

Mabon ap Modron

The story of the Divine Son

Mabon ap Modron, the Son of the Mother, in his story from birth to kingship, is a recurring theme found throughout Celtic mythological and legendary literature. Presented here is an insight into his story as found in the myths of "the Mabinogion" collection in the White and Red Books, and from this the reader will recognise the theme as it occurs in the Welsh, the Irish and in the ancient Gaullish traditions.

The *Mabon* theme is that of the birth of a miraculous - divine - boy, born to a remarkable or significant - divine - mother, who is lost to her, performs amazing feats to attain manhood, and wins the hand of a beautiful - also divine - maiden. *Mabon* is the Celtic child solar deity; his mother the Celtic tripartite goddess in her mother aspect and the maiden the goddess as maiden. His story has a seasonal aspect, for we can identify the time of birth of the Celtic god's nativity, and also of his union with the goddess: these are recorded in the myths quite clearly.

Mabon literally means 'son' and comes from the Celtic 'maonos' now found in 'map', 'mab' and 'mac' (meaning 'son of') in the extant Celtic languages. Likewise, *Modron* literally means 'mother', from 'matronae', 'the Mothers', the Celtic tripartite Goddess. The ultimate meaning of "the Mabinogion" relates to this, and the Four Branches together appear to have originally formed a 'Myth of the Son'. While the White Book of Rhydderch (1325) and the Red Book of Hergest (1400) were compiled from redactions quite late, the stories themselves are much older, and the themes ancient. The fostering of the 'son' characters, for example, clearly echo the account Julius Caesar recorded during the Conquest of Gaul.

We meet the divine child *Mabon* over and over again throughout the myths in the Mabinogion and in other sources, and he has many names. He is Mabon ap Modron, he is Culhwch, he is Lleu, and he is Pryderi; he is many others as well, but these will suffice to reveal his nature and deeds.

Mabon ap Modron

Let us first look at the story of Mabon ap Modron itself, and from it follow the revelation of the Divine Son story as details come to light. We find the story of Mabon ap Modron within the tale 'How Culhwch won Olwen', first written down in about AD990 from a corpus of never fully recorded material, and this is the story:

One of the many tasks required of Culhwch by Chief Giant Ysbaddaden, in order to win the hand of his daughter Olwen, was to enlist the houndsmanship of "Mabon son of Modron, who was abducted from his mother when he was three nights old. No one knows where he is, or if he is alive or dead." All of the tasks are intended to be impossible to achieve but in response, as with all the other tasks, Culhwch replies, "It will be easy for me to get that, though you may think otherwise."

In due course, the task of locating Mabon is begun. Culhwch is not alone, but has as his chief guide his cousin Arthur, as well as the services of Eiddoel, Gwrhyr Interpreter of Languages, Kei and Bedwyr. Gaining the assistance of Eiddoel, first cousin to Mabon, was as an important prerequisite task immediately previously enlisted by means of eloquence on Arthur's behalf.

The party began their search for Mabon by asking the Ousel of Kilgrwri: "Do you know anything of Mabon son of Modron, who when three nights old was stolen away from

between his mother and the wall?" Though the ousel was old enough to have worn down an anvil to the size of a nut working with nothing more than its beak, it did not know anything of the man they sought. It did offer to guide them to a more ancient creature who might be able to assist them.

Sequentially, and asking the same formula question, and obtaining the same answer and assistance, the party meets more and more ancient creatures, namely the Stag of Rhendevre (as old as a forest), the Owl of Cwn Cawlwyd (as old as three forests), the Eagle of Gwernabwy (who was so old that he had worn down a rock which he pecked at the height of the stars to the size of a hand) and finally the Salmon of Llyn Llyw.

After asking the same question to the Salmon, it told them that it had "found such evil as I had never found before" at Gloucester. It took Kei and Gwrhyr to this evil, which was revealed to be the imprisoned Mabon. "They heard moaning and wailing from the other side of the wall; Mabon son of Modron is here, and no one was ever so harshly imprisoned, not Lludd Silver Hand, not Greid son of Eri", though Triad 52 names the Three Famous Prisoners as Mabon, Llyr and Gweir.

Not gold or silver, nor worldly wealth could secure the release of Mabon, only battle and fighting. The battle to free Mabon was achieved through Arthur summoning the warriors of Britain, and Kei 'broke through the wall of the enclosure and rescued the prisoner on his back; then Arthur returned home, and with him Mabon, a free man.'

In this short story then, an unnamed son, a 'Mabon', is born to an unnamed mother, his 'Modron' and is soon afterwards abducted, on his third night; he is lost to all, even the most ancient of creatures, except for the Salmon, who holds the knowledge of his location and that he is imprisoned. The presence of his cousin is required for the end of his abduction, and only the King of Britain is able to secure his release. In the end he emerges as a free man.

The story of Mabon ap Modron itself is brief and lacking in detail. His abduction remains a mystery and both his and his mother's names are simply a wordplay on their roles as son and mother, and we do not meet Modron. The theme of *mabon* is more fully developed in the stories of other heroes of mythology, and it is to these we now turn.

From Maiden to Modron: the Birth of Mabon

The birth of the *mabon* child is always associated with some type of mystery, and the effect of the birth upon the mother profound. The birth marks the transition of the tripartite Goddess from 'Maiden' to 'Modron', and always the child is soon afterwards separated from her. Culhwch and his first cousin Arthur are at the rescue of Mabon ap Modron. The story of the birth of Culhwch gives us more detail of the *mabon* theme, both for the son as well as the mother. Here is the story of Culhwch's birth:

Kilydd son of the king of Kelyddon wanted a wife as well born as himself, and the woman he chose was Goleuddydd, 'Bright Day'. After he had slept with her, the country went to pray for the couple to have children, and because of these prayers, a son was born. Once she had become pregnant Goleuddydd went mad and would enter no house, but when her time came her senses returned. She was near a swineherd and his herd of pigs, and out of fear of the pigs, she delivered. The swineherd kept the boy until he came to court, where the lad was given the name Culhwch, 'Pig run' because he had been found in a pig run, and he was a well-born lad.

The mystery behind Culhwch's birth is that it was not due to Kilydd's sleeping with the maiden Goleuddydd that made her pregnant, but rather 'because of these prayers', and his birth and Goleuddydd's transition from maiden to mother was 'out of fear of the pigs'. Culhwch's separation from his mother is removal by the swineherd.

The period of transition of the Goddess from Maiden to *Modron* made Goleuddydd 'mad', and indeed she dies soon after in the myth. This is reflected by the angry reaction of Arianrhod to the birth of her son, later known as Llew, which also follows the *mabon* theme.

Math the Lord of Gwynedd asked his niece Arianrhod, daughter of his sister Don, "Girl, are you a virgin?" She replies, "I do not know but that I am." Math took his wand and bent it, saying "Step over that, and if you are a virgin I will know." Arianrhod stepped over the wand, and with that she dropped a sturdy boy with thick yellow hair. The mystery of this birth is that Arianrhod was still a maiden - her entire pregnancy seems to take place as she steps over the wand. Like Culhwch, the son of Arianrhod is spirited away, this time by her brother Gwydion, for we are told 'Gwydion snatched it up and wrapped it in a silk sheet and hid it in a little chest at the foot of his bed.'

Arianrhod becomes angry, and she denies the boy a name, "he shall have no name until he obtains one from me." To this Gwydion replies: "*Being a woman now you are angry, because you are no longer a virgin - never again will you be called a virgin!*"

The *mabon* theme is also found in the birth of the son of Rhiannon, later known as Pryderi. Like the virginity of the maiden Arianrhod, so, too, was Rhiannon resoundingly virginal. It took five years for her to produce a child to Pwyll, from the time they first met. Because of the lack of an heir 'the men of Dyfed began to fret at seeing that this man Pwyll whom they loved as their lord and foster-brother was still childless'. Pwyll asked to be given another year, and 'they set a date, and before the year was up, Rhiannon bore Pwyll a son in Arberth.'

On the night of his birth, the son of Rhiannon was abducted. No one knew where he was, even though six hand maidens were in attendance with Rhiannon at his birth. Stricken with anxiety, the hand maidens falsely accused Rhiannon of infanticide, and sacrificed new born deerhound pups to display bones and blood as proof. Rhiannon was sympathetic to their worry, and attempted to have the maidens speak the truth, that they did not know what had happened, but their fear of punishment compelled them to maintain their lie: They claimed they would 'consider it getting off lightly if we were only burned or executed'.

And so Rhiannon stood accused, and 'was to sit every day by the mounting-block near the gate and tell her story to anyone who might not already know it, and to offer to carry guests and strangers to the court on her back.' Such was the 'anger' or 'madness' Rhiannon had to endure having transformed from Maiden to Modron.

Like the abductions of Llew and Culhwch, the *mabon* of Rhiannon was fosterage to an 'uncle' figure, who was the lord of Gwent Ys Coed, Teyrn Twryf Liant 'Bright Tower'. He 'found by his door a small boy in swaddling clothes and wrapped in a silk mantle.' He presented the boy to his wife, saying "Here is a boy for you, if you want him, for that is the one thing you have never had.' His wife said, "See, lord, what kind of cloth the boy is wrapped in? He is the son of noble folk. This could be a joy and comfort to me. I will take some women folk into my confidence and we will let out that I have been pregnant."

In the abduction story of the child of Rhiannon, we are told when *mabon* is born:

At the time of the birth of Rhiannon's son, Teyrn Twryf Liant was the best man in the world. Teyrn had a mare in his house, and there was not a handsomer horse in the realm. Every May Eve she foaled, but no one ever knew anything of the colt, so that

Teyrnon, in talking to his wife said, "Wife, we are fools to loose the foal of our mare every year without getting even one of them." "What can you do about it?" she asked. "It is May Eve tonight," said he, "God's revenge on me if I do not find out what fate the foals have met with." So he had the mare brought inside, while he armed himself and began to watch.

As night fell the mare foaled, a big colt without a flaw and standing already. Teyrnon rose to remark the sturdiness of the colt, and as he did so he heard a great noise, whereupon a great claw came through the window and seized the colt by the mane. Teyrnon drew his sword and hacked the arm off at the elbow, so that the colt and part of the arm were inside with him. Hearing a loud crash and a scream, he opened the door and rushed out after the noise; and he found by the door a small boy in swaddling clothes and wrapped in a silk mantle.

So here we find that the birth of *mabon* is upon Beltaine, the beginning of the season of Summer. During his 'abduction', the boy was called Gwri Golden Hair because 'what hair was on his head was as yellow as gold'. No wonder his hair is 'golden', for no other imagery would be appropriate.

According to Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia*, Arthur was born in the same *Mabon* theme manner, and his was also a mysterious birth. Geoffrey's story demonstrates the essential attributes of the *mabon* stories found in the Mabinogion, of which Geoffrey would likely have been aware - he claimed to have read an ancient manuscript of the Britons.

Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, King of Britain, desired to bed the beautiful Ygerna, and this he made known to Ulfin: "I am desperately in love with Ygerna," said Uther, "and if I cannot have her, I am convinced that I shall suffer a physical breakdown. You must tell me how I can satisfy my desire for her, for otherwise I shall die of the passion which is consuming me." "Who can possibly give you useful advice," answered Ulfin, "when no power on Earth can enable us to come to her where she is inside the fortress of Tintagel? The castle is built high over the sea, which surrounds it on all sides, and there is no other way in, except that offered by a narrow isthmus of rock. Three armed soldiers could not hold it against you, even if you stood there with the whole Kingdom of Britain at your side. If only the prophet Merlin would give his mind to the problem, then with this help I think you might be able to obtain what you want."

Merlin was summoned and advised, "I know how to give you the precise appearance of Gorlois her husband, so that you will resemble him in every respect. I will change my appearance, too, and come with you. In this way you will be able to go safely to Ygerna in her castle." The King spent that night with her, having deceived her by the disguise. She refused him nothing that he asked. That night she conceived Arthur, the most famous of men, who subsequently won great renown by his outstanding bravery.

Meanwhile, Gorlois was killed, and Uther Pendragon mourned for the death of Gorlois; but he was happy all the same, that Ygerna was freed from her marital obligations. He returned to Tintagel Castle, captured it and seized Ygerna. From that day they lived together as equals, united by a great love for each other. She bore Arthur, and a daughter, Anna.

In honour of *Modron* in her Christianised form, Mary mother of Jesus, Arthur had the image of the Virgin Mary inscribed on his shield 'so he would always think of her.'

The Abduction and Rescue of Mabon

In the story of Mabon ap Modron, we are told that he was 'abducted from his mother when he was three nights old'. In the story of Culhwch, we are told that he was brought up by the Swineherd; In the story of Lleu, we are told he was brought up by his uncle, Gwydion; and in the story of Pryderi, we are told he was brought up by Teirnon and his wife. The separation of *mabon* is the story of his abduction. His rescue is the story of the gaining of his name.

This part of the *mabon* theme is overseen by an 'uncle' figure. In the different stories, the specific relationship to *mabon* varies, but there is good reason to identify the uncle as the intended relation in the theme. In these stories, the end result is the kingship of the hero. Using matrilineal descent, it is the son of the sister of the family patriarch who inherits. This inheritance is clearly shown in the story of Lleu in the myth of Math ap Mathonwy, where at its outset the Lord of Gwynedd is Math and at its conclusion Lleu.

Confusion as to the maternal uncle's relationship to Mabon in other myths is understandable given the time that these stories were recorded and the religious and social customs of the myths' recorders. Geoffrey of Monmouth very frequently confuses uncle-nephew and first cousin relationships in his History of the Kings of Britain. Specific confusion in the Mabinogion appear in the relationship between Manawdan and Casawallawn, where in the myth of Branwen they are nephew and uncle, but in the myth of Manawydan they are first cousins. In this light, the necessity to enlist the assistance of Eiddoel, the first cousin of Mabon, prior to obtaining the freedom of Mabon makes sense. And witness Arthur's response to Culhwch when he presents himself at Arthur's court:

Arthur asked who the lad was, saying "My heart grows tender towards you, and I know that you must come from my lineage. tell me who you are." "I am Culhwch, son of Kilydd son of the ruler of Kelyddon, and Goleuddydd daughter of the ruler of Amlawdd is my mother." Arthur said, "That is true. You are my first cousin, therefore state your desire and you shall have it, whatever mouth and tongue may name."

Originally, Math's nephews Gilvaethwy and Gwydion attempted to usurp power from Math through the rape of his virgin footholder Goewin, and consequently loose their right to inherit. These two were the brothers of Arianrhod, and the sons of Math's sister, Don. The punishment befit the crime, and Gilvaethwy and Gwydion were shape shifted by Math into male and female deer, wild pigs and wolves over three consecutive years, and each year they produced a boy, namely Hyddwn 'Deer', Hwchdwyn 'Pig' and Bleiddwn 'Wolf'. Gwydion subsequently sponsored the kingship of his nephew Lleu, who was born by a 'fabulous birth' to Gwydion's sister, Arianrhod.

Thus, Math was Lord of Gwynedd when his sister Don was the *modron* of Gwydion, Gilvaethwy and the daughter Arianrhod, but Gwydion was disinherited: Gwydion's sister Arianrhod became the *modron* of Lleu, who became the new Lord of Gwynedd. It follows from this that each king was originally a "Mabon ap Modron", with each *Modron* being the sister of the king.

The naming of *mabon* marks his 'rescue'.

Culhwch did not receive his name until he had grown sufficiently to go to court, where he received a name based on a pertinent aspect about him - his place of birth, namely 'Pig run'.

Likewise, Lleu did not receive his name until he had grown sufficiently to go to court. His abductor, Gwydion arranged for a woman in the town to nurse the unnamed child, and he developed at tremendous rate: "The boy was raised for a year, and at the end of it, his size would have been large had he been twice as old, and by the second he was a big boy who could go to court himself".

The naming of Llew came after Gwydion had trained him in the arts of craftsmanship. They returned to Arianrhod's court shape shifted in the guise of cobblers and tricked Arianrhod into naming her *mabon* based on a pertinent aspect about him - his skilfulness: the lad aimed at a wren and hit him between the sinew and the bone of the leg. At that, Arianrhod remarked, "The light-haired one hit it with a skilful hand," and Gwydion declared, "That he did, and the lad has got a name, and a good enough one: Llew Llaw Gyffes, 'Bright Skilful Hand'.

This form of naming is true also for Pryderi. The young Gwri was brought up at the court, and before he was a year old he could walk and was sturdier than a well-grown three year old. At the end of the second year he was as strong as a six-year-old, and by the time he was four he was bargaining with the stable boys to let him water the horses. Looking at Gwri, Teyrnon's wife said, "Would it not be a good idea that the colt rescued on the night the boy was found be broken in and given to the boy?" And so she went to the stable-boys and grooms to command them to look after the colt and break it in for when the boy would go riding and there would be a story about him.

And when the boy was five, after Teirnan had heard of the abduction of the son of Rhiannon, it was time for him to be presented at court. Teyrnon's wife agreed to send Gwri back to Pwyll, "for we will gain in three ways, lord: thanks and gratitude for releasing Rhiannon from her punishment, Pwyll's thanks for rearing the boy and returning him, and finally, if the boy grows into a good man, he will be our foster-son and will always do the best he can for us."

The conclusion of Gwri's 'abduction' was, like Culhwch and Llew, his presentation at court, where he was given his true name: "Lady," said Teirnon to Rhiannon, "look upon your son, for whoever lied about you did you wrong." And seeing her son, Rhiannon declared, "What a relief from my anxiety if this is true!"

Rhiannon as *Modron* had thus named her *Mabon* for a very pertinent aspect about him, that is, 'Pryderi', 'my anxiety'.

This is the completion of the story of the abduction of *mabon* and his release through the actions of his 'uncle'. Now he has been given his identity.

Winning the Hand of the Maiden

And Culhwch replied to Arthur after his recognition as first cousin, "Then I ask you for Olwen daughter of Chief Giant Ysbaddaden, and I invoke her in the name of your warriors."

In the myths concerning Culhwch and Llew we have superlative descriptions of the destiny of the post-abduction Named *mabon*. Subsequent to his release from abduction, the 'Mabon' story develops, and this is to gain the hand of the most beautiful woman in the world, the Maiden Goddess, as a prelude to his kingship.

After having been presented at court, where he received his name, Culhwch was offered by his father's wife the hand of her daughter. Culhwch denied her, claiming to be too young yet to take a wife. In angry retort his father's wife declares, "Then I swear this destiny upon you: your side shall never touch that of a woman until you win Olwen daughter of Chief Giant Ysbaddaden".

The mere utterance of Olwen's name made Culhwch feel 'love for her enter into every limb'. Olwen is clearly not a woman of this earth. She is indeed the Maiden Goddess, just as *Modron* is the Mother Goddess. Here is how she is described in the myth:

Olwen was dressed in a flame red silk robe with a torque of red gold around her neck studded with precious pearls and rubies. Her hair was yellower than broom, her skin whiter than sea foam, her palms and fingers whiter than shoots of marsh trefoil against the sand of a welling spring. Neither the eye of a mewed hawk nor the eye of a thrice

mewed falcon was fairer than hers, her breasts whiter than the breast of a white swan, her cheeks redder than the reddest foxgloves, and anyone who saw her would fall deeply in love. Wherever she went four white trefoils appeared behind her, and for that reason she was called Olwen, 'White Track'.

The destiny laid upon Culhwch has a direct counterpart in the story of Lleu in the myth of Math ap Mathonwy. After having gained his name and arms at the court of his mother, by means of shape-shifting trickery conducted by Lleu's uncle and instructor Gwydion, Lleu has a fate placed on him by his mother, Arianrhod, in angry retort to the trickery: *"I will swear a fate on the boy: he shall have no wife of the race that is on the earth at this time."*

Such a wife, like Olwen, would again be no other than the Maiden Goddess. Using further magic, Gwydion with the assistance of his uncle, Math, conjure a maiden out of *'the flowers of oak and broom and meadowsweet, the most beautiful girl anyone had seen; they baptized her with the form of baptism that was used then, and named her Blodeuwedd, 'Flowers'.*

In the story of Pryderi, we have a slightly different situation. For Pryderi himself, we are told simply that he married the beautiful Kigfa and ruled as Price of Dyfed for many a year. It is the story of Pwyll, his father, that reveals the winning of the hand of the maiden. Like the denials of the wife of Kilydd and Arianrhod, it is Rhiannon who denies Pwyll a wife - herself - until she is ready.

It was Rhiannon who declared her love for Pwyll. Over three consecutive nights, Pwyll had gone to sit on the Gorsedd Arberth, the Mound of Arberth, 'where whenever a man of royal birth sits on it, one of two things happens: he receives blows and wounds, or else he sees a wonder.' Pwyll had seen a wonder, for 'a woman dressed in shining gold brocade and riding a great pale horse' had approached the hill on the first, and the second and again on the third night of his sitting.

Each time Pwyll had sent a man to try to catch up with her, and each time no matter whether he walked or mounted his horse or chased at full speed, he could not catch up with the horsewoman, even though she would appear to travel 'at a slow steady pace'. Exasperated, Pwyll himself mounted his horse on the third night; 'He climbed the saddle, but no sooner had he done so than the lady rode past him. Giving his spirited prancing mount its head he turned to follow, supposing he would overtake her on the second or third bound; yet he drew no closer than before. He pushed his horse to its utmost speed, until he saw that pursuit was fruitless:

Pwyll then called out, "Lady, for the sake of the man you love most, stop for me!" "I will gladly," said she, "and it would have been better for your horse had you asked me earlier." The lady reigned in and halted, and drew up the part of her veil that covered her face; and said, "I am doing my errands, and I am glad to see you." Pwyll said, "I welcome you." It seemed to Pwyll that the beauty of every girl and woman he had ever seen was nothing compared to the face of this lady. She said, "My most important errand was to try to see you; I am Rhiannon daughter of Heveydd the Old. I am being given to a man against my will; I have not wanted any husband, and that because of my love for you. Even now I will not have him unless you reject me, and it to hear your answer that I have come." "Had I my choice of every girl and woman in the world, I would choose you," answered Pwyll. So they set a date, before she was given to another man: "A year from tonight in Heveydd's court, "Rhiannon declared, "I will see that a feast is prepared for your arrival."

Here the similarity between the story of Pwyll 'Judgement' and the Irish story of Mider 'Judgement' meeting Etaine for three days on the hill above his court is worth noting, for the Irish myths are also replete with the *mabon* theme, further examined in the companion article Bé Find.

In the story of Mabon ap Modron, his imprisonment in Gloucester is significant. In Geoffrey's *Historia*, Gloucester was originally Kaerglou, named either for the Emperor Claudius, who built the city in memory of the great love between his daughter Genvissa, whose 'beauty was such that everyone who saw her was filled with admiration' and King Arvirargus, or for Claudius' son Gloius who had been born in that city. Either way, the theme of the love for the most beautiful girl in the world, and the son of noble birth are important to the *Mabon* story of the myths. Geoffrey would have been aware of these stories when he wrote his great work in 1135.

Indeed, the myth 'How Culhwch won Olwen' iterates the *mabon* theme manifold. The simple reference to the city of Gloucester in itself summarises by implication the entire 'Mabon' story, and this reference occurs within the Mabon ap Modron story. Likewise, the story of Mabon is embedded within the myth of Culhwch, and the story of Culhwch is part of the great story of Arthur, an element within the totality of Celtic mythology. So like some sort of literary Celtic knot work, the story of Mabon iterates itself in an infinite progression.

The time between Rhiannon choosing Pwyll and her bearing a son was exactly five years. This period of five years is also true for the abduction times of Gwri and Lleu and reflected in the five-fold questioning of ancient creatures, the ouzel, stag, owl, eagle and salmon, in the quest to locate Mabon ap Modron. These stories may be an echo of that ancient calendar known from Gaul.

This proposition is further supported by the birth of *mabon* occurring at Beltaine, which is when the ancient calendar also began. We know this date directly from the myth of Pryderi, and the other *mabon* heroes are of the same nature as the boy Gwri. This is true also of Cú Chulaind in Irish myth, whose birth was accompanied with that of a colt. Romans posted on the Wall also recognised *Apollo Mabon*, associating him with the Roman Sun God; and Patrick was most upset with the Irish celebrating the Sun God at Beltaine when he lit the Easter Fires in honour of the Resurrection of Christ.

This article has explored the theme of the Divine Son in Celtic mythology and shown its recurrence throughout the myths of Britain, Ireland and presence in Gaul. It is a theme of the continuation of the Divine lineage, with kingship passing matrilineally through the tripartite Goddess, at the time of rebirth in the Celtic world - the start of Summer. Here we find the true celebration of Mabon - far from the autumn equinox as suggested by some - and with his birth, the power of rebirth provided by the Divine Mother, the Goddess of the Celts.

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