



## Roman Origins of a Pot at the End of the Rainbow

*Jim Willis*

*Why are there so many songs about rainbows and what's on the other side?*

*Rainbows are visions, but only illusions, and rainbows have nothing to hide.*

*So we've been told and some choose to believe it.*

*I know they're wrong, wait and see.*

*Someday we'll find it, the rainbow connection - the lovers, the dreamers and me...*

*All of us under its spell know that it's probably magic.*

*(The Rainbow Connection, by Paul Williams and Kenneth Archer)*

Parke Godwin, in his richly textured novel, *The Last Rainbow*, spins an engaging story around an idea that in its very simplicity goes a long way toward connecting a whole host of legends and myths associated with the misty history of the British Isles. Tales of faerie people, leprechauns, and mysterious spirits that inhabit the night have long been a staple of Celtic mythology. Merlin himself, the quintessential wizard, stands at the apex of many of them, weaving his unique spells and incantations. The Holy Grail commands an entire opus of such tales. But perhaps no single category of stories has captivated human imagination down through the centuries quite as much as that of buried treasures and the haunted curses that protect them.

*Haunted stone circles guard liminal ways (Heartland Arts/Adobe Stock)*



## Haunted Barrows and Stone Circles

Barrows and stone circles, eerie cries heard on a night of the full moon, flickering lights seen on distant hilltops and holy places built by human hands as well as the gloomy oak groves preferred by druids of old, merge to weave a spell of mystery that echoes down through the dark corridors of history, forming a mythological tapestry known throughout the world. There are times of the year when spaces between dimensions seem especially diminished, and ears attuned to the clarion call of magic can, it is said, hear forgotten messages floating on wispy currents of wonder.

Might there be, however, a mundane basis for at least some of these fables? Is it possible that at the root of every myth lies a kernel of historical fact? Could it be that mythology is sometimes a shroud which envelops the work of common, everyday people whose day-to-day activities, unbeknownst to them, were somehow, over time and the inevitable alterations of bards, troubadours, and elder story-tellers, transformed into legends of myth and magic?

## The Rise and Fall of Hadrian's Defensive Wall

Consider, for instance, the thrill that virtually everyone feels when they consider a majestic rainbow, especially when they see the place its end touches the ground. Is that, in fact, the hiding place of a pot of gold? How did such a tale come to be almost universally embraced? Where did such an idea originate?

The story drifted south out of the Highlands, down from the hollow hills, as ephemeral as the mists that arise on a cool morning. No one knows its genesis. It cannot be attributed to any one person. But someone heard it from someone else, who had it on good authority from something he overheard ... and on and on.



*Roman soldier gazing out over Hadrian's Wall (Justinas/Adobe Stock)*



*Sunset over Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland (ColobusYeti/Abode Stock)*

South of Hadrian's Wall, such tales infiltrated the mythology of Wales and Cornwall, becoming common knowledge that soon formed a staple theme of stories told around a crackling fire during the dark nights of winter. Crossing Muir Éireann, the Irish Sea, it

transformed into a common folk tale familiar even to Saint Patrick and his flock, who smugly smiled among themselves with a private knowledge known only to initiates.

During the time of the Ceasars, it was said, when the armies of Rome used the advantage of their iron swords and military tactics to subjugate the native Picts and Celts who were armed only with bronze and stone weapons, there were fierce, indigenous people, small of stature but fierce in determination, who refused to bow the knee to imperial might, even as they were forced again and again to surrender the lowlands and take refuge in mountains and high places which were of no practical interest to farmers. For generations they lived in isolation – clannish people of the night who observed everything that went on in the homes of their immigrant neighbors. Secretive to a fault, they operated within the parameters of an ancient wisdom that manifested itself in something that seemed like magic to those who took refuge in villages and the protected comfort of Roman wealth.

When superstitious commoners left food and drink at roadside crossings, the better to appease the mysterious hill people who had become, in popular thought, gods of the hills and forests, it was no surprise to find the offerings gone in the morning. When the eerie cry of the bean *sídhe*, the “woman of the Faerie mounds” who came to be known as *Banshee*, was heard floating on the evening breeze, wise folk in scattered settlements took shelter in their homes and waited for morning light to dissipate the fears that lurked in darkness.

Rome gradually came to face the futility of trying to compete with indigenous forces they could not understand. Emperor Hadrian himself, when he visited the islands in the year 122 AD, gave the order to build a wall across the whole of northern Britain. “*This far you may come,*” he announced to the hidden foe of the north, “*but no farther.*” The wall was manned for 300 years, and parts of it remain to this day, but it stood only as a hindrance, not an insurmountable obstacle, to furtive people who had lived on the land since the beginnings of time. They continued to cross it with impunity, usually during the dark of night when soldiers who, despite their outward allegiance to the Soldier's God and later the Christ, were never more than a few short steps removed from pagan superstitions. They huddled together in the security of their barracks while the mysterious ghosts of the hills claimed the night.

Upstart religions soon recognized the impossibility of defending themselves against mysterious traditions which were as old as the land itself. Unable to destroy the most entrenched of the pagan customs, they simply baptized them. It was not long before evergreen trees announced the birth of a child who never, in all his short life, ever saw one. Rabbits and baby chicks celebrated his victory over death.

The day came, however, when the armies of Rome were recalled from far outposts such as those of northern Britain. Soldiers were needed closer to home. Barbarians were nibbling away at their borders. *Pax Romana*, the “Peace of Rome,” was soon revealed to be nothing more than a crumbling infrastructure. There was no peace without Roman might. There never had been.

*When the Romans retreated the defensive forts, such as Mediobogdum in Cumbria fell in ruin, leaving the settlers exposed and vulnerable (jmh-photography /Adobe Stock)*



This left the rich, British landowners south of the wall in a precarious position. Ostentatious wealth was on display in their lavish estates. Gems, jade, and precious stones; tapestries and intricately designed inlaid floors; gold and silver dining ware; coins galore, from every civilized country on earth; jewelry by the basketful, imported from far-flung empires in the East. With no military protection, the wealth of the land and even the personal safety of the landowners were no longer guaranteed.

It soon became obvious the rich would have to abandon their places of refuge and pleasure, but, like all people of privilege, they assumed it would be only a temporary condition. Someone would arise to make Rome great again. The bulk and weight of so much wealth could not be transported easily. Such riches were not safe in transport, subject as they would be to highway robbers and bandits who no longer feared being kept in check by imperial soldiers and guards.



*Broken pot with Roman Piddletrenthide hoard in Dorset, (third century AD) found by metal detectorist Brian Read in 2016 (CC BY-SA 2.0)*

## Burying the Pot of Gold

What could be done? The answer was simple. Since the upper-class citizens had determined their absence would be only temporary, and that they would soon return, they decided to hide their wealth. In the dead of night, free, or so they supposed, from prying eyes, they secreted away their treasures, confident they would return someday soon to again live the lives to which they had grown accustomed. But they underestimated the mysterious folk from the hills, who freely came and went in the dark of night, oblivious to the obstacle of a wall they had long since learned to ignore. They knew where the riches lay hidden, and sometimes the upper-class entourage was barely out of sight around a bend in the road when their treasure was freed from its confines, carried north over the wall, and buried anew.

A few trinkets were liberated to grace the features of women who were the leaders of this matriarchal society, and sometimes a particular iron knife or jeweled sword became the possession of a man who saw its advantage over his own armament, but, for the most part, the treasures were buried in secret. Why? There were many reasons. First and foremost, there was little advantage to carrying around such extravagant weight when existence depended on seasonal migration. Second, what was there in the highlands that was worth so much gold and silver? Needs were simple and direct. A few trinkets to trade for a young pony, or some delicacy for a feast, were all that were needed. Mostly the answer was that the treasure was confiscated because it was available retribution.



*Pot of gold at the end of the rainbow in Britain's country side (Vlastimil Šesták /Adobe Stock)*

But where to hide it, and how to find it again? Fortunately, ready hiding places lay close at hand. The people of the hills had no written language. They never used maps. Theirs was an oral

tradition. Small clans passed on information from mother to daughter and father to son. That was the key to hiding, and then locating, the hordes of gold and silver that crossed over the wall to find refuge in the north and, later, across the Irish sea. These were people who buried their dead in barrows so carefully hidden that, within a very short period of time, they blended in perfectly with the landscape. What better places to sequester new-found wealth?

For thousands of years to follow, farmers would plow the earth and graze animals on fields that, had they known it, could have supported them for untoward generations in luxury, had they only known what lay beneath their feet. But the folks who originally buried the treasure knew where it was. Although they never created written treasure maps, they told stories that reserved clues to riches undreamed. "Fairy tales," they were called, and told to children as bedtime stories. After a few generations, there were few who remembered how aptly those rhymes and songs were named.

*"To discover great riches," they might say, "on the morning of the longest day of the year, stand in a sacred circle of stones that had been built by the giants of old. Watch for a rainbow to form (a common event in those wetlands) and its end will mark the entrance to a hidden barrow that served as a tomb for our ancient ancestors. Those who have gone before will guard the treasure and prevent anyone unworthy from discovering and looting the hoard."* That was the key. The map was not written on parchment. One had to be in the right place at the right time to discover where the treasure lay, and one had to avoid the curse of the ancient guardians.



*A leprechaun guarding a secret hiding place of a pot of gold ( X-Poser/Adobe Stock)*

Ever since that time the legends have been preserved. There is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but it is protected by faeries, the banshee, the little people, leprechauns, and ancient spirits who once trod this land. But anyone who would seek to obtain it must search their motives, guard their intentions, and, above all, keep secret their objectives. Buried treasure is nothing to be trifled with!