SIR GAWAIN'S JOURNEY AND HOLYWELL, WALES

LINES 698-701 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* describe how the hero, having travelled far into North Wales, comes back into England.

> Alle the iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldes,
> And fares over the fordes by the forlondes,
> Over at the Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
> In the wyldrenesse of Wyrale.[1]

That is, 'Keeping all the islands of Anglesey on his left hand, and passing over the fords at the coastal promontories, he crossed over at the Holy Head, till he gained the shore once m re in the wilderness of Wirral.'[2]

Tolkien and Go rdon understood Sir Gawain as journeying eastwards along the North Wales coast, crossing the rivers Conwy and Clwyd where they enter the sea, as Gerald of Wales did in 1188. They cite the place-name *Y Foryd* (from *môr* 'sea' and *rhyd* 'ford') by the mouth of the Clwyd in support of their argument.[3] But the location of *the Holy Hede* has remained a puzzle. Gollancz, citing R. V. Chambers, took it as Holywell (in the former Flintshire), below which Gawain might ford the Dee at low tide. Gollancz states that the 'remains of a ford or ferry can be seen near Holywell Station and also at Gayton [south of Heswall] in Wirral'. He thought the miracle of St Winifred, the decapitated virgin patron of Holywell, would appeal to Gawain, besides explaining the name 'Holy Head'. This argument was accepted by Burrow, who quotes a reference of 1403 to fords *ultra aquam de Dee,* perhaps as far down as Holywell.[4]

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[1] *The Middle Ages 700-1550,* ed. M. J. Alexander & Felicity Riddy (London, 1989), 281.

[2] Alexander & Riddy, 280.

[3] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1967), 97.

[4] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. Israel Gollancz, EETS o.s. 210 (1940), 107; J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight',* (London, 1965), 192.

However, Dodgson rejected this, proposing that Gawain crossed the Dee much further down, along the line where it reaches the open sea between Point of Air in Flintshire and West Kirby in Wirral.[1] But this suggestion must be ruled out. Dodgson's explanation of *the Holy Sede* as 'a periphrasis for *Kerkeby* (West Kirby) by a fancied analogy with the place-name Holyhead for *Kaerkeby* (Caer Gybi)' is unconvincing, not least because *Kerkeby* would be stressed on the first syllable, *Kaerkeby* on the second. Further, an attempt to ford the Dee here would normally be suicidal; the only such recorded crossing (in a life of St Werburgh) was miraculous, the Dee opening like the Red Sea; and, as Norman Davis remarks, if Gawain had taken this route, the poet would surely make more of it. Davis also discounts Gollancz's link between *the Holy Lede,* Holywell, and St Winifred as 'altogether too fanciful; the poet gives no hint that Gawain went that way because of a special interest in heads chopped off and replaced.'[2]

Andrew and Waldron say of *the Holy Hede* that 'the only real certainty is that it does not refer to Holyhead in Anglesey.' They criticize the suggestion of P. L. Heyworth in *Medium Ævum,* xli (1972), 124-7 that lines 698-9 refer to a crossing of the Dee over to Shotwick, between the headlands at Blacon and Burton (all places north-west of Chester), as it does not explain *the Holy Hede*[3]' Hence the scepticism of Felicity Riddy: 'this location is unidentifiable; it is clearly not the Holyhead on Anglesey since it is at a crossing of the river Dee.'[4]

Yet all these problems may be solved very simply if we take *hede* in *? e Hply Hede* as meaning, not 'part of the body containing mouth and brain' or 'headland', but 'source of a river or stream'. This sense is first attested in OED from Barbour's *Bruce* of 1375, which refers to the 'hed off Tay', and occurs at such Yorkshire places as Coverhead (south of Wensleydale) and Ribblehead, 24 kilometres to the west.[5] It also figures at *Pearl* 974, where the

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[1] J. McN. Dodgson, Sir Gawain's Arrival in Wirral, in *Early English and Norse Studies,* ed. Arthur Brown & Peter Foote (London, 1963), 19-25.

[2] Tolkien & Gordon, 97-8.

[3] *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript,* ed. M. R. Andrew & R. A. Waldron (London, 1978), 234.

[4] Alexander & Riddy, 281.

[5] Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1936), 218.

maiden tells the dreamer to go upstream to the source *(Bow up towarde thys bornes heued)* if he would see the city of God.

If the Holy Hede means 'the holy sprlng or source', it must mean Holywell 'holy spring', of which *Holy Hede* is an exact equlvalent. This shrine of St Winifred was famous through the centurles.[1] As far as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is concerned, interpretation of *the Holy Hede* as 'Holywell' means line 699 would refer to the fords of Conwy and Clwyd, line 700 to the ford or ferry across the Dee described by Chambers, Gollancz, and Burrow. This strengthens arguments for associating the Gawain-poet with the Stanley family of Storeton, which lies Just six kilometres north-east of Gayton. It also strengthens the argument that the Gawain-poet knew the Latin life of St Winifred written by Robert, prior of Shrewsbury, which presents verbal parallels to the English poem.[2] In short, it provides evidence which may help us establish the exact identity of the *Gawain*-poet.

Andrew Breeze

University of Navarre, Pamplona

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[1] Burrow, 190-4.
[2] Burrow, 193.