu Gauran mab Aedan, a aethant y'r mor dros eu harglwyd;
> A thrydyd, Teulu Guendoleu mab Keidaỽ yn Arderyd, a gynhalyassant y ỽrwydyr pythewnos a mis wedy llad eu harglỽyd.
> Sef oed riuedi teuluoed pob un o'r gỽyr hynny, ỽn can wr arugeint.
>
> Three Faithful War-Bands of the Island of Britain:
> The War-Band of Cadwallawn son of Cadfan, who were with him seven years in Ireland; and in all that time they did not ask him for anything, lest they should be compelled to leave him;
> And the second, the War-Band of Gafran son of Aeddan, who went to the sea for their lord;
> And the third, the War-Band of Gwenddolau son of Ceid(i)aw at Ar(f)derydd, who continued the battle for a fortnight and a month after their lord was slain.
> The number of the War-Bands of each of those men was twenty-one hundred men.[16]

Trioedd Ynys Prydein evolved over time as the text was recopied and reinterpreted in successive medieval manuscripts. For this reason, different manuscripts contain different versions of the collection with varying sequences of triads. The triad that may be related to Caerlaverock is first found in a manuscript now in the National Library of Wales called Peniarth 50, nicknamed *Y Cwtta Cyfarwydd* ('The Short Guide'). The manuscript was written by a scribe called Dafydd in the middle decades of the fifteenth century, though the triad itself may well be older than that. The triad is number 84 in Rachel Bromwich's edition:

> Teir Ouergat Ynys Prydein:
> Vn onaddunt a vu Gat Godeu. Sef y gwnaethpỽyt, o achavs yr Ast y ar iỽrch fechỽys a Chornygil;
> Yr eil a vu y Gweith Arderydd, a wnaethpỽyt o achavs nyth yr (E)hedydd;
> A'(r) drydydd oedd waethaf. Sef oedd honno, Camlan. A honno a wnaethpỽyt o gywryssedd Gwenhỽyuar a Gwennhỽyach.
> Sef achaỽs y gelwit y rei hynny yn ouer: ỽrth y gwneuthur o achaỽs mor ddiffrỽyth a hỽnnỽ.
>
> Three Futile Battles of the Island of Britain:
> One of them was the Battle of Goddau: it was brought about because of the bitch, the roebuck and the plover;
> The second was the Contest of Ar(f)derydd, which was brought about because of the lark's nest;
> And the third was the worst: that was Camlan, which was brought about because of Gwenhwyfar's contention with Gwenhwy(f)ach.

[16] Bromwich 2014, 62.

> This is why those (Battles) were called Futile: because they were brought about by such barren causes as that.[17]

It was Nora Chadwick who first perceived the possible connection between this triad and Caerlaverock, though Kenneth Jackson subsequently set out some of the ramifications of that connection more fully.[18] As James explains, reaching a similar conclusion to Jackson, the 'laverock' element of the name probably originated as a Celtic-language term meaning 'babbling' or the like, in reference either to a noisy local stream or the loud tidal boar that comes up the Nith estuary.[19] However, during the Middle Ages, and indeed beyond, it would have been readily interpreted by speakers of Middle English or Older Scots as 'lark'. 'Laverock' was the original word for 'lark' in Old English, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists attestations of the 'laverock' form up to as late as 1897.[20] 'Caerlaverock' would thus have been widely perceived to mean 'fort of the lark'. The suggestion of Chadwick and Jackson was therefore that Caerlaverock is in some sense the 'lark's nest' that the triad blames for the Battle of Arfderydd. It might also be noticed that the presence of the nearby River Nith could have encouraged the formulation, because the Welsh word for nest is *nyth*, as seen in the text above.

If it is accepted that, in the context of a medieval Welsh literary reference to the Battle of Arfderydd, the 'lark's nest' is an allusion to Caerlaverock, it could be explained in a variety of ways. Nora Chadwick understood it in terms of sixth-century history, suggesting that the Battle of Arfderydd was fought to secure possession of Caerlaverock.[21] Jackson showed that the name Caerlaverock predated the construction of the thirteenth-century castle on the site, quoting a document from between 1159 and 1165 that mentions the estate of *Karlaueroc* being rented by the monks of Holm Cultram Abbey from Ralph son of Dunegal.[22] He suggested instead that the name originally pertained either to the Roman fort on Wardlaw Hill about a mile north of the castle, or to the nearby multivallate fort on the summit of the Wardlaw, and that one of these was the original 'fort of the lark' over which the battle of Arfderydd was fought. Jackson also offered various explanations to account for how, if the triad refers to an aspect of real warfare among Britons in the sixth century, the name Caerlaverock came to include the English (rather than Welsh) element 'laverock', meaning 'lark'.[23] However, despite such hypothesising, it remains perilous to think that we can learn anything about real sixth-century history from this evidence, given its nature and date.

A different approach would be to consider the significance of the triad in terms of the generally perceived relationship between literature and place names in the Middle Ages. At that time, just like now, it was often assumed that the names of places could be explained through stories set in the past, especially if the places incorporated personal names. The recurrent question 'how did X get its name?' was thus a fruitful prompt for storytelling in the Middle Ages, not least in medieval Welsh and Gaelic literature. Conversely, when people were pondering legends that they

[17] Bromwich 2014, 217.
[18] Chadwick 1963, 64; Chadwick 1976, 99-100; Jackson 1977.
[19] James 2026; Jackson 1977, 48.
[20] *Oxford English Dictionary*, *s.vv. laverock*, n. (2022) and *lark*, n.1 (2022).
[21] Chadwick 1963, 64; Chadwick 1976, 99-101, mirrored by Clarke 1973, 160; Jackson 1977, 49-50.
[22] Jackson slightly misquoted the form as *Kaer*-; see Barrow 1954, 176, n. 1.
[23] Jackson 1977.

knew little about, it would have seemed natural to them to turn their minds to surrounding place names to see if they held any further clues about the stories.

It is in this spirit that the name ‘Carwinley’ in Arthuret parish, seemingly incorporating the name of Gwenddolau, the defeated party in the Battle of Arfderydd, should be considered. It is sometimes assumed nowadays that the place name shows that Gwenddolau had his chief base in the local vicinity, perhaps at the old Roman fortress of Netherby nearby.[24] But it is a remarkable coincidence that not only should Gwenddolau’s fort be named after him, but also the fort itself should be located directly adjacent to the site of a battle that we know almost nothing about aside from that Gwenddolau died there. It is more likely that this set of circumstances can be better explained in one of two alternative ways: (1) either the idea that Gwenddolau was the person who died in the battle arose *because* of the proximity of the pre-existing place name Carwinley; or (2), perhaps more probably, the place name itself arose because of stories about the battle.[25] The potential connection to Caerlaverock should be viewed in a similar light. If somebody in the Middle Ages, somebody who probably knew more about it than we do, was pondering the cause of the Battle of Arfderydd, especially if they were aware of the name Carwinley (understood, correctly, as Welsh *caer* + Gwenddolau), it would have seemed natural for them to assume that other place names in the general vicinity would offer clues about the battle’s circumstances. Caerlaverock may have seemed notable in this regard to a Welsh speaker, since its first element was also recognisably equivalent to Welsh *caer*: a consideration which may have encouraged an assumed connection with Arfderydd and Carwinley. The apparent coupling of this *caer* with the English word for ‘lark’, and its location adjacent to a river that would have appeared to mean ‘nest’ in Welsh, may have been enough to generate the idea that the ‘lark’s nest’ was somehow linked to the Battle of Arfderydd. From a medieval Welsh standpoint, the actual distance between the two ‘northern’ locations of Caerlaverock and Arthuret may not have been so readily comprehensible as it is now.

Trioedd Ynys Prydein may contain another reflex of this line of thinking. One triad (no. 32), appearing already in a manuscript from the second half of the thirteenth century, concerns the ‘Three Men who performed the Three Fortunate Slaughters’. The first is described as follows:

> Gall son of Dysgyfdawd who slew the Two Birds of Gwenddolau. And they had a yoke of gold on them. Two corpses of the Cymry [i.e., the Welsh] they ate for their dinner, and two for their supper.[26]

Elsewhere we are told that Gwenddolau’s two birds were guarding his gold and silver.[27] Perhaps Gwenddolau’s two magical birds were thought to be the larks.

Once the idea that the Battle of Arfderydd was caused by a lark’s nest became established, it could be incorporated into stories of the battle in numerous imaginative ways. Two such stories survive from the seventeenth century, both written in English. One is found among the notes of the Welsh antiquary Robert Vaughan (d. 1667), who believed that Rhydderch Hael, king of Dumbarton, and

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[24] Suggested in Chadwick 1949, 143.
[25] The latter is hinted in Breeze 2020, 33; James 2025, vol. 2, 49-50; James 2026, 1-2.
[26] Bromwich 2014, 73.
[27] Bromwich 2014, 18, no. 10W.

Aeddan, king of Dál Riata (Argyll and the Inner Hebrides), were involved in the battle. Vaughan's story is rendered in modern English spelling thus:

> It chanced that the shepherds of Rhydderch and Aeddan aforesaid, by the instigation of the Devil, fell out for no other cause than a lark's nest; who, having beaten one another to the effusion of their blood, at last acquainted their lords of the whole strife, and they presently engaged themselves in the quarrel, entering into open hostility with such eagerness and hatred that having mustered their forces and committed some outrages, they appointed a day and place to try the matter by dint of sword; and Aeddan fearing to be too weak to encounter Rhydderch, drew to his side Gwenddoleu the son of Ceidiaw of the tribe of Coel Godeboc, a very powerful prince, and they, joining their forces, met Rhydderch at a place called Arderydd, where upon the first encounter Gwenddoleu was slain, and with him Llywelyn, Gwgawn, Einiawn, and Rhiwallawn, the sons of Morfryn, Merlin Caledonius's brethren; and in the end after a great slaughter on both sides, Rhydderch obtained the victory, and Aeddan fled the country.[28]

The motif of the two quarrelling shepherds was known already in the fifteenth century, so it was not invented by Robert Vaughan.[29] A similar idea, involving two quarrelling falconers, is the basis of a more elaborate story found in a different manuscript, written by an unidentified scribe in the middle of the seventeenth century. Within a larger work on the history of Britain, drawing on numerous Welsh poetic and oral sources, the story is given as follows:

> In his [i.e., Myrddin Emrys's] time also was one other Myrddin, grandchild unto Meurig, king of Dyfed, as the British Histories and bards do allege. This Myrddin after he came to man's estate for a small occasion as some [say] it was but a lark, it is said that the falconer of Cerdig, king of Cardigan, and Myrddin's falconer being hawking all day, the king's falconer having gotten no prey all the day, and in the evening meeting with Myrddin's falconer, who had taken only one lark, and showing it to the other, who gave it his hawk. Upon which occasion, Myrddin did chop off the head of the king's hawk and therewith did wound the falconer in a bloody combat between them. Whereupon, the king sent for Myrddin to come and appear to answer the business, but, being a wild youth, refused as fearing the king's displeasure, but stood on his guard and gathered his friends and kinsmen to him. The king did the like and marched into Myrddin's lands, and there was a great fight between them with loss of many men, and Myrddin was forced to flee. Yet he fought […] three or four battles more with them, but was overthrown in them all. At the last, his power decreasing, he fled to Albany [i.e., Scotland] and there was aided by Irish Picts that he had a mighty, great army, indeed, and Ceredig [i.e., Cerdig], he marched after him with the power of South Wales, Buellt [i.e., Builth], North Wales, and Powys, that he had an exceeding great army, and near the forest of Calidon both armies met, where was one of the

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28 Bromwich 2014, 220-1.

29 Bromwich 2014, 217-18.

bloodiest battles that ever the Britons fought. Yet Myrddin was still vanquished and fled with such as he had living into the forest of Calidon [i.e., 'Scotland' generally], where he was compassed about [i.e., surrounded] by his enemies the space of five days, by which time his men were in evil case, who having fasted all the time, and Myrddin, taking pity on them, gave them leave to depart one by one and save themselves and he would embrace for himself such fortune as pleased God to send, but the soldiers denied, and said they would be partakers of his fortune to the death, whereupon, ranging the forest, [they] happened upon a great apple tree full of apples, wherefore he thanked God, and taking down all the apples and giving everyone one apple of all the soldiers. Which done, there was not as much as one spare for himself. Whereupon, every one of his men would have given his apple to him, one after the other, but he refused, saying that sentence God had provided not one for him, he would have never a one and saith that thereby he knew God was angry with him alone, and therefore but them save themselves otherwise they should die through his wickedness. Thereupon, all his men did depart and left him alone. Then he ranging in the forest, there appeared to him a man clothed all in white, seated on a fair, white steed, who said to him, "Myrddin, I am come to show thee thy wickedness. Thou didst take a wrong cause in hand. Thou didst maintain it through wars and bloodshed that hast been the cause of such evil wars and slaughter that thou hast spilt much blood, and many fatherless children and widows who curse thee daily, but thou had undone and overthrown thy country. Thou and thy men should have spent your blood in defence of your country, which by thy means is overrun with strangers on every side that the state is no more to be recovered. Therefore, for a punishment for thy wickedness, I give thee choice of three things. Choose which thou wilt, that to be mad every tenth month, tenth day, or tenth hour, during thy life." Who considering thereupon and confessing his sins, he thought better to choose to be mad every tenth hour, because that for an hour he might be kept from doing harm rather than a whole day or month, and therefore did choose to be mad every tenth hour, and thereupon the vision did vanish away, and ever after he was mad every tenth hour and did great harm, and the other nine hours he was sober and wise, yet never came to the company of any but a sister of his own called Gwenddydd, who took great care of him and fed him always. In his good hours he used to prophesy and to tell his sister many things that happened and should happen until doomsday in Britain, saying that in the end a queen should reign in Britain, but his prophecies were very dark that none could expound them but himself, and verily, I think he could not expound them himself, and for my part, I do not [know] from what spirits they proceeded. Among the papers of old antiquaries there be diverse fragments of them without head or tail, rent and torn, and all misplaced. And this was the reason that he was called Merlinus Calidionus of the vision which he had there.

He did interpret diverse dreams to his sister, Gwenddydd, to good purpose which are also extant among old antiquities to be seen of the state of

things. In his mad hours he would take any wild beast of the forest as the poet sayeth:

y fy wilt fywn eltyth
yn iste rwng clyste'r hydd

He ran wild in the desert and sat on the deerhead between his horns and ears.[30]

The story finishes with this quotation and translation of two lines from the poem *Marwnad Wiliam Herbert o Raglan, Iarll Cyntaf Penfro* by Guto'r Glyn, composed not long after 17 August 1469. In the modern edition of the poem by Barry Lewis, the relevant lines of the poem are edited and translated as follows:

Merddin Wyllt am ei urddas
Amhorfryn, aeth i'r glyn glas.
Af yn wyllt o fewn elltydd
I eiste rhwng clustiau'r hydd.

Myrddin the Wild, son of Morfryn,
for his lost honour withdrew to the green valley.
I too will go wild in woodlands
to sit between the ears of a stag.[31]

This last image of Myrddin riding through the woodlands on the back of a stag appears too in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Life of Merlin*,[32] composed in the middle of the twelfth century, as is explored below.

Myrddin Poetry

Myrddin was an important character in medieval Welsh literature. His key function was to be a prophet, in a sense that was fairly widespread in the Middle Ages. It was thought that he could prophesy political events because he had gone mad, perhaps possessed by a demon. For this reason, there exists a body of 'prophetic' poetry in medieval Welsh of which Myrddin is construed as the speaker.[33] None of this poetry is as old as the putative time when this version of the Myrddin character lived (i.e., the sixth century); rather, it was produced by anonymous later poets who used Myrddin as the narrator of their poems. Such poems were typically formed from at least four key elements: (1) allusions, often cryptic, to elements of Myrddin's backstory such as the Battle of Arfderydd; (2) prophecies of events that had already happened by the time that the poems were composed, but which, from the Myrddin character's perspective, would have lain in the future; (3) invented prophecies intended to express the poet's political aspirations, especially insofar as they pertained to the Welsh or Britons as a whole; and (4) eschatological references to the end of time and Judgement Day. There are seven such early poems surviving in medieval manuscripts, though many later poems are found in early modern

[30] Thomas 1987–8, 272-4. The spelling is modernised for ease of reading.
[31] Lewis 2013, ll. 63-6.
[32] Clarke 1973, 74-7.
[33] For surveys of this material, see Jarman 1991; Bollard 2019.

manuscripts too. As they stand, the seven early poems probably belong for the most part to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, though aspects of some of them may have developed prior to that time.

These early Myrddin poems are intimately related to two other textual sources for the Myrddin story. One is the Lailoken tales mentioned above, surviving in a Scottish context linked to Glasgow Cathedral. The other is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Life of Merlin*, a long Latin poem concerning the life and prophecies of Merlin, which was composed in the middle of the twelfth century.[34] Around 1138 Geoffrey finished composing his most famous work, usually known as *The History of the Kings of Britain*, which was the major catalyst for the proliferation of the Arthurian legend on a European stage during the Middle Ages and beyond.[35] It is in this latter text that the name form 'Merlin', rather than 'Myrddin', first appears, probably for the reason explained above. Although Geoffrey was clearly inspired by the idea of the Welsh Myrddin character and puts a long prophecy into the mouth of his Merlin, the Merlin of Geoffrey's *History* is given a role far closer to that known from later versions of the Arthurian legend than to the story of Myrddin and the Battle of Arfderydd. In *The Life of Merlin*, on the other hand, written a decade or so after the *History*, Geoffrey relays a story that is instead comparable to the allusions in the early Welsh Myrddin poetry and to the Lailoken stories, and indeed to the seventeenth-century story about the falconers given above. The precise nature of the relationship between Geoffrey's *Life of Merlin*, the Welsh poetry and the Lailoken material is deeply uncertain and continues to be much debated, though it is likely that stories of Myrddin and Lailoken predated Geoffrey's work and that he knew versions of them.[36]

The early Welsh Myrddin poetry does not provide a consecutive narrative of Myrddin's story, but the poems do contain sufficient allusions to Myrddin's circumstances to allow us to piece together the intended context. The general idea, as seen also in the texts already quoted, was that Myrddin was a follower of Gwenddolau in the Battle of Arfderydd, but during the battle he lost his reason and fled into the Caledonian forest ('Coed Celyddon' in Welsh). He spent the remainder of his life there, wandering the wilderness and speaking prophecies. Although he mainly lived a solitary life, he was persecuted by Rhydderch Hael, king of Dumbarton. In some depictions, Myrddin's sister, Gwenddydd, continued to interact with him; indeed, one of the early poems is cast as a dialogue between Myrddin and Gwenddydd.

Although some scholars have attempted to identify which specific forest was implicated by the name 'Calidon' or 'Celyddon',[37] it seems highly probable that the Welsh poets and storytellers did not have anything more specific in mind than the 'forests of Scotland'. If anything more specific was intended, it would have been the forests of what is now south-western Scotland, given the probable location of the battle at Arthuret in Cumbria and the subsequent persecution suffered by Myrddin at the hands of Rhydderch, king of Dumbarton. For this reason, it would be plausible to interpret the woodland of Caerlaverock through the lens of the persistent natural imagery found in the Myrddin poetry; not because it was the specific woodland that Myrddin was thought to have lived in, but because it is exactly the kind of place, in the right general area, where Myrddin was understood by the composers of poems

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[34] Text and translation in Clarke 1973.
[35] Text and translation in Reeve and Wright 2007.
[36] For some contributions to the debate, see Padel 2006; Tolstoy 2008; Guy 2020a, 61-5.
[37] Tolstoy 1960-2, 127; Breeze 2020, 28.

and stories in medieval and early modern Wales to have roamed the wilderness speaking prophecies. By way of example, I give here several stanzas from the early poem *Yr Afallennau* ('The Apple Tree Stanzas'), first recorded in the mid-thirteenth-century Black Book of Carmarthen:

> 4.
> Sweet apple tree that grows beyond Rhun:
> I contended at its base for a maiden's favour
> with my shield on my shoulder and my sword on my hip.
> O little pig! Why do you contemplate sleep?
> Listen to the birds, joyous is their desire!
> Princes over sea will come on a Monday:
> blessed are the Welsh because of the expedition.
>
> 10.
> Sweet apple tree, blessed tree,
> which grows on top of a hill without arable land around it.
> And it is I who prophesy an army in Pictland
> contending for their borders with the men of Dublin:
> in seven ships they will come across a wide lake
> with seven hundred over the sea to conquer.
> Of those who will come, none will go from them
> except seven, half-hollow after their pain.
>
> 15.
> Sweet apple tree that grows in a clearing,
> a special quality conceals it from Rhydderch's lords;
> a thronging at its base, people around it,
> they had many brave ranks of soldiers.
> Now Gwenddydd does not love me and she does not address me;
> I am hated by Gwasawg, a famous protector,
> I have killed his son and his daughter.
> Death takes everyone, why does it not greet me?
> And after Gwenddolau, no lords respect me,
> entertainment does not honour me, a lover does not visit me.
> And in the battle of Arfderydd my torque was gold,
> although I am wealthy today with the likeness of swans.[38]

Finally, it is worth mentioning that one of the early Myrddin poems, *Peirian Faban* ('Commanding Youth'), seems to concern a legendary event in south-western Scotland, when Aeddan, king of Dál Riata (i.e., Argyll, broadly), led an attack on Rhydderch Hael, king of Dumbarton. It seems probable that this poem influenced Robert Vaughan's portrayal of the Battle of Arfderydd in the seventeenth century, as quoted above. The poem, however, though referring to elements of Myrddin's backstory, appears to portray the episode involving Aeddan and Rhydderch Hael as a separate event. Here are stanzas 1 and 5:

[38] Guy 2025, where the original text is also edited.

1.
Little lord child, cease your sadness.
God will protect you from the foreigner Gaels
and on Ffordd Allt Wyddyl there will be a battle of devils
and mercenaries and Gaels will barely escape.
Aeddan will come after crossing a wide sea
and a host from Man and the Isles will rise with him
on Ffordd Allt Wyddyl:
there will be a battle of devils as swift as spears.

5.
Little lord child, dry your tears.
Weeping is not pleasant; it is not best.
Myrddin will come, great his intention,
because of the death of my brothers and Gwynddolau,
Llewelyn, Gwgon (best of the generous ones),
Einion, Rhiwallon (lord of all armies);
due to the encounter between Rhydderch and illustrious Aeddan:
so clearly will it [the encounter] be heard from the north to the
south.
And tell Gwenddydd, when it is daylight,
the woods will be full of men and arms.[39]

Conclusion

During the Middle Ages, the idea arose that the sixth-century Battle of Arfderydd, where Myrddin supposedly went mad and gained the power of prophecy, was caused by a lark's nest. The idea was developed in various ways thereafter, as seen in two seventeenth-century stories written in English. It is plausible that the idea originated as an interpretation of the place name Caerlaverock. In the Middle Ages, the name Caerlaverock would have been perceived, especially by bilingual English/Welsh speakers, as meaning 'fort of the lark', and the general proximity of Caerlaverock to Arthuret and Carwinley, from a medieval Welsh perspective, along with the name's inclusion of an element equivalent to Welsh *caer*, may have been enough for the 'fort of the lark' to be drawn into the story surrounding the battle.

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[39] Hopwood 2025, where the original text is also edited.

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