

A New Date for the *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein* of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Jesus College MS 20?

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Near the end of the Middle Welsh *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein* (*The Seven Sages of Rome*), on folio 68,15 in Jesus College MS 20 (Bodleian Library, Oxford), an amusing scribal error appears in the final intercalated story, conjuring up the mental image of a king flying away as a crow: ‘*A phan welas y brenhin hynny, hehedec a wnaeth y deu vran ...*’, ‘And when the king saw this, the two crows flew away ...’

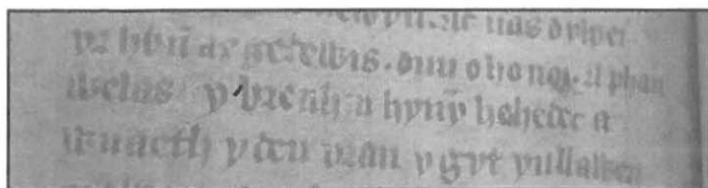


Figure 1. Jesus College MS 20, fol. 318, v. 3.¹

This bizarre sentence occurs within a tale where the main protagonist has the gift of interpreting the cawing of crows. The crows in question seek the king's arbitration in a love triangle, the king gives his judgment with the hero (a handsome young man) serving as interpreter; following the king's decision the two successful crows fly away. It is at this point that the Jesus College MS 20 (hereafter: 'J 20') text unexpectedly places both the Welsh noun '*brenhin*'/'king' and the noun '*brain*'/'crows' as the subject of the sentence where we would expect only '*brein*'/'crows', the reading recorded in the apparatus of

the only scholarly edition of the *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein* by Henry Lewis.²

Both Lewis's base manuscript, Jesus College Oxford MS 111 (Bodleian Library, Oxford, known in Welsh as *Llyfr Coch Hergest* and in English as *The Red Book of Hergest*), and the third medieval manuscript witness of the Middle Welsh *Seith Doethon Rufein*, Llanstephan MS 2 (National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth) have the more expected reading:

'A phan weles y brein hynny ehedec a wnaeth y deu vran'
 'And when the crows saw this, the two of them flew away....'

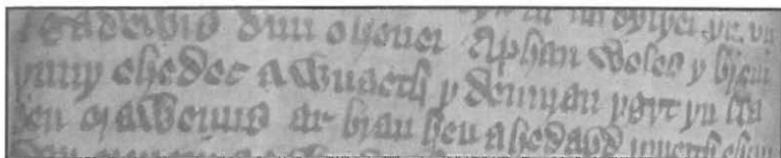


Figure 2. Llanstephan MS 2, fol. 347v, lines 3- 4.³

The Jesus 20 reading is clearly a scribal error. The words '*brein*' and '*brenhin*' are not dissimilar visually, and appear regularly within the story, so this surreal reading could be dismissed as a straightforward instance of scribal inattention. However, a closer look at the corresponding passage in the Red Book points to a very specific reason for this error, as is apparent from the reproduction of the relevant lines (Figure 3).

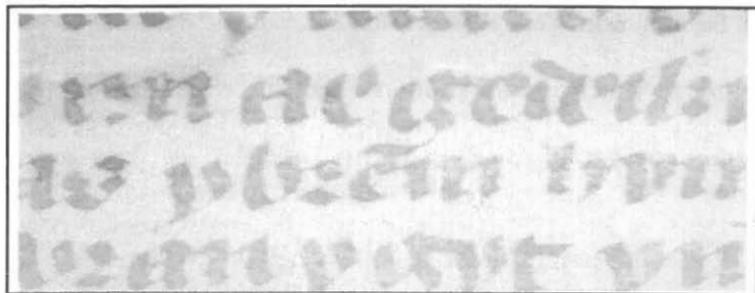


Figure 3. MS Jesus 111, fol. 134r, col. 553, line 48.⁴

As Lewis quite rightly transcribes, this text reads 'y brein' ('the crows'). However, one may note that the word immediately above 'brein', 'gedewis' ('abandoned'), is placed in such a way that the descender of the 'g' is immediately above the 'e' of 'brein'. The spacing of the lines, and the distinctive horizontal ending to the descender, result in a text that is visually deceptive. It looks very much as though we are dealing with a superscript abbreviation, turning 'brein' into an abbreviated form of 'brenhin'.⁵

The likelihood of such a misreading is increased by the fact that this section is very near the bottom of the second 46-line column of the folio, where eye-skips might be expected. At the same time, the error depends on a very specific configuration of the text on the page of the exemplar copied by the scribe of Jesus 20, to the extent that there is a strong argument in favour of the master-manuscript used for Jesus 20 having been the Red Book itself. For a letter 'g' of that specific shape having been copied immediately above the middle letters of the word 'brein' in any other manuscript would presuppose an identical manuscript layout and an identical hand. Considering the exceptional nature of the Red Book compendium, this is highly unlikely; witness the very different visual configuration of the passage in Jesus 20 and Llanstephan 2 (Figures 1 and 2 above).

If, as seems to be the logical conclusion from our observation, the Jesus 20 text of the *Seith Doethon* was copied from the corresponding section of the Red Book, there are implications for our understanding of the textual tradition of the Welsh *Seith Doethon Rufein*. In particular, the currently accepted line of transmission as given by Lewis,⁶ making Jesus 20 the oldest witness, followed by The Red Book at the beginning of the fifteenth century and finally Llanstephan 2 in the mid-fifteenth century, needs to be revised. The text of Jesus 20 can no longer be seen as predating the *Seith Doethon* version of the Red Book. The competing model proposed by J. Gwenogvryn Evans (1902) dated Jesus 20 to the first part of the fifteenth century, making it slightly later than The Red Book, which Gwenogvryn Evans placed at the end of the fourteenth century or beginning of the fifteenth century.⁷ The date of the Red Book itself has now been established with some certainty by a colophon in the Middle Welsh manuscript Philadelphia 8680,⁸ which states that it was copied by Hywel Fychan

for his master Hopcyn ap Tomas of Ynystawe, who is known to have met Owain Glyndŵr in 1403.⁹ The same hand was identified by G. Charles-Edwards (1989-90) as The Red Book's main scribe, thus also dating that manuscript.¹⁰

Gwenogvryn Evans's dating of Jesus 20 was revised drastically in 1953 by R.M. Jones who stated that Evans's dating was in fact a misprint for 'fourteenth century'.¹¹ This reassessment, offered without any supporting argument, was nevertheless generally accepted, and Jesus 20 appears at the beginning of the section for the fourteenth to fifteenth century in Daniel Huws's table of Medieval Welsh manuscripts.¹² Thompson too, in his edition of *Owein* (1986), accepts this date for Jesus 20, placing the Jesus 20 *Owein* text before the one found in The Red Book. Stephens, in the *Oxford Companion to the Literature of Wales* (1986) equally considers the text of the *Seith Doethon* in Jesus 20 to be a product of the mid fourteenth century. In 2007, Rodway distanced himself from the earlier consensus, stating that 'the grounds for this dating are unclear' and giving the Red Book as the oldest witness to the *Seith Doethon*, rather than the Jesus 20 version;¹³ however, in 2011, Lloyd-Morgan suggested a date of c. 1400 for Jesus 20 and c. 1408 for The Red Book which, although placing Jesus 20 in the fifteenth century still accepts its seniority.¹⁴ It would now appear that Rodway's judgment is vindicated, on the evidence of a simple mistake made by the Jesus 20 scribe who expanded a non-existent abbreviation when copying the text of *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein* from the Red Book of Hergest.

It is therefore clear from the manuscript evidence that the *Chwedleu* section of Jesus 20 postdates The Red Book, as it was copied from it. The stemma for the Welsh *Seith Doethon Rufein* must now be seen as comprising two distinct but close textual families, with the Llanstephan manuscript on the one hand, and the Red Book tradition, from which the Jesus text is derived, with some reworking. It remains to be seen what implications all this has for the other texts contained in Jesus 20.

Notes

¹ Reproduced with kind permission of the Librarian.

³ H. Lewis, *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein o Lyfr Coch Hergest*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1925 (second edition 1967), p. 80.

³ Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Wales.

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⁵ 'Brenyn' appears in the laws of Hywel Dda (c. eleventh century) codified in Peniarth MS 29, Llyfr Du'r Waun (The Black Book of Chirk), National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. In the twelfth century Peniarth MS 4, better known as Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch (The White Book of Rhydderch), National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, fol.3, 1 has 'urenhin'. Though Modern Welsh omits the 'h' in 'brenin', the three Middle Welsh manuscript witnesses to *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein* all include it.

⁶ S. Rodway, 'The Where, Who, When and Why of Medieval Welsh Prose Texts', *Studia Celtica* XL (2007): 47-89, is a rare dissenting voice in this respect.

⁷ J. G. Evans, *Report on Manuscripts in the Welsh Language*, vol. 2, London, HMSO, 1902.

⁸ The full reference of this manuscript is Philadelphia MS 8680, Library Company of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.

⁹ D. Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*, Cardiff and Aberystwyth, University of Wales Press and The National Library of Wales, 2000; p. 80.

¹⁰ G. C. Edwards, 'The Scribes of the Red Book of Hergest', *Journal of the National Library of Wales*, 21.3 (1989-90): 246-56.

¹¹ R. M. Jones, 'Y Rhamantau Arthuraidd' *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 15 (1953): 110, note 2.

¹² Huws, (2000), p. 60. The placing of the manuscript at this point could be explained by its catalogue number in H. O. Coxe's *Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Oxford Colleges*, vol. II (orig. 1852): in Coxe's catalogue, J 20 is the twentieth in the list of manuscripts held by Jesus College, with the Red Book numbered at one hundred and eleven.

¹³ Rodway, note 86.

¹⁴ C. Lloyd-Morgan, *Welsh Manuscripts and English Manuscripts in Wales*. (An Index of Images in English and Welsh Manuscripts 6), Turnhout, Belgium and Washington, U.S.A., 2011, pp. 67-68.