

THE DREAM OF MAXEN

'MAXEN' is a mixture of history and pseudo-history and reflects traditions found also in Geoffrey's *Historia*. Maxen himself is a composite figure. He draws his name from Maxentius, Roman emperor from A.D. 306 to 312, but the source of the tale is the career of the Spaniard Magnus Maximus (in Geoffrey identified with the Roman senator Maximianus, another confusion). Maximus served with the Roman army in Britain from A.D. 368 until 383, when the disenchanted troops proclaimed him emperor. He crossed the Channel, defeated Gratian and became master of Gaul and Spain, and even of northern Italy; subsequently Theodosius defeated him twice, however, and in 388 Maximus was captured and beheaded. In Geoffrey's version the Roman senator Maximianus is invited to Britain to marry the daughter of Octavius (Eudav in 'Maxen') and to rule the island. This daughter is not named, but only a few pages earlier in the *Historia* Cœl's daughter Helena (Elen in 'Maxen') is married to the wise and courageous Roman senator Constantius, and it seems that through further confusion Elen became the name of Maxen's wife. Geoffrey's Conanus, the nephew of Octavius, appears in 'Maxen' as Eudav's son Kynan, but the part he plays is very different.

The debt of 'Maxen' to Geoffrey is difficult to determine. It is clear that Geoffrey's history is the more accurate, and that 'Maxen' has departed from the tradition of the *Historia* by making the

ruler a wise and courageous hero, by making his expedition to Rome (to *recapture* the throne) a success, and most of all by claiming that Maxen could not have retaken Rome without the help of his wife's relatives. As told, 'Maxen' extols the beauty of Elen, and the courage and intelligence of Kynan and Avaon.

The Dream of Maxen

The ruler Maxen was Emperor of Rome, and he was handsomer and wiser and better suited to be emperor than any of his predecessors. One day, at an assembly of kings, he said to his friends, 'I wish to go hunting tomorrow.' So the next morning he set out with his host; they rode to the valley of the river which flows through Rome and hunted until noon. There were with Maxen thirty-two crowned kings, all his men, and it was not so much for the pleasure of hunting that the emperor rode out as because he had been made a man of such rank that he was lord over all these kings. The sun was high overhead and with the great heat Maxen grew sleepy, so his chamberlains made a castle round him by setting their shields on their spear shafts to protect him from the sun, and they placed a gold-chased shield under his head. Thus the emperor slept.

In his sleep Maxen had a dream. He saw himself travelling to the end of the valley and reaching the highest mountain in the world – it seemed as high as the sky – and having crossed this mountain he saw himself journeying through the flattest and loveliest land that anyone had seen. Great broad rivers flowed from the mountain to the sea, and he made along these rivers to their outlets, and though his journey was long he finally reached the mouth of the greatest river anyone had seen. There he saw a great city, and a great fortress within with many tall towers

of different colours. At the mouth of the river he saw a fleet, the greatest he had seen, and one of the ships was much bigger and more beautiful than any of the others; insofar as the ship was visible above the water he could see one plank of gold and another of silver. A bridge of ivory led from ship to shore, and along that bridge Maxen saw himself going aboard, whereupon the sail was hoisted and the ship set out across the sea until it came to the loveliest island in the world. When he had crossed this island from one sea to the other, to the very farthest reaches, he saw steep slopes and high crags and a harsh rough land whose like he had never seen, and beyond it an island in the sea. Between him and this island he saw a land where the plain was as broad as the sea and the forest as broad as the mountain; from this mountain a river ran through the land and down to the sea, and at the mouth of the river stood a great fortress, the handsomest ever. The gate was open and he entered.

Inside Maxen saw a fine hall: its roof seemed all of gold, its sides of luminous stones all equally precious, its doors all of gold. There were golden couches and silver tables, and on the couch facing him two auburn-haired lads playing gwyddbwyll¹ with a silver board and golden men. These lads were dressed in pure black brocade, with headbands of red gold restraining their hair, and precious luminous stones therein, rubies and gems and imperial stones in alternation, and shoes of new cordovan on their feet, strapped on with bands of red gold. By the base of a pillar Maxen saw a white-haired man sitting in a chair of elephant ivory, on which was an image of two eagles in red gold; he wore gold armlets, and rings on his fingers and a gold torque round his neck, with a gold hairband, and he had an impressive quality about him. A gold board

1. gwyddbwyll (=fidchell in Irish): wood sense. A board game in which one side's king attempts to escape to the edge of the board, and the other side attempts to capture him.

for gwyddbwyll lay before him; in his hands he held a bar of gold and a file, and he was carving men for the game.

Sitting before him Maxen also saw a girl in a chair of red gold, and looking at the sun at its brightest would be no harder than looking at her beauty: she wore shifts of white silk with red gold fastenings across the breast, and a gold brocade surcoat and mantle, the latter fastened by a brooch of red gold, a hairband with rubies and gems and pearls and imperial stones in alternation, and a belt of red gold. She was the loveliest sight man had ever seen. From her golden chair she rose to Maxen, and he threw his arms round her neck, and they sat down in the chair, which was as comfortable for two as it had been for her alone. His arms were round her neck, and they were sitting cheek to cheek, but what with the hounds straining at their leashes, and the edges of the shields banging together and the spear shafts rubbing together and the stamping and whinnying of the horses the emperor woke up.

When Maxen woke, there was no life or being or existence in him because of the girl he had seen in his dream – not a knuckle-bone, not the tip of a fingernail, let alone anything more, was not full of love for her. His retainers said, 'Lord, it is past your mealtime,' so the emperor, the saddest man ever seen, mounted his palfrey and rode back to Rome, and thus he remained for a week. When his retinue went to drink wine and mead from golden cups he stayed behind; when they went to listen to songs and entertainments he stayed behind. He did nothing but sleep, for then he would dream of the woman he loved best, and when he was awake he cared for nothing about him because he did not know where she was.

One day a chamberlain spoke to the emperor (though he was a chamberlain he was also King of the Romani), 'Lord, your men all slander you.' 'Why?' 'Because you give them neither the speech nor the errands that men

expect from their lord,' and the emperor answered, 'Summon the wise men of Rome, and I will tell you why I am sad.' The wise men of Rome were summoned, and Maxen told them, 'I have had a dream, and in that dream I have seen a girl, and because of her there is not life nor being nor existence in me.' 'Lord,' said the wise men, 'as you have asked us, we will advise you. For the next three years send messengers to the three parts of the earth in search of your dream. Since you will never know at what time of day or night good news might arrive, that much hope will sustain you.' The messengers were sent to roam the world seeking news of the emperor's dream, but when they returned at the end of a year they knew not a word more than they had when they set out, and the emperor was saddened to think that he would never get news of the woman he loved most.

The King of the Romani then said to him, 'Lord, set out to hunt where you saw yourself, whether east or west.' The emperor did this; he found the river bank and said, 'This is where I was in my dream, and I was moving westward upstream.' Thirteen men set out as the emperor's messengers, until they saw before them a mountain which seemed to reach to the sky. These messengers journeyed thus: each one wore a sleeve of his cape in front as a sign that he was a messenger, so that whatever warring land they might pass through they would come to no harm. Having crossed the mountain they saw great level expanses with broad rivers flowing through them and they said, 'Look, here is the land our lord saw.' They travelled along the estuaries of the rivers until they reached a major river which flowed into the sea; they found a great city at the mouth of the river, and within a great fortress with many tall towers of various colours, and at the mouth of the river the largest fleet in the world, and one ship larger than any of the others. 'Here again is the dream our lord

saw,' they said. They boarded the great ship and sailed to the island of Britain, and then they journeyed through that island until they reached Eryri.² 'And here is the rough land our lord saw,' they said. They went on until they could see Môn³ opposite, and Arvon as well, and again they said, 'There is the land our lord saw in his dream.' They saw Aber Seint⁴ and a fortress at the mouth of the river; finding the gate open they entered and saw a hall. 'Look, the hall our lord saw in his dream.'

The messengers then entered the hall and saw the two lads playing gwyddbwyll on the golden couch and the white-haired man seated in the ivory chair at the base of the column carving gwyddbwyll men; they saw the girl seated in the chair of red gold, and they knelt down before her and hailed her as Empress of Rome. 'Sirs, you have the look of noblemen, as well as the badge of messengers,' she said. 'Why then do you mock me?' 'Lady, we do not. The Emperor of Rome has seen you in a dream, and now life and being and existence have all left him. We give you a choice: you may come with us and be made empress in Rome, or else the emperor will come here to make you his wife.' 'Men,' she answered, 'I do not doubt what you say, but I do not believe it overmuch either. If it is I whom the emperor loves, let him come for me.'

The messengers rode day and night getting back; when their horses failed they left them and bought new ones, and when they reached Rome they went to greet the emperor and ask for their reward, which they got even as they were asking: 'Lord, we will guide you by land and sea to the woman you love best; we know her name and her relatives and her birth,' they said. At once the emperor and his host set out, taking the messengers along as guides. They crossed ocean and sea to the island of Britain, which

2. Eryri = Snowdon.

3. Môn = Anglesey.

4. Aber Seint: estuary where stood the Roman fort Segontium.

Maxen took by driving Beli son of Mynogan and his sons into the sea, and pushed on to Arvon, and he recognized the land as soon as he saw it. Upon seeing Aber Seint he said, 'There is the fortress where I saw the woman I love best.'

Maxen entered the fortress, and inside the hall he saw Kynan son of Eudav and Avaon son of Eudav playing gwyddbwyll, and Eudav son of Caradawg sitting in the ivory chair carving gwyddbwyll pieces, and the girl from his dream sitting in the red gold chair. 'Hail to the Empress of Rome,' he said, and he embraced her, and that night he slept with her. The next morning she asked for her gift, as he had found her a virgin, and he told her to name her own gift. She asked for the island of Britain for her father, from the English Channel to the Irish Sea, and the three offshore islands⁵ for the Empress of Rome, and three strongholds to be made for her in the island of Britain, in the places she chose. She asked that the chief fortress be built in Arvon, and soil from Rome was brought so that it would be healthier for the emperor to sit and sleep and move about. The other fortresses were none other than Caer Llion⁶ and Caer Vyrddin.⁷

One day Maxen went to hunt at Caer Vyrddin; he went to the top of Y Vrenni Vawr⁸ and pitched his tent there, and the tent ground has been known as Cadeir Vaxen⁹ ever since. Caer Vyrddin, on the other hand, was so called because it was built by a multitude of men. Afterwards, Elen thought to have highways built from one fortress to

5. The three offshore islands are the isles of Wight, Man, and either Anglesey or the Orkneys.

6. Caer Llion (=Caerleon on Usk): Roman Castra Legionum, 'Encampment of the Legions'.

7. Caer Vyrddin=Carmarthen. Explained here as if it were derived from myrdd, 'myriad'; elsewhere explained as the fortress of Myrddin (Merlin). The Roman name is Maridunum.

8. Y Vrenni Vawr: the big prow.

9. Cadeir Vaxen: encampment of Maxen.

another across the island; these were built, and are now called the highways of Elen of the Hosts, because of her British origin – that is, because the men of the island would not have assembled for anyone but her.

The emperor spent seven years in this island, and at that time it was a custom of the Romans that whenever an emperor stayed conquering in another land for seven years, he must stay abroad and not be allowed to return to Rome. A new emperor was elected, and he sent Maxen a threatening letter, no more than this: *If you come, and if you ever come to Rome.* This letter with its contents reached Maxen at Caer Llion, and he in turn sent a letter to the man who claimed to be Emperor of Rome, no more than this: *If I go to Rome, and if I go.* Then Maxen and his host set out for Rome. On the way he conquered France and Burgundy, and then he laid siege to Rome, but after a year before the fortress he was no closer to taking it than he had been the first day.

There had followed Maxen from the island of Britain a small band led by the brothers of Elen of the Hosts, and there were better fighters in that small band than among twice as many Romans. The emperor was told how this band had been seen dismounting and pitching their tents near his own, and how no one had ever seen a finer band nor one better equipped, nor with handsomer standards for their size. Elen of the Hosts went to look, and she recognized the standards of her brothers; thus Kynan and Avaon came to see Maxen, and he threw his arms about them and welcomed them. They all went to look at the Roman assault on the stronghold, and Kynan said to his brother, 'We should look for a cleverer way to take this stronghold.' At night they measured the height of the wall, and then they sent their carpenters into the forest and had a ladder made for every four men, and soon the ladders were ready. Every day at noon the two emperors would stop fighting and eat their meal. The British, how-

ever, took their food and drink in the morning, until they were in high spirits, and so when the two emperors were eating the British approached the wall and set their ladders against it, and at once they scaled the wall and dropped over inside. The new emperor had no opportunity to arm himself before they were upon him; they killed him and many others, and three days and nights they spent overcoming the host in the fortress and in conquering the castle, while another part of them were on watch lest any of Maxen's host should enter before they had finished.

Maxen said to Elen of the Hosts, 'Lady, I marvel greatly that it is not for me that your brothers have conquered this fortress,' and she answered, 'Lord, my brothers are the wisest men in the world. Go and ask for the stronghold, and if they control it they will gladly give it to you.' So Maxen and Elen went to ask for the fortress, and Maxen was told that its capture and surrender to him was the doing of none save the men of the island of Britain. The gate to the fortress of Rome was then opened, and the emperor sat in his chair and the Romans did him homage.

Maxen then said to Kynan and Avaon, 'Sirs, I have regained control over my empire, and now I will give you this host, that you might conquer any territory you like.' The brothers went out and conquered lands and castles and cities; they killed all the men but left all the women alive, and this continued until the young lads who had come with them were white-haired with the time they had been conquering. Kynan said to his brother Avaon, 'Do you want to stay in this land or return to your own country?' Avaon and many of his men decided to go home, but Kynan and another group stayed, and they determined to cut out the tongues of the women, lest their own British language be contaminated. Because the women were silent and the men could speak, the men of Brittany were called Bryttanyeid, and there have often

come and still do come men of that language from Brittany.¹⁰

This tale is called the Dream of the Ruler Maxen, and this is its end.

10. The Welsh name for Brittany, Llydaw, is here interpreted as Lled-taw, 'half silent'.