Cantre'r Gwaelod - The Lost Lands

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Visible at low tides, the remains of an ancient forest can be seen along the coast between Tywyn and Aberdyfi, north of Aberystwyth on the west coast of Wales. Tree stumps and roots of this sunken land can still be found among the medieval peat diggings, which may be the source of the lost lands of the legendary Cantre'r Gwaelod, 'the Lowland' or 'Bottom Hundred'.

Many versions of the same story exist to explain how this area came to be claimed by the sea. Until about the 17th Century, the lost land was called Maes Gwyddno (the land of Gwyddno). This early legend has it that the land was drowned when the priestess of a fairy well allowed the water to overflow.

But the legend which is known and told today, calls the land Cantre'r Gwaelod, which extended some 20 miles west of the current shoreline into what is now Cardigan Bay, and was ruled as part of the Kingdom of Meirionnydd by Gwyddno Garanhir (Longshanks), born circa 520 AD.

The land was said to be extremely fertile, so much so that it was said that any acre there was worth four acres elsewhere. The catch was that the land depended on a dyke to protect it from the sea. The dyke had sluice gates that were opened at low tide to drain the water from the land, and closed as the tide returned.

Around 600 AD, one night a storm blew up from the south west, driving the spring tide against the sea walls. The appointed watchman, Seithennin, a heavy drinker and friend of the King, was at a party in the King’s palace near Aberystwyth. Some say he fell asleep due to too much wine or that he was too busy having fun to notice the storm and to shut the sluices.

The water gates were left open, and the sea rushed in to flood the land of the Cantref, drowning over 16 villages. The King and some of his court managed to escape by running to safety along Sarn Cynfelin, Gwyddno Garahir and his followers were forced to leave the lowlands and make a poorer living in the hills and valleys of Wales.

Another, more bawdy version, maintains that Seithennin was a visiting local King, who, at the time of the storm, was intent on amorousely distracting the fair maiden Mererid, who was in charge of the sluice gates. Successful in his mission, Mererid was therefore unable to shut the gates, and the land was flooded.

Part 2
The legend has inspired many poems and songs throughout the ages. It is first thought to be mentioned in the 750-year old Black Book of Carmarthen. The Black Book, which was named after the colour of its binding, was written in 1250, and contained poems and much older material relating to events that had taken place centuries earlier, including a poem about Cantre'r Gwaelod.

The poem is called "Boddi Maes Gwyddno", The Drowning of the Land of Gwyddno, and tells the early version of story where the maiden Mererid is held responsible for allowing the deluge that floods the land.

The Poem 'Boddi Maes Gwyddno' is one of the finest examples of medieval Welsh poetry, featuring tight and spare triplets with internal rhyme and alliteration. The first four stanzas are below, together with a rough English translation of each verse:

Seithennin, saf-di allan, ac edrychwyr-di faranres môr. Maes Gwyddno rydôes.
Seithennin, stand out here, and look at the wild sea: it has covered Maes Gwyddno.

Boed emendigaid y forwyn a'i hellyngawdd gwedi cwyn, ffynnon fynestr môr terwyn.
Cursed be the maiden who released it after the feast - let the fountain of the rough sea be poured out.

Boed emendigaid y fachdaith a'i gollyngodd gwedi gwaith, ffynnon fynestr môr diffaith.
Cursed be the maiden who released it after battle - let the fountain of the waste sea be poured out.

Diaspad Fererid y ar fan caer; hyd ar Dduw y'i dodir. Gnawd gwedi traha dranc hir.
The cry of Mererid from the high point of the fortress; directed to God it was. Pride as always goes before long dissolution.

Whichever version of the legend you choose, it is said that if you listen closely you can hear the bells of the lost city ringing out from under the sea, especially on quiet Sunday mornings, and particularly if you're in Aberdyfi, which is famous in Welsh folk legend as being the nearest place on dry land to Cantre'r Gwaelod. The well-known song 'The Bells of Aberdyfi' became popular during the 18th Century in the music halls and is still popular during sing-songs in Welsh pubs today.
Cantre'r Gwaelod was said to cover much of the lowlands now beneath Cardigan Bay, and many geographical features are connected to the legend.

The Sarnau, single ridges several miles long, which run at roughly right angles to the shore, are located between each of the four river mouths in the north of the Bay. Legend has it that these ridges are the remains of causeways built to give access to the present mainland at high tide, but they are probably the remains of glacial moraines - formations of gravel, clay, sand and boulders left behind as the glaciers melted away at the end of the last Ice Age.

In his 'Topographical Dictionary of Wales' (1833), Samuel Lewis recorded another of the features of Cardigan Bay, which could be seen at particularly low tides. Caer-Wyddno - "the fort, or palace, of Gwyddno;" is a collection of large stones and boulders, seven miles out to sea, west of Aberystwyth. Could this have been the actual palace of the unfortunate King, who partied while his kingdom flooded?

Many of the global legends that feature flooding, or inundation by water are thought to refer to the drastic changes in land formations after the last Ice Age. Between 17,000 and 7,000 years ago, great ice caps over northern Europe and North America melted down, resulting in floods, and sea-level rises of over 100 metres. 25 million square kilometres of formerly habitable lands around the world were drowned by the waves, and although the changes were mostly gradual, our ancient ancestors would have lived in a turbulent, vulnerable environment.

It is thought that stories were handed down from generation to generation in remembrance of those distant times, and have resulted in the myriad of myths that feature the loss of lands due to coastal flooding and sea level rises. In featuring a 6th Century King, the story of Cantre'r Gwaelod seems to have taken place at a much later point in time, but serves to illustrate how changes in the natural world provide food for the imagination, and tales of the hearthside.

Part 4
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The various versions of this story are all based on the loss of a once fertile area of land, but the different versions throughout the ages may serve as a valuable indicator of the change in social values throughout history.

The earlier version warns of the consequences of being distracted from duty by lust, whilst the later legend has become a fable promoting temperance - a popular choice amongst Welsh Chapel goers - warning of the consequences of having one drink too many.

The legend keeps the story alive in the minds of the masses, as do the names ascribed to the geological features, some of which refer to characters from the stories. Whilst there is no scientific doubt that areas beneath present day Cardigan Bay were forested and probably inhabited 7,000 years ago, up until recently, these references may have been the only tenuous 'proof' to the existence of the Lowland Hundred as a land above the seas in 600 AD.

Advances in technology today may mean that we can discover the location of Cantre'r Gwaedol. In 2003, British scientists unveiled a scanning technique that can create a map of sea beds to identify where people might have lived in the sea off the current Welsh coastline.

Whether Cardigan Bay is investigated or not, the legend of Cantre'r Gwaedol firmly establishes the story of the lost lands of Wales, and provides a variety of twists to the tale that celebrates and mourns the loss of the Lowland Hundred.

By Sarah Goodey, December 2003