

Winefride's Scar and Merlin's Horse in the Landscape of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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In the Middle English poem (ca.1375-1400) that has been named after him (Borroff and Howes, 2010; Burrow, 1972), Sir Gawain contracts to go and meet his challenger the Green Knight a year after this latter had burst at Christmas into Arthur's court at Camelot. Grandly sent off by the court the following All Saint's Day, Gawain rides north through Wales and then east. Eventually he reaches the domain of the Green Knight, who at the end of the poem acknowledges himself to be Bertilak de Hautdesert (l. 2445). Scholars have now established this place as the High Peak, Derbyshire (Elliot, 2007; Brewer, 2007).

Before he first spies Bertilak's castle (l. 764), the stanzas of the poem that narrate Gawain's itinerary have a geographical specificity which has been seen to contrast strikingly with the aura of Arthurian romance that otherwise pervades the text. In stanza 30, he keeps Anglesey and the North Wales coast to his left and crosses from Holywell to the Wirral. Stanzas 31 and 32, though devoid of toponyms, graphically invoke the rocky ascent from east Cheshire (mony clyff, knarres, high fell, naked rokkes, crest), Kinder Downfall (claterande the colde borne rennes/ and hanged high over his hede in hard iisse-ikkles) and the great bog of Kinder itself (mony misy and mere) at the heart of the High Peak. Stanzas 30-32 have served especially well to correlate the kind of English spoken by the poet with just this region. They have a number logic of their own (the tenthe dole, stanza 12; hore okes ... a hundredth together, stanza 13) and moreover, together with Gawain's pentangle, anticipate that of the whole poem of 5x500 plus 5x5 lines. More interesting still, for our purpose, Gawain's experience before crossing to the Wirral and up to the High Peak proves to have survived in memory today.

In the poem, Holywell in Flintshire is named the Holy Hede, which recalls the story of Gwenfrewi, patron saint of Wales, and at the same time alludes to the contract between Gawain and Bertilak. Gwenfrewi or Winefride had her head cut off in rage by Caradoc and put back on again by her uncle St. Bueno, a well springing up on the spot. First built in the seventh century, hers is "the only shrine in Britain that can show an unbroken history of pilgrimage to the present day" (David, 2002). Stone statuary in situ shows her scar, as do plastic replicas on sale along with water from the well in the visitors' shop. It is precisely the scar that Bertilak cuts into Gawain's neck that is evidence of his "shame".

Across the Dee from Holywell, its pagan counterpart "hazel well" is marked by Heswall, the highest point in the Wirral (over 300 feet). Within its parish, this place opposes the steep rise of the Wallrake to the east, where the well is found near the Norman church, to that to the scabrik to the west, that ran through rougher country, and has remained a name spoken rather than written. Hazel and hawthorn, the source of the no less pagan May, are two inter-tangled trees (harled all samen) that typify the country Gawain has travelled through just before he finally sights Bertilak's castle.

Gawain's rocky ascent in stanza 31 takes us back to Arthur and Merlin via information given by Doug McCaskill in *So 'tis said* (1998). Noting recent archaeological work in the caves along Alderley Edge that connect them with Rhiannon, white-horse bride of Pwyll and mother of Pryderi (Ashe, 1990), McCaskill cites their importance for Manchester witches in the 1960s. He also tells a tale about Merlin who behind iron gates guards a long line of knights in armour lying there fast asleep, each with a white horse, ever ready to rise and defend their land.

References

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