Vita Merlini Silvestris

WINIFRED AND JOHN MACQUEEN

Introduction

The Vita Merlini Silvestris ('Life of Merlin of the Forest') occurs in only one manuscript, the 15c BL MS Cotton Titus A XIX, folios 74–75, edited by H. L. Ward (1893) with an introduction and concluding notes, but without translation. Ward included as a parallel text the version of the first section concerning St Kentigern, given in a clumsily truncated form by Walter Bower in his mid-fifteenth century Scotichronicon (Bk. 3, Ch. 31). A variant of the story told in the second section is to be found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's poem, Vita Merlini, edited by E. Faral (1929: 310–19).

In the same BL manuscript, folios 76–80 are occupied by the anonymous fragmentary Life of Kentigern, composed for Herbert, bishop of Glasgow 1147–64 (ed. in Forbes, 1874: 123–33 [translation], 243–52 [text].) This contains only the story of Kentigern's conception and birth. It is possible that both the fragmentary Life and the first part at least of the Vita Merlini Silvestris are by the same author and were extracted from a more complete version of the Life of Kentigern, otherwise lost, apart from the prose lections in the Sprouston Breviary (see below p. 89). The extractor, it may perhaps be assumed, was particularly attracted by stories involving the famous figure of Merlin; he saw however that the birth-story of Kentigern was almost equally remarkable and so included it.

Text*

Section 1

Eo quidem in tempore quo beatus Kentegernus heremi deserta frequentare solebat, contigit die quadem illo in solitudinis arbusto solictae orante ut quidam demens nudus et hirsutus et ab omni bono destitutus, quasi quodam torvum furiale, transitum facet secus eum, qui Lailoken vocabatur, quem quidam dicunt fuisse Merlynnum, qui erat Britonibus quasi prophetar singularis, sed nescitur. Quem cum vidisset sanctus Kentegernus, fertur eum in dicendo taliter convenisse: 'Adiuro te, qualiscumque es creatura dei, per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum si ex parte dei es et in deum credis, ut mecum loquaris, exprimem quis es et cur in hac solitudine solivagus silvestribus comitatis bestiis.' At concito demens cursum cohercens, respondit: 'Ego sum christianus, licet tanti nominis reus, in hac solitudine dira paciens fataque pro

* The translation follows on p. 83.
peccatis meis mihi sunt cum feris predestinata, quoniam non sum dignus inter homines mea punire peccamina. Eram enim cedit omnium causa interemptorum qui interfecti sunt in bello cunctis in hac patria constitutis satis noto, quod erat in campo qui est inter Lidel et Carwannok, in quo etiam prelio celum super me dehiscere cepit. Et audivi quasi fragorem maximum vocem de celo mihi dicentem: "Lailochen, Lailochen, quia tu solus omnium istorum interfectorum reus es sanguinis, tu solus cunctorum scelerata punies. Angelis enim Sathane traditus usque in diem mortis tue conversacionem habebis inter bestias silvestres." Cum autem ad vocem quam audivi meum directe intuitum, vidi splendorem nium quem natura humana sustinere non potuit. Vidi etiam innumerabiles phalanges exercitus in aera fulguri similes chorusco, lanceas ignes et tela scintillancia in manibus tenentes, que crudelissime in me vibrabant. Unde extra meipsum conversum spiritus malignus me arripuit ferisque silvestribus, sicut ipse contemplaris, predestinavit.' Et hiis dictis prosluit in loco inde nemorum infrequencia feris dumtaxat ac avibus nota. De cuius miseria Kentegernus beatus valde compassus, procidit in faciem suam super terram, dicens: 'Domine Jhesu, hic miserorum miserimus hominem, quomodo in haec squalenti degit solitude inter bestias ut bestia, nudus et profugus et herbarum tantum pabulo pastus. Sete et pili sunt feris ac bestiis tegmina naturalia, herbarumque virecta, radices et folia propria cibaria. Hic frater noster formam, nuditatem, carmem, sanguinem et fragilitatem, sicut unus habens ex nobis, omnibus caret quibus humana indiget natura, preter dumtaxat acerem communem. Quomodo igitur pre fame et algore et inediarum universitate inter bestias vivit silvestres? Flevit igitur pietatis lacrimis genas profusus pius presul Kentegernus, solito arcius pro dei amore solitudinari se tradere discipline. Opitulabatur etiam domino precibus obnixis pro illo silvestri homine misero, immundo et energuminoso ut calamitates et erumpne quas paciebatur hic in corpore sue subsisterent anime refrigerium in futuro.

Hic autem demens, ut fertur, postmodum de solitudinibus sepius veniens, sedebat super quandam rumpe proclivam, que eminet trans torrentem Mellodonor quasi in prospectu Glascu ad aquilonem partem eiusdem loci ecclesia, multociens inquietavit clamoribus horrosonis sanctum Kentegernum et clericos eius divino contemplacionis operi vacantes. Presagavit enim ibi multa futura ac si propheta. Sed quia nuquam repeteret solebat que predixerat, quamquam erant valde obscura et quasi non intelligibilia, nullus ei credere presumebat. Sed quasi verba nugatoria quedam retinebant et scripture commendabat. In die autem qua de huius mundi miseriis migrare debuerat demens iste, ut suevit, ad rumpe pervenit prefatum, beato Kentegerno missam manu celebrante, eiulans et clamans magnaque voce rogitans ut ab illo christi corpore muniri et sanguine meretur, antequam de hoc seculo transitum faceret. Cuius clamoris irreverenciam beatus Kentegernus cum ferre non posset, misit aliquem clericum qui silencium illi indiceret. Cui miser felix piis et mitibus verbis respondens ait: 'Vade, precor, domine mi, ad beatum Kentegernum et eius gracie caritatis opitulare quatenus viatico me dominico munire dignetur, quoniam de hoc seculo nequam hodie per illum
feliciter transibo.' Cum autem episcopus hec ab ore cleri audisset, pie subridens dixit: circumstantibus pro energuminoso vociferante illi obnixe supplicantibus: 'Nonne vos omnes ceterosque nonnullos miser iste sui sepe verbis seduixit vitamque energuminosam inter feras silvestres multis annis deduxit nec communionem christianam novit? Quapropter mihi non credo esse salubre tantum illi munus donare. Sed perge' inquit cuidam clerico suorum 'et interroga eum de qua morte morietur et si hodie sit moriturus.' Perrexit igitur clericus dicens dementi, sicut ei iniunctum fuerat ab episcopo. Cui respondit demens: 'Quia hodie lapidibus obvolutus et fistibus defungar.' Clericus vero regressus ad episcopum dixit ei quod audierat ab ore dementis. Episcopus autem: 'Regredere' inquit ad clericum dicens 'quoniam non credo huic sermoni quod ita sit moriturus. Sed dicat verius quando et qua morte morietur.' Hoc autem dixit episcopus, si forte miser ille verax et in sermone stabilitus saltem in ultimo die vitae eius inventi posset, quia numquam eundem quem prius dixerat sollevat repetere sermonem sed semper in obliquum per transversum coniecturare. Interrogatus igitur a clerico iterum demens dixit: 'Hodie corpus meum perforabitur veru ligneo acuto et sic deficiet spiritus meus.' Regressus denuo clericus ad episcopum, dixit quod ab amente audierat. Episcopus autem convocatis clericis suis dixit: 'Modo quoque vos ipsi audistis quia in nullo verbo servat modum, quapropter timeo favere eius peticioni.' Dixerunt ergo clerici eius: 'Domine pater venerande, ne irascaris nobis si adhuc semel pro illo dilecctioni vestre opitulemur. Probetur adhuc tercio si forte in alio verbo fidelis valeat inventi.' Episcopus igitur tercio mittens clericum interrogavit miserum felicem qua nece vitam finiret. Demens vero ita respondit: 'Hodie in undis absorptus vitam presentem terminabo.' Ad quod responsum clericus nimium indignatus dixit: 'Stulte agis, frater inepte, cum sis homo fallax et mendax quod ab homine sancto et verace poscis muniri cibo spirituali, quem tantum fidelibus ac iustis licet dari.' Miser autem demens sed iam felix, recuperato sensu a domino, in lacrimis redivivis statim prorumpens, dixit: 'Heu mihi miserimo, domine Jhesu, quamdiu fata tam dira perpeciar, quamdiu tot tormentis afficiar? Cur etiam modo a fidelibus tuis sum repudiatus, cum huc a te sim destinatus? Ecce non credunt verbis meis, cum nihil aliud illis prefatus sim quam quod mihi tu inspirasti.' Conversus igitur ad clericum dixit: 'Veniat quam maxime obsebro ad me episcopus ipse cuius patrocinio a domino in hac die precise sum delegatus et afferat secum sacrosanctum quod postulo viaticum et audiet mandatam quod dignatus est illi per me significare.' Venit igitur episcopus, multis clericorum precibus superatus, deferensecum panem et vinum sacramissimun. Quo appropinquantest, descendens miser felix de rupe cecidit in faciem suam ante pedes episcopi, in huiusmodi verba prorumpens: 'Salve, pater venerande, summis regis miles electe. Ego sum miser ille inermis, qui olim tibi in heremo apparens, fata paciens mea solivagus et erroneus, angelis adhuc sathane traditus. Sed et a te per deum vivum et verum in nomine trinitatis coniurator, causam meee calamitatis enarravi. Pro cuiris etiam crumpons et miseriis pietate saecuiatis, si retines, domino cum lacrimis preces fudisti quatenus omnes angustias et infortunia, que in hoc seculo paciebar in corpore, in
gaudium mihi converteret sempiternum, recolens nimirum apostoli verba dicentis quod non sunt condigne passiones huius temporis ad futuram gloriam que revelabitur in electis dei. Et quia oraciones tuas mei misertus exaudivit dominus, hodie in meipsum reversum et in deum patrem omnipotentem, sicut decet christianum catholice credentem ut verbis meis credas, hiis signis munitum, tibi hodie pre ceteris electis specialius me misit ut per susceptionem sacrosancti corporis et sanguinis eius ad illum hodie me remittas.

Cum autem audisset beatus presul Kentegernus illum hunc esse qui dudum in heremo illi apparuit et alia multa ab ipso que in hoc codicello scripta non sunt, de incertis ad certa aliquantulum promotus pietateque convictus, lacrimis quoque faciendis perfusus, misero deflenti et dei graciae obnixe petenti respondit benigniter dicens: 'Ecce adest corpus et sanguis domini nostri Ihesu Christi qui est perpetua vivencium vita, salus vera in se credencium, gloria eterna se digne sumencium. Quicumque ergo hoc sacramentum digno suscipit, vita vivet et non morietur. Qui autem indigne, morte mortetur et non vivet. Idcirco si te dignum tanti doni contemplaris, ecce christi mense impositum. Accede tamen cum timore dei, cum omni humilitate ipsum accepturus, ut ipse Christus te quoque dignetur suscipere, quoniam nec tibi date neque audeo prohibere.'

Miser autem beatus confestim aqua lotus et unum deum in trinitate fideliter confessus, accessit humiliater ad altare et suscepit pura fide ac sincera devotione incircumscripti sacramenti munimen. Quo percepto, extendens manus ad celum, dixit: 'Gracias tibi ago, domine Ihesu. Nam quod optavi sanctissimum iam consequutus sum sacramentum' et conversus dixit ad beatum Kentegernum: 'Domine, si hodie completa fuerit in me vita temporanea, sicut a me acceperitis, Regum britannie præstantissimus, Episcoporum sanctissimus, Comitum nobilissimus in hoc anno me sequuntur.' Respondit episcopus: 'Frater, adhuc peranes in simplicitate tua? Non expers irreverencie? Igitur vade in pace et dominus sit tecum.' Lailoken autem, pontificali benediccione suscpta, prosluit inde, velut capreolus de laqueo venantis ereptus, solitudinis petens letus fructecta. Sed quoniam ea que a domino sunt predestinata nequeunt pretermittii quin ea oporteat fieri, contigit ut eodem die quibusdam regis Meldredi pastoribus usque ad mortem lapidatus ac fustigatus, casum faceret in mortis articulo ultra oram Travedis fluminis prerpuram prope opidum Dunmeller super sudem acutissimam que in aliqua piscaria erat inserita et transfuxis per medium corpus, inclinato capite in stagno, spiritum, sicut prophetaverat, domino transmisset. Hec autem cum cognovissent beatus Kentegernus et clerici eius consummata videlicet ita esse que de se presagierat energuminus ille, credentes et timentes ea proculdubio fore futura que de residuis preixerat, ceperunt omnes pavere et lacrimis genas uberime perfusa nomenque domini in omnibus collaudare, qui est in sanctis suis semper mirabilis et benedictus in secula seculorum. Arenen.

Sude perfossus, lapidem perpesus et undam,
Merlinus triplicem furtur inisse necem.
Translation

Section 1

At that time when blessed Kentigern\(^1\) used to frequent the desert wilds,\(^2\) it happened on a certain day, as he was intently praying in a thicket in the wilderness, that a certain madman, naked and hairy and devoid of all worldly possessions, crossed his path like a raging beast. He was called Lailoken.\(^3\) Certain people say that he was Merlin\(^4\) who was regarded by the Britons as unique in his powers of prophecy, but the identification is uncertain.

When St Kentigern saw him, it is said that he greeted him in the following words: ‘I adjure you, whatever kind of God’s creature you are, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, if you are on God’s side and believe in God, to speak to me, explaining who you are and why you wander alone in this wilderness, a companion to wild beasts.’

And the madman immediately stopped running and replied: ‘I am Christian, although guilty of so great a crime, suffering in this wilderness the evil fate which was predestined for me, to live with the beasts for my sins, since I do not deserve to suffer my punishment in the company of men. For I was the cause of the slaughter of all the slain who were killed in the battle,\(^5\) well known to all the inhabitants of this country, which was fought in the plain that lies between Liddel\(^6\) and Carwannok.\(^7\) In this battle also the sky began to yawn open above me and I heard a voice like the sound of thunder, speaking to me from heaven: “Lailoken, Lailoken, because you alone are guilty of the blood of all those that have been killed, you alone will pay the penalty for the sins of all. For you will be handed over to the angels of Satan and you will consort with wild beasts until the day of your death.”’

When I directed my gaze towards the voice which I heard, I saw a brilliance greater than human nature could endure. I also saw the innumerable battalions of an army in the air, holding in their hands fiery spears like the flash of lightning and sparkling weapons which they brandished savagely against me. Then when I was beside myself, a malignant spirit seized hold of me and assigned me to the wild beasts, as you yourself see.’

And with these words he leapt away from there into the unfrequented parts of the wood, known only to beasts and birds.

Blessed Kentigern felt great compassion for his wretchedness and fell on his face upon the earth, saying: ‘Lord Jesus, this most wretched of wretched men, how has he lived in this squalid wilderness, like a beast among beasts, naked and on the run, his only food the grass! Bristles and skins are the natural coverings of animals and wild beasts and their appropriate food green blades of grass, roots and leaves. This our brother has shape, nakedness, flesh, blood and frailty, just like one of us, yet lacks everything which human nature requires, with the sole exception of the common air we breathe. How then does he live among wild beasts in spite of hunger, cold and a complete lack of anything to eat?’
So the holy bishop Kentigern wept, his cheeks drenched in pious tears, devoting himself more strictly than usual to the discipline of solitude for the love of God. He sought to obtain help from the Lord also with earnest prayers for that wretched, unclean and possessed of the devil, in order that the misfortunes and sorrows which he was enduring here in the body would stand as refreshment to his soul in the world to come.

Now this madman, as it is said, afterwards often came out of the wilderness and sat on a certain steep crag which rises on the other side of the Molendinar burn, overlooking Glasgow, to the north of the church of that place. On many occasions he disturbed St Kentigern and his clergy with horrifying shrieks, as they were singing the divine office. For he foretold there many future events, as if he were a prophet, but because he used never to repeat what he had foretold, although his prophecies were extremely obscure and quite unintelligible, no one dared to believe him. But they remembered certain worthless words and entrusted them to writing.

Now on the day on which he was destined to escape from the miseries of this world, that madman, as usual, arrived at the aforesaid crag, while blessed Kentigern was celebrating early morning mass. He was wailing and shouting and kept demanding in a loud voice that he should be deemed worthy to be fortified with the body and blood of Christ, before he passed over from this world. Kentigern could not endure this irreverence of shouting and sent a cleric to enjoin silence upon him. The happy wretch answered him in holy and gentle words, saying: ‘Go, I beg you, my lord, to blessed Kentigern and beseech the grace of his charity that he may condescend to fortify me with the Lord’s viaticum, since today I shall pass over happily with his help from this wicked world.’

Now when the bishop heard this from the lips of the cleric, he smiled in a holy manner and said to those standing around, who were beseeching him earnestly on behalf of the vociferous demoniac: ‘Is he not that wretch who often misled all of you, and everyone else as well, with his words and who has led a demoniac life amid wild beasts for many years and has no knowledge of the Christian sacrament? Therefore I do not think that it is profitable for me to give him such a great gift. But go’, he said to a certain one of his clerics, ‘and ask him about what kind of death he will die and if it is today that he is going to die.’

Therefore the cleric went and spoke to the madman, just as he had been instructed by the bishop. The madman answered him: ‘I shall die today, crushed by stones and cudgels.’ The priest returned to the bishop and told him what he had heard from the lips of the madman.

‘Return to him’, the bishop said to the cleric, ‘since I do not believe this statement, that he is going to die in this way. But let him tell more truthfully when and by what death he will die.’

Now the bishop said this to see if by any chance that wretch could be found to be truthful and consistent in his speech, because he had never been in the habit of
repeating the same statement that he had uttered before but always spoke ambiguously and obliquely in riddles. Therefore having been questioned a second time by the cleric, the madman said: 'Today my body will be pierced by a sharp wooden stake and thus my spirit will fail.'

The cleric returning again to the bishop said what he had heard from the madman. The bishop called his clergy together and said: 'Now you also have heard for yourselves that he does not observe consistency in any utterance. Therefore I am afraid to agree to his request.'

So his clergy said: 'Lord and reverend father, do not be angry with us, if just once more we beseech your affection on his behalf. Let it be put to the test yet a third time, to see if by chance he is able to be found consistent in some statement.'

The bishop therefore sent a cleric for the third time and asked the happy wretch by what death he would end his life. The madman thus replied: 'Today I will terminate my present life by drowning.' The cleric was very indignant at this reply and said: 'You are behaving foolishly, stupid brother, since you, deceitful and a liar as you are, are asking to be fortified by a saintly and truthful man with spiritual food which is only permitted to be given to those who are faithful and upright.'

The wretched but now happy madman, restored by the Lord to his senses, immediately burst into renewed tears and said: 'Alas for wretched me! How long, Lord Jesus, shall I endure such a dire fate? How long shall I be afflicted with so many tortures? Why am I even now rejected by your faithful, although I have been guided here by you? See, they do not believe my words although I have foretold to them only what you have inspired me to do.'

Turning therefore to the cleric, he said: 'Let the bishop himself come to me as soon as possible, I beg you. To his protection I have been especially entrusted by the Lord on this day. And let him bring with him the consecrated viaticum which I demand and he will hear the instruction which God has deigned to impart to him through me.'

Therefore the bishop came, overcome by the many entreaties of his clergy, carrying with him the most sacred bread and wine. As he drew near, the happy wretch came down from the crag and fell on his face before the bishop's feet, bursting out in the following words: 'Greetings, reverend father, chosen champion of the highest King. I am that defenceless wretch who once appeared to you in the desert, wandering alone and astray enduring my destiny, still delivered over to Satan's angels. But adjured by you through the living and true God in the name of the Trinity, I recounted the reason for my disaster. You were stabbed with pity for the sorrows and wretchedness of this disaster, if you recall, and poured forth tearful prayers to the Lord, that he might turn to everlasting joy for me all the distress and misfortune that I suffered in the body in this world, remembering, of course, the words of the Apostle,' saying that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared to the future glory which will be revealed to the elect of God. And because the Lord took pity on me and heard your prayers, today, now that I have returned to my true self and believe in God the Father Omnipotent, as a
Christian of the Catholic faith should, so that you may believe my words, fortified as I am with these signs, the Lord has sent me especially to you today, in preference to all the rest of the chosen, in order that you may duly send me to Him today through the taking of his sacred body and blood.’

Now when the blessed bishop Kentigern heard that he was the man who appeared to him in the desert long ago and heard many other things from him that are not included in this little book, somewhat converted from doubt to certainty and overcome with pity, while his face also was drenched in tears, to the wretch who was weeping and earnestly beseeching the grace of God he replied, saying kindly: ‘Behold,’ here is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ who is the everlasting life of the living, true salvation of those who believe in him, eternal glory of those who receive him worthily. Whosoever therefore receives this sacrament worthily will live the life and will not die, but who receives it unworthily will die the death and will not live. Therefore if you consider yourself worthy of such a great gift, look! it has been placed upon Christ’s table. Draw near to receive Him in the fear of God with all humility, in order that Christ himself may deign to receive you, since I do not dare either give it to you or withhold it from you.’

The blessed wretch hastily bathed in water, and, faithfully confessing belief in One God in Three, he humbly approached the altar and took up in complete faith and with sincere devotion the fortification of the uncircumscribed sacrament. When he had received the sacrament, he held up his hands to heaven and said: ‘I thank you, Lord Jesus, because I have now attained the most holy sacrament which I longed for.’ And turning to blessed Kentigern, he said: ‘Lord, if temporal life finishes for me today, just as you have heard from me, the most outstanding of the kings of Britain, the holiest of the bishops, and the noblest of the lords will follow me during this year.’

The bishop replied: ‘Brother, do you still persist in your folly, without having completely shaken off your spirit of irreverence? Therefore go in peace and may the Lord be with you.’

Lailoken, after receiving the episcopal benediction, leapt away from there like a wild goat set free from the hunter’s snare and joyfully made tracks for the desolate waste. But since what has been preordained by the Lord must come to pass, it happened that on the same day he was stoned and beaten to death by certain shepherds of king Meldred and while he was in the throes of death he fell down the steep side of the river Tweed near the town of Drumelzier on to a sharp stake which had been driven into the ground as part of a fish-trap and he was impaled right through the middle of his body. His head fell forward into the water and so, just as he had prophesied, he gave up his soul to the Lord.

When blessed Kentigern and his clergy heard that his prophecies concerning himself, previously uttered when he was possessed of the devil, had been fulfilled, believing and fearing that the rest of his prophecies would undoubtedly come to pass, they all began to be afraid and the tears gushed down their cheeks and they began to praise the name of the Lord in all things, who is always wonderful and blessed in his saints for ever and ever. Amen.
Section 2

It is said that Lailoken was kept prisoner for a long time by underking Meldred, and he was held bound in thongs in his town of Drumelzier in order that the king might be privileged to hear some new prophecy from him. Lailoken remained for three days without food and gave absolutely no answer at all to any one, although he was approached by many people. On the third day, while the underking was sitting in the hall on a lofty throne, his wife came in, conspicuously carrying on her head a leaf from a tree which was caught in her wimple. When the underking saw this, he pulled it off with his hand and, in pulling it off, tore it into tiny pieces. When he saw this, the madman Lailoken began to break into a deep laugh. And, when king Meldred saw him more cheerful than usual, he addressed him with flattering words, saying very pleasantly: ‘My friend, Lailoken, tell me, please, what is the meaning of the laughter with which you piercingly assailed our ears, making them ring, and I shall set you free, to go wherever you wish.’ To this Lailoken immediately replied: ‘You captured me and ordered me to be bound in thongs, eager to hear some new prophecy. Therefore I shall pose you a new riddle on a new subject. “From poison dripped sweetness and from honey bitterness, but neither is so, although both remain true.”’ There, I have posed the question. Give the solution, if you can, and allow me to go free.’

The underking replied: ‘This riddle is very puzzling and I do not know how to solve its perplexity. Therefore give me another more obvious riddle under the same condition as before.’

But Lailoken produced a similar riddle to the one before, saying: ‘Wickedness returned good with evil and goodness repaid it the other way round, but neither is so, although each remains true.’ The underking said: ‘Do not speak any more in riddles but tell us openly why you laughed, and the solutions of the riddles which you posed, and you will be set free from your bonds.’

Lailoken replied: ‘If I speak openly to you, sadness will be the result for you and for me death-bearing sorrow.’ To this the underking said: ‘Although this is the way it will turn out to be, nevertheless we wish to hear it.’ Lailoken indeed said to the underking: ‘But do you, since you are a learned judge, tell me first the judgement of one case and I shall thereafter obey your commands.’ The underking replied: ‘Quickly tell me the case, so that you may hear the judgement.’

Lailoken said: ‘He who confers the greatest honour on an enemy and he who metes out the worst punishment to a friend, what does each deserve?’ The underking replied: ‘Tit for tat.’ ‘You have judged correctly,’ said Lailoken. ‘Therefore without a doubt your wife has deserved a crown, while you have earned the worst kind of death. But it is not so, although each remains so.’ The underking said: ‘The obscurity of everything you do is wrapped in darkness. Therefore explain these riddles to us, please, and whatever can be honourably granted, if you ask, I shall give you.’ Lailoken replied: ‘I make one very easily granted request, namely that in addition to giving me my freedom you hand
over my body for burial on the eastern side of the town at a place suitable for the funeral of a dead believer, not far from the turf where the burn Pausayl runs down into the river Tweed. For it will come to pass after a few days that I shall die a threefold death, and at the time when the meeting of the two rivers is close to my grave, the ruler of the British people will hold sway over an adulterous race.’ In saying this he indicated the destruction of the Britons, and that there would be a reunification after their separation.

While he was spinning out this narrative and other matters and putting off for feigned reasons what they wanted to hear, the underking and queen and their court granted his request for burial and affirmed with an oath that they would allow him to go free and unharmed wherever he wished. But Lailoken, when his bonds were loosened, standing ready to flee began speaking as follows: ‘What is more bitter than a woman’s gall, which was infected from the beginning with the serpent’s venom? And what is sweeter than just judgement, through which the gentle and lowly are defended from the gall of the wicked? This woman your wife today conferred the greatest honour on her enemy, while you tore up your faithful friend into little bits. But neither action was really so, because in doing this you thought you were doing well, while she was completely unaware of the honour which she conferred on her enemy. The second riddle is similar to this one. Wickedness performed a good deed at that time when the wicked woman showed reverence to her betrayer. Goodness performed a wicked deed when a just man destroyed his own faithful friend. But neither action was really so, because each was ignorant of what they were doing. For a short time before while the underqueen was committing adultery in the underking’s garden, a leaf from a tree fell upon her head to betray her and reveal her adultery to the king. By carrying it caught in the wimple on her head into the hall in the presence of all, the underqueen did reverence to it. When the king saw it, he immediately pulled it off with his fingers and in pulling it off he tore it into little pieces with his fingers. This is how the woman conferred honour on her enemy who wished to betray her crime, and how the king did injury to his friend who decided to forewarn him in order that he might avoid the charge.’

With these words Lailoken made for the trackless wastes of the wilderness. No one pursued him, but all alike began to nod significantly. The adulteress in tears and devising guile began to try to win over the underking with speeches as sweet as she could make them, saying: ‘Do not, my lord and revered king, believe the words of this madman, since, as one must suppose, he had no other purpose in making his riddles than to seek release from bondage and dismissal. Therefore, my lord, I am ready with apt arguments to clear myself of the charge brought against me. You yourself also have heard along with us how that wicked deceiver said that he would die three times, which is undoubtedly impossible, since, after a person dies once, his death cannot be repeated. Obviously therefore both statements are equally false. Moreover, if he were really a prophet or a trustworthy seer, he would never allow himself to be captured or
bound by those from whom he would afterwards wish to be rescued. So if you cease to pursue him, you will seem to be cherishing the insult to me and the wrong done to your kingdom. Therefore, because the king's honour loves justice, you ought not to allow such a crime to go unpunished, lest it happen that, by sparing him, the honour of your kingdom is lost.'

To this the underking replied: 'Most stupid of women, if I were eager to obey your words, you would be proved to be the foulest of adulteresses, while he would be proved to be a true prophet. For he said: 'If I openly report what you demand, there will arise from this sadness for you but death-bringing sorrow for me'. Now indeed our sorrow is obvious, while his sadness is hidden, so long as he survives.'

At these words the woman burst more copiously into tears, because she was not able to get what she wanted and she secretly prepared snares to bring about the death of Lailoken.

After some years it happened that Lailoken on that day on which he had been fortified with the divine viaticum, was passing through the fields near Drumelzier castle at sunset. When certain shepherds, who had been stirred up against him by the wicked woman, discovered this, just as he had foretold and as is written above, so we have heard, an end was made of him. The king, as it is said, handed over his dead body for burial in the place which he himself had previously chosen for himself, while he was still alive. That town is thirty miles distant from the city of Glasgow. In its territory Lailoken lies buried.

Pierced by a stake, and having endured stoning and drowning, Merlin is said to have undergone a three-fold death.

Commentary

Section 1

1 Kentigern  Bishop and patron saint of Glasgow, d. c.612. The principal sources for his life are (1) the fragmentary Life already mentioned; (2) the Life by Jocelin of Furness composed somewhere between 1175 and 1199 (Forbes 1874: 29–119 [translation], 159–242 [text]); (3) the prose lections in the Office of Kentigern preserved in the Sprouston Breviary written for Glasgow Cathedral c.1300 (NLS MS 18.2.13b, fos. 35v–38v, printed in Forbes op. cit.: xciv–c) and probably based on a more complete form of the fragmentary Life including at least the boyhood deeds as well as the conception and birth of Kentigern. The verse portion depends on Jocelin. (See MacQueen 1956: 107–31; Jackson 1958: 273–357; MacQueen 1959: 175–83; Bronwich 1961: 319–21; MacQueen 1980: 1–21; 1987: 453–70.)

2 the desert wilds  Early Celtic monasticism was influenced by the practices of the desert fathers of Egypt and Syria, and so the word 'desert' came to be used of any wild
place in which a hermit had settled; cf. the place-names Dysart FIF, associated with St. Servanus, and Diseart Chonnáin, Dalmally ARG, associated with St Connán. (See W. J. Watson 1926: 256–7.) J. F. Kenney (1979: 468) notes that the reaction against the secularisation of monastic churches, which in Ireland became apparent during the eighth century, showed several characteristics: (1) the development of the disert, attached or in close proximity to the monastic church, where the more devout monks, and the ‘pilgrims’ from other establishments, might lead the life of recluses and at the same time share in the religious work of the church; (2) the change in religious ideals, which were becoming more rigorous and more puritanical; (3) the appearance of a number of leaders who sought to promote and organise these reform tendencies; (4) the rise of the Céli Dé. All these are evidenced in Jocelin’s Life of Kentigern; note in particular the saint’s way of conducting himself in the episcopate (Chs. 12–19), and the claim in Ch. 20 that he was the actual founder of the Céli Dé movement. This last is impossible; Kentigern’s date is too early; but the claim shows the background against which the versions of the Life used as sources by the twelfth-century hagiographers were originally composed.

3 Lailoken The word appears to be Welsh llalogan, a diminutive of llalog, used as a term of friendly but respectful address in the sense ‘brother, friend, companion, lord’. The more specific ‘twin-brother’ is less well attested. See the article by A. O. H. Jarman (1937–9) ‘Lailoken a llalogan’, and the entries in Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru A Dictionary of the Welsh Language (1950– ) s.v. ‘llalog’.

‘Little brother’ or ‘little lord’ is presumably the form of address, half-respectful, half-contemptuous, which a Cumbrian speaker might employ towards a madman possessed of unknown, possibly supernatural powers. Note how Kentigern addresses him as ‘Brother’, and Meldred as ‘My friend, Lailoken.’

4 Merlin It is fairly certain that Lailoken was in fact the same as the Welsh Merlin (Myrddin), wrongly identified by Geoffrey of Monmouth (Wright 1985: 71 ff.) with the prophetic boy Ambrosius mentioned in Nennius (Morris 1980: 29–31).

The consequent apparent longevity of Merlin gave rise to the idea that there were two Merlins, Merlinus Ambrosius and Merlinus Caledonius or Silvestris. (See H. M. and N. K. Chadwick 1932: 123–32; Jarman 1937–9: 21; Lewis Thorpe 1978: 192–3).

5 the battle This is the battle of Arfderydd (Armerid), fought according to ‘Annales Cambriae’ in 573 (Morris 1980: 45). The 13c B MS gives the additional information that it was fought ‘between the sons of Eliffer and Gwenddolau son of Ceidio; in which battle Gwenddolau fell; Merlin went mad.’ The annal for 580 identifies the sons of Eliffer as Gwrgi and Peredur. In Geoffrey’s Vida Merlini (Faral 1929: 307–9, lines 19–69) Gwennolus is defeated by Rodarchus and Peredurus. Merlin is on the side of the latter pair, is driven mad by the death of his three brothers, and becomes a man of the woods. Early Welsh poems, in particular the ‘Afallenau’ (‘Apple-trees’) and
‘Hoianeu’ (‘Greetings, little pig’), indicate that Gwenddolau was the much lamented lord of Merlin, and less certainly that Rhydderch led the forces opposed to him in the battle. (See Jarman 1959: 20–30; Bromwich 1961: 208–10, 379–80).

Arfderydd is usually identified with the parish of Arthuret CMB, the present northern boundary of which is formed by the Carwinley Beck, which flows into the Esk a mile below its junction with the Liddel. The modern parish lies on the side of Carwinley Beck away from Liddel, and so does not fully correspond to the location described in the text.

6 Liddel Liddel Water ROX.

7 Carwannok The name is now represented by Carwinley and Carwinley Beck CMB. Etymologically it may represent ‘Caer Wenddolau’, the caer or fort of Gwenddolau. The name would not originally have belonged to a stream, but the combination with Liddel in the text would suggest that this soon became the case.

An ultimately Welsh or Cumbric origin for the names Arthuret and Carwinley is accepted in The Place Names of Cumberland (Armstrong 1950: 51–3) but ignored by the Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names.

8 steep crag The Necropolis or cemetery to the north of Glasgow Cathedral.

9 Molendinar burn The stream which used to run between the Cathedral and the Necropolis, now piped underground.

10 viciaticum Literally ‘provision for a journey’; the term used in the Roman Catholic church for the last communion given to the dying.

11 the apostle St Paul; Rom. 8. 18.

12 this little book Possibly a reference to the fragmentary Life of St Kentigern. See above note 1, and compare ‘codiculum stilo scoticco dictatum’ in Jocelin (Forbes 1874: 160).

13 Behold . . . The language here is drawn from the Christian liturgy.

14 unworthy I Cor. 11. 27.

15 most outstanding of the kings of Britain Identified by Jocelin as Rhydderch.

16 the holiest of the bishops Kentigern himself.

17 noblest of the lords Mordechai according to Jocelin. Nothing is known about him.

18 the hunter’s snare Ps. 123. 7 (Vulgate); 124. 7 (NRB).

19 Meldred Unknown outside the two episodes of ‘Vita Merlini Silvestris’; the term ‘underking’, ‘regulus’ in the Latin text, implies that Meldred was the local king of a comparatively small population group occupying an area corresponding more or less to the medieval Deanery of Stobo, Peebles or Tweeddale in the diocese of Glasgow or to
the modern county of Peebles. He would owe certain duties to the overking of Strathclyde, almost certainly Rhydderch.

20 *Drumelszer* PEB; the seat of underking Meldred.

21 *fishtrap* A cruive, *i.e.* ‘a fishtrap in the form of an enclosure or row of stakes... across a river or estuary’ (*CSD*). In the Tweed it would be intended for salmon.

Section 2

1 *suitable... believer* *i.e.* in consecrated ground.

2 *Pausayl* Compare the traditional couplet:

When Tweed and Pausayl meet at Merlin’s grave,
Scotland and England shall one monarch have.

These lines are quoted by Ward (1893: 525–6) from Alexander Pennycuik (1715: 26–7). Pennycuik claims that on the same day that King James VI of Scotland was crowned king of England (25 July 1603) the River Tweed joined with the Pausayl at the traditional site of Merlin’s grave. (See also Scott 1880: 143).


4 *separation* The reference may be to the expansion westwards of the Bernicians under King Aethelfrith, who died in 616. This effectively separated the Britons in Wales from the Britons in southern Scotland. (See Stenton 1971: 78.)

5 *king’s... justice* Ps. 99: 4 (NEB); 98: 4 (Vulgate).

REFERENCES

ARMSTRONG, A.M., MAYER, A., STENTON, F.M. and DICKINS, B.
1950 *The Place-Names of Cumberland I.* English Place Name Society, Cambridge.

BROMWICH, R.

CARNEY, J.

CHADWICK, H. M. and N. K.

CSD

FARAL, E. (ed.)

FORBES, A. P.
JACKSON, K. H.

JARMAN, A. O. H.
1937–9 'Lailoken a Ilalogan'. Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies IX.

KENNEY, J. F.
1979 Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical. Dublin. [Revised edn.]

MACQUEEN, J.
1959 'Reply to Professor Jackson'. Transactions, 3rd Series, XXXVI: 175–83.

MORRIS, JOHN (ed.)

PENNYCUICK, ALEXANDER
1715 A geographical historical Description of the Shire of Tweedale. Edinburgh.

ROSS, ANNE

SCOTT, SIR WALTER

STENTON, F.

THOMPSON, STITH
1936 Motif-Index of Folk-Literature VI. F. F. Communications No. 117. Helsinki.

THORPE, LEWIS (trans.)

WARD, H. L. (ed.)
1893 'Vita Merlini Silvestris' in Romania XXII: 504–26.

WATSON, W. J.

WRIGHT, NEIL (ed.)