

# *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 quadam illo in solitudinis arbusto solicite orante ut quidam demens nudus et hirsutus et ab omni bono destitutus, quasi quoddam torvum furiale, transitum faceret secus eum, qui Lailoken vocabatur, quem quidam dicunt fuisse Merlynum, qui erat Britonibus quasi propheta 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, exprimens quis es et cur in hac solitudine solivagus silvestribus comitaris bestiis.' At concito demens cursum coercens, respondit: 'Ego sum christianus, licet tanti nominis reus, in hac solitudine dira paciens fata que 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 cedis 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 scelera punies. Angelis enim Sathane traditus usque in diem mortis tue conversacionem habebis inter bestias silvestres." Cum autem ad vocem quam audivi meum direxi intuitum, vidi splendorem nimium quem natura humana sustinere non potuit. Vidi etiam innumerabiles phalanges exercitus in aera fulguri similes chorusco, lanceas igneas 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 prosiluit 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 hominum, quomodo in hac squalenti degit solitudine 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, carnem, sanguinem et fragilitatem, sicut unus habens ex nobis, omnibus caret quibus humana indiget natura, preter dumtaxat aerem communem. Quomodo igitur pre fame et algore et inedarum universitate inter bestias vivit silvestres? Flevit igitur pietatis lacrimis genas profusus pius presul Kentegernus, solito arcus 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 rupem proclivam, que eminet trans torrentem Mellodonor quasi in prospectu Glascu ad aquilonem partem eiusdem loci ecclesie, multociens inquietavit clamoribus horrisonis sanctum Kentegernum et clericos eius divine contemplacionis operi vacantes. Presagavit enim ibi multa futura ac si propheta. Sed quia numquam repetere solebat que predixerat, quamquam erant valde obscura et quasi non intelligibilia, nullus ei credere presumebat. Sed quasi verba nugatoria quedam retinebant et scripture commendabant. In die autem qua de huius mundi miseriis migrare debuerat demens iste, ut suevit, ad rupem pervenit prefatam, beato Kentegerno missam mane celebrante, eiulans et clamans magna que voce rogicans ut ab illo christi corpore muniri et sanguine mereretur, antequam de hoc seculo transitum faceret. Cuius clamoris irreverenciam beatus Kentegernus cum ferre non posset, misit aliquem clericum qui silentium 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 clerici audisset, pie subridens dixit circumstantibus pro energumino vociferante illi obnixè supplicantibus: 'Nonne vos omnes ceterosque nonnullos miser iste suis sepe verbis seduxit 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 obrutus et fustibus 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 stabilis saltem in ultimo die vite eius inveniri posset, quia numquam eundem quem prius dixerat solebat repetere sermonem sed semper in obliquo 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 petitioni.' Dixerunt ergo clerici eius: 'Domine pater venerande, ne irascaris nobis si adhuc semel pro illo dilectioni vestre opitulemur. Probetur adhuc tercio si forte in aliquo verbo fidelis valeat inveniri.' 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 nichil aliud illis prefatus sim quam quod mihi tu inspirasti.' Conversus igitur ad clericum dixit: 'Veniat quam maxime obsecro ad me episcopus ipse cuius patrocinio a domino in hac die precipue sum delegatus et afferat secum sacrosanctum quod postulo viaticum et audiet mandatum quod dignatus est illi per me significare.' Venit igitur episcopus, multis clericorum precibus superatus, deferens secum panem et vinum sacratissimum. Quo appropinquante, descendens miser felix de rupe cecidit in faciem suam ante pedes episcopi, in huiusmodi verba prorumpens: 'Salve, pater venerande, summi 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 coniuratus, causam mee calamitatis enarravi. Pro cuius etiam erumpnis et miseriis pietate sauciatus, 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 chatholice credentem ut verbis meis credas, hiis signis munitum, tibi hodie pre ceteris electis specialius me misit ut per suscepcionem 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 faciem perfusus, misero deflenti et dei gratiam obnixè petenti respondit benigniter dicens: 'Ecce adest corpus et sanguis domini nostri Jhesu Christi qui est perpetua vivencium vita, salus vera in se credencium, gloria eterna se digne sumencium. Quicumque ergo hoc sacramentum digne suscipit, vita vivet et non morietur. Qui autem indigne, morte morietur 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 humiliter ad altare et suscepit pura fide ac sincera devocione incircumscripti sacramenti munimen. Quo percepto, extendens manus ad celum, dixit: 'Gracias tibi ago, domine Jhesu. 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 accepistis, Regum britannie prestantissimus, Episcoporum sanctissimus, Comitum nobilissimus in hoc anno me sequentur.' Respondit episcopus: 'Frater, adhuc permanes in simplicitate tua? Non expers irreverencie? Igitur vade in pace et dominus sit tecum.' Lailoken autem, pontificali benediccione suscepta, prosiluit inde, velut capreolus de laqueo venantis ereptus, solitudinis petens letus fructa. Sed quoniam ea que a domino sunt predestinata nequeunt pretermitti quin ea oporteat fieri, contigit ut eodem die a quibusdam regis Meldredi pastoribus usque ad mortem lapidatus ac fustigatus, casum faceret in mortis articulo ultra oram Travedis fluminis prerruptam prope opidum Dunmeller super sudem acutissimam que in aliqua piscaria erat inserta et transfixus per medium corpus, inclinato capite in stango, spiritum, sicut prophetaverat, domino transmisit. 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 predixerat, ceperunt omnes pavere et lacrimis genas uberime perfundere nomenque domini in omnibus collaudare, qui est in sanctis suis semper mirabilis et benedictus in secula seculorum. Amen.

## Section 2

Fertur quod Lailoken a regulo Meldredo dudum captus et in opido suo Dunmeller loris convinctus tenebatur ut aliquod novum ab illo rex audire mereretur. Ille vero triduo ieiunus permanens nulli penitus, licet a multis conveniretur, dedit responsum. Tercio quoque die regulo in aula celsiori assidente sedili intravit uxor eius, arboris folium suo peplo involutum nobiliter gerens in capite. Quod regulus videns manu attraxit et attrahendo in minuta frusticula discerpsit. Quo viso Lailoken demens cepit in altum prorumpere risum. Cumque illum solito hillariorem rex Meldredus conspiceret, convenit eum blandis verbis dulcissime dicens: 'Amice mi, Lailoken, dic mihi obsecro quid risus portenderit, quem argute stringendo auribus nostris tinnire fecisti et liberum eundi quo vis te dimittam.' Ad hoc confestim Lailoken respondit: 'Tu me cepisti et vinciri loris iussisti, gliscens novum aliquod audire oraculum. Quapropter problema novum de nova tibi proponam materia. De veneno stillavit dulcedo et de melle amaritudo. Sed neutrum ita, licet verum manet utrumque. En proposui questionem. Dic si potes solutionem et me liberum ire dimitte.' Regulus respondit: 'Hoc problema valde est perplexum cuius nescio solvere nexum. Dic igitur aliud apertius sub premissa condicione.' At Lailoken priori simile problema protulit dicens: 'Bonum pro malo fecit iniquitas, e converso reddidit pietas, sed neutrum ita, licet verum manet utrumque.' Regulus dixit: 'Noli ultra loqui per coniecturas sed palam nobis cur risisti et questionum soluciones quas protulisti et liber a vinclis eris.' Lailoken respondit: 'Si palam loquutus fuero, vobis inde mesticia, mihi autem mortifera orietur tristicia.' Ad hec regulus: 'Quamquam' inquit 'ita futurum fore contigerit, nichillominus audire hoc volumus.' Lailoken siquidem intulit regulo: 'Tu quoque cum sis iudex sciencia preditus, dic mihi prius unius pragmatism iudicium et tuis postmodum iussis parebo.' Regulus respondit: 'Dic cito causam ut audias iudicium.' Lailoken dixit: 'Qui summum honorem confert inimico et supplicium pessimum amico, quid meretur uterque?' Respondit regulus: 'Talionis vicem.' 'Recte' inquit Lailoken 'iudicasti. Proinde nimirum uxor tua promeruit coronam, tu vero pessimam mortem. Sed non ita, licet verum restat utrumque.' Regulus dixit: 'Cunctorum que facis fucus opacitate concluditur. Edissere ergo nobis obsecro has questiones et quicquid honeste potest persolvi si postules, tibi dabo.' Respondit Lailoken: 'Unum valde dabile postulo, libertate non pretermissa, videlicet ut tradas corpus meum sepulture ad partem huius opidi orientalem in loco funeri fidelis defuncti competenciore haut longe a cespite ubi torrens Passales in flumen descendit Tuedense. Futurum est enim post paucos dies trina nece me moriturum. Cum autem confurcacio ampnis utriusque contigua fuerit tumulo meo, pactor britannie gentis dominabitur adulterine.' Hec dicendo signavit excidium britannorum et iterum eorum divorcii reformacionem esse futuram. Hec illo et alia protrahente et que audire optabant fictius differente, regulus ac regula eorumque curia, concessa funeris postulacione, cum iuramento affirmaverunt ut liberum et incolumem illum quo vellet ire dimitterent. At Lailoken, loris solutis, stans fuge paratus

huiusmodi verba exorsus est dicens: 'Quid est amarius felle muliebri quod ab inicio serpentino infectum est veneno? Quid autem dulcius iusticie censura per quam mites et humiles a felle impiorum defenduntur? Hec quippe mulier uxor tua summum honorem hodie suo contulit inimico, tu vero amicum fidelem conscidisti in frustula. Sed neutrum ita, quia hoc faciens bene facere existimasti. Illa vero honoris quem inimico conferebat prorsus erat ignara. Secundum problema huic est simile. Tunc iniquitas fecit bonum cum mulier nequam suum veneraretur proditorem. Tunc pietas fecit malum quando vir iustus suum fidelem occidit amicum. Sed neutrum ita, quia inscius facti fuit uterque. Regula enim paulo ante in orto reguli adulterante, descendit folium arboris super caput eius ut illam traduceret regique adulterium manifestaret, quod in peplo suo involutum coram omnibus regula super caput suum in aulam portando venerabatur. Quod cum vidisset rex protinus digitis attraxit et attrahendo digitis suis minutatim decerpsit. Hoc est quod mulier honorem contulit inimico qui facinus suum prodere voluit. Et quia rex iniuriam fecit amico qui ut crimen evitaret illum premunire decrevit.' Lailoken hiis dictis solitudinis squalena invia petente nulloque illum persequente omnes pariter nutare ceperunt. Mecha vero cum lacrimis machinans dolum, regulum quam dulcibus cepit allicere sermonibus dicens: 'Noli, domine mi rex venerande, huius dementis credere verbis quoniam, ut credi fas est, nichil aliud coniecturando fecit quam querere a nexibus solvi et dimitti. Quapropter, mi domine, cum complicibus presto sum ydoneis me de obiecto crimine purgare. Ipse quoque audisti nobiscum quatenus seductor ille pessimus dixit se ter moriturum quod proculdubio est impossibile, quoniam in nullo semel defuncto mors iterari potest. Utrumque ergo pari patet mendacio, propterea si propheta vel vates fidelis esset, numquam se capi permetteret seu ligari a quibus vellet postea erui. Quamobrem si illum persequi desistas, nostrum opprobrium et regni tui iniuriam fovere videberis. Tu ergo quia honor regis iudicium diligit, non debes tantum scelus impunitum transire, ne forte illi parcendo honor regni insolescat.' Ad hec regulus resondit: 'O mulierum stultissima! si verbis tuis obtemperare anelavero, tu mecharum fedissima fueris probata, ille autem veridicus propheta. Dixit enim: "Si palam referam que postularis, vobis inde mesticia, mihi autem letalis orietur tristitia." Nostra iam quippe patet tristitia, sua vero quamdiu superfuerit patet mesticia.' Mulier hiis dictis uberius in lacrimis prorumpens, quia quod voluit non valuit, clam morti Lailoken parabat insidias. Post aliquot quidem annos contigit Lailoken illo die quo divino erat premunitus viatico occidente iam sole transitum facere per campum secus castellum dummeller. Quo a quibusdam comperto pastoribus qui erant in illum a nequam femina incitati, sicut predixerat et super-inscriptum est, ita de illo diffinitum esse audivimus. Cuius, ut dicitur, corpus exanime rex tradidit sepulture in loco videlicet quem ipse adhuc vivens sibi preelegerat. Porro opidum istud distat a civitate Glascu quasi triginta miliaribus. In cuius campo Lailoken tumultatus quiescit.

Sude perfossus, lapidem perpressus et undam,  
Merlinus triplicem fertur inisse necem.

## Translation

## Section 1

At that time when blessed Kentigern<sup>1</sup> used to frequent the desert wilds,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Certain people say that he was Merlin<sup>4</sup> 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, whatsoever 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,<sup>5</sup> well known to all the inhabitants of this country, which was fought in the plain that lies between Liddel<sup>6</sup> and Carwannok.<sup>7</sup> 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 wild man, 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<sup>8</sup> which rises on the other side of the Molendinar burn,<sup>9</sup> 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*,<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> 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,<sup>13</sup> 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<sup>14</sup> 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,<sup>15</sup> the holiest of the bishops,<sup>16</sup> and the noblest of the lords<sup>17</sup> 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<sup>18</sup> 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<sup>19</sup> and while he was in the throes of death he fell down the steep side of the river Tweed near the town of Drumelzier<sup>20</sup> on to a sharp stake which had been driven into the ground as part of a fish-trap<sup>21</sup> 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,<sup>1</sup> not far from the turf where the burn Pausayl<sup>2</sup> runs down into the river Tweed. For it will come to pass after a few days that I shall die a threefold death,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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,<sup>7</sup> 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; Bromwich 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 Discart 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 Cumbric 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 Celedonius 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 (Armterid), 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 *Vita Merlini* (Faral 1929: 307-9, lines 19-69) Gwennolous 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 *viaticum* 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 scottico dictatum' in Jocelin (Forbes 1874: 160).

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

14 *unworthily* 1 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* Morthec 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 *Drumelzier* 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).

3 *A three-fold death* See 'Prophecy: three-fold death M 341.2.4' (Thompson 1936). See also Jarman 1959; Jackson 1940: 535-50; Carney 1948-52: 83-109). Compare also the three-fold death, apparently ritually inflicted on Lindow Man (Ross 1986: 162-9).

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., MAWER, A., STENTON, F. M. and DICKINS, B.  
1950 *The Place-Names of Cumberland I*. English Place Name Society, Cambridge.
- BROMWICH, R.  
1961 *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, Cardiff.
- CARNEY, J.  
1948-52 '*Suibhne Geilt*' and '*The Children of Lir*'. *Eigse* VI: 83-109.
- CHADWICK, H. M. and N. K.  
1932 *The Growth of Literature I*. Cambridge.
- CSD  
1986 *Concise Scottish Dictionary*, ed. Mairi Robinson. Edinburgh.
- FARAL, E. (ed.)  
1929 Geoffrey of Monmouth: '*Vita Merlini*' *La Legende Arthurienne*. Vol. 3. Paris.
- FORBES, A. P.  
1874 *Lives of S. Ninian and S. Kentigern*. Edinburgh.



- JACKSON, K. H.  
 1940 'The Motive of the Three-fold Death in the story of Suibhne Geilt' in *Essays and Studies presented to Professor Eoin MacNeill*. Dublin. pp. 535-50.  
 1958 'The Sources for the Life of St. Kentigern' in *Studies in the Early British Church*, ed. N. K. Chadwick. Cambridge. Pp. 273-357.
- JARMAN, A. O. H.  
 1937-9 'Lailoken a llalogan'. *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* IX.  
 1959 'The Welsh Myrddin Poems' in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. S. Loomis. Oxford. Pp. 20-30.
- KENNEY, J. F.  
 1979 *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical*. Dublin. [Revised edn.]
- MACQUEEN, J.  
 1956 'Yvain, Ewen and Owein ap Urien'. *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 3rd Series, XXXIII: 107-31.  
 1959 'Reply to Professor Jackson'. *Transactions*, 3rd Series, XXXVI: 175-83.  
 1980 'Myth and the Legends of Lowland Scottish Saints'. *Scottish Studies* 24: 1-21.  
 1987 'Epic Elements in Early Welsh and Scottish Hagiography' in *The Heroic Process*, edd. B. Almqvist, S. Ó. Catháin and P. Ó. Héalaí. Dublin. Pp. 453-70.
- MORRIS, JOHN (ed.)  
 1980 Nennius: *Historia Brittonum*.
- PENNYCUIK, ALEXANDER  
 1715 *A geographical historical Description of the Shire of Tweedale*. Edinburgh.
- ROSS, ANNE  
 1986 'Lindow Man and the Celtic Tradition' in *Lindow Man: The Body in the Bog*, edd. I. M. Stead, J. R. Bourke and D. Bothwell. London. Pp. 162-9.
- SCOTT, SIR WALTER  
 1880 *Poetical Works IV. Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Edinburgh.
- STENTON, F.  
 1971 *Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford.
- THOMPSON, STITH  
 1936 *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* VI. F. F. Communications No. 117. Helsinki.
- THORPE, LEWIS (trans.)  
 1978 Gerald of Wales: *The Journey through Wales and the Description of Wales*. Harmondsworth.
- WARD, H. L. (ed.)  
 1893 'Vita Merlina Silvestris' in *Romania* XXII: 504-26.
- WATSON, W. J.  
 1926 *History of the Celtic Place Names of Scotland*. Edinburgh and London.
- WRIGHT, NEIL (ed.)  
 1985 Geoffrey of Monmouth: *Historia Regum Britannie*. Cambridge.