

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:

A View to Britain's Obscure Celtic Past

The late medieval tale *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, in the words of English poet and translator Simon Armitage, “not only a most brilliant example of Middle English poetry but one of the jewels in the crown of English Literature” (Armitage 9). A romance in verse, the tale contains all the definitive elements of that genre: a setting in rather remote courtly world, adventure, action, chivalry, the marvelous, the uncanny, the mythic, and courtly love (Cuddon 614-615). However, in addition to its poetic and entertainment excellence, *Gawain and the Green Knight* represents a threshold: Janus-like, the work looks forward and backward at British literature, history, and culture. Strikingly, beneath the tale's Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Saxon foundations hovers an ether-like layer that whispers of Britain's Celtic past.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight serves as a distant mirror reflecting the infrequently lived-up-to ideals of late Medieval European chivalry, a code and culture already waning in the aftermath of the battles of Crecy (1346) and Poitiers (1356), where mere English commoners armed with longbows and polearms decimated the flower of continental knighthood (Tuchman 87-88, 147-151). In truth, the chivalric ideal, represented by Sir Gawain and Chaucer's character “the Knight” (Chaucer 222-225), was already rapidly becoming an anachronism by the time the alluded to works were being penned. In terms of literature, the ‘bob and wheel’ endings of the Pearl Poet's stanzas not only reflect the end-rhyming verse of his contemporary, Chaucer, but presage the alternating line rhyme pattern (e.g., **a b a b**) of the quatrains of English sonnets of Shakespeare's era. Additionally, while *Gawain* reflects the Anglo-Norman culture of the era in

which it was composed, it also looks back at elements of the Anglo-Saxon period. *Gawain and the Green Knight* represents a prime example of England's "Alliterative Revival," hearkening back to Britain's pre-Norman verse (Cuddon 23). Like its great predecessor, the epic *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain* represents an example of the archetypal hero's journey: a challenging trek into hostile territory, battles against various monsters and foes, and the return and reintegration of the now transformed hero into his native society (Campbell 19-20, 30). However, if we dig yet deeper, below these more prominent Norman and Saxon strata of the Pearl Poet's work, we find an older layer of less "civilized," more primitive, and perhaps more primal Celtic matter—elements that often go unnoticed by readers unfamiliar with Western Europe's prominent pre-Roman culture. Initially, one marked example of Celtic influence is the starting point of Gawain's effort to keep his word to the Green Knight.

Sir Gawain begins his quest to locate the Green Chapel and fulfill his pledge to the Green Knight on the first of November, All Saints Day. This important feast day, as with a number of other Christian holydays, was simply pasted on top of an important pagan festival—in this case the all-important Celtic festival of *Samuin*. *Samuin* (November 1st) marked the beginning of the Celtic New Year, a time of transition, and its eve was believed to be "an open door between the real world and the otherworld" (Gantz 12). Professor T. G. E. Powell, in his seminal work on the Celts, refers to *Samuin* as "a turning point in a pastoralist rather than an agrarian cycle" (Powell 144). Furthermore, Celtic scholar Proinsias Mac Cana¹ refers to this all-important Celtic festival

¹ Proinsias Mac Cana (Francis McCann, 1926-2004), born in Belfast, was one of the most noted Celtic scholars of the late 20th century and held several prestigious posts at various universities between 1951 and his death in 2004, including Queen's University, Belfast; University College of Wales, Aberystwyth; and University College, Dublin University.

as “a partial return to the primordial chaos . . . the appropriate setting for myths that symbolise the dissolution of established order as a prelude to its recreation in a new period of time” (Mac Cana 127). The above descriptions of *Samuin* are all apropos to the date of Gawain’s “setting out,” as he leaves the settled, civilized, agriculturally-based kingdom of Arthur’s Camelot for the mystical and enchanted realm of wild north Wales, the bailiwick of the Green Knight. On November 1st, Gawain, astride trusty Gringolet, rides through an open door from one world to another (*Gawain* II. 670-702²).

One element that veritably *leaps* out at initiates of the Celtic World occurs at the beginning of Gawain’s journey:

till anon he drew near unto Northern Wales.
 All the isles of **Anglesey** he held on his left,
 and over the fords he fared by the flats near the sea,
 and over by the **Holy Head** to high land again
 in the wilderness of Wirral

(II. 697-701, **bold** my emphasis)

Anglesey, . . . from time immemorial, was the center of Druidism in Britain. The druids were the priests, judges, seers, historians, and, if you will, “magicians” of the continental and insular Celts (Gantz 10-11; Piggott 41, 44-45). In fact, these “holy men” were central to the culture of the Celts. As early as the first century B.C.E., Gaius Julius Caesar noted the importance of this druidical epicenter in his *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars*:

² All references to passages to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from J.R.R. Tolkien’s translation located in the class textbook, *Masters of British Literature*—Volume A.

It is believed that their rule of life was discovered in Britain and transferred thence to Gaul; and to-day those who would study the subject more accurately journey, as a rule, to Britain to learn it.

(Caesar VI. 13; 337)

So important was the druidical center of Anglesey to the national identity of the Celtic Britons that the Romans, under the military governor Suetonius Paulinus, found it necessary to destroy the site and slaughter the druids and their adherents residing there in order to break British resistance (Tacitus 14:29-30). In reading about Gawain's departure from Camelot, the informed scholar realizes that the young knight is riding into the traditional *heart* of Celtic Britain. Furthermore, the above quoted lines make mention of *Holy Head*, a neighboring islet of Anglesey, to this day one of the traditional jumping-off points to Ireland—the late repository of Celtic culture, myth, and legend (Gantz 5).³

A further connection with Celtic myth also occurs in Part 2 of *Sir Gawain* as the young knight passes through the wilds of Wales:

At every wading or water on the way that he passed
he found a foe before him, save at a few for a wonder;
and so foul were they and fell that fight he must needs.

(II. 715-717)

Although this passage refers to fights along waterways that Arthur's fledgling paladin is forced to engage in, it immediately brings to mind a series of duels between Gawain's Celtic counterpart, the youthful Irish warrior, Cú Chulaind, and the three sons of Nechta Scéne in the

³ Indeed, this writer has “jumped” from Holy Head to the Emerald Isle on two occasions.

tale “The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulaind.” Interestingly, after killing each of his adversaries, Foill, Fannall, and Túachell, in turn, Cú Chulaind decapitates them and places their heads in his chariot, an action echoing the “beheading game” in *Gawain* (Gantz 143-145).

One character that is introduced in the latter portion of Part II of *Gawain* (947-968) can certainly be traced back to Celtic Mythology of the British Isles: the seemingly revered old crone at Lord Bertilak’s White Castle, later revealed to be Arthur’s half-sister, the somewhat sinister Morgan le Fay (IV. 2446-2455). Celtic scholars Norris Lacy and Lucy Allen Paton claim that there is ample evidence to support the notion that le Fay “is descended from the Welsh Madron” (Norako 1). Furthermore, the Arthurian character of Morgan le Fay may well be related to the Celtic goddess the Morrigan, “queen of demons, sower of discord, and goddess of war” (200, n. 8). In fact, at one point, Bertilak himself refers to le Fay as “Morgan the Goddess” (IV. 2454). In *The Celts*, Professor Powell points out that at Samuin the Morrigan is the ritual mate of the prominent Celtic deity, the Dagda, the “Good God”—that is, “good” not in the moral sense, “but good-at-everything, or all-competent” (Powell 146). Among his other attributes, the Dagda may have been a fertility god (MacCulloch 80), a role Bertilak, in his guise of the Green Knight, also seems to represent. Though she is not Bertilak de Hautdesert’s mate *per se* in *Gawain and the Green Knight*, le Fay is certainly “paired” with him in the plot to scare Guinevere to death and thereby discredit Arthur (IV. 2458-2464). In the Irish Celtic myths, the Morrigan has the power to “shape shift,” i.e., to change forms, either into an animal or a different human form (MacCulloch 130-131, 136; Powell 146). While it is not stated outright in *Gawain* that Moran le Fay shape-shifts, she employs her Merlin-learned magic to change Bertilak back and forth into the Green Knight (IV. 2446-2450). And although the Lord of the White Castle describes her as

“that ancient lady,” one wonders if the guise of crone is merely an assumed one, given that Morgan le Fay is often depicted as a beautiful sorceress in popular art and film.

One eerie Celtic element that sent chills up this writer’s spine is the description of the actual “Green Chapel,” the locus of Gawain’s promised meeting with the Green Knight. Rather than a Christian holy site as the term “Chapel” seems to imply in Part I (451, 454), the Green Chapel is most probably an ancient pre-Celtic burial mound (194, n. 4)— a grass-enshrouded tumulus of the sort that dot the British Isles from Maeshowe in Orkney Islands north of Scotland to the round barrows round about Stonehenge in Wiltshire in southern England, and from the Neolithic tombs of the Boyne Valley in Ireland to Bryn Celli Ddu on the aforementioned isle of Anglesey in Wales. In the case of the Welsh barrow, its name translates—fittingly in terms of Gawain’s tale—as “the Mound in the Dark Grove” (“Bryn Celli Ddu”). At this point it is worth noting the actual description of the Green Chapel:

Then he halted and held in his horse for the time,
and changed oft his front the Chapel to find.
Such on no side he saw, as seemed to him strange,
Save a mound as it might be near the marge of the green,
a worn barrow on a brae by the brink of a water, . . .
It had a hole at the end and at either side
and with grass in green patches was grown all over,
and was all hollow within: nought but an old cavern, . . .

(IV. 2169-2173, 2181-2183)

Here the poem emphasizes the seemingly-abandoned structure’s lonely location, verdurous covering, and its frightening yet beckoning entrance. Having observed first-hand the grass-covered mounds in close proximity to Stonehenge and the Newgrange megalith in Ireland,

having entered the Newgrange tomb itself, and having peered inside a “monk’s cell” near St. Andrew’s in Scotland that closely resembled the Green Chapel, this writer must admit to a genuinely creepy sense of *déjà vu* in reading the lines above. To a degree, I have been in Gawain’s shoes. Also, in keeping with the description above, it should be noted here that some Neolithic burial chambers, such as the great tumuli of Dowth and Knowth in the Boyne Valley, Ireland, have more than one entrance (“*Brú na Bóinne*”).

While the Green Chapel, so ominously commented on by Gawain in lines 2190-2195, certainly harkens back to the pagan past of Arthur’s Britain, the archaeological record clearly establishes the construction of such megaliths as antedating the emergence of the Celts in the British Isles by roughly 2,000 years (“*Brú na Bóinne*,” Gantz 5). However, in the case of Celts of Ireland, they viewed the burial mounds and great tombs of the Boyne Valley as entrance ways into the *Síde*, the Celtic spirit world (Gantz 15) —a realm Gawain chooses to enter when he fulfills his pledge to the Green Knight. There is evidence that the insular Celts employed these sites for ritual purposes from the latter half of the first century BCE down to the early Christian period (“*Brú na Bóinne*”). Furthermore, Celtic spiritual sites, locations where the druids performed sacred rituals, were commonly located in oaks groves and similar wild places—sites matching the environs of the Green Chapel (Piggot 48; IV: 2191). As Professor Powell notes,

. . . the sacred places of the Celts, prior to, or beyond, the Roman Empire seem to have been of the simplest kind.

A widespread form appears to have been a sacred wood, or tract of ground on which stood a grove of trees (Powell 166).

Both Piggott's and Powell's descriptions of a Celtic sacred sites seem to fit well with the wild venue Green Chapel because of the description of its environs in Part IV:

Then he puts spurs to Gringolet, and espying the track,
 thrust in along a bank by a thicket's border,
 rode down the rough brae right to the valley;
 and saw no sign of shelter on any side at all,
 only high hillsides sheer on either hand,
 and notched knuckled crags and gnarled boulders; . . .
 On my word," quoth Gawain, "'tis a wilderness here!
 The oratory looks evil. With herbs overgrown . . .

(IV.2161-2167, 2190-91)

Just as the Green Chapel connects the story to Britain's ancient Celtic past, so too does the Green Knight himself tie the tale to the island's pre-Roman heritage. As noted above, Lord Bertilak, in his green guise—his hair, skin, and garments, even his horse, the hue of vegetation (I.145-179, Armitage 11)—can be favorably compared with the Celtic Dagda, a fertility god, one who serves as consort to the local goddess of the land (MacCulloch 80, Powell 146). In keeping with this notion, Dr. Gantz, in the introduction to his translation of "Bricriu's Feast," suggests that Lady Bertilak, rather than Morgan le Fay, fulfills the role of the local "earth goddess figure" (Gantz 219). At any rate, though Lord Bertilak deports himself as an Anglo-Norman lord, hunting, acting the gracious host, and dispensing his largess, his courtly demeanor is essentially a façade—behind which hides a pagan Celtic nature figure, and behind whom works a goddess in the ancient model.

One of the strongest links between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the British Isles' Celtic past is what has been termed the "cult of the human head" ("obsession" rather than "cult" might be a better term) and the associated "beheading game" that plays such a crucial role in the story. Central to *Gawain* is the sudden appearance of the astounding Green Knight at Camelot's New Years celebration, where he challenges the assembled knights, as "a Christmas pastime" (!) to strike off his head with a fearsome axe—if he can return the blow in a year and a day. Gawain, ultimately, is the one to take up the challenge, though his blow to the magical knight causes the latter no harm: The Green Knight simply picks up his head and reminds Gawain to meet him in year at the Green Chapel before disappearing on his emerald mount.

The ancient Celts believed that the human head, and not the heart, was the repository of the soul. Therefore, taking an enemy's head in battle was tantamount to taking his spirit (Melia 1). As such, severed heads were highly valued battle trophies. Ancient sources attest to severed heads adorning the walls of forts and settlements and being kept as war prizes (Herm 54-55, MacCulloch 240-241, Piggott 52). This obsession appears in myth, as, after slaying the sons of Nechta Scéne, Cú Chulaind takes their severed heads his enemies back to Emuin Machae (Navan Fort in County Armagh) as proof of his skill at arms (Gantz 145, MacCulloch 240).

Perhaps the most direct connection to Celtic mythology in *Gawain* is the beheading game played between the Green Knight / Bertilak and Arthur's knight. The "You-can chop-off-my-head-if-you-let-me-chop-off-yours" plot element central to *Gawain* seems to have been borrowed directly from an Irish tale in the Ulster Cycle entitled "Bricriu's Feast." In this highly descriptive, repetitive story originating from the oral tradition, three heroes of the Ulaid (the

Ulstermen), Lóegure Búadach, Conall Cernach, Cú Chulaind, vie for the “champion’s portion”⁴ at a feast hosted by Bricriu, the Celtic equivalent of the Norse Loki (i.e., a trouble-maker). During the course of this convoluted story, the heroes are referred to a magical character who lives by a lake, Úath son of Imoman, for judgment as to who of the three is the worthiest to receive the highly-valued portion. Úath, “a man of great power” who “could change into any form he wished” and “perform druidry and discharge claims of mutual obligation,” offers to let each of the heroes cut off his head one day—if he can then chop off their head on the following one. Lóegure and Conall refuse to take the gamble—or, in another version, as the Gaelic storyteller points out, *do* chop off Úath’s head, but then decide to “skip town.” Cú Chulaind, of course, takes up the challenge and lops off his host’s head, after which “Úath rose, took his axe, put his head on his chest and returned to his lake” (Gantz (245-246). What ensues the next day is worth noting in comparison to the ‘beheading scene’ in Book IV of *Gawain* (2240-2331):

The following day, Úath reappeared, and Cú Chulaind stretched his neck out on the stone. Three times Úath drew the axe down on Cú Chulaind’s neck, and each time the blade was reversed. ‘Rise, Cú Chulaind,’ he said, then, for you are king of the warriors Ériu [Ireland], and the champion’s portion is yours, without contest. (Gantz 246)

There are some obvious differences in the two encounters. Whereas Cú Chulaind’s test is solely one of physical courage and is in keeping with hot-blooded, impetuous nature, he merely having to wait until the next day to prove himself worthy of the champion’s portion, Gawain’s trial is

⁴ The “champion’s portion” was the choicest cut of a boar or other animal served at a Celtic feast, as well as the right to sit at the right hand of the local king, e.g., Conchubur of Emuin Machae in the case of “Bricriu’s Feast” (Gantz 219). The honor of receiving the champion’s portion was a point of contention among Celtic warriors, one with the potential of leading to violence

one of moral courage as well: The young knight has to endure an entire year of mental agony and then numerous dangerous encounters (including lustful ones threatening his immortal Christian soul), before facing his potentially grisly fate (II, IV; Armitage 11). Yet the basic elements of the Irish tale's beheading sequence are present in the medieval English romance.

Given the frequent exchange of people and ideas between Ireland and Britain, and between monastic institutions on both isles, the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight* must have been acquainted, directly or indirectly, with the early twelfth century *Lebor na huidre* (*Book of the Dun Cow*⁵) in which "Bricriu's Feast" is contained (Gantz 21). It is also evident that the Pearl Poet was intimately familiar with geography and local lore of still heavily Celtic north Wales. One might even be led to conjecture that Bryn Celli Ddu (the Mound in the Dark Grove) on Anglesey was the model for the Green Chapel. While these Celtic elements do not alter the essential *Gawain* narrative, they do add a distinctive nuance to the poem: As one descends into its layers, much as an archaeologist uncovers strata of sequent occupation at historical site, one uncovers evidence of an earlier culture.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight holds an honored place in the canon of English literature: it is not only one of the greatest examples of a medieval romance, but a superlative example of the poet's art. But, although this work reflects the *idealized* chivalric culture of the late fourteenth century, this Anglo-Norman tale evinces echoes from an earlier era: haunting Celtic murmurs from within the lines of a superb Middle English poem.

⁵ The *Book of the Dun Cow* is named for a cow that belonged to Máel Muire, chief scribe of the monastery of Saint Cíaran of Clonmacnois, County Offaly, Ireland—ostensibly the source of the book's vellum pages (Gantz 20).

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A page from the Irish *Lebor na huidre* (*Book of the Dun Cow*) that contains “Bricriu’s Feast,” the source of the “beheading game” in *Gawain*.



Bryn Celli Ddu (the Mound of the Dark Grove) on Anglesey, Wales.

(<https://cadw.gov.wales/daysout/bryn-celli-ddu-burial-chamber/?lang=en>)

Though tumuli like Bryn Celli Ddu and the ones pictured below are pre-Celtic, the Celts of the British Isles considered the structures mystic sites, and, in the case of Ireland, portals to the *Síde* (spirit world), the sort of realm Gawain enters in Part IV of the Middle English poem when he fulfills his promise to the Green Knight. (See page 6.)



Grass covered “monk’s cell,” possibly an ancient barrow, near Saint Andrews in Fife, Scotland: This structure is eerily reminiscent of the description of the Green Chapel in Part IV of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Photograph by the author, 1996.



Maeshowe chambered cairn, Mainland, Orkney Islands, Scotland
(Visit Orkney. <https://www.visitorkney.com/things/history/maeshowe>.)



Above: Series of tumuli (burial chambers) immediately north of Stonehenge, Wiltshire, England.
Photographs by the author, 1989.



Above: Burial mound on the north bank of the Boyne River, County Meath, Ireland. The famous Newgrange megalithic tomb is in the background. (“*Brú na Bóinne*”. World Heritage Ireland, 2010. <http://www.worldheritageireland.ie/bru-na-boinne>.)



Above: Two views of the Newgrange megalithic tomb, County Meath, Ireland. Top—a view from the east, bottom—looking at the monument from the west. Photographs by the author, 1996.

Below: The Green Knight picks up his head. Illustration from the Cotton Nero A.x Manuscript containing the work of the Pearl Poet, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/sir-gawain-and-the-green-knight>.

