



# The Celtic Roots of Meriadoc Brandybuck

By Lynn Forest-Hill

Readers of *The Lord of the Rings* do not seem perplexed by the name Peregrin Took (Pippin), perhaps because any dictionary will tell them that Peregrin means 'pilgrim' and 'Pippin' is familiar as a name for a small rosy apple. But many readers express an interest in the unusual naming of Merry Brandybuck. This is a brief outline of some of the Celtic background to his unusual name 'Meriadoc'.

The texts used for this outline are:

*The History of the Kings of Britain* Geoffrey of Monmouth trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1966).

*The Mabinogion* trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: Dent, 1974).

*The Lais of Marie de France* trans. Glyn S. Burgess (London: Penguin, 1986).

*The Arthur of the Welsh* Rachel Bromwich et al, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991).

*Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1965)

In most cases I have abstracted information from a good deal of elaboration. I have quoted directly where this is necessary, and indicated this with quotation marks.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* provides some information regarding real lords bearing the name Conan:

Celts from Britain fled from the invading Saxons in the 5th and 6th centuries. Brittany in France was known as Armorica before this influx of Celts from Britain. Celtic Brittany divided into several petty lordships. The Merovingian and Capetian Frankish dynasties tried to impose over-lordship but were resisted.

In the 10th century Conan of Rennes became overlord. His line ended in 12th century after long struggle against Breton feudal lords. Conan II (1040-66) eventually became count of Brittany.

Conan IV (d.1171) sought help from Henry II of England, and married Margaret, sister of Malcolm IV of Scotland.

This details the real historical migration of the Celts. They came particularly from their last refuge in the far south-west of Britain, from Cornwall and Wales, hence their culture and storytelling traditions migrated into what became Brittany, and Conan (Cynan in Welsh) went with them. It seems likely that the myth of Conan Meriadoc may have given rise to the naming of the historical lords. I have not found a separate derivation for the name Meriadoc, but this dates back at least to the 12th century. It is still a remarkable fact today that people speaking Welsh can understand some aspects of the Breton language.

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The earliest mention of Conan in its Welsh form 'Cynan' is in *The Dream of Maccsen Wledig*. This is one of the shorter stories in the collection of ancient Welsh tales known as *The Mabinogion*. The collection is recorded in medieval Welsh in 2 books, *The White Book of Rhydderch* (Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch), written c. 1300-25, and *The Red Book of Hergest* (Llyfr Coch Hergest), written about 1375-1425. However, the stories date from periods much earlier than these manuscripts. Where I have quoted directly, I have used the 1949 edition of *The Mabinogion* by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones.

The name Maccsen Wledig is the Welsh form of the name of the historical Spanish-born warrior Magnus Maximus who served with the Roman Theodosius in the British wars and rose to high military command in this Island. In 383 he invaded Gaul to oust Gratian, then emperor of Rome. Maccsen (Magnus) later controlled Italy. (The name Maximus associated with Spanish warrior may be familiar from the Gladiator film, but this character lives in the time of a different emperor).

The story of the Dream of Maccsen Wledig includes hints of this history, but is essentially an early form of dream-vision tale. Maccsen is emperor of Rome and one day while hunting he becomes sleepy and while resting dreams of finding a lady with whom he falls in love. He dreams this in great detail (early Welsh stories show a love of rich and intricate detail), and on waking becomes sad at the thought that he has no idea how to find the lady. He sends out messengers who travel far and wide, but always encountering things Maccsen said he saw in his dream. Eventually they find the great fleet he saw, and this carries them to the Island of Britain (Ynys Prydein). There they find a castle in which 2 youths on a gold couch are playing gwyddbwyll [a kind of battle board game], and an old man in an ivory chair carving pieces for it, and a maiden sitting in a chair of red gold [red gold is associated with magic in Celtic stories] – all exactly as Maccsen had dreamt.

The messengers went back to Maccsen in Rome and told him what they found. He set out immediately and when he arrived he conquered the Island, driving the former rulers into the sea. Entering the castle he found Cynan and his brother playing gwyddbwyll while their father carved pieces for the game, and Elen the maiden he loved in her red gold chair. He greeted her as 'Empress of Rome'. She was later known as Elen of the Hosts because she came up with the idea of linking all the strongholds of the Island with roads, enabling the gathering of the Hosts of the Island.

After more than 7 years word came that Rome had chosen itself a new Emperor and he sent a threatening letter to Maccsen warning him not to return. Maccsen set out at once with his army. He conquered France and Burgundy and all the lands as far as Rome on his way. He besieged Rome for a year without success, but

'behind him came brothers of Elen of the Hosts from the Island of Britain, and a small host with them, and better fighters were in that small host than twice their number of the men of Rome ... And Elen came to look on the host, and she recognised her brothers' standards. And then came Cynan [and his brother] and the emperor welcomed them. And then they watched the Romans [i.e. Maccsen's army] assault the city. And Cynan said to his brother, "We shall seek to assault the city more cannily than this." ... and a ladder was made for every four of their men ... Every day at mid-day the 2 emperors would take their meat, and on both sides they would cease fighting till all had finished eating. But the men of the Island of Britain took their meat in the morning, and drank till they were inspirited. And while the 2 emperors were at meat the Britons approached the rampart and ... they went over the rampart ... three days and nights were they subduing the men who were in the city and conquering the castle, and

another company of them guarding the city lest any of Macsen's host should come inside until they had subdued all to their will.

And then Macsen said to Elen of the Hosts: "It is a great marvel to me, lady, ...that it was not for me thy brothers should conquer the city". "Lord emperor", she answered, "my brothers are the wisest youths in the world. Now go thyself to ask for the city, and if they are masters of it thou shalt have it gladly. And then the emperor and Elen came to ask for the city. And then they told the emperor that taking the city was the concern of none save the men of the Island of Britain. And then the gates of the city of Rome were opened, and the emperor sat on his throne and all the Romans did him homage.

And then the emperor said to Cynan and his brother, "I have gained possession of all my empire. And this host I give you to conquer what region of the world you will. " And they set out and conquered lands and castles and cities, and they slew all their men, but the women they left alive ... Then Cynan said to his brother, "Which wilt thou ... remain in this land or go to the land from whence thou art sprung?" He determined to go to his own land, and many with him but Cynan and another company stayed on to live there. And they determined to cut out the tongues of the women, lest their language be corrupted. And because the women were silenced of their speech, and the men spoke on, the men of Llydaw<sup>1</sup> were called Brytanieid. And thence there often came, and still come from the Island of Britain, men of that tongue.'

This Welsh story, like all the other texts included in this overview, would certainly have been known to Tolkien, and I find it tempting to think about what he may actually have borrowed from it. We have to remember that in doing so, he was writing in truly a medieval manner because borrowing from ancient sources was a characteristic medieval literary technique that was considered to give authority to one's own writing. Today such borrowing are regarded as plagiarism and will get you into deep trouble!

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On now to medieval history as told by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136). I use Lewis Thorpe's translation for all quotations.

Geoffrey of Monmouth was creating an historical context within which to legitimate the invasion of England in 1066 by his Norman masters. The story is quite complicated and cannot be treated as history in the sense that we understand it because Geoffrey himself was working from ancient sources that may have been founded on myth and legend. The name he uses for Conan Meriadoc is his version and has been left by the translator in the Latin form used by Geoffrey. He wrote that:

Before Constantine the Great was emperor in Rome, Maxentius became dictator and exiles from Rome fled to Britain. Octavius, Duke (dux) of the Gewissae (southern British tribe) led a revolt against the Roman governor of Britain. Constantine, who had been born in Britain, had gone to Rome to confront Maxentius but he sent his kinsman Traherne to restore Roman power in Britain. Octavius, however, overcame Traherne and assumed kingship of Britain.

In old age, having only a daughter, Octavius sought the advice of his counsellors about who should succeed him. Some said he should marry his daughter to a Roman nobleman, other said that Conanus Meriadocus, nephew of Octavius, should be declared heir to the kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> The derivation of Llydaw (Brittany) implied in this sentence is from lled, 'half', and taw, 'silent'.

Caradocus of Cornwall supported the marriage of Octavius's daughter to a Roman senator, which infuriated Conan and he tried to gain the kingship. When the Roman senator landed at Southampton Conan was there to meet him. A debate was held concerning the kingship but eventually Conan gathered an army and confronted the senator who vanquished him. But he did not destroy him and a peace was agreed.

The Roman senator, now King of Britain, became obsessed with gaining more power and gathering a great force of Britons he invaded Armorica. Having slaughtered most of the Franks living there he gave Armorica to Conan who promised to be faithful in doing homage. Armorica was then 'restocked' with 100,000 ordinary Britons, and their language was imposed. 'In this way he created a second Britain, which he gave to Conan Meridiadocus'.

(In Geoffrey's version of the story, Cynan becomes Conan Meridiadocus and from being Elen's brother, he becomes her cousin.)

This early version of the reason why Britons ended up in Armorica, and how that land came to have its name and language changed, does what all good medieval histories do: it links British history back into Roman history, thereby giving it the status of reflected glory while providing an explanation of an existing situation.

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A number of the essays in *The Arthur of the Welsh* include material that touches on Conan Meriadoc. We learn that:

1. In Geoffrey's other famous book *The Prophecies of Merlin*, he maintains that Merlin and the poet Taliesin discuss the restoration of British victory and peace under Arthur but Merlin thinks the time not yet ripe. It will, however, come about through an alliance between Scots, Welsh, Cornish and Bretons, led by Conan of Brittany and Cadwallader of Wales.
2. The names Cynan (Conanus) and Cadwaladr (Cadwallader) are found in the poem *Armes Prydein (The Prophecy of Britain)* c. 930, as those of expected leaders of the resistance to the Saxons. The return as deliverers of these 2 shadowy princes from early times was frequently foretold in vaticinary poems and they are linked together in the poems *Yr Afellennau* (The Apple Trees) and *Yr Oianau* (The Greeting). These poems are recorded in the *Black Book of Carmarthen* c. 1250, but are older.
3. Brittany and the Arthurian Legend: Although Bretons traced their origins back to Britain they have little to say of the series of Migrations which must have occurred ... their foundation story connected their origin with Magnus Maximus [Macsen Wledig] the Spaniard whom the Roman army in Britain proclaimed Emperor in 383. Under the name Macsen, maximus played an important role, according to tradition, in the history of Britain and Brittany. The 9th century *Historia Brittonum* says that Brittany was settled by troops whom Macsen had taken to Gaul and Rome. From Geoffrey – Conan Meridiadocus remained with his troops on the Continent as the founder of Breton settlement.
4. It has been pointed out that Arthur, the royal British hero and supposed descendant of the Breton founder Conan Meriadoc received far more lasting fame in Brittany than did either Conan or any other of the legendary Breton rulers.
5. After its original settlement by Conan Meriadoc, Armorica provides a founder for the Arthurian dynasty in Constantine II, a brother of Conan's descendant Aldroenus King of

Brittany. His 3 sons were Constans, Aurelius Ambrosius, and Utherpendragon (Arthur's father). Budecius of Armorica later protects Aurelius and Uther in the time of Vortigern.

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A little later in the 12th century than Geoffrey's *Historia*, Marie de France (that rarest of medieval writers, a woman, and one who gives us her name), wrote a series of *lais*, short stories in verse intended to be sung, chanted, or simply accompanied by a harp (we get the later word 'lay' from this form). The poems are written in Old French rather than in Anglo-Norman, and Marie herself tells us that they are based on old Breton stories, although they are heavily influenced by what was then the new and fashionable ideal of courtly love.

Only one of her stories deals with Conan Meriadoc. It is a story of courtly love, chivalry, and separation and is called *Guigemar*. Marie begins by saying:

'I shall relate briefly to you stories which I know to be true and from which the Bretons have composed their lays. After these opening words I shall recount to you, just as it has been set down in writing, and adventure which happened in Brittany long ago.'

In the story which follows:

The knight *Guigemar* shoots a white stag (in Celtic myths and legends always a sign of Faerie or the Otherworld), and the arrow rebounds and wounds his own thigh. The magical stag curses him, saying that the wound will never heal until he finds a lady prepared to suffer love's anguish for him. Seeking healing he goes aboard a deserted ship, falls asleep, and the ship floats away. Eventually it comes to land where an unhappily married lady and her maiden go aboard and find the wounded knight. They take him ashore and tend his wound. He falls in love with the lady and she with him. Neither speaks of their feelings, but the maiden advises *Guigemar* to do so. He does, and the lady kisses and embraces him in return.

Afraid they will be discovered by her jealous old husband they know they must part but the lady ties a knot in the tail of *Guigemar's* shirt which it can only be unravelled by a woman who loves him. In return, she is secured in a girdle that cannot be unbuckled except by one who truly loves her.

They are discovered, and *Guigemar* is consigned again to the unmanned ship and set adrift. The ship bears him back to his home. There his friends want him to take a wife but he says he will only marry the woman who can untie his shirt without cutting or tearing it. The news goes throughout Brittany and all the ladies come to try, without success.

Meanwhile, the lady he left has been imprisoned by her old husband in 'a tower of dark-hued marble'. There she suffers the anguish of love for *Guigemar*. Eventually she escapes and finds in a nearby harbour the same ship that *Guigemar* travelled in. She goes aboard, happy to drown as this is what she believes must have happened to *Guigemar*, but the ship sails off to another port in Brittany close to a fine strong castle.

The lord of the castle was *Meriaduc*. He saw the ship, and going aboard, found that lady 'who was as lovely as a fairy'. He took her to his castle, asked his sister to tend her, and fell in love with her although she was always sad. He begged for her love, but she showed him the girdle and said she would only marry the man who could undo it without cutting or tearing it. *Meriaduc* was very angry and said 'There is a famous knight in this land with a knot in his shirt that cannot be untied. I think you tied the knot.' At this the lady almost fainted. *Meriaduc* took her in his arms

and cut the lace of her tunic and tried to undo the girdle but to no avail. Later all the knights in the land were summoned to try to undo it, but without success.

There came a time when Meriaduc summoned knights to a tournament, especially asking Guigemar. When he arrived Meriaduc treated him with great honour and asked his sister to bring the lady with her to greet their guest. When the lady heard Guigemar's name she 'almost lost her balance'. Guigemar appeared first to recognise her, but then thinking he was mistaken, gave her a polite kiss and asked to sit beside her, but said nothing else to her.

Meriaduc was not pleased but jokingly said to Guigemar, 'This maiden will see if she can undo your shirt'. Guigemar sent for his shirt but the lady did not dare to untie it, although she recognised it.

Meriaduc realised this and commanded her to try again. This time she untied it. Guigemar then put his hands on her hips, and finding the girdle, acknowledged her and begged Meriaduc to give her back to him. Meriaduc refused.

Guigemar and his retinue left the castle, issuing a challenge to Meriaduc. With him, Guigemar took all the knights who had come to the castle for the tournament, but not his lady. Guigemar gathered more men, returned to the castle, besieged it, killed Meriaduc its lord, and took back his lady.

This version of Meriadoc is a long way from Tolkien's Merry, but the story is fascinating for lots of reasons, not least the white stag of Celtic myth and legend, and the description of the lady as 'lovely as a fairy.' The 'virgin knot' motif derives ultimately from classic Latin texts (and crops up most famously in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*).

Much of the material concerning Conan Meriadoc comes from such early sources that we are dealing with oral traditions that have been written down many centuries after the stories were first told, and they include clearly mythic motifs as well as onomastic material and, in the case of Geoffrey of Monmouth, political propaganda. The possibility that Tolkien was promoting a lost British hero seems to fit with his projected 'Mythology for England', especially as Conan Meriadoc, in one version at least, is the ancestor of the archetypal English hero Arthur.

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Lynn Forrest-Hill

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## More about Meriadoc, and related matters

By David Doughan, February 2010

Conan Meriadoc is not the only "real life" bearer of this name. For example, a 7th-century St. Meriadoc is venerated in Cornwall (Camborne Parish Church is dedicated to SS. Martin and Meriadoc), and even more so in Brittany, where tradition makes him Bishop of Vannes. [Follow this link to read more about him.](#) There are variant forms of this name, such as Meriasec and Meriadec. Also, Meriadeuc, ou li chevalier as deus espees is a 13th-century French romance from the Arthurian cycle; [follow this link for a summary of the work.](#)

And then there is Hercule-Mériadec de ... Rohan! This Rohan in fact has nothing to do with Rohirrim (alas) – it is a town in Brittany, not far from Pontivy. Hercule-Mériadec's son, Ferdinand

Maximilien Mériadec de Rohan (1738-1813), who became Bishop of Bordeaux. A 1960s commercial quarter near the centre of Bordeaux is named Mériadeck in his honour; it stands on land which he donated to the city (and the very imposing Bordeaux Town Hall is called le Palais Rohan).

Looking at other Brandybucks, whose names had a style we should perhaps vaguely to be 'Celtic' (Appendix F), we see in the Brandybuck family tree (Appendix C) plenty of such names, and the original Oldbuck who changed the family's name was called Gorhendad, which is good modern Welsh for Great-great-grandfather. However in fact, this is a typically Tolkienian muddying of the waters, since very few of these names are authentic Welsh, Cornish or Breton; the majority of them derive from the Matter of Britain, i.e. Arthurian stories and romances, which include characters with names like Gorbadoc (or Gorboduc), Dodinas, Seredic, etc., which may look 'vaguely Celtic', but which actually are not. On the other hand, most of the names of the Tooks are from Frankish, or Old French, tales – the Matter of France, mainly centred on the paladins of Charlemagne: Isengrim, Ferumbras, Sigismond ... and of course Pippin, which is the English form of the name of Charlemagne's father, Pépin le Bref (Pippin the Short). So while the Tooks take their names from the Matter of France, Brandybuck names are largely from the Matter of Britain. Ponder these Matters.