

# SIR GAWAIN



KNIGHT OF THE GODDESS

John Matthews

# Sir Gawain

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**Knight of the Goddess**



**John Matthews**



Inner Traditions  
Rochester, Vermont

*For Freya Reeves Lambides*  
*who without knowing it sparked off this hook.*

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Gwalchmai, who pursued his quarry to the end of the wide world and back, could change at will to swan or wren, win further names, saunter in and out of the Other World, live forever on the lips of bards.

Peter Vansittart  
from *Parsifal*

. . . Gawain, with his old curteisye,  
Thought he were come ageyn out of Fairye . . .

Chaucer  
from *The Squire's Tale*

# Acknowledgments

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There is simply no way to express my debt to my wife, Caitlin, who not only found time to listen to my ravings in the midst of her own busy work schedule, but also helped shore up my flagging energy from time after time, opened many of the secrets of the Goddess to me, and generally shared her own not inconsiderable understanding of the Matter of Britain.

My thanks must also go to Prudence Jones for her excellent translation of *L'Enfances Gauvain*, for which all Gawain scholars should be grateful, and for her stimulating conversation on this and other topics.

To Dick Swettenham for his timely translation and summary of *La Pulzella Gaia*.

To my friend Richard Blackford, whose operas of *Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Gawain and the Ragnall* have remained a deep source of inspiration to me.

To all those legions of explorers and commentators who went before—naturally the mistakes are mine not theirs.

I have tried to look at every text, though several are in antique and sometimes unreliable editions. Where this was the case I have relied upon the exhaustive commentaries available, especially those of Professor Bruce, Alfred Nutt, and H.O. Sommer. For much of the background to Chapter 11 owe a special debt to the work of R.S. Loomis, whose detailed research into the origins of Gawain provided some valuable links. Also particularly helpful was Keith Busby's exhaustive study of the French Gawain texts, without whose sharp eye and excellent scholarship, Chapters 6 and 7 would have been much the poorer.

Grateful acknowledgement also to the Scottish Academic Press Ltd, for permission to reprint the text of *The Great Sorrow*, which originally appeared in Volume 5 of *The Carmina Gadelica* by Alexander Carmichael.

Thanks also to Tim Cann, for the photo of Wetton Mill which appears on p. 190.

Finally I would like to thank Mildred Leake Day for her encouragement and for her generous foreword, and of course for her translation of *De Ortu Waluuanii*,<sup>39</sup> a contribution without equal in Gawain scholarship.

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## Preface to the Second Edition

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I was always drawn to Gawain's passion and stubbornness—traits that I am all too aware of sharing. It was Gawain who was the first to leap up and demand the right to follow a new quest or adventure, which he seldom failed. It was Gawain who undertook the terrible test of the Green Knight and showed his willingness to admit to human flaws. Finally, it was Gawain whose anguish at the loss of his beloved brother helped to bring down the Fellowship of the Round Table. It was this last event and the way in which Gawain was represented in later interpretations of the Arthurian legends that set me on a personal quest, resulting in the book you now hold.

In the twelve years since this book first appeared, research has added nothing significant to the interpretation of Gawain archetype. The single exception being the fact—of which I was unaware at the time of writing—that Gawain features as the main character in a late Irish romance, “The Visit of the Grey Hammed Lady” (The Visit of Sgil Isgaide Lithé). In its oldest translation the hero's name is translated as Galahad; in reality it should have been Gawain. This revealed a new source in which the Knight of the Goddess undergoes a series of adventures in the Otherworld that in every way supports the later interpretations of his character. I was able to make my own version of this tale in *The Book of Arthur* (Vega, 2002), and I refer those interested in the story to that book, which also contains versions of the other main Gawain romances.

My findings on the character and history of Gawain have not been challenged to any significant degree, and I am elated that the book has proved useful as a starting point for several generations of students working in the field of Arthurian studies. It is a great pleasure to welcome this new edition which remains unchanged apart from a few minor corrections.

John Matthews

# Foreword

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Sir Gawain, nephew of the great King Arthur, figures in much of the extensive literature of the Arthurian legend. Although this body of material was written down long after the pagan era had ended, the tales preserve hints of the ancient story that celebrated the heroes and rituals of the pre-Christian ages. Anthropologists, folklorists, and archeologists working with the Celtic traditions have identified many gods and goddesses, but perhaps the most pervasive is the Goddess of the Land, sometimes called the 'Sovereignty', sometimes 'The Great Mother', and often represented as a triple figure. Although Gawain serves no person identified specifically as 'The Great Goddess', he is involved with women of mysterious characteristics—Morgan (sometimes called a Goddess), Lady Bercilak, Dame Ragnell, even Guenivere. These ladies can be identified by name or by story motifs with Irish and Welsh pagan figures of an earlier time, as can Gawain himself. Behind these stories is a compelling feminine power dimly remembered in Western culture as 'Mother Nature', 'The Mother Country', 'the Muse', and even 'Lady Luck'.

Beginning with the massive work of Sir James Frazer almost a century ago, scholars have tried to reconstruct the largely lost pagan cultures. Frazer, in *The Golden Bough* (1898), presents a pagan pantheon based on the agricultural year with rituals for increasing the fertility of soil and flocks. His research on the sacral kingship and the battles between summer and winter have done much to increase our understanding of the relationship between the king and his land that appears in the Arthurian legend as the Wounded King and the Wasteland. Frazer does not deal as extensively with the feminine principles, although he does touch on the Corn Goddess in her two aspects of hag and bride, which he explains as a variation of the Demeter Persephone concept:

Judged by these analogies [the customs he has recorded] Demeter would be the ripe crop of this year; Persephone would be the seed-corn taken from it and sown in autumn, to reappear in spring. The descent of Persephone into the lower world would thus be a mythical expression for the sowing of the seed; her reappearance in the spring would signify the sprouting of the young corn. In this way the Persephone of one year becomes the Demeter of the next . . . (Theodore H. Gaster, ed., 1959, p. 422)

Although Frazer's golden mistletoe bough may now be considered merely a green branch broken by a suppliant and much of his collection of folklore and ritual frowned upon as not collected with proper professional discipline, Frazer's influence on twentieth century scholars and artists is immeasurable. Jessie Weston, T.S. Eliot and John Boorman, to name but a few, have touched on fertility, the king and the wasteland.

C.G. Jung, perceiving that the patterns of the ancient mythology continue to recur in modern literature as well as in the dreams and hallucinations of his patients, proposes that these myths exist as archetypes in the unconscious, providing modern man with the patterns for coping with the great crises of human birth, puberty, and death. Jung identifies the feminine principle as the 'anima', dividing her into mirror aspects, the 'Good Mother', and the 'Terrible Mother'. He explains that the creative principle of great art is in the evoking of the archetypes and that it is generated from the unconscious of the artist:

It makes no difference whether the artist knows that his work is generated, grows and matures within him, or whether he imagines that it is his own invention. In reality it grows out of him as a child its mother. The creative process has a feminine quality, and the creative work arises from unconscious depths—we might truly say from the realm of the Mothers. ('Psychology and Literature' (1950) in *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature* p. 103.)



Robert Graves, whose primary thesis in *The White Goddess* (1948) is not so much anthropology or psychology but poetry, presents a poet's description of the Goddess as Muse:

The Goddess is a lovely, slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips red as rowan-berries, startlingly blue eyes and long fair hair; she will suddenly transform herself into sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag. Her names and titles are innumerable. In ghost stories she often figures as 'The White Lady', and in ancient religions, from the British Isles to the Caucasus, as the 'White Goddess'. I cannot think of any true poet from Homer onwards who has not independently recorded his experience of her. The test of a poet's vision is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and of the island over which she rules. The reason why the hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat is constricted, the skin crawls and a shiver runs down the spine when one writes or reads a true poem is that a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust—the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death. (2nd ed., p. 24)

Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), describing the adventure of life which all are called, asserts the inevitability of meeting the Goddess:

Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters. And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation. Woman is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure. By deficient eyes she is reduced to inferior states; by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness. But she is redeemed by the eyes of understanding. The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the kind, the incarnate god, of her created world. (2nd. ed., Bollingen series, p. 116)

Miranda Green, in *The Gods of the Celts* (1986), adds to our visualization of the Great Goddess in her triple form through her richly illustrated archeological study:

The mother-goddess is perhaps the commonest type of Celtic divinity treated in this way [triplism] and the triadic form appears to have played an important role in her worship and cult-expression. The Three Mothers or *Deae Matres*, as they are frequently called in inscriptions, were known also as *Matronae*, especially in Cisalpine Gaul (North Italy) and lower Germany . . . The iconography of the Three Mothers gives us valuable information as to how they were looked upon by their devotees. The vast majority are seated side by side, fully draped. But within this framework, there are many variations, all of which stress the maternal, nourishing and fertility role of the goddesses. The commonest attributes are baskets of fruit, *cornuacopiae*, loaves, fish and children, (pp. 78-81)

Jaan Puhvel, in *Comparative Mythology* (1987), does not discuss the Celtic gods until he has covered chapters on the gods of India, Persia, Greece and Rome. Then following his account of various Roman attempts to explain the Celtic pantheon in terms of the Roman one, he describes the Celtic Goddess:

'Minerva', with the epithet *Belisama*, 'Brightest', is the cover term for a great goddess. Powerful female types stand out in Celtic mythical lore at both the divine and the saga levels. The transfunctional goddess has here come into her own. 'Minerva' had a temple with 'eternal flame' in the third-century C.E. Britain and is identifiable with the British Celtic theonym Brigantia, formally identical with the Sanskrit feminine adjective *brbati* 'great, lofty' and with the Irish Brigit, the later saint with her feast day of *Imbolc* (1 February) and her monastery with perpetual fire at Kildare, (Unlike the usual overlay, e.g., with the Virgin Mary superimposed on the sanctuary of Aphrodite at Cypriot Paphos, the Celtic deity was simply Christianized, name and all.) Triplicity or triunity is in evidence among the Celtic mythical females: Brigit herself had two synonymous 'sisters', there was the triad of Irish Machas, Gaul had the triple Matres or Matrae or Matronae, Just as the Greek three-by-three Muses did not perturb Homer's Muse, the Matronae did not preclude a single great Matrona, embodied in a river (Matronae - Marne), whereas in Ireland the mother-goddess was the land itself . . . Matrona was the mother of the 'Divine Son', Maponos, matching Modron and her son Mabon in Welsh saga . . . (pp. 173-174)

Before these modern authorities from folklore, psychology, anthropology, and archeology are construed as presenting a tradition of the Goddess completely independent of the Arthurian legend, it must also be said that each of these authorities uses aspects of the Arthurian material to support their theories, Frazer cites the episode of Lancelot in the burning city from the *High History of the Holy*

*Grail* as evidence of the representation of the sacril slaying of the king in legend (pp. 237-240). C. Jung's wife and collaborator, Emma Jung, wrote *The Grail Legend*, illustrating the Jungian interpretation of the Arthurian material in a volume completed posthumously by Marie-Louise von Franz in 1960. Robert Graves makes extensive use of the early Arthurian poem 'The Spoils of Annwn' to support his answers to the Gwion's riddles in *Hanes Taliessen* (pp. 97-112). Joseph Campbell illustrates his description of the Goddess quoted above with the Irish tale of how Niall gave a kiss to a hag in exchange for water, only to have her turn into a beautiful woman and declare herself the 'Royal Rule of Ireland', an analogue of the tales of Gawain and Dame Ragnall (pp. 116-118). Miranda Green acknowledges not only Irish but also Welsh sources, particularly the four branches of the *Mabinogion* and the *Tale of Culhwch and Olwen* (p. 16). Jaan Puhvel works primarily with the Irish sagas and the *Mabinogion*, but cites parallel episodes in the Arthurian material (p. 185). The possibility of a circularity of logic exists between contemporary studies of the mythology of pagan Celts and a study of pagan mythology in the Arthurian legend.

Yet if one goes back to texts of the twelfth century, the pagan qualities of the Arthurian material can be affirmed. Even if Nennius records that Arthur carried the Blessed Virgin's image on his shoulders and Geoffrey of Monmouth tells of Arthur's investiture by the Archbishop Dubricius, other writers writing in Latin are clear about the pagan aspect of the Arthurian material. Etienne de Rouen writing *Draco Normannicus* for Henry II in 1169 or 1170, tells how the Bretons were hard pressed by Henry's forces and called on King Arthur for his promised aid. Arthur, in turn, writes a letter to King Henry, threatening to return and save his people. Etienne does not hesitate to make Arthur a pagan. Arthur calls upon the triple Goddess by her classic names of the three fates: Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. His very immortality is a state of suspended animation induced by the ministrations of his sister Morgana, a nymph. He awaits the call of his people in the Antipodes. (It is interesting that the Latin term *fata* for the Three Fates apparently becomes singular, as in 'Fata Morgana', and passes into French as *fée*, 'fairy'. This may be evidence of the simplification of grammar in process in medieval Latin, but the triplicity of the Celtic Goddess may also have had its influence on the ambiguity of the form.)

The author of *Historia Meriadoci regis Cambrie* 'The Story of Meriadoc, King of Cambria' (twelfth century), who also wrote *De Ortu Waluuanii*, 'The Rise of Gawain', states unequivocally that the Arthurian adventures took place in Britain in the pre-Christian era. He names the Goddess who controlled the destinies of men 'Fortuna'. Fortuna also appears as the Goddess in *Wigalois*, *The Knight of Fortune's Wheel*, in *Diu Crône*, and in a number of other Arthurian romances. The choice of Fortuna as the name of the Goddess by these early authors is particularly appropriate: Fortuna shares many of the attributes of Matrona or the Celtic Sovereignty. In the statue now in the Vatican, Fortuna holds a cornucopia in her left hand, a rudder in her right. The rudder is the *gubernaculum*, the steering mechanism that is the metaphor behind our term 'government'. Her cornucopia, symbol for fertility, good harvest and plenty, is also a recurring motif in the depictions of the Three Mothers. It passes into Arthurian literature as an ivory horn and as the food-giving grail. Not only that, but since the highly respected Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (524) had portrayed Fortuna as the handmaid of Philosophia and the agent of God's will, she remained a proper subject for a Christian author.

But though her name is Fortuna, her attributes remain those of the Celtic Great Goddess. In *Historia Meriadoci*, her palace appears on a plain where no building had been seen before. She entertains her people with chess. She tells the hero Meriadoc that she has long awaited his coming. She feeds the hero at a feast more splendid than anything he has experienced before. She wants the hero to remain but he breaks a taboo by asking questions and, terrified, flees the palace. Later, after many trials, she reappears as the Weeping Lady and provides the hero with a horse. The hero is then able to leave the Otherworld and return to the world of men. Many adventures later Meriadoc rescues the Emperor

daughter from the King of the Land From Which No One Returns. A folklorist would recognize the episode as analogous to other tales of the Sovereignty, making the Emperor's daughter another human manifestation of the Goddess. Fortuna favours Meriadoc, but he never realizes this. Instead he continues to defy what he sees as 'misfortune' with courage, following in this Latin romance the Roman code of behaviour. Although Fortuna dominates his story, Meriadoc never becomes the knight of the Goddess.

It is Gawain, with his Celtic code of honour, who becomes the champion of the Goddess, as John Matthews demonstrates. More of the Arthurian legend is accessible today in printed editions and translations than ever before. Matthews has taken this immense body of literature and, concentrating on the episodes in which Gawain appears, put together the recurring elements into a pattern of what must have been the core of the Gawain story. This core he then elucidates from what is known of the pre-Christian pantheon and culture. He restores our understanding of the character of Gawain to the premier hero and Grail-winner that he was before the innocent Perceval, the wise Bors, and the saintly Galahad pursued the quest, sweeping all other contenders behind them. Yet even though Gawain is portrayed in the later romances as a failure in the Christian quest and his character is degraded in comparison to Lancelot and Galahad, he remains in the Arthurian tradition one of Arthur's foremost companions: a knight of gallantry, courtesy, and prowess—and a champion of women. That he was also, as Matthews demonstrates, the recognized champion of the Goddess—the feminine creative principle of the Sovereignty, the Great Mother, the Muse—will not surprise those of us who have studied his story.

Mildred Leake Day  
Quondam et futurus  
Gardendale, Alabama, USA  
March, 1989

# Introduction

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Gawain was once the most important knight at Arthur's court, a shining example of all that was best of the chivalry of the time; yet as the popularity of the Arthurian romances grew throughout the Middle Ages, so Gawain's star waned, until by the time Sir Thomas Malory wrote his great book *Le Morte d'Arthur* in 1485, he had become little more than a stock character, noted more for his cavalier attitude to women than for his chivalry. How this transformation came about, and more importantly the reasons for it, are explored and charted in this book.

The answers are inextricably bound up with the question of Gawain's real identity and of his allegiance to the great sovereign Goddess of Britain, facts which became steadily obscured with the passage of time. In showing how this came about we shall need to examine the evidence contained in the many stories where Gawain features as hero (or anti-hero) including Celtic hero-tales, elegant medieval romance, and the justly famed Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

From this we shall endeavour to chart the course of Gawain's rise and fall, of his great middle years when he outranked all other knights (including the latecomer Sir Lancelot du Lac) at Arthur's court. And we shall show that he once attained the greatest heights to which an Arthurian hero could aspire—the achievement of the Grail, and how his service to all ladies once stood for service of another kind.

Finally we shall attempt to unravel the mystery of Gawain's original role in the great mythic cycle of Camelot, thus restoring him to his once unchallenged position as the foremost of the Round Table knights.

Considering this importance it is surprising that comparatively little has been written about Gawain despite the fact that, 'apart from Arthur himself, the two ubiquitous characters are Arthur's nephew Gawain, and Kay the seneschal'.<sup>112</sup> These two are with Arthur from the start. As Gwalchmai (the Hawk of May) and Kai, they are among the foremost warriors of the Arthurian court in the earliest surviving versions of the myths.<sup>121</sup>

Later, during the heyday of Arthurian literature, Gawain occupied more space and has more adventures attributed to him, than any other knight. Even Perceval, who as a successful quest knight in search of the Grail features in numerous texts, is secondary to Gawain in the number of appearances he makes.

A number of commentators have drawn attention to the way in which Gawain's character undergoes such a significant change throughout his literary career. It is a far cry from the description found in the early Welsh tale of *Culhwch and Olwen*, where it is said of him that,

he never came home without the Quest he had gone to seek. He was the best of walkers and the best of riders He was Arthur's nephew, his sister's son, and his first companion.<sup>31</sup>

to the account, in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, of his part in the murder of King Pellinore (or for that matter his slaying of an innocent woman in the early pages of the same text).

Scholars such as J.D. Bruce,<sup>77</sup> Jessie Weston,<sup>152</sup> R.S. Loomis, J.B. Whiting<sup>154</sup> and Raymond Thompson<sup>147</sup> have all drawn attention to this curious state of affairs; however, with the exception of Miss Weston, none have so far come up with a satisfactory reason, being content to assume that the appearance of Lancelot, as the representative of fashionable Courtly Love, ousted Gawain from his premier position. In reality it was another rivalry, more fundamental than literary fashion, which was

responsible for Gawain's downfall. The present author hopes to show that it was in fact Gawain's original role as Champion of the Goddess which lies at the heart of the mystery. Her own history precludes that of her knight, for as Christianity became the dominating force in the land, so belief in the ancient goddesses changed, faded and finally went into hiding. They became, rather than figures of worship and adoration, objects of vilification and symbols of evil.

All of this makes it very difficult to say with any degree of certainty just what the Celts themselves understood by the term Goddess, or what, for that matter, it meant to certain other people in the Middle Ages. Celtic religious beliefs are still little understood, though we do know that the worshipped deities of wood and water, sky and sea—indeed that each of the elements was of prime importance to them. So that when they spoke of goddesses they were probably thinking of what we would call an abstract principle, represented in the form of a woman.

The best example of this is the Goddess of Sovereignty, with whom Gawain, as we shall see, had a particular relationship. For the Celts, particularly the Irish, the concept of sovereignty, as of kingship, was of a unique kind of link with the earth itself. Thus the king was believed literally to mate with the Goddess of the Land—the otherworldly representative of the particular area over which he reigned. Without the sanction of sovereignty thus gained he could not rule wisely or honestly, or ensure that the kingdom remained strong and virile. This is all part and parcel of a much older idea concerning the sacredness of the land itself—which perhaps in some distant foretime gave birth to the people who walked upon it—hence the concept of Mother Earth.

By the period of the Middle Ages much of this had been forgotten—or at least reassimilated. The fact remains that it takes many hundreds of generations for a new set of religious beliefs to supersede an earlier strata and while the process is taking place a situation exists in which the shadowy forms of earlier traditions mingle with those of the new.

This is the situation which existed during most of the time the Gawain romances were being composed and reactions to it came in two distinct forms. There were those who took the stories that came to them, mostly from wandering singers and story-tellers, and who simply turned them into medieval romances by dressing them in the fashions of the time. And there were those who saw the same stories as an opportunity to put forward the tenets of Christianity in a unique form and who recognized the 'pagan' origins of much of what they saw. It is to these writers that we owe the degraded view of Gawain, who saw in him a champion of the old ways and sought to discredit him in the eyes of the world.

In considering this view we must not allow ourselves to forget that the subject of belief, of faith and theological teaching, was much more to the fore in educated society than it is today. Although it was among the so-called 'ordinary' people that the stories that went into the making of the Matter of Britain originated, in the process of becoming literary creations they underwent a considerable degree of change and adaptation, to suit both the era and the audience.

Thus, since the majority of that audience was made up of knightly or noble classes, who loved to hear about chivalrous adventure above everything, so the epics of the Middle Ages concerned themselves with battles and tournaments and single combats. And when later on the concept of Courtly Love appeared on the scene, so that element also was tossed into the melting pot to add its flavour to the already heady brew.

The final element was the religious one evidenced by the sudden outbreak of interest in the Grail story, which until the beginning of the twelfth century had existed as part of an obscure collection of Celtic tales and Christian apocrypha, but which by the end of the fourteenth century had become one of the most important, most widely written about themes of the time.

Gawain, as the Champion of the Goddess, underwent a form of character erosion similar to that of the Goddess herself—though in his case it was more subtle, hence the frequent failure of earlier

writers to perceive the truth. Yet there is, as we shall see, a significant body of evidence connecting Gawain with the Goddess and showing not only his original role as her champion, but the stages by which he became demoted to the kind of Victorian rake pictured by Tennyson in the nineteenth century. It has been argued that Gawain was ousted from his position of supremacy by the new code of Courtly Love<sup>77</sup> which preferred the illicit passions of Lancelot and Tristan to the more casual amours of Gawain. Certainly Gawain was no courtly lover, despite his famed *courtesy*; indeed, it is more than likely that finding him intractable material in the new literary *genre*, the medieval authors simply sought elsewhere for their heroes and that Gawain's career suffered as a result. Yet it is curious, not to say ironic, that his reputation remained primarily that of a lover.

As Jessie Weston remarked as long ago as 1898 in her book *The Legend of Sir Gawain*:

It ought not to be impossible to single out from among the various versions of Gawain's adventures certain features which, by their frequent recurrence in the romances devoted to him, and their analogy to ancient Celtic tradition, seem as if they might with probability be regarded as forming part of his original story. It is scarcely to be hoped that we can ever construct a coherent account on which we may lay our finger and say 'This, and no other, was the original Gawain story'; but we may, I think, be able to specify certain incidents, saying, 'This belongs to Gawain and to no other of King Arthur's knights. That adventure is a necessary and integral part of his story.'

It is in belief that this is the case that the present writer has undertaken this study, for although it has become customary to criticize Miss Weston for her flights of fancy, in this instance (as in others) she was close to the truth. While this current investigation frequently diverges from her own, it is very much to the spirit of Miss Weston's pioneering study that the present work is dedicated.

Another writer, in more recent times, dedicated his study of Gawain to 'bringing him out of Fairyland into the world of real men and their affairs.'<sup>112</sup> On consideration it is the opinion of the present writer that there is no evidence to suggest that Gawain ever had *anything* to do with the real world, except in as far as it affected his role in the Matter of Britain. He seems to have been born in 'Fairyland', lived most of his life within its confines, only to have emerged long enough to die. Otherwise his whole character, deeds and behaviour mark him out as an otherworld figure, more properly described as a 'Green Knight' than his actual adversary of that name. Gawain was indeed, as I shall hope to show, the Green Knight at Camelot, the representative of the Goddess-upon-Earth-Sovereignty's Champion, the Son of the Mother.

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## The British Cuchulainn

### MODENA: ON THE ROAD TO THE GREEN CHAPEL

Our search for the truth about Gawain begins far from Britain, in the medieval city of Modena, northern Italy. There, above the north-facing porch of the cathedral, known as the Porta del Pescheria, instead of the usual angels, saints or Old Testament prophets, we find a surprisingly secular scene sculpted on the archivault.

In the centre is a moated castle with twin towers, in which are two people, a man and a woman, Mardoc and Winlogee. From the left three mounted knights, Artus de Bretania, Isdernus and an unnamed man, charge with lowered lances, to be met by a huge churl wielding a kind of pickaxe called a *baston cornu*. To the right a battle is taking place between two mounted knights, Carrado and Galvagin, while two more knights, Galvarium and Che, spears at rest, gallop up from behind.<sup>104</sup>

Much debate has raged over the precise dating and subject matter of this sculpture, but most scholars now accept, from evidence furnished by details of armour and the architecture of the castle, that it was executed some time between 1090 and 1120. There is little doubt, either, that the main characters in the piece, whose names appear in what seems to be Breton, are in fact more familiar to us as Guinevere (Winlogee), Melwas or possibly Mordred (Mardoc), Arthur (Artus de Bretania), Ydarn (Isdernus), Caradoc (Carrados), Gawain (Galvagin), and Kay (Che). Only the names Galvarium and Bermaltus have no exact equivalents in Arthurian legend; although, as we shall see, the characters they represent are well known therein.<sup>108</sup>

The story told in this enigmatic tableau has been reconstructed several times, the most likely (with certain reservations, which will appear later) to date being that of Roger Sherman Loomis in 1923. The story as he gives it is as follows:

Winlogee, Arthur's queen, escorted only by the unarmed knight Isdern, has gone out to a meadow. Suddenly there gallops out, from a wood near by, a giant knight, Carrado, who swings her from her palfrey to his horse . . . Carrado rides away with the Queen. Isdern goes back and gives the alarm . . . and starts in pursuit. There set out after him . . . Galvarium, Galvarin, Artus and Che. At length they arrive before a castle, surrounded by a marsh and approached by two opposite barbicans. Before one of them stands a huge ruffian, swinging a *baston cornu*, whose name is Bermalt. At the other entrance Galvagin, Galvarium and Che are met by the giant Carrado. Probably Che and Galvarium are overthrown. Galvagin, however, encounters Carrado and pursues him into the castle. When Galvagin breaks his sword, a damsel whom Carrado has abducted places Carrado's own sword, with which alone he could be killed, within Galvagin's reach, and with this Galvagin dispatches him. The hero then proceeds . . . finds at last Winlogee with Mardoc, who has long loved her and to whom Carrado has delivered her. What is the fate of Mardoc is uncertain, but probably he throws himself on the Queen's mercy and is pardoned. Galvagin then brings her back to her husband.<sup>104</sup>

The central theme of this story, and one which we shall meet again throughout this book, is that of the rape and subsequent rescue of the Flower Bride, an aspect of the otherworldly queen or Goddess with whom Gawain is seen to be consistently connected.

What interests us particularly about the version of the story given here, which is reconstructed from

several texts, is the role of Gawain as the rescuer of Guinevere, a task normally reserved for Lancelot and the fact that it probably marks the earliest recorded appearance of the name Gawain (Galvagi) anywhere. Before this time, though we may assume that stories featuring the hero were in circulation, we have no definite evidence to support the claim. Though there is, as we shall see, plentiful indication of a much earlier Gawain figure.

The story depicted on the Modena archivault is familiar from more than one major Arthurian source. In Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*<sup>32</sup> Guinevere is abducted by Meleagraunce and rescued by Lancelot; in the medieval Latin *Life of St Gildas*<sup>59</sup> Melwas, Lord of the Summer Country, is the abductor and Arthur himself the putative rescuer, aided by the Saint, who brings about a peaceful settlement. In three other texts, *Iwein* by Hartmann von Aue, the *Diu Crône* (The Crown) of Heinrich von dem Turlin,<sup>22</sup> and the *Livre d'Artus*,<sup>60</sup> Gawain is named as the hero, though the identity of the abductor varies in each case.

Other characters in what we may for convenience call the *Modena version*, appear in a variety of roles. In the thirteenth-century poem *Durmart le Gallois*<sup>45</sup> the hero rescues Guinevere from the clutches of an aggressor, aided by Yder (Isdernus). Durmart himself is probably the same name as Bernaloc, though in this case he is an attacker rather than a defender. While the full significance of this story will be discussed later (see pp. 47-52) we should note that in four out of the eight texts mentioned above Gawain is the hero, while in the *Vulgate Lancelot*<sup>60</sup> he is himself rescued, and that he is depicted in the *Modena version*, together with a giant, axe-bearing churl—the first of many such encounters that we shall meet.

The further importance of the Modena carvings lies in the evidence they offer both for the importance of the Arthurian mythos at a time substantially *before* any of the great romances had appeared, and for the presence of such stories far afield from their place of origin in Celtic Britain. This is not the place to go into the complex matter of transmission, by which the stories of Arthur and his knights were disseminated across the Western world. However it is important to grasp certain salient points.

The stories were almost certainly carried across the English Channel to Brittany by wandering bards and story-tellers at various times after the general exodus which followed upon the Saxon Wars of the fifth-sixth centuries—not long, in fact, after the disappearance of Arthur himself. Once there they were carried deeper into Europe, where they became cross-fertilized with native tales, finally returning to Britain with the Normans.

Often the tales were changed so much that even those who knew the original versions would have been hard put to identify them. Isolated episodes were taken up, transformed, applied to other people, so that a single story could reappear in as many as a dozen new forms, embedded in much larger tales and often attributed to a completely different set of characters.

We will observe this happening throughout Gawain's literary and mythical career. It is one of the main reasons why his true story has remained obscured for so long, and it reflects the changes which took place in the medieval world during the heyday of Arthurian romance.

But it was long before this that the story really began, in the richly peopled and magical realm of Celtic myth and legend. Although many of the texts to be considered here were not written down until after the carving of the Modena archivault, the material they contain dates from much earlier. It is here that we first learn of Gawain.

The *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (Triads of Britain)<sup>56</sup> although not collected until the twelfth century remain one of the most reliable sources for the lost Celtic hero sagas. We find, altogether, eight mentions of Gawain there, under the Welsh version of his name, *Gwalchmai*, which may be translated as The Hawk of May—though the name itself, as we shall see, has caused problems of its own.

In Triad 4, 'Gwalchmai son of Gwyar' is described as one of the 'three well-endowed men of the



Island of Britain'. Triad 75 names him one of the 'Three men of the Island of Britain who were most courteous to guests and strangers'; and Triad 91 as the first among the 'Three Fearless Men of the Island of Britain'. Triads 42 and 46a further mention his horse *Meingalet* (translated as 'Slender Hard' by Rachel Bromwich) or *Keincaled* (translated as 'White and Hardy' by R.S. Loomis).

To this may be added one further reference. The late medieval work known as *The Twenty-Four Knights of Arthur's Court*<sup>36</sup> refers to the 'three Golden-Tongued Knights [who] were in Arthur's Court: Gwalchmai son of Llew son of Cynfarch . . . [etc.] . . . and there was neither king nor lord whom these came who did not listen to them; and whatever quest they sought, they wished for and obtained it, either willingly or unwillingly' (Trans. Bromwich).

These may well be the earliest surviving references to Gawain we possess, for though we must not forget that they are of medieval origin, there is little doubt that they derived from much earlier sources. We may note, also, that the references to Gwalchmai already possess a certain unity and that they clearly refer to one person, rather than several. Gwalchmai is rich (well-endowed), courteous, fearless, and possessed of a golden tongue—all attributes which we may see reflected in the later romances.

The theme of Gwalchmai's ability as a conciliator is taken up again in three of the major Arthurian stories contained in the *Mabinogion*.<sup>31</sup> In 'The Lady of the Fountain' he is clearly shown to be Arthur's confidant, walking with him and advising him as to the best course of action to take over a missing knight. In 'Geraint and Enid', he acts as an intermediary between Arthur and Geraint, when the latter is wounded and unwilling to appear before the king. Finally, in 'Peredur', he awakens the hero from a trance into which he had fallen and during which he had absent-mindedly unhorsed two other knights who had approached him.

In each of these tales, which we shall examine in more detail later, we see Gwalchmai acting in a noble, as well as a heroic, manner. He is a respected courtier whose ability to smooth the path between contending factions is widely recognized.

The reference in the *Twenty-Four Knights* to Gwalchmai's ancestry are of particular importance since they lead us directly into the genealogical tangle surrounding Gawain's original identity. We note here that he is the son of Llew ap Cynfarch, a figure who has been identified with Loth or Lot of Lothian and Orkney, a major figure in the Arthurian romances. He it was who, according to these later stories, married Arthur's half-sister, sometimes called Morgause, sometimes Anna, thus establishing Gawain as Arthur's nephew, an important relationship as we shall see.

The fact that Lot is known chiefly in the later French texts has led some scholars to the belief that the reference to him in *Twenty-Four Knights* is also late, and was influenced by the continental stories. In much the same way, the name Gwalchmai has been put forward as an attempt, by a Welsh storyteller, to Anglicize the French name *Gauvain*. However, there seems to be no real justification for this other than a desire to claim French origin for all the Matter of Britain. Sufficient references exist in *The Mabinogion*,<sup>31</sup> *The Stanzas of the Graves*,<sup>56</sup> and the *Ystoria Trystan*,<sup>85</sup> as well as *The Triads*, to indicate the presence of an established Gawain tradition. And as we shall see, there are further reasons for choosing to see the name Gauvain as deriving from another direction altogether.



## THE THREE SONS OF LUGH: GAWAIN, CUCHULAINN AND GWRI

The great Celtic scholar Sir John Rhys first advanced the theory that Gawain was to be identified with the Irish hero Cuchulainn and that both were solar heroes.<sup>135, 134</sup> He based this in part on certain points of similarity between their careers, and from the fact that both had a specific quality—their strength waxed and waned with the rising and setting of the sun, being at its height at midday. This has been

popular theory with critics of the Arthurian legend, and R.S. Loomis in particular made much of it. His brilliant early book *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*<sup>104</sup> and in various articles which followed it. In all of these he found further evidence to support the identification and in so doing added considerably to our understanding of Gawain,

Loomis' argument may be summarized thus.

1. Gwair, a rather mysterious figure whose name appears several times in the *Mabinogion* and elsewhere,<sup>114</sup> is the son of the Welsh hero Llŵch Lleminawc.
2. Cuchulainn is the son (or possibly the reincarnation) of the Irish god Lugh Loínbheimionach.
3. Gwalchmai is the son of Llew ap Cynfarch (Lot or Loth in the later romances).
4. Numerous incidents from Gawain's career coincide with those in the life of Cuchulainn, and also with those of Gwair under the names Gwri and Goreu.
5. The name of Gawain's son in the romances, Guinglainn, sounds like an attempt to Anglicize the name Cuchulainn.
6. Two names which appear in the warrior list in *Culhwch and Olwen*, Gwri Gwallt-Awryn and Gwri Gwallt-Euryn, transpose easily into the names of Galvagin and Galvarium, as found on the Modena archivault.
7. The epithets attached to the name Gwri both mean Golden Haired.
8. Cuchulainn had a halo of golden hair.
9. Both Cuchulainn and Gwri are precocious at birth and are put out to fosterage.
10. Both are connected with the birth of a foal which is to provide them with a steed in later life.
11. Another rebirth of Lugh is as the huge and heroic warrior Curoi mac Daire, who plays the Beheading Game (see pp. 65-7) with Cuchulainn in the same way that an identical figure, Bercilak who will be discussed in [Chapter 3](#), plays it with Gawain. To this we must add,
12. Both Curoi and Bercilak can be identified as playing similar roles to that of Bermaltus in the *Modena version*.

We are looking then, at an overlay between the careers of Gawain and three different heroes: Cuchulainn, Gwri Gwallt-Euryn and Curoi mac Daire. We must now look at all three in more detail to see how they enlarge our understanding of Gawain's original role.

Cuchulainn perhaps needs least by way of introduction. He is the premier hero of Ancient Ireland and one of the most extraordinary figures in Celtic myth. His mother, Dechtire, was spirited away to the Otherworld on the evening of her wedding to Sualtair mac Roth and while there the god Lugh fathered Cuchulainn upon her (or was reincarnated through the birth according to a more primitive version of the story). The child was named Setanta bee, the Little One, but received the name *Cuchulainn* (The Hound of Cullan) when he killed the giant dog of Culann the Smith and promised to act as watch-dog until another animal could be trained.

He had many loves but the first and greatest was Emer, daughter of Forgall the Wily. When Cuchulainn presented himself as a suitor Forgall indicated that he would only look with favour on someone who had been trained by Domhnall the Warlike of Alba. Having swiftly learned all he could from Domhnall, Cuchulainn went on to the woman warrior Scathach, who trained him further, until he was the greatest warrior in all Ireland. Returning to Forgall, Cuchulainn again presented himself as a suitor for Emer, and on being refused yet again attacked and slew so many men that Forgall jumped from the ramparts rather than face the angry warrior. Cuchulainn married Emer but had many other loves, including the fairy woman Blathnat, whom he abducted from Curoi's revolving fortress in a story reminiscent of the abduction of Guinevere. We shall return to this episode in more detail in a later moment.<sup>11</sup>

Cuchulainn's career is a catalogue of remarkable adventures, but his most famous exploit was his virtually single-handed defence of Ulster against the invading armies of Connacht. The story is told

full in the epic poem *The Tain*<sup>54</sup> and is one of the great hero-tales of all time. He was only finally killed after he rejected the love of the Morrigan, the terrible battle goddess of Ireland, and this too would prove to be part of the story of Gawain.

The second in this trio of heroes Gwri, under his recognized aliases, Gwair, Goreu and Pryderi, has a similarly remarkable life.<sup>114</sup> In the *Mabinogion* of *Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed* his story is as follows:

When a son is born to the goddess Rhiannon and her husband Pwyll, she is accused of the infant's murder when he is stolen from her side on the night of his birth. At the same time, in another part of the land, a man named Teyrnnon Twrf Lliant had a mare which bore a splendid foal every May Eve, but which always disappeared. Determined to find out the cause of this, Teyrnnon lies in wait and sees a huge arm and claw come in through the window of the stable. He successfully cuts this off and gives pursuit of the wounded monster. Returning from the chase, he finds a newborn child in the stable wrapped in rich clothes. It is, of course, Rhiannon's child, the implication being that he had been stolen by the same monster and dropped in the struggle. Teyrnnon and his wife adopt the boy and name him Gwri Gwallt-Euryn (Gwri Golden Hair). He grows rapidly and becomes so attached to the cow born on the night of his discovery that Teyrnnon gives it to him. Soon after they learn that Rhiannon has been banished from the court and made to wait outside the gate to carry guests inside on her shoulders, and noticing the likeness of the growing Gwri to Pwyll, they take him to court. Both refuse to be carried inside by Rhiannon, and Teyrnnon relates the story of Gwri's discovery. Rhiannon declares that she is released from anxiety (*pryder*) and the boy is named from this 'Pryderi'.<sup>31</sup>

The second instance of Gwri's appearance is also in the *Mabinogion* in the story of *Culhwch and Olwen*. This long and complex tale is really a compendium of ancient stories bound together by Culhwch's quest for Olwen, the daughter of the giant Yspaddaden Pencawr. In this he is aided by a glittering array of heroes from Arthur's court, who assist him in performing a number of impossible tasks set for him by the giant. Among those who offer outstanding help is Goreu, the yellow-haired son of Custenin, Yspaddaden's herdsman, and possibly of the giant's sister. It is told of him that his mother hid him in a cupboard for fear of the giant, who had already killed 23 of her sons, but that the hero Cai (Kay) came and made him his companion and page. He is said to be a cousin to both Arthur and to Culhwch. He acquits himself with outstanding bravery in the stealing of a magical sword from another giant, Gwrnach, and it is then that he is named Goreu, which means 'the best'.

He appears again in Triad 52 which lists the Three Exalted Prisoners of the Island of Britain:

Llyr Half-Speech, who was imprisoned by Euroswydd,  
and the second, Mabon son of Modron,  
and third, Gwair son of Geiriodd.

And one [prisoner] who was more exalted than the three of them, was three nights in prison in Caer Oeth and Anoeth, and three nights imprisoned by Gwen Pendragon, and three nights in an enchanted prison under the stone of Echymeint. This Exalted Prisoner was Arthur, and it was the same lad who released him from each of these three prisons—Goreu, son of Custenin, his cousin.<sup>56</sup>

The meaning of this enigmatic Triad has been successfully established by Caitlin Matthews in her book *Mabon and the Mysteries of Britain*<sup>114</sup> and need only be summarized here. Gwair, Goreu and Gwri are all aspects of the Celtic Divine Child, Mabon son of Modron, who, like Gwri/Pryderi, was stolen from his mother's side within three nights of his birth, and who must be released rather in the same way that the waters of the Waste Land in the Grail tradition must be released in order to heal the wounded land. Mabon is the imprisoned splendour and beauty of the world, which remains dark and desolate until he is set free. His mother, Modron, is the Goddess of the land and together these two archetypal figures reappear again and again throughout Celtic and Arthurian myth. As we have seen

Gawain also appears in Arthurian romance as a conciliator—one who frees people from difficult situations in which they have become embroiled through meddling in otherworldly affairs, and he is almost certainly, the son of a Goddess.

Under the name Gwair, Mabon-Gwri-Goreu appears in perhaps the most genuinely ancient Arthurian text, the *Preiddeu Annwn* (Spoils of Annwn), where the lines appear: ‘Perfect is the captivity of Gwair in Caer Siddi, According to the testimony of Pwyll and Pryderi’<sup>120</sup> another reference to the captivity theme which is a concomitant of the Mabon story. Loomis believed that Gwair was the son of the Welsh hero Llwch Llemenawc which, as we shall see, provides a further link between the three figures under discussion. Gwair’s name certainly passed into Arthurian romance, in a mutated form, attached to Gawain’s brothers Gareth and Gaheris. He is also involved in a quest for a magical sword, which became a key motif of the Gawain saga.

The third of this trio of Celtic heroes is Curoi mac Daire, who is a curious blend of historical character and mythic being. He was probably a real king of Munster sometime during the Heroic period (roughly equivalent to the Iron and Bronze ages), but he is best known through the Cuchulainn saga where he begins as Cuchulainn’s friend and ends as his bitterest foe when they quarrel over the fairy woman Blathnat. Here he plays a far more otherworldly role, as two further incidents from his life indicate.

A detail from the early Irish text, *Compert Cuchulainn*,<sup>11</sup> instanced by Loomis, offers a clue to Curoi’s original identity, and ultimately, to that of Gawain. The story concerns an incarnation of the god Lugh, and how in the same night two colts were born (as in the story of Gwri). This particular incarnation was unsuccessful, the child dying in infancy, but Lugh appeared to the mother of the dead child and instructed her to keep the two colts until she should bear another son. This is to be Cuchulainn himself, another incarnation of Lugh.

Loomis’ inference is that the first incarnation was, in an earlier version, Curoi, which he backs up with the knowledge that Daire himself had a well-founded identification with Lugh or Lugaid, and that both Curoi and Cuchulainn seem to have been, on separate occasions, the father of the same son, Legaidh mac na tri-con.

The second episode from Curoi’s career is told in *Fled Bricriu*<sup>13</sup> (Bricriu’s Feast). It has him appearing as a giant, who offers to play the Beheading Game with three heroes: Conall Cearnach, Laoghaire, and Cuchulainn himself to establish the championship of Ireland. The game consists of each one of the three being allowed to cut off Curoi’s head in return for allowing him to do the same to them. Expecting no possible retaliation, both Laoghaire and Conall Caernach strike their blows, but in each case Curoi replaces his head. Both heroes flee, Cuchulainn alone being prepared to accept the return blow, which is withheld and Cuchulainn pronounced a worthy champion.

As with the related theme of the rape of the Flower Bride, we shall meet this most important incident in one form or another throughout this study. Its most famous appearance is in the Middle English poem *Gawain and the Green Knight*<sup>49</sup> in which Gawain takes the role originally assigned to Cuchulainn, while Curoi’s role is played by the monstrous Green Knight, who challenges the knights of Arthur’s court to the Beheading Game. We shall be examining the evidence of this text, and other texts where the motif appears, in [Chapter 3](#). For the moment it is enough to say that it is this test which helps establish Gawain as the Champion of the Goddess, though this has been obscured in the later versions of the story.

For a text in which both the rape of the Flower Bride and the Beheading Game appear side by side, though in confused form, we have to look only at *The Tragic Death of Cu Roi Mac Daire*<sup>13</sup>

Blathnat is part of the spoils of the siege of Fir Falge in which Curoi had fought bravely in disguise. Because no one knew him, he received none of the spoils, and in anger seized the cows of Tuchuan

together with the three birds which perched in their ears, causing them to give the milk of 30 cows into a great cauldron, and putting the birds into his belt, Blathnat under one arm, the cows under the other and the cauldron on his back, he fled. Cuchulainn gave chase but was overcome by Curoi, who shaved his head and buried him up to his armpits in mud and anointed him with cow dung. So angry was Cuchulainn that he followed Curoi and, discovering at last who he was, secretly planned his death with Blathnat, with whom he was in love. Blathnat bathed Curoi in a river into which she poured milk to alert her lover, then she bound Curoi to the bed by his hair and Cuchulainn burst in and slew him, cutting off his head.

The idea of the hero fighting incognito could come from almost any one of a hundred Arthurian stories, including several featuring Gawain. But there are several more important points in this story. Not only is it, as already remarked, similar to the abduction stories associated with Guinevere, (and thus with the Flower Bride), but we find Cuchulainn, who as we have seen is a precursor of Gawain acting as her rescuer. There is also the matter of Blathnat being Cuchulainn's lover, which seems to look forward to the later situation where Lancelot is both Guinevere's rescuer and her lover. The nature of Curoi himself, as abductor, is very similar to that of both Mardoc *and* the giant churl Bermaltus in the *Modena version*. Add to this the method of Curoi's death, by beheading, and we are once again back at the story of the Beheading Game, though this time all the dice are weighted in favour of Cuchulainn.

More importantly, perhaps, is the clue this story offers to another aspect of Gawain's original role in which he undertook various tasks in order to win the favours of the Goddess. The theme of the abduction of the Flower Bride, of which both Guinevere and Blathnat are types, will be examined in more detail later (see pp. 86-91). For the present it is important to recognize that Cuchulainn/Gawain/Curoi act as both abductor *and* rescuer within the texts examined above.

For the sake of clarity it may now be as well to summarize again the parallels between Cuchulainn, Gwri and Curoi, and their relationship to the story of Gawain.

1. All four are in a certain sense sons of the god Lugh or Llŵch. Both Cuchulainn and Curoi being sons of Lugh Loinnbheimionach; Gwair (who has been identified with Gwri and Goreu) is the son of Llŵch Lleminawc; Gawain is the son of Llew ap Cynfarch (or as he becomes in the later texts Loth or Lothian who in the medieval romance of *Erec* (v. 1737) is called Loth 'le Irois', (the Irishman).
2. Cuchulainn, Curoi and Gwri are all associated with horses born at the same hour as themselves.
3. Gwri and Goreu are both called 'Golden Haired'; Cuchulainn has a halo of golden hair.
4. Both Gwri and Cuchulainn are precocious at birth and both are put to fosterage.
5. Both Cuchulainn and Curoi are involved in the Beheading Game which afterwards is a crucial part in Gawain's career;
6. Gawain and Cuchulainn are both involved in abduction/rescue stories, in which the object of their efforts is an aspect of the Flower Bride and hence of the Goddess.

All three characters in one form or another have influenced the name and character of Gawain to a lesser or greater degree. They establish him as a mythic archetype whose father may have been a god and whose task is to become the champion of a Goddess, and who epitomizes the figure of the Hero.

Before we pass on to look at the later career of Gawain, it remains to examine the evidence for his possible place of origin, which will be shown to have been a part of the country where the kind of cross-fertilization between Irish and British story-tellers we would expect to give rise to the kind of overlay in the career of Gawain and the other heroes, could easily have taken place.



## GAWAIN OF GALLOWAY: THE BIRTH OF A HERO

In one of the many fugitive poems contained in the *Four Ancient Books of Wales*,<sup>15</sup> a fragment known as ‘The Porter at the Gate’, an unnamed character is referred to as ‘a nephew (of Arthur) who would cause reconciliation’. This can surely be none other than Gawain, as both the references to him in the *Mabinogion* and another early text, the *Ystoria Trystan*,<sup>85</sup> bear witness.

This fragment deals with the flight of Trystan and Esyllt (Isolt) to the wood of Celyddon, and the pursuit by her jealous husband March ap Meirchion (the King Mark of the later romances), who has claimed the assistance of Arthur and his warriors rather in the same way that Culhwch does *in his* quest for Olwen. However, Trystan has certain special properties, which were

that whoever drew blood from him would die, and whoever he drew blood from would die despite all the doctors in Christendom . . . (Trans. J. Hill)

Understandably, therefore, neither March nor his borrowed men are eager to attack Trystan, even though they have the guilty lovers surrounded. Therefore Arthur advises that he send ‘singers with verses of praise to praise him [Trystan] and bring him out of his fury and anger.’, and that they also send ‘the chief of peace, that is to say Gwalchmai ap Gwyar, to talk to him.’<sup>85</sup> This is done, and the following exchange takes place:

G: Fierce is the unbounded wave  
When the middle sea doth rave.  
Who art thou, O warrior brave?  
T: Fierce are the thunder and the flame,  
Though they be no whit the same.  
In battle Trystan is my name.  
G: Trystan I can nowhere see  
Blemish in thy Chivalry.  
Gwalchmai once was friend to thee.  
T: If Gwalchmai in the day of blood  
Needed me, for him I would  
Do more than a brother could.  
G: Trystan, noble prince of light,  
Sore they buffets. I am hight  
Gwalchmai, Arthur’s nephew wight.

(Trans. R.S. Loomis)<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to Gwalchmai’s golden tongue Trystan is persuaded to submit to Arthur’s judgement, which is that one man should have Esyllt while the leaves are on the tree and the other while they are not, and that the husband should have the choice. March chooses winter, ‘because the nights would be longer that time’, but of course he thereby forfeits all rights to Esyllt because of the evergreen ‘holly, ivy and yew, which keep their leaves as long as they live.’

This episode owes something to the ancient battle of the lords of summer and winter for the Flower Bride (see [Chapter 3](#)) traces of which are also to be found in the abduction stories of Guinevere and Blathnat. But what is even more interesting is the part played by Gawain, who is referred to as ‘the chief of peace’, and the setting of the story in the forest of Celyddon in Scotland. This northern link points us towards the probable birthplace of the Gawain legends, to a place also associated with Trystan where, as already stated, there was opportunity for shared information by both British and

Irish story-tellers.

~~This is Galloway, on the western side of Scotland, and it has consistent associations with Gawain.~~ According to Professor Chadwick<sup>82</sup> in the ninth century, when the earliest Gawain stories were probably written and told, *Gall-Gaidil* extended over all the islands and coastline of the Western Highlands. It was here that a well-founded Gaelic-speaking community existed, to which travellers from Ireland found welcome.

Here, until the seventeenth century, a Castell Gwalchmai was recorded, and here, in a significant number of later French texts, Gawain was said to have his abode. In both the continuations of Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte del Graal*<sup>12</sup> and the slightly later *Perlesvaus*<sup>23</sup> Gawain's home is said to be 'Galvoie', while in the English *Awntyrs of Arthur at Tarn Wathelin*<sup>21</sup> Gawain is awarded the lands 'Galeron of Galloway' for his services.

All this may add up to nothing more than a scribal confusion between the name Gawain, Gwalchmai, and the place name Galloway, which appears in Middle English texts under such various spellings as: Galeweoie, Galeweie, Galvoyne, and Galvoye. The last is an almost exact approximation of the Old French *Galvoie*, and clearly suggests that there was a well-founded tradition of Gawain's association with the area. In the *Vulgate Merlin Continuation*<sup>60</sup> there is even mention of a detachment of men from Galloway fighting for Arthur under the command of one 'Bertelot'—a name significant and similar to Bercilak (the Green Knight in *Gawain and the Green Knight*) to uphold yet another link with the area.

Finally, if we turn to William of Malmesbury's *De Gestis Regum Angelorum* (Deeds of the Kings of the Angles) (1125) we find the following passage:

At the time (1066-1087) in a province of Wales called Ros [modern Pembrokeshire] the tomb of Walwein [Gawain] was found who, by no means unworthy of Arthur, was a nephew by his sister. He reigned in that part of Britain still called Walweitha [Galloway], a soldier greatly celebrated for valour, but driven from the kingdom by the brother and nephew of Hengist, of whom I spoke in Book I, he made them [the Saxons] pay severely for his exile. (Trans. L.B. Hall)<sup>21</sup>

Whatever theory one accepts finally, there is enough evidence to suggest that Gawain's point of origin may have been the North. (Later medieval texts place him in Orkney), And since this has long been accepted as the probable home of many of the most prominent figures of the Arthurian cycle (Peredur and Cai are notable among these) we may believe with some justification that Gawain also first saw the light of day there. For the story of his birth, and more importantly his parentage, we must refer to later texts, and to the next stage in the development of Gwalchmai into Gawain.



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## The Rise of Gawain

### THE SON OF THE GODDESS

On the night that Aurelius Ambrosius, King of the Britons, lay dying from a poisoned draught administered by a Saxon spy, there appeared in the sky ‘a star of marvellous bigness and brightness from which issued a ray of light ending in a ball of fire in the shape of a dragon. From its mouth issued two further rays, one of which reached beyond the regions of Gaul, and the other, stretching towards the Irish sea, ended in seven lesser rays.

This account, from Book VIII of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s celebrated *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain),<sup>19</sup> describes a portent which Merlin is on hand to interpret for the King’s brother, Uther:

Thou shalt be king of the whole of Britain!  
 For yon star doth betoken thee, and the fiery  
 dragon that is under the star! The ray, moreover,  
 that stretcheth forth towards the region of Gaul,  
 doth portend that a son shall be born unto thee that  
 shall be of surpassing mighty dominion, whose power  
 shall extend over all the realms that lie beneath the  
 ray; and the other ray signifieth a daughter whose  
 sons and grandsons shall hold the kingdom of Britain  
 in succession. (Bk VIII, Ch. 15)

The first part of this prophecy clearly relates to Arthur; the second is more puzzling. Even Geoffrey seems uncertain about it, and gives conflicting information about Uther’s daughter and grandsons. As we read on, it becomes apparent that he is actually referring to Gawain’s family, though the prophecy remains unfulfilled since neither Gawain himself, nor any of his brothers or offspring, actually inherit the crown in any obvious sense. It may be that Geoffrey is referring to a source now lost, but this remains uncertain. Another possibility, which we shall examine later, is that Gawain’s relationship to the sovereignty-bestowing Goddess of the Land makes Geoffrey’s statement more accurate than he could have supposed.

Layamon, in his *Brut*,<sup>61</sup> which followed Geoffrey but adapted it in various ways, modifies the original prophecy to say that Uther’s grandsons shall be great warriors. However, the importance of establishing Gawain’s parentage is at once apparent from the moment we plunge into the complex dynastic framework of the Latin Romances and their associated texts, which established the next stage in Gawain’s literary career,

Geoffrey of Monmouth is clear in his statement that Gawain (Walganus) is Arthur’s nephew—relationship already well established both in the early Celtic texts and oral tradition. Another important text, *De Ortu Waluuanii Nepotis Arturi*<sup>39</sup> (The Rise of Gawain, Nephew of Arthur) makes clear, by its very choice of title, that this relationship was seen as important,

To see the reason for this, one need look no further afield than Scotland, which at the time the author was writing (1175-1186) was still ruled by kings who inherited through the female line.



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