

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Andrew Breeze, 'The Gawain-Poet and Hautdesert ', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 38 (2007), 135-41

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Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
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The *Gawain*-Poet and Hautdesert

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Hautdesert is the territorial appellation of Sir Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It occurs in line 2445 only, after Gawain has asked who his opponent is:

'Pat schal I telle þe trwly,' quop þat oþer þenne,
'Bertilak de Hautdesert I hat in þis londe.'¹

Bertilak has been discussed in detail.² But something can still be said of *Hautdesert*. This note therefore has two objects: to survey opinion on the toponym, and suggest a new implication of it. First, the opinions, as follows.

Modern views begin with John Burrow. He rejected Tolkien and Gordon's early suggestion that the form means 'high hermitage' (reflecting Celtic usage) and refers to the Green Chapel. He pointed out that medieval knights called themselves after their homes ('Gareth of Orkeney', and so on), which indicates Bertilak's castle, not the chapel. For a parallel formation Burrow cited Beaudesert in Warwickshire (there was another Beaudesert in Staffordshire).³ The implications of this seem clear: *Hautdesert* is not the chapel but the castle, and has nothing to do with Celtic words meaning 'hermitage'.

Burrow's arguments were accepted by Norman Davis. He took *Hautdesert* as an entirely French name meaning 'high and deserted place, elevated waste land', noting that *désert* 'solitary place, wilderness' is to this day common on maps of France. He added that the chapel was not high, but in a valley bottom; that it was not a hermitage; and that a medieval seigneur would be called after his castle (and not some obscure mound). His comment 'a specialized Celtic meaning is very unlikely to appear in so characteristically French a compound as *Hautdesert*' is worth noting, as we disagree with it below.⁴

Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron compromise. They agree Hautdesert must be the castle, not the chapel, but still think its name means 'high hermitage', quoting G. V. Smithers for the notion that the Green Knight here 'performs some of the confessional functions of the spiritualized French Arthurian *Quest del saint Graal*'. They also cite Avril Henry for the suggestion that the name puns on French 'high merit, great reward'.⁵

Ralph Elliott, in an important study of topography, says the name of Hautdesert is 'literally, High Wasteland or High Wilderness, a description that can appropriately be employed for the high moor and the forest tracts above the valley of the Dane.'⁶ Theodore Silverstein followed Burrow and Davis. The chapel being at the bottom of a valley, it cannot be 'high', while the meaning 'hermitage' would 'seem to have to reflect a highly specialized Celtic use'. Silverstein thought the evidence for *desert* as a French element was much better, and *Hautdesert* 'would thus seem to refer to the rough upland area, or the castle in it, from which the knight would take his name.'⁷

Peter Lucas echoes and refines on Burrow and Davis. He dismisses the 'specialized Celtic meaning' of *disert* 'hermitage' as here irrelevant. He adds detail on the English places called Beaudesert. One, nine miles west of Warwick, is by Henley-in-Arden. It passed from the de Montforts to the Beauchamps in 1369. Its church survives, but nothing is left of the castle except earthworks (at National Grid Reference SP 1566) within a deep entrenchment. The other Beaudesert appears on the map at Beaudesert Old Park (SK 0313), a valley thick with conifers six miles north-west of Lichfield. The park once had a palace (to the east, near Longdon) of the bishops of Lichfield, from whom it passed in the sixteenth century to the Paget family. Since the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, who spoke the dialect of the Cheshire-Staffordshire borderland, lived in the diocese of Lichfield, Lucas thinks he would know of the bishop's palace and might adapt its name for his poem. He also thinks Hautdesert 'high waste land' was originally used not of the castle or its park (still less the chapel), but of the 'wild hill with its boulders and crags' above them.⁸

John Anderson says 'Hautdesert, evidently the name of Bercilak's castle, means "high solitary place"'.⁹ Derek Brewer describes *Hautdesert* as 'of course' derived from French. While the North Wales, Anglesey, and Wirral of Gawain's journey (lines 697-701) are real enough, Hautdesert might seem a mere place of romance (like Camelot). Yet its name resembles that of Beaudesert, although Brewer thinks the poem does not refer to the West Midland places so called. He considers the High Peak more relevant here, since it was closer to Gawain's journey, was called *Autepeek* in 1330, is wild country, and has many tumuli or barrows.¹⁰ We

may note that the Peak District contains Thor's Cave (SK 0954) seven miles east of Leek, and the ravine of Lud's Church (SJ 9865), both contenders for the site of the Green Chapel.

The above survey, then, points to a consensus amongst Middle English scholars during the last forty years. *Hautdesert* is a toponym of French origin; it does not refer to the Green Chapel; and it has nothing to do with Celtic terms for 'hermitage'. Yet what follows endeavours to overturn that in part, arguing that *Hautdesert* owes something to a Celtic hermitage by Gawain's route through North Wales. It tries therefore to turn the clock back to 1925, and Tolkien and Gordon's suggestions in their first edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Let us look at the Celtic elements involved. The forms are Old Irish *dísert* 'solitary place; hermit's cell, refuge' (giving Modern Irish *diseart* 'hermitage') and Welsh *diserth* 'hermitage, retreat' (cognate with Breton *deserz*). All go back to spoken Latin *disertum*, with long first vowel, from Late Latin *desertum* 'wilderness' in the Vulgate Bible. Dizzard (SX 1698), in a remote spot south of Bude (and appearing in Domesday Book as *Disart*), may give evidence for a Cornish cognate (and for early monasticism in Cornwall).¹¹

In their quest for solitude, Welsh and Irish anchorites faced extremes and did not flinch. Welsh monks settled on Bardsey, 'isle of twenty thousand saints', separated from the Lleyn Peninsula of Gwynedd by a dangerous tidal surge. Irish monks lived in stone huts perched 700 feet up on Skellig Michael, a sheer rock eight miles off the coast of Kerry. Far out in the Atlantic beyond Cape Wrath is North Rona (HW 8032), described as 'utterly desolate and almost inaccessible'. Sixty miles north of Lewis, it still possesses an oratory and early Christian graveyard.¹² Given this hankering for desert places, it is no surprise that Celtic-Latin *disertum* has left a wide trace. In Ireland some 500 forms from it have been listed, including *Díseart Diarmada* or Castledermot near Carlow, Dysert O Dea (with a fine high cross) in Clare, and Dysartkevin at Glendalough in the Wicklow Mountains.¹³ In Scotland are Dysart in Fife (where St Serf outfaced the Devil in a cave) and *An Diseart* near Pitlochry.¹⁴ But it is Welsh *diserth* 'hermitage' that concerns us here. The form is attested early. It appears in *Armes Prydein* 'The Prophecy of Britain', a fiery call to arms written in late 940, after the West Saxon capitulation at Leicester to the Vikings, which it mentions. Its unknown poet hated and despised the English. Once the Welsh wreak vengeance on them, he gloats on how they will cower in the wilds; *boet perth eu dissertth* 'let a bush be their refuge!'¹⁵ Welsh *diserth* also accounts for Dissertth (SO 0358) near Llandrindod Wells and Dyserth or Diserth (pronounced 'Disart' by local people) in Flintshire.¹⁶ It is the last place, near Gawain's route through Wales, that assists us here.

Diserth (SJ 0579) has a long history, attested by sculptures of crosses at its church (of St Brigit of Kildare, an ancient dedication).¹⁷ Henry III thought its situation on the route from Rhuddlan to Holywell and Flint was strategic. Between 1241 and 1248 he spent a fortune on its castle (modern quarrying has almost destroyed the site). Yet in 1263 a Welsh attack damaged this stronghold so badly that it was never rebuilt as such.¹⁸ Edward I, recognizing that the castle was poorly located (it could be cut off from the hills), abandoned the site fortified at such expense by his father, and put his considerable energy into constructing a new castle at Rhuddlan.¹⁹

Diserth appears in official records as *Dissard* or *Disserd*.²⁰ So the form resembles the second element of *Hautdesert*. Yet Diserth was not the only castle in the Flintshire area. Fourteen miles south-east of it was the (long vanished) castle at Mold, often fought over by Welsh and English. The name of Mold, for centuries Flintshire's county town, is from Norman-French *Mont-hault*, attested in 1297 as *Mohaut*, and describing the 'high hill' or Bailey Hill where its castle stood.²¹

At this point we return to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Lines 698-702 of the poem tell how, on his journey from North Wales to Wirral, Gawain went through the Flintshire region, either along the coast or (more probably) by the Roman road between St Asaph and Holywell:

Alle þe iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldez,
And farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez,
Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrle; wonde þer bot lyte
Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied.²²

Since the poet clearly knew this area, he would be aware of both Diserth and *Mohaut* or Mold (in the marcher lordship of Moldsdale, absorbed by Flintshire in 1536). Hence, perhaps, the prompting for *Hautdesert*, taking its elements from *Disserd* and *Mohaut*, both places in *Gawain* country. The argument may be phrased thus. The poet had special knowledge of Cheshire. Medieval Cheshire had intimate links with Flintshire, since they shared the same royal administration.²³ Diserth and Mold, with conspicuous hill-top castles, therefore probably occupied part of the poet's memory and imagination. The poet certainly knew (having passed them by sea?) of the islands by Anglesey. A devout man, he likewise knew the *Holy Hede* 'holy river-source' (?) or Holywell, with its copious springs and traditions of St Gwenfrewi (a princess decapitated, but miraculously restored to life), facing Wirral

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across the sands of Dee. Diserth and Mold in the Flintshire region would likewise be familiar to a Cheshire-based poet, as the Beaudeserts of the West Midlands would not be. Hence, perhaps, *Hautdesert*, a fortress *on a lawe* like those of Diserth and Mold.

But the question remains, why should castles at Diserth and Mold have suggested *Hautdesert*? Were not scores of other appellations possible for Bertilak? An answer is perhaps given by Avril Henry's paper already mentioned. It has not been much noticed, even though *hautdesert* has a parallel in the thirteenth-century French poem *Aymeri de Narbonne* (in the phrase *Et damedeu tel loier l'en rendi / Que en la fin s'amor en deservi; / Ce fu haute deserte*).²⁴ Yet Henry may be right in seeing special meaning in *Hautdesert*, thereby resembling Chaucer's Melibee 'honey drinker' (i.e., one enjoying worldly prosperity), with his wife Prudence and daughter Sophie ('wisdom'), or the allegorical places and persons of Bunyan.²⁵ If so, *Hautdesert* 'what is greatly deserved' (whether reward or punishment) would be unusually apt for a poem with such an emphasis on reaping what one sows; in which Gawain gets (however interpreted) his *haut(e) desert(e)*, his merited or just deserts.

A final point. There is a case for the authorship of *Sir Gawain*, together with its three associated poems, by Sir John Stanley (d. 1414), Knight of the Garter.²⁶ Stanley seems to have been brought up at the village of Stanley in north-west Staffordshire: if so, he would have had the same dialect as the poet. At a later date he lived at Storeton (SJ 3084) in the heart of Wirral. In 1378 he elected to do military service in Aquitaine; in 1394 he was Justice of Chester (and thus responsible for Flintshire's administration). Of special interest in the present context is his letter of 30 July 1405 to Henry IV, a report on Glendower's rebellion based on intelligence given to him by David Whitmore and Ieuan ap Maredudd, two Flintshire gentlemen. So Stanley knew Flintshire well. The language of the letter, in (excellent) French, has curious parallels with that of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Present discussion of *Disserd*, *(Mo)haut*, and *Hautdesert* does not, of course, add to the case advanced there. However, if Sir John Stanley and the poet were one and the same, the apparent knowledge of the Flintshire region shown in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would be no surprise. It would be a further aspect of the poet's art and personality: matters likely to induce even more analysis and discussion in the twenty-first century than they did in the twentieth.²⁷

NOTES

¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 67.

² P. R. Kitson, 'The Name of the Green Knight', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 49 (1998), 39-52.

³ J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (London: Routledge, 1965), p. 125, n. 17.

⁴ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Tolkien and Gordon, pp. 128-29.

⁵ *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (London: Arnold, 1978), pp. 296-97.

⁶ R. W. V. Elliott, *The Gawain Country* (Leeds: University of Leeds School of English, 1984), p. 49.

⁷ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Theodore Silverstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 165.

⁸ P. J. Lucas, 'Hautdesert in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Neophilologus*, 70 (1986), 319-20.

⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. J. Anderson (London: Everyman, 1996), p. 314.

¹⁰ D. S. Brewer, 'Some Names', in *A Companion to the 'Gawain'-Poet*, ed. by D. S. Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), pp. 191-95.

¹¹ *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1950-2002), p. 1043; Oliver Padel, *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names* (Penzance: Alison Hodge, 1988), p. 78.

¹² Nora Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 96; *The New Shell Guide to Scotland*, ed. by D. L. Macnie (London: Ebury Press, 1977), p. 413.

¹³ Lord Killanin and M. V. Duignan, *The Shell Guide to Ireland*, 2nd edn (London: Ebury Press, 1968), pp. 153, 269, 294; Charles Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 33.

¹⁴ W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1926), p. 256.

¹⁵ *Armes Prydein*, ed. by Ifor Williams (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1972), pp. 64-65.

¹⁶ Hugh Williams, *Christianity in Early Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), p. 271.

¹⁷ V. E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1950), pp. 126-27; Wendy Davies, *Patterns of Power in Early Wales* (Oxford:

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Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 55.

¹⁸ Ian Soulsby, *The Towns of Medieval Wales* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1983), pp. 128-30.

¹⁹ A. J. Taylor, *The King's Works in Wales 1277-1330* (London: HMSO, 1974), p. 318.

²⁰ J. Goronwy Edwards, *Calendar of Ancient Correspondence Concerning Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1935), pp. 10, 51.

²¹ Melville Richards, 'Mold', in *The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain*, ed. W. F. H. Nicolaisen (London: Batsford, 1970), pp. 136-37.

²² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Tolkien and Gordon, p. 20.

²³ David Walker, *Medieval Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 149.

²⁴ Avril Henry, 'Temptation and Hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Medium Aevum*, 45 (1976), 187-99.

²⁵ J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 79; *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Jill Mann (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 1001-02.

²⁶ A. C. Breeze, 'Sir John Stanley (c. 1350-1414) and the *Gawain-Poet*', *Arthuriana*, 14/1 (2004), 15-30.

²⁷ Cf. A. C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 137-73.