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THE GODODDIN

The Oldest Scottish Poem

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(76)

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B.38 = CA. cii

There is no variant. This is the verse with the famous reference to 'Arthur', who is treated here as a paragon that no hero can quite equal. There is of course no guarantee that it was in the original *Gododdin*, but if it was, and if the poem was composed about the year 600, it is by far the oldest known reference to King Arthur and dates from a time when people who remembered him would still be alive. Arthur was the great national hero of the entire British people, from Scotland to Brittany, and there is therefore no logic whatever in the idea that this reference can be used to support the theory that he was a Northern leader.¹ The last words probably refer to the fact that shields were often made of alder wood, and mean that Gwawrddur alone was as good as a whole 'shield wall'.

② 'He stabbed over three hundred of the finest, he slew both the centre and the wings, he behaved worthily in the forefront of the most generous army; he gave out presents from his herd of horses in the winter. He glutted (?) black ravens on the rampart of the stronghold, though he was no Arthur. . . . In the van, Gwawrddur was a palisade of alder (?).'

B.39 = CA. lxvi B

B.39, 40, and the fragmentary 42 are a chain beginning 'A most fitting song' (B.41 is wrongly inserted in this chain, to which it does not belong), and A.63-67 are a chain beginning 'A fitting song' and obviously related to the one in B. The relationship is complicated, but A. is evidently fuller and preserves the original better. To put it briefly, B.39 is repeated by the close variant A.65 (but the first line of B.39 belongs to B.42, from which it is taken); B.40 is repeated by the close variant A.63; and when B.42 was complete it would probably have had its close variant in

¹ TYP. p. 275.

A.66. 'The barrier of Aeron' is Cynon son of Clydno, the subject of the verse; see the Introduction § 5. The eagles praised him because he provided them with carrion in battle. 'Better by far' strikes one as odd, but the thought is really 'there was none better, and *he* was better by far'.

'A most fitting song of a skilful company; and before the barrier of Aeron had passed away the beaks of eagles praised his hand. In frenzy he made food for carrion birds, for the sake of Mynyddog the horseman of hosts; he set his side against the spears of the enemy. Before Catraeth the wearers of gold torques were active, they pierced, they slew those who withstood (?); the cubs of violence were far from their land. Rare in battle was a man from among the Britons of Gododdin better by far than Cynon.'

B.40 = CA. lxiv B

See the note on B.39. 'The trees of battle' is a kenning for 'warriors'. The last sentence seems to mean that he took communion before going to Catraeth, but was killed and therefore never received his 'pay'.

'A most fitting song of a company was got. Our warriors had made embroilment around Catraeth; a trampling of bloodstained chequered cloth was trodden down, the trees of battle were trampled in retribution for earning their mead; with corpses it was settled (?). Cibno does not tell, after the uproar of battle, that he got his dues though he took communion.'

B.41 = CA. ciii

This verse is wrongly interpolated into the chain B.39, 40, and 42, presumably because it praises the same hero as B.40; which may itself be a secondary alteration. It is obscure and corrupt. It begins by saying 'His hand used to feed [carrion-]birds; I honour him. . . . He put on gold [ornaments], in the van of combat, in the fierce struggle. . . .'