# The medieval Welsh poetry associated with Owain Glyndŵr

*The 2010 Sir John Rhŷs Memorial Lecture formed part of the British Academy's 'Medieval Week', hosted by the Royal Society of Edinburgh. In the following extract,* **Professor Gruffydd Aled Williams** *starts by describing how two medieval Welsh poets celebrated Owain Glyndŵr's less peaceful visit to Scotland.*

THE EARLIEST EXTANT POETRY relating to Owain Glyndŵr leads me to recall an episode in Scottish history, one much impressed on contemporary and later Scottish consciousness. The early 1380s witnessed rising tensions between England and Scotland, and when the truce of 1369 expired in February 1384 the two nations edged towards open war. Scottish attacks on the English-occupied zone of southern Scotland prompted a retaliatory cross-border expedition from Berwick by John of Gaunt in April 1384, but the arrival in May 1385 of a substantial force of Scotland's French allies under Jean de Vienne, admiral of France, was the cue for a much more serious English response. Issuing a general feudal levy for a force to advance, according to the summons 'against the said Scots, to restrain manfully and powerfully, their rebellion, perfidy and evil', Richard II, at 19 years of age exercising his first command and eager to impress, mustered one of the largest English armies of the 14th century, a total of almost 14,000 men. Advancing from Newcastle and crossing into Scotland on 6 August in three battle formations – each member of the force according to the king's ordinances of war bearing the arms of St George before and behind – the English army advanced in a destructive swathe, a medieval equivalent of 'shock and awe'. The Westminster chronicler wrote of the army 'giving free and uninterrupted play to slaughter, rapine, and fire-raising all along a six-mile front and leaving the entire countryside in ruins behind them'; Walter Bower, drawing later on bruised Scottish memories in his *Scotichronicon*, referred to 'an arrogant host, destroying everything on all sides and saving nothing.' Having laid waste to Lothian, the English reached Edinburgh and destroyed it by fire, not sparing the church of St Giles. The abbeys of Melrose, Dryburgh and Newbattle were also burned and destroyed during this punitive campaign, which ended with the return of the English army to Newcastle after a fortnight's ravaging in Scotland.

In the absence of a native polity, it was in English armies fighting in France and Scotland that the nobility of post-conquest Wales – with few dissident exceptions – found an outlet for military action. Owain Glyndŵr's own grandfather had been summoned to campaign in English armies 'contra Scotos inimicos et rebelles nostros' in 1333 and 1334. And it was in connection with the events just recalled that his grandson served his military apprenticeship. Muster rolls show him – together with his brother Tudur and Crach Ffinnant, his 'prophet' in 1400 – serving in the English garrison of Berwick in 1384 under the command of a veteran Welsh captain, Sir Gregory Sais (his surname means 'Englishman', denoting one of English inclinations or of English tongue). And Owain's deposition in 1386 – 'aged twenty-seven years and more' – in connection with the Scrope/Grosvenor dispute before the Court of Chivalry confirms his presence in the royal army which devastated Scotland in 1385. Further confirmation of this occurs in a Iolo Goch poem addressed to Glyndŵr, probably in early July 1385, as he set off for the war in Scotland, probably in the retinue of the earl of Arundel, whose lands in the Welsh march bordered on those of Owain.

### Poem by Iolo Goch

The massing of armies in what the Westminster chronicler described as the hot summer of 1385 is vividly conveyed in the opening couplet of Iolo's poem which refers to a 'Great movement' of lords. The Virgin Mary's protection is invoked for the departing hero, Owain's battle-charge is

*Iolo Goch* extract (A)

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| Pan aeth mewn gwroliaeth gwrdd, | When he went with mighty prowess, |
| Gorugwr fu garw agwrdd, | He was a terrifying and powerful piercer, |
| Ni wnaeth ond marchogaeth meirch, | He did nothing but ride steeds, |
| Gorau amser, mewn gwrmseirch, | The best of times, in dark-blue armour, |
| Dwyn paladr, gwaladr gwiwlew, | Bearing a lance, fine and valiant lord, |
| Soced dur a siaced tew, | A steel spearhead and a thick jacket, |
| Arwain rhest a phenffestin | Wearing a rest and a mail cap |
| A helm wen, gŵr hael am win, | And a white helmet, a generous provider of wine, |
| Ac yn ei phen, nen iawnraifft, | And surmounting it, fine-plumed lord, |
| Adain rudd o edn yr Aifft. | A red-winged phoenix crest. |
| Gorau sawdr gwrs ydoedd, | For a while he was the best soldier |
| Gyda Syr Grigor, iôr oedd, | With Sir Gregory, he was a lord, |
| Ym Merwig, hirdrig herwdref, | In Berwick, a long-enduring town under attack, |
| Maer i gadw'r gaer gydag ef. | He was a steward defending the fort with him. |

compared to that of Bendigeidfran, legendary king of Britain, and Owain's grandfather and father cited for their renown. Having lauded Owain briefly as his parents' filial paragon and cited his love of poets, Iolo then draws on a topos of Welsh eulogy, in which the hero is dually conceived, being both a bold challenger of the mighty and one who is mild-mannered before the weak. He firstly asserts Owain's innate gentleness as one who would not forcefully seize a toy from a young boy or even admonish him verbally (this may reflect Owain's likely domestic status at the time as a young paterfamilias). But then the tone changes abruptly as the contrasting aspect of the topos is developed and emphasised. A different Owain appears as Iolo turns to portray him in his full military might, specifically citing his service at Berwick under Sir Gregory Sais the previous year. A cameo portrait of Owain replete with terms relating to knightly military equipment (some of them, significantly, loanwords from English or Anglo-French) would, no doubt, have fed the young esquire's self-image as he set off again for Scotland – see extract (A)[1]

The poet then enlarges upon Owain's knightly prowess, seemingly distinguishing between single combat in tournament and action in battle. Even if this, as is likely, is mere conventionalised praise, it passes the test of verisimilitude: the 1380s saw what Juliet Barker has called 'a sudden resurgence of tourneying activity on the borders', largely around Berwick, and, in view of John of Gaunt's chevauchée into Scotland from Berwick in the spring of 1384, it is possible that Glyndŵr may have seen some military action. The final section of the poem recalling the alleged effects of Owain's last tour of duty in Scotland, though patently conventional and hyperbolical, is not without interest. According to Iolo, all Scotland will remember the terror caused by 'the candle of battle', a metaphor, of course, with incendiary connotations. The routed Scots, identified – with interesting ethnic confusion – as 'Deifr' (literally 'the men of Deira', remembered as enemies of the Britons in the heroic age of Welsh tradition), are depicted as crying like wild goats. Iolo Goch was no Celtophile; he had harsh words to say too about the Irish kings of Ulster and Leinster who resisted Richard II. He is, of course, reflecting what one historian has called 'a discourse of abuse' commonly aimed at the Scots from south of the border at this time. In the genealogy of Scotophobic insults, Iolo's 'wild goats' is a hybrid: it echoes such barbs as an anonymous Latin poet's *gens bruta Scotiæ* and Ranulph Higden's *barbari satis et silvestres* ('very savage and wild') and various disparaging animal metaphors, such as featuring Scots as dogs and swine (anticipating perhaps the infamous modern 'ginger rodent'). Iolo ends his poem in a crescendo of hyperbole, his patron's allegedly booty-laden service in Scotland being grimly depicted as 'A year feeding wolves', its destructive swathe being such that neither grass nor dock-leaves grew from English Berwick – as the poet significantly calls it – to Maesbury in Shropshire, a mere stone's throw from Glyndŵr's home at Sycharth.

Figure 1. *Owain Glyndŵr's home at Sycharth Castle, as it is today. Photo: Crown copyright, Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales.*

### Poem by Gruffydd Llwyd

A poem addressed to Owain by Gruffudd Llwyd shares a historical context with Iolo's poem, being a celebration of Owain's safe return from war in Scotland, probably at some time during September 1385 after the English army had dispersed from Newcastle. References to Owain as 'defender of the Glen of the great Dee of the rapid water' and as 'My favourite above the manor of the Dee' suggest that the setting for the poem was Owain's ancestral home on the banks of the river Dee at Glyndyfrdwy in Merioneth, the only poem addressed to Owain for which this can confidently be claimed. Having hailed Glyndŵr as 'Owain of the fine helmet' (recalling Iolo Goch's mention of the red phoenix crest), Gruffudd Llwyd recalls the former joy of carousing on mead and wine at his patron's court, and his disquiet and grief following Owain's departure for war in Scotland. He relates that, when his anxiety was at its worst, relief came in the form of a messenger's tidings that Owain had gained great renown in battle, a theme to which the poet returns at the end of his poem. He then proceeds to elevate his patron by means of comparisons which clearly reflect the chivalric cultural tastes of Owain and his court. Owain is compared to a trinity of knightly heroes of romance: Uther Pendragon, father of king Arthur, Glyndŵr's namesake Owain son of Urien (as depicted in the Welsh tale of *Owain* or *The Lady of the Well*, counterpart of Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*), and Fulk Fitz Warin, hero of an Anglo-Norman romance from the Shropshire March. Of these comparisons that with Owain son of Urien, which at one point exactly replicates the wording of the Welsh version of the tale, is much the more extended. This may reflect the poet's familiarity with the source or be due in part to the fact of homonymy, the shared name of Owain prompting the comparison. Having cited these comparisons, Gruffudd Llwyd then portrays Glyndŵr the warrior in conventional terms: the force of his charge shatters his lance which strikes through the chinks in his enemy's armour with the effect of thunderbolts; he scatters his adversaries in all directions, and his spear is suitably bloodied. The depiction of warfare is stylised: it owes more to both Welsh bardic exemplars and the chivalric depiction of warfare in romances than to the irregular actuality of war as experienced by Glyndŵr in Scotland in 1385 in an army which never saw formal battle. The poet ends by claiming to have heard tidings of Owain from a herald: whether literally true or not, in what was something of a golden age for heralds – prime disseminators of tales of deeds of prowess – and a time when oral reports of valour were crucial in promoting martial reputations, the claim does not lack verisimilitude. Gruffudd Llwyd rejoices that his heraldic informant had brought news that Owain was unharmed and that his valiant deeds were widely hailed, then concludes by juxtaposing the pathos of sad cries heard in Scotland with the feats and triumphant conquests of 'the knight of the Glen' which, the poet exults, had earned his patron renown (Welsh *clod*). That such an equation of participation in war with the seeking of renown and reputation reflects contemporary chivalric ideals hardly needs emphasis.

### Iolo Goch's description of Sycharth

By way of contrast to the military focus of the two poems already cited, a poem by Iolo Goch – composed after 1386 and before the revolt of 1400, possibly in the 1390s – places Owain in the pacific and domestic setting of his motte and bailey residence at Sycharth on the Welsh border. There is evidence that Iolo had visited Sycharth before 1382, and it has been suggested that the poem in question celebrates a new building. A 16th-century bardic statute refers to a former right of poets to receive gifts from a patron on the occasion of the building of a new house, and a number of surviving poems focusing on architectural details of patrons' courts, as does the core of Iolo's poem, tend to confirm the existence of such a custom.

Describing himself as an old man who is fulfilling two previous promises to visit Sycharth, and depicting his journey there as a pilgrimage – the first of many religious metaphors in the poem – Iolo lays the foundation for his praise by evoking the appeal of Sycharth in general terms: it is 'The court of a baron, a place of refinement, / Where many poets frequent, a place of the good life.' Turning to specifics, he first refers to the moat surrounding Owain's residence: its encircling water is implicitly compared to a golden ring and described as being crossed by a bridge leading to a gateway, wide enough, says the poet, to admit a hundred loads. Moats, of course, were contemporary status symbols: as Christopher Dyer has said, 'If a lord was unable to afford a castle, a moat was the next best thing'.

Iolo's eye then focuses on the fine timberwork of Owain's court, a central feature of the poem. Here it is worth quoting Dr Lawrence Butler's remark about medieval Welsh gentry timber halls: 'The festive hall was an owner's pride, a bard's joy, and a carpenter's masterpiece.' In a couplet ingeniously binding in the tight bonds of *cynghanedd* different but related words deriving from *cwpl*, English 'couple' – meaning one of inclined beams or crucks converging at the top to support a roof – he replicates verbally the aesthetically pleasing interlocking of the timbers: 'Cyplau sydd, gwaith cwplws ŷnt, / Cwpledig pob cwpl ydynt;' ('There are couples, they are coupled work, / Each couple is coupled together'). The awe-inspiring aspect of the timberwork inclines Iolo towards ecclesiastical metaphors: this is unsurprising, as architectural historians have seen crucks or couples as timber replications of Gothic ecclesiastical pointed arches of stone. Sycharth reminds Iolo firstly of 'Patrick's belfry, fruit of French workmanship', the tower of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, newly built in 1370 by Archbishop Thomas Minot; and, secondly of 'The cloister of Westminster, gentle enclosure', a feature of the abbey completed by Abbot Nicholas Litlyngton before his death in 1386. These comparisons with faraway contemporary ecclestiastical structures of note tell us something about the cultural reach of both poet and patron: neither Iolo nor Glyndŵr – both familiar with an upper class world of relative geographical mobility and broad horizons – were isolated backwoodsmen ignorant of metropolitan developments. The suggestion of an affinity with ecclesiastical architecture is repeated in a comparison of Sycharth's timberwork with the symmetry and splendour of a gilded chancel and with stone vaulting. Further, having evoked Sycharth's lofty aspect atop its grassed motte, Iolo playfully imagines its high timber pillars as raising it literally

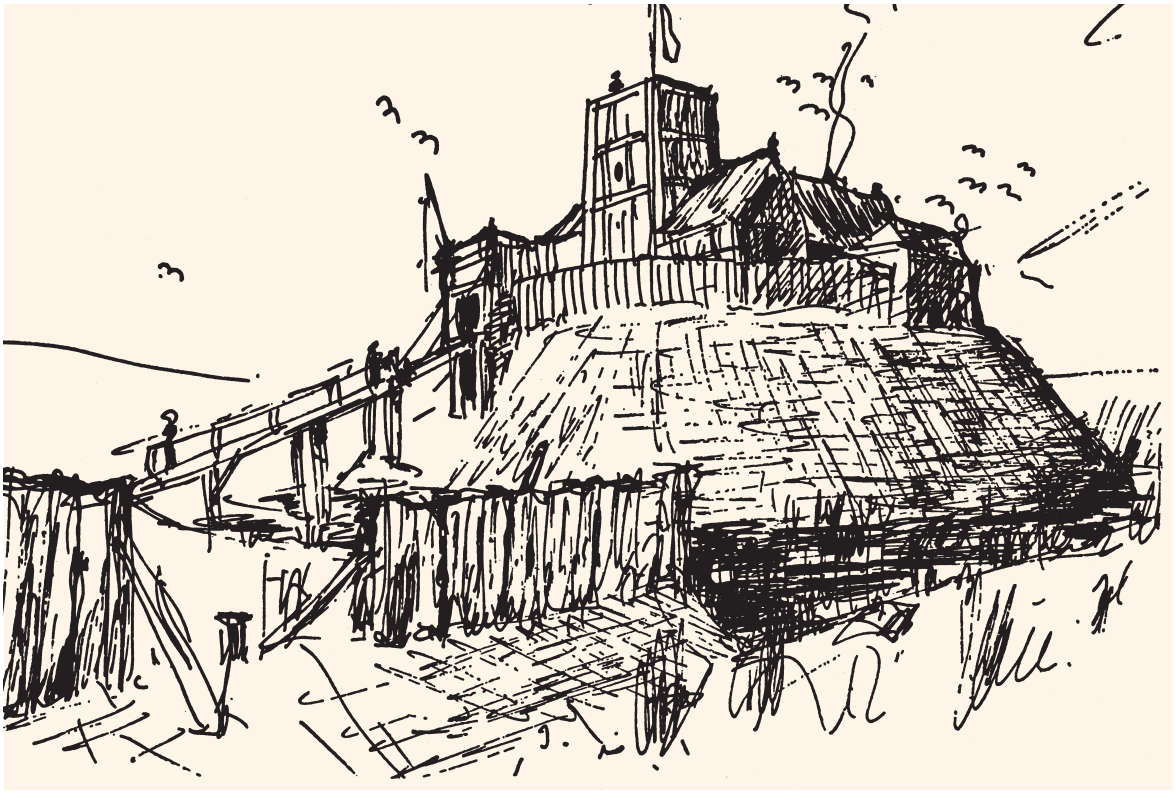

Figure 2.
*Pen and ink drawing by Douglas Hague, showing reconstruction view of Sycharth Castle. Image: Crown copyright.*

nearer heaven; there are once again obvious religious connotations, and at the same time the wording implies that Owain's court is indeed a virtual heaven.

The court's storeyed sleeping quarters – described as being atop pillars – are then evoked. Four bedchambers where poets slept are said to have been turned into eight, a claim born perhaps of hyperbole suggestive of an abundance of bardic visitors and thus of Owain's reputation for liberality. Amongst the luxury features noted by Iolo at Sycharth are a 'tiled roof' on every building – excavations during the 1960s suggest that the tiles referred to were in fact slates, an occasional meaning at this time – and a chimney to channel smoke, a marker of a high status house in a period more commonly of sooty open hearths. Wealth and luxury are also evoked by a comparison of Sycharth's wardrobes – in the medieval sense of storage rooms for precious items, clothes or armour – to a shop in Cheapside, the principal shopping street of medieval London (the metropolitan comparison is again significant).

To end his celebration of Sycharth's architecture Iolo reverts to ecclesiastical imagery. His description of Owain's court as a lime-washed cross-shaped church probably echoes its likely H-shaped plan, consisting of a central hall with flanking wings, a common feature of ambitious gentry houses. He also cites 'Chapels with fine glass windows', a description not to be taken literally – Sycharth is unlikely to have had a private chapel – but an image echoing the previous ecclesiastical metaphors. Like its slate roof and chimney, Sycharth's glazed windows – common in churches but a luxury in domestic abodes at this time – were details selected by the poet to depict a dwelling of high status and lordly refinement.

Turning away from the architecture of Sycharth, Iolo provides a cameo of its exterior appurtenances, features of Owain's demesne essential to sustain his lordly existence. In the sharp clarity of its detail and its seigneurial setting, it is a verbal counterpart of some of the idealised calendar illustrations of the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duke de Berry. Iolo cites a bakehouse, an orchard, a vineyard, a mill, a stone dovecote, and a fishpond (whose remains are still to be seen at Sycharth) replete with pikes and whitefish. Owain's bord-land is portrayed as the haunt of peacocks and herons; there are hay and grass meadows, corn in carefully tended fields, a rabbit-warren, strong work-horses for drawing ploughs, and an adjoining deer-park. And the fortunate Owain too has his bondsmen (*caith*) to undertake what Iolo blithely calls 'all good work'.

Towards the end of his poem Iolo's eye turns back to the court's interior. Conveyed there are the best brew of Shrewsbury beer, bragget, white bread, wine, and meat destined for the kitchen. Sycharth, with its daily plenitude, is a veritable pavilion for poets and the finest timber court in the kingdom, fully deserving of God's protection. Then comes a warm evocation of domestic bliss: Owain's wife, Margaret Hanmer, whom he married about 1383, daughter of Sir David Hanmer, Justice of the King's Bench, is a fleeting female presence in the otherwise unremittingly male world of the Glyndŵr poems; we hear also of their children (referred to as coming 'two at a time', perhaps suggesting a 1390s date for the poem) – see extract (B).

In Iolo's poem a medieval microcosm endures in words. The only other contemporary description of Sycharth is less effusive and very different in tone. In a

## *Iolo Goch* extract (B)

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|---|---|
| A gwraig orau o'r gwragedd, | And the best woman of all women, |
| Gwyn fy myd o'i gwin a'i medd! | Blessed am I receiving her wine and mead! |
| Merch eglur llin marchoglyw, | A fair daughter from the line of a knightly lord, |
| Urddol hael anianol yw; | She is noble and generous by nature; |
| A'i blant a ddeuant bob ddau, | And his children come two at a time, |
| Nythaid teg o benaethau. | A fair nestful of chieftains. |
| Anfynych iawn fu yno | It was very rare to see there |
| Weled na chlicied na chlo, | Either a bolt or a lock, |
| Na phorthoriaeth ni wnaeth neb; | Neither did anyone perform porterage; |
| Ni bydd eisiau, budd oseb, | There will be no want, a beneficial trait, |
| Na gwall na newyn na gwarth, | Nor lack nor hunger nor shame, |
| Na syched fyth yn Sycharth. | Nor thirst ever in Sycharth. |
| Gorau Cymro, tro trylew, | It's the best Welshman of the brave deed, |
| Piau'r wlad, lin Pywer Lew, | Who owns the land, of the line of Pywer Lew, |
| Gŵr meingryf, gorau mangre, | A slim and strong man, best of locations, |
| A phiau'r llys, hoff yw'r lle. | And he owns the court, a delightful place. |

The poem's last lines provide a unique, if stylised and all too compressed, snapshot of Glyndŵr's physical appearance, describing him as *gŵr meingryf*, a slim and strong man:

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|---|---|
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letter written at the height of Owain's revolt in May 1403 by Henry, the king's eldest son (the later Henry V), to his father, king Henry IV, he relates how he and his army came to Sycharth, a court that was well-built and Glyndŵr's principal residence. He tells how, finding it abandoned, they burnt it totally together with the nearby dwellings of Owain's tenants. When the motte at Sycharth was excavated in the 1960s fragments of burnt oak were found, sorry remnants of the 'finest timber court' which inspired the muse of Iolo Goch.

**Note**

1 Quotations of original Iolo Goch text are from D.R. Johnston (ed.), *Gwaith Iolo Goch* (Cardiff, 1988). Translations are by GAW.

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His Sir John Rhŷs Memorial Lecture was delivered on 16 November 2010. An audio recording is available via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary