Spear

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SPEAR

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

ORIGINS

Peretur, Peredur, Peredurus, Perceval, Parzival, Percival, Parsifal—there are tales of the hero I call Peretur written in Old Welsh, Middle Welsh, Latin, Old French, Middle High German, Middle English, and a dizzying number of modern languages. And before anyone wrote such things down there were no doubt tales told in Brythonic—the P-Celtic language spoken on the British mainland before Rome invaded—and then in one of its successors, Primitive Welsh.

The first written mention is from the sixth century, in Old Welsh, with Peretur, one of the sons of Eliffer, a hero of Yr Hen Ogledd (the Old North)—so most likely a northern princeling up around Hadrian's Wall. In one genealogy, *Historia Peredur,* the name Arthur is also mentioned (Arthur as a name crops up a few times among northern British aristocracy during the Early Middle Ages[1]). Peredur appears in many poems of the period, including *Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin,* an imaginary conversation between the poet Taliesin and an early iteration of Merlin in which Peredur is praised by implication as one of the "brave sons of Eliffer" who died in a battle: so, again, a northerner. In a later (that is, more recent) recension of *Y Gododdin,* the tale of the tragic slaughter of British warriors that brings about the death

of the Old North, possibly originally composed in the sixth century, Peredur is listed as one of the dead warriors.

In these early texts, then, Peretur seems to be a northern noble—but things are rarely as they seem. Not one of those works I've mentioned exists in its original form; all have been written, rewritten, translated, added to, and altered over the centuries. They also borrow from each other. So, for example, some scribe writing down the umpteenth version of *Y Gododdin* remembers having seen the name Peredur in *Annales Cambriae* (*AC*) and, for added verisimilitude, sticks the name into a list of those who died in the sixth-century battle. Yet that version of the *AC* they cribbed from was itself perhaps similarly embellished in previous eras. None of these early poems, genealogies, and annals are reliable—but all are fantastic fuel for the imagination and served as source material for later writers.

In the early twelfth century, writing in Latin, Geoffrey of Monmouth composes three works of interest: *Prophetiae Merlini* (*Prophecies of Merlin*)[2]; *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*HRB,* the *History of the Kings of Britain*); and *Vita Merlini* (*Life of Merlin*), a poem. *HRB* is a stirring pseudo-history covering about two thousand years from the founding of Britain by Brutus of Troy through to the seventh century, with some lovely just-so stories along the way about how London got its name, and so on. It's a wildly improbable hotchpotch of names and events drawn from a variety of earlier sources including Gildas, Bede, and "Nennius"[3], and decorated with generous dollops of imagination and myth. It is in *HRB* that we encounter Peredurus, a British king

ruling somewhere north of the Humber and one of the powerful men who is present at a court Arthur convenes in the "City of Legions." And in *Life of Merlin,* we meet Peredur, a Northern Welsh prince.

A Norman poet, Robert Wace, translates[4]—or perhaps "loosely interprets" might be more accurate—*HRB* into a dialect of Old French, along the way inventing the famous Round Table and changing the name of Arthur's sword Caliburnus to Excalibur.

A few decades later, in five major works written in Old French, Chrétien de Troyes introduces a whole raft of characters and events that have since become pillars of Arthurian legend, for example Lancelot[5], and Perceval's search for the Grail[6]. Chrétien's Perceval is raised in the wilds of Wales by his mother; he encounters a group of knights and yearns to be one; he sets off for Arthur's court, where a girl predicts greatness for him; Sir Kay laughs at that and slaps the girl; Perceval stonks off swearing revenge; he kills a knight in red armour; decides to go see his mother and along the way encounters the Grail but does nothing about it; finds out his mother is dead; fights Sir Kay and breaks his arm; and becomes a Knight of the Round Table.

Then, in the thirteenth century Wolfram von Eschenbach pens *Parzival* in Middle High German, borrowing heavily from Chrétien, in which Parzival actually wins the Grail, becoming the new Grail king.

At this point our trail moves back to Wales, where *Peredur Son of Efrawg,* one of the Three Welsh Romances, is written in Middle Welsh.[7] There are all kinds of argu-

ments about the story's original composition—ranging from the twelfth to the fourteenth century—and whether the author(s) cribbed from Chrétien or perhaps drew from a shared source. But once again Peretur is associated with the Old North (the name of his father, Efrawg, is a Brythonic name for York). But his father isn't important because, again, Peretur is raised in the wilds by his mother. Again he encounters knights of Camelot; again he sets off on adventures, though this time he encounters not the Grail but a severed head on a plate; the knight who makes fun of him is Cei, and we get a name for the woman Peretur loves: Angharad Golden-Hand.[8]

And finally (for my purposes) we have Thomas Malory, whose fifteenth-century Middle English epic, published in 1485 by William Caxton as *Le Morte d'Arthur,*[9] brilliantly synthesises previous sources in Britain and Europe—and is basically responsible for the legend we know today. His work overtook all others in popularity for the simple reason that it was one of the first books printed. This is how I encountered King Arthur and Camelot.

CHOICES

I first read *Le Morte d'Arthur* as a nine-year-old and fell headlong into the legend. Beneath its visible High Medieval trappings I could smell the hidden iceberg of ancientness; practically taste the moors with menhirs looming from the mist; feel the dark forests tangled and forbidding at the side of the road; and hear the forlorn cries of the lost, lonely, and

mad. Even then I think I sensed that there was no single true tale of Arthur and Camelot: the legend is and always has been mythic fanfic, endless mash-ups of what has gone before, woven together and cut and draped by each writer to suit the current fashion.

Scenting a trail, I read every version I could find—I still do—but I never considered making my own contribution. As a result, I had no dog in the origin fight: all story lines, characters, and eras seemed to me equally valid, as did academic arguments regarding the legend's beginnings (though I admit to a leaning towards Arthur-as-deity). But then Swapna Krishna and Jenn Northington invited me to contribute to an anthology of "gender-bent, race-bent, LGBTQIA+ inclusive short-fiction retellings" they were putting together for Vintage. I had planned to say no—I was in the middle of writing my novel *Menewood* and didn't want to set it aside for a short story—but with my fingers poised over the keyboard to send my regrets, an image of a figure in red on a bony gelding in the woods dropped into my head and, *Oh,* I thought. *I can do something with that. . . .*

The clues were all in the initial image. The bony gelding spelled poverty, or at least a sense of mix-and-make-do: this was not a person of privilege. Then there were those woods, and wearing red—like the Red Knight of Chrétien's *Perceval,* though this figure was not exactly a knight.[10] Yes, it had to be Peretur/Peredur/Perceval/Percival! But that red . . . It wasn't plate armour, so we weren't talking a Knightly Romance; it gradually came into focus as red leathers, sewn with

a mix of rings and small plates. And, oh look, there were no stirrups. So it had to be an earlier era—Peretur or Peredur—because although stirrups were used on and off in Britain from about the third century, by the end of the eleventh they were uniformly used by mounted fighters.[11] And given that the real Arthur (if there ever had been a real Arthur—which for my fictional purposes clearly there must have been) had to have been lost from history for a reason, it made sense for it to be during a time when history went largely unrecorded, that is, my favourite period: the Early Medieval.

As for the Welsh setting, that was never even a question. Although the very earliest mentions of Peretur seem equally divided between northern British or Welsh ancestry, later tales all weigh in on the Welsh side of the balance—and if even French writers like Chrétien call Peretur Welsh, why not go with the flow? Second, I wanted Wales—Dyfed, specifically—for its connection to the Irish legend of the Tuath Dé.[12]

Arthur and the Tuath Dé seem to have a lot in common; to my mind, they belong together. I suspect that both began as deities who gradually acquired human characteristics such as lust, cunning, bravery, greed, and jealousy. Certainly the Tuath Dé are a quarrelsome lot, forever stealing from one another—particularly their Four Treasures: the cauldron, the sword, the stone, and the spear. The first three treasures, in the guise of the Grail, Excalibur, and the stone Excalibur is pulled from, fit very nicely into Arthurian legend. The spear, though, on first glance? Not so much. However, once I really started paying attention to Peretur I realised that, etymologically, in Old Welsh, Peretur could be

Bêr-hyddur, "spear enduring." In other words, Peretur could *be* the spear.[13]

Given the Welsh setting, Camelot became Caer Leon. In *HRB,* Peredurus meets Arthur in the "City of Legions," and Roman Britain had three permanent legionary fortresses—Eboracum, Deva Victrix, and Isca Augusta—settlements now known as York, Chester, and Caerleon. After that it was easy: the place where Peretur grew up had to be Ystrad Tywi, the eastern border of old Dyfed that in the sixth century became a liminal space between kingdoms, particularly the less accessible northern valley.

So now I was set: Peretur, the spear, the Tuath Dé, Ystrad Tywi in the early sixth century, and travel to Arthur at Caer Leon. The rest fell into place in a feverish three-week writing sprint during which I took enormous delight in following that most honourable of Arthurian traditions: stealing blithely from all and sundry—Merlin, the Lady of the Lake, the Red Knight, the search for the Grail—and making it my own.

Even though a book stuffed with magic, gods, monsters, and legendary heroes is not by any stretch of the imagination a historical novel, I wanted the details—including the material culture for which we have archaeological evidence—to be historically grounded.[14] All the names are rendered as closely to sixth-century versions as I could manage—the ogham and Latin inscriptions on the commemorative stones, for example, are real, and found in Dyfed. The Cup, too is based on the Iron Age hanging bowls I've always admired. Given the lavish decoration of some found as grave goods, I

suspect they may have acquired ritual overtones in various times and places. So the hanging bowl Peretur knows became a combination of the Gundestrup Cauldron and bowls from Sutton Hoo, York, Lullingstone, and Wilton.[15]

The fortifications—bank and ditch and palisade with some stone courses—are how I imagined Isca, the fortress and vicus, might have looked three hundred years after II Augusta withdrew. The arms and armour were a little trickier: in a world with many cultures, levels of technology, and access to same, the accoutrements of war would have varied considerably. How they were used, too, would differ from place to place. Blades, for example, were expensive in terms of time and resources, and few would have the expertise to create them new. Each blade would be valued by the owner; each would be repurposed, rehilted, and redecorated to suit changing requirements. At any one time, a body of fighting men and women might be armed with long swords, curved swords, short swords, and knives ranging from six to twenty inches. Armour, well, it would depend, again, on resources and cultural allegiance and method of fighting. Warriors could have worn anything from quilted warrior jackets, to leather sewn with panels of horn or metal, to coats of ring mail, to iron plates on legs or backs—or any combination thereof. Shields and spears—again, an enormous variety. But there have always been slim javelins (with or without soft iron points designed to bend) and big-game spears with broad thrusting blades and crosspieces designed to stop a charging boar. I had fun coming up with ways an ignorant self-taught user with superstrength might "misuse"

found tools, and grinned as I imagined the beefy, arrogant Cei trying to re-create some Roman tactics only to have his nifty methods absolutely destroyed by the self-taught spear-wielder.[16]

Most importantly for me, historical accuracy also meant this could not be a story of only straight, white, nondisabled men. Crips, queers, women and other genders, and people of colour are an integral part of the history of Britain—we are embedded at every level of society, present during every change, and part of every problem and its solution. We are here now; we were there then. So we are in this story. In addition, as I don't much care for stories that are only concerned with those at the pinnacle of power, privilege, and prestige, that's not who I wrote about.[17] *Spear* became not a traditional Hero's Journey—the story of a Supremely Selfish Superhero with no mother who does everything for and by himself, and who, in relentless pursuit of his goal, which is to win, strews his path with wreckage and weeping, then returns home unchanged—but something between an ur-Bildungsroman and a truer Hero's Journey.[18] As in the early folktales in which an orphan or otherwise unwanted son (it's always a son) sets out to seek his fortune, Peretur does set out to find her place in the world, but she does it unprovoked by loss. Her mother is still very much alive; her mother and her past are not something she wants to forget—just as she is not unloved, unwanted, or unadmired at home. And though, like all heroes, Peretur does set out to win, winning for her is not a binary, a zero-sum game in which winners win and losers lose: she can win without someone else losing.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Winning for Peretur is not just about triumphing over enemies and slaying monsters—which of course she does—but about learning, changing, and growing. Her journey is not linear but circular: she revisits her past and the people in it.[19] The main difference between Peretur's Journey and a traditional Hero's Journey is that her real goal is connection: finding her people and a place to belong; finding happiness—for herself and others—at least for now.

NOTES

1. What used to be called the Dark Ages—the fifth, sixth, and early seventh centuries, during which in England no annals, no chronicles, no histories were kept because the populace was functionally illiterate—is now variously termed the sub-Roman or Late Antique or Early Middle Ages period, depending on one's perspective. My affinity has always been with the sixth and seventh centuries and I tend to prefer Early Medieval.

2. Apparently Geoffrey's Merlin prophesies launched the Galfridian tradition of political prophecy.

3. All, like Geoffrey himself, monks, and all writing with very particular agendas—and, in turn, pulling their information from dubious sources and/or one anothers' work:

   • *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*: Gildas, a monk born in Scotland and educated in Wales, writing in—probably—the early sixth century, creates not a history but a sermon and polemic. While he discusses battles between Britons and "Saxons," including one at Badon, and the triumphs of one Ambrosius Aurelianus (repurposed by Mary Stewart—in

The Crystal Cave—as the father of Merlin), he makes no mention of Arthur or any other familiar Arthurian characters.

- *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*: Bede, born in Old English–speaking Northumbria in the late seventh century and writing in the Latin of early eighth century, creates what some consider the foundation of English history. The contemporary accounts are probably quite accurate (though he left out many things that might have proved awkward for his agenda). The early history, though, is only as accurate as his sources—such as *De Excidio*. Bede, too, mentions the Battle of Badon; he also makes no mention of Arthur.

- *Historia Brittonum*: "Nennius," another monk writing in—perhaps—the early ninth century (though this is widely believed to be a misattribution; no one knows his, or her, real name), compiles a sort-of history from sources such as Gildas and Bede. Here is where we encounter Arthur and his famous twelve battles (including Mount Badon) against the Anglo-Saxons. Though I don't believe he talks about Peretur.

4. Most probably around the middle of the twelfth century.

5. *Lancelot, le Chevalier de la Charrette* (*Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*)

6. *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal* (*Percival, or the Story of the Grail),* in which Percival, described as "the Welshman," finds the Grail—though he does nothing about it, merely observing mutely.

7. The Three Welsh Romances are part of the Mabinogion (a collection of eleven of the earliest stories of Britain, divided into Four Branches, written down in Middle Welsh but most probably composed and endlessly reinterpreted for a long time before that)—as is the tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen,* another text

that mentions Arthur but whose origins many believe predate Geoffrey of Monmouth. And of course one of the branches of the Mabinogion, *Manawydan fab Llŷr,* concerns the person Peretur knows as Manandán—an import from Irish myth.

8. Angharad Golden-Hand: I changed it to Angharad Ton Felen, "most beloved golden-waved" (that is, golden-haired), which was the name of the daughter of Rhydderch Hael, a king of Alt Clut—bringing in that northern connection yet again.

9. Clearly Caxton either couldn't spell or didn't understand French grammar.

10. Writing ideas, and the images that accompany them, are, for me, rather like dream images: I know things about what they mean without being able to say why.

11. Roman alae, or some of them, used stirrups. So the use of stirrups and different types of saddle in Britain would have depended on geography, cultural spread, and access to the necessary resources.

12. The Irish raided and settled West Wales during the fourth and fifth centuries. By the end of the fifth century, they ruled Dyfed.

13. Primitive Welsh grew from Brythonic by perhaps the mid-sixth century. By the begining of the ninth it had become Old Welsh, which sometime in the early twelfth century evolved into Middle Welsh.

14. The more a reader is able to verify details in some places, the more likely they are to willingly suspend their disbelief in others.

15. I forwarded pictures for Rovina Cai, the illustrator, and she did a wonderful job; the cauldron is just right—ditto with the armour.

16. I imagined Cei as the kind of English rugby player I used to know: mostly kind—if he thinks you're like him; not stupid

but lazy and willing to learn only when prodded; and (mostly) just this side of being an asshole but (almost) always very close to the line. Basically, a jerk but with some good points, and useful in a fight. I've spent a lot of time in a lot of pubs with men like Cei.

17. The west and southwest of Britain maintained a thriving trade with the Mediterranean, and then Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire, long after the "fall" of the Western Roman Empire, as evidenced by surviving material culture—amphorae, coinage, jewellery, etc.—and also in the fact that parts of the country suffered terribly during the earliest waves of Justinianic Plague. Before that, of course, Britain was an integral part of the Roman Empire, with merchants, civilian citizens, government officials, and military personnel from Africa, Europe, and Asia. In the book, I imagined Bedwyr as coming to Caer Leon from near Hadrian's Wall where many numeri and foederati from all over the Empire were stationed during the fourth century when Irish Pictish and Saxon raids were particularly severe. These soldiers would have intermarried with the local populace. When the Roman tax structure began to wither, those groups would have become, gradually, more like local lords, extracting payment in kind. Bedwyr's forebears were from Africa originally, but he would have grown up speaking Brythonic and Latin, perhaps with the accent of a northerner: in this sense he's as British or "Welsh" as Cei. (Though "Welsh" comes from *wealh*, an Old English word for foreigner, or slave—and that's a whole other story.) Llanza, on the other hand, is an Astur. The Astures were a Celtic tribe from Northern Spain; Llanza would have spoken a dialect of P-Celtic similar to Brythonic, but with an accent.

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Andros, though, would be a native Greek speaker: his accent would definitely be marked.

18. And absolutely not a "Heroine's" Journey. I hate that word, hate it with the heat of a thousand fiery suns—it's as bad as Authoress, or Actress, or Poetess. Just . . . no. That's the problem with binaries: like old-school heroes, one is always Good and the other Bad.

19. But as Tolkien understood, Heroes can rarely go home again.