

Cor Gawr: an ancient British name for Stonehenge?

I first came across the name Cor Gawr when I joined The Gorsedd of Bards of Cor Gawr, close to the Winter Solstice in 2002. On asking the meaning of the name I was told that it was the 'ancient British' or Welsh name for Stonehenge. On later acquiring some knowledge of Middle Welsh I began to doubt the reliability of this information. The English have a habit of borrowing from other languages, though not always, when doing so, giving a word the same meaning as it had in the original language. The name Cor Gawr appears as the 'British' name for Stonehenge in a number of books that, to be polite, lack a certain academic rigour, and whose authors have copied one another ad infinitum. Because an error has been copied for decades, even centuries, constant repetition may give a false appearance of accuracy, despite the truth being otherwise.

So what does Cor Gawr mean if we take it as Welsh? Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru, the University of Wales online dictionary gives no meaning for the two words combined as a phrase, but is generous with meanings for the individual words:

- cor: 1. *dwarf, pigmy, little urchin, &c.*
- 2. *spider; shrew.*
- côr¹: 1. a. *choir in a church, host of angels, company of bards; assembly, council; tribe, host; religious community; choir, choral society.*
- b. *a society that was both a convent and a seminary, conventual college.*
- c. *faculty, profession.*
- 2. *crib, stall.*
- 3. a. *pew (in church or chapel), stall, box (in theatre, &c.).*
- b. *reading-pew, lectern.*
- 4. *song.*
- 5. *chancel, choir, sanctuary; court; circle, compass, range.*
- côr²: *quire (of paper).*

If that embarrassment of riches were not enough, Gawr can be read in one of two ways; either straight, or as a mutated form of Cawr, the mutation due presumably to the phrase Cor Gawr being considered a compound:

- gawr¹: a. *shout, cry, outcry, clamour, tumult, noise.*
- b. *battle-cry.*
- c. *conflict, battle, attack.*
- d. *(clamorous) host.*
- gawr²: *grey.*
- cawr: *giant; mighty man, hero, champion; the devil.*

So what does Cor Gawr mean? You can pick whatever combination you like: a dwarf-giant, a grey council, a devil's choral society, a council of battle, a choir of a

clamorous host, or, closest to what we need, but not quite there, a circle-giant.¹ The same dictionary does clearly state the correct answer:

Côr y Cewri: Stonehenge (lit. the Giants' Circle), name also applied to any similar prehistoric stone circle.

The Gorsedd of Bards of Cor Gawr was founded in 1997 by Philip Shallcrass (Greywolf), and Emma Restall Orr (Bobcat). When I approached Philip concerning the matter he sent me the following information:

. . . The adoption of the name 'Cor Gawr' goes back to the early 1990s, when I was asked to research the bardic tradition for the Council of British Druid Orders. The resulting article, 'The Bardic Tradition in Britain,' appears in issue 3 of *The Druids' Voice* (1993). Liz Murray . . . loaned me a copy of *Prehistoric London: Its Mounds and Circles*, by Elizabeth O. Gordon, published in 1914 by Covenant Publishing, the publishing arm of a group called the British Israelites whose main, somewhat eccentric, thesis was that the British are one of the mythical Lost Tribes of Israel and that evidence for this can be construed from prehistoric monuments. In the book, Gordon attributes the names 'Caer Ambresbiri' and 'Cor Gawr' to Stonehenge, interpreting the latter as meaning 'Great Circle.' . . .²

Gordon's source for the name is far from clear, but the phrase does get repeated in a number of books by various authors, and on my first attempt to track the source I did trace it back to two books of roughly the same date. Algernon Herbert's *Britannia after the Romans*, published in London in 1836, and Charles Hulbert's *The Religions of Britain*, published in Shrewsbury about the same time.³ Both would appear to have copied the name from elsewhere, but, as I said previously, both lack academic rigour and fail to state their source.

I made no further progress in my search until I happened to glance at a copy of Edward (Celtic) Davies's *Mythology and Rites of the Ancient British Druids* of 1809, where I found the following passage:

. . . Geoffrey [sic] of Monmouth's Choir Gaur, or more accurately, Côr Gawr, the great circle, or sanctuary, has been often quoted by antiquaries, as the British name of this fabric of Stonehenge. . . .⁴

I have found no instance of the name Cor Gawr before 1809, so it does appear that Davies was the original source of the name, in a failed attempt to correct an even older error. Choir Gaur is clearly a corrupt form, neither Welsh nor English, and to attempt to elucidate the original form, as Davies did, is fraught with difficulties, though Côr y Cewri is obviously a strong possibility. The only course was to attempt to track the source for Choir Gaur. I will return to Geoffrey of Monmouth later.

I had already found mention of Choir Gaur in Ralph Waldo Emerson's *English Traits*, (London, 1856), but Emerson also fails to mention his source.⁵ Davies does, elsewhere in his book, quote a passage from Thomas Maurice's *Indian Antiquities* of 1793-4:

. . . Stonehenge, or Choir Gaur, its ancient British name, meaning, according to Stukeley, the Great Cathedral or Grand Choir. . .⁶

Davies realised the need for at least the appearance of academic rigour by inserting reference to his sources in footnotes and in this case refers to 'Ind. Antiq. V. VI. p. 123.' This gave me a problem since there is a Chapter 6 in Volume 5, but page 123 plays no part in it. Further, the passage quoted does not occur either in Chapter 6 or on page 123, or, in fact on any page of the volume up to page 140, which is as far as I was prepared to give myself the pain of reading before I gave up. I came to the conclusion that Davies's references are as unreliable as his facts.

Having given up on Maurice I turned to William Stukeley, writing in 1740, hoping the Druid Chyndonax, as he called himself, would be easier to track down. He was:

. . . The old Britons or Welsh call Stonehenge Choir Gaur, which some interpret chorea gigantum, the giants dance: I judge, more rightly chorus magnus, the great choir, round church, or temple. . . . But they mistake it for chorea, chwarae yuare, a ball, dance; as Necham sings;

Nobilis est lapidum structura, chorea gigantum:

Ars experta suum posse, peregit opus.

Mr Camden defines the work coronæ in modum. The Latin corona a crown, corolla a ghirland, and the British crown comes from its circular form, as cōr chorus. . . .⁷

The mention of Alexander of Neckham, and the 'chorea gigantum', takes us back to the 12th century, but before we go there I need to follow up the reference to Camden. Camden's *Britannia* went through several Latin editions between 1586 and the first English edition in 1610. Camden says nothing of the name Choir Gaur, but he does mention 'chorea gigantum'. Edmund Gibson extended Camden's work in 1695, with several subsequent editions. In the 1722 edition the following passage appears under 'Wiltshire':

. . . For the name; Leland's opinion that the British one, Choir gaure, should not be translated Chorea Gigantum, a Choir of Giants, but Chorea nobilis, a noble Choir; or else that gaure is put for vaure, which makes it Chorea magna, a great Choir, is probable enough. . . .⁸

Since Gibson gives us no inkling of where in John Leland's works to look for this reference, that gives me a problem. Leland makes no mention of Stonehenge in his *Itinerary* through Wiltshire, and the mentions in the *Collectanea* complain (in English) of Bede's failure to comment on the place, and debunk (in Latin) the idea

that the stones came from Ireland.⁹ So that is as far as I have got in tracking Choir Gaur(e). It would be interesting to find the reference, if it exists, as it would take the story back to the 16th century.

Here I should mention John Wood's book *Choir Gaure* of 1747.¹⁰ Philip Shalcrass also pointed me towards this book, which contains one of the earliest accurate surveys of the monument. He does not specify his source for the name but he does mention that he consulted both Stukeley and Gibson's edition of Camden, so it is fairly safe to assume that Gibson is his source.

Edward Williams, better known by his Bardic name Iolo Morganwg, has been blamed for many statements having little or no foundation in truth. I cannot, however, attribute Cor Gawr or Choir Gaur to him. I can find no evidence in any of his published works that he referred to the monument other than by its English name Stonehenge, or sometimes Stone Henge.¹¹ There is admittedly a reference to the Giants' Dance, which indicates he may have known the phrase 'chorea gigantum', but the only reference to a Welsh name is in a letter to him from Walter Davies (Gwallter Mechain) who refers to 'Côr y Cawri' [sic] clearly expecting Iolo to know what he meant by it.¹²

Alexander of Neckham derived the name 'chorea gigantum' from Geoffrey of Monmouth, of that there can be little doubt. Both wrote in the 12th Century, but Geoffrey's *De gestis Britonum*, which became the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, was written in the 1130s, and must predate Neckham's work. The Latin term 'chorea gigantum' needs a little explanation. I quote from online Latin dictionaries:

chorea: (from Greek χορεία)

I. a dance in a ring, a dance

II. of the circular motions of the stars: choreae astricae¹³

gigantum: genitive plural of gigans: giant.¹⁴

So the translations that read it as the Giants' Dance are correct.¹⁵ Christopher Chippindale, however, states " 'Chorea gigantum', the medieval Latin name for Stonehenge, is generally translated as 'Giants' Ring' or 'Giants' Dance'. I prefer 'Giants' Round', which expresses both its shape and the idea of dancing."¹⁶ In the recent edition by Michael Reeve and Neil Wright, Wright translates it as 'Giants' Ring'.¹⁷ The full text of the Latin sentence, in which Merlin speaks to king Ambrosius, is:

. . . Si perpetuo opere sepulturam uirorum decorare uolueris, mitte pro **chorea gigantum** quae est in Killarao monte Hiberniae. . . .

This Wright translates as:

. . . If you wish to mark their graves with a lasting monument, send for the Giants' Ring, which is on Mount Killaraus in Ireland. . . .

The plan here is to ship the stones, using Merlin's magic, to 'Mount Ambrius' in Salisbury Plain.

So how, you will now be asking, does 'Côr y Cewri' come into it? For that we need to return to *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*. The dictionary quotes four sources for the phrase. The earliest is the 13th century manuscript known as Brut Dingestow, which is a translation into Welsh of Geoffrey's *Historia*. The equivalent passage there is given as:

. . . "Arglvyd," heb ef, "o mynny di teccau bedravt y guyr hyn o dragywydavl weithret, anuon hyt yn Ywerdon y gyrchu **cor y keuri** y syd yno yn mynyd Kilara. . . ."18

. . . "Lord," he said, "if you wish to mark the host of graves of these men by an everlasting monument, send to Ireland to seek the Giants' Circle that is there in Mount Killara . . ."

The letter 'k' exists in medieval Welsh, but not in the modern language where it is replaced by 'c'. The second reference is to another translation of Geoffrey, Brut y Brenhinedd in the Red Book of Hergest, which *GPC* marks as 'c.1400'. The same passage there reads:

. . . Os o tragy6wyda6l weithret y myny di teckau bedra6t y g6yr dy6ededigyon hynn. Anuon di yn ol **cor y keir6** yr h6n yssyd y mynyd kilara yn Iwerdon. . . .19

. . . If with an everlasting monument you wish to mark the host of graves of these aforementioned men, send after the Giants' Circle that is at Mount Kilara in Ireland. . . .

The '6's represent a long tailed 'v' used in the manuscript for 'w', 'u', or 'v'. The scribe seems to have gone dyslexic for a moment and written 'keir6' instead of 'ke6ri', but *GPC* gives two other references in the same manuscript, which give 'ke6ri' in both cases.²⁰ The third reference is to another version of Brut y Brenhinedd, in BL Cotton Cleopatra B v, which is from the 15th century. It reads:

. . . Sef y kynghoras Merdyn yna; mynet hyt yn Iwerdon lle gelwyd **cor ykewri** ar mynyd kilara. canys yno ydoed mein anryued eu hansawd. ac nyd oes arglwyd yn yr oes honn neb awoyppo dim iwrth y mein hynny. ac ny cheffir wynt o gedernyt nac o gryfder; onyt ogeluydit. aphebythei y mein hynny ymha val y maen yno; wynt asseuynt yn dragywydawl. . . .

The editor, J. J. Parry, translates this as:

. . . This is what Merlin advised: to go to Ireland to a place called the Giants' Circle on Mount Killara, for there there were stones of a marvellous appearance,

"and there is no one, lord, in this age who knows anything about those stones. And they shall not be got by might or strength, but by art. And if those stones were here as they are there, they would stand for ever." . . .²¹

The fourth is to a poem by Lewis Môn in the 16th century manuscript Llanstephan 6. This reads 'kor kewri', which might indicate something that might be corrupted to the late 17th century Choir Gaur(e), but the definite article 'y' may simply have been dropped for poetic purposes, or be a slip in the copying, and other versions of the same poem read 'cor y kewri'.²²

It is interesting to note that the three translations into Welsh of Geoffrey's Latin vary considerably in word order, but are totally consistent in their translation of 'chorea gigantum' as 'cor y keuri'. This might give one to suppose that, since 'côr' is not a direct translation of 'chorea', that 'cor y keuri' is the original and 'chorea gigantum' the translation. I would, however, suggest caution in jumping to that conclusion. Meanings of words shift over time, and 'cor' may well have been an acceptable translation of 'chorea' in the 13th century, and, as I have already observed, once a name is written down and becomes accepted, it may be copied time and time again without anyone considering it might be incorrect.

It is, of course, possible to argue that the name 'chorea gigantum' was made up by Geoffrey of Monmouth, and it would be true to say that Geoffrey had a vivid imagination. Without the discovery of a hitherto unknown source it is impossible to know what the 'British' name for Stonehenge was.

One has to consider also the medieval practice of 'pia fraus', or pious fraud: that it was acceptable to invent stuff where facts were not available, just so long as the cause was good. Equally, unless someone can find the source we cannot be absolutely sure that Gibson did not make up the reference of Choir Gaur to Leland, any more than we cannot be sure that Geoffrey did not make up 'chorea gigantum'. The principle of 'pia fraus' was undoubtedly still being used by Iolo Morganwg in the 18th century, and who knows who is still using it today?

I have traced Cor Gawr back to 1809, Choir Gaur(e) back (probably) to 1695, and Côr y Cewri back to the 13th century. On the grounds of antiquity and accuracy Côr y Cewri must be accepted as the true Welsh name for Stonehenge. What the name was in the 'British' tongue before Geoffrey can never be known for sure. It may well have been something translatable as the 'Dance of the Giants'.

It may be interesting to note that, since I and others have pointed the matter out, The Gorsedd of Bards of Cor Gawr has decided to adopt the Welsh name 'Gorsedd Beirdd Côr y Cewri' as an additional name on an equal footing to the original. As a tailpiece I can only echo the words of another bard:

What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet
- William Shakespeare - *Romeo and Juliet*

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April/Ebrill 2017

¹ There is a problem here. A circle of a giant should be Côr cawr, without mutation. A compound such as Côr gawr does not imply a genitive, rather circle-giant, which makes no sense.

² Private email, 28th September 2016; E. O. Gordon, *Prehistoric London its Mounds and Circles* (London, Elliot Stock, 1914), 46. 'Great Circle' would be 'Côr Fawr', not 'Côr Gawr'.

³ Algernon Herbert, *Britannia after the Romans: being an attempt to illustrate the religious and political revolutions of that province in the fifth and succeeding centuries* (London, 1836), 54, 109; Charles Hulbert, *The Religions of Britain: or a view of its various Christian denominations; the tenets, ceremonies, &c. of the ancient Druids; and the history of the British church, from the earliest to the present period: to which are added the doctrines and customs of the Greek or Russian church; a display of Paganism, Judaism, Mahometanism, Deism, &c.*, 3rd ed. (Shrewsbury, c. 1840), 36.

⁴ Edward Davies, *The Mythology and Rites of the Ancient British Druids, ascertained by National Documents, and compared with the general traditions and customs of Heathenism, as illustrated by the most eminent antiquaries of our age. With an Appendix, containing ancient poems and extracts, with some remarks on ancient British Coins* (London, 1809), 316.

⁵ XVI Stonehenge, 157.

⁶ Davies, *op. cit.*, 303, quoting Thomas Maurice, *Indian Antiquities: or, Dissertations, relative to the ancient geographical divisions, the pure system of primeval theology, the grand code of civil laws, the original form of government, and the various and profound literature of Hindostan. Compared, throughout, with the religion, laws, government, and literature, of Persia, Egypt, and Greece. The whole intended as introductory to the history of Hindostan, upon a comprehensive scale, 5 Vols.* (London, 1794).

⁷ William Stukeley, *Stonehenge a temple restor'd to the British Druids* (London, 1740), 8.

⁸ William Camden, *Britannia: or a Chorographical Description of Great Britain and Ireland, Together with the Adjacent Islands . . . Revised, Digested, and Published, with large Additions by Edmund Gibson*, 2nd ed. (London, 1722), Wiltshire. The suggestion that 'gawr' is a mistake for 'fawr' (big, great, grand) is an interesting one, but unlikely.

⁹ See Rev. J. E. Jackson (ed.), 'Leland's Journey through Wiltshire: A.D. 1540-42', *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine* 1 (1854), 132-195, 175; Thomas Hearne (ed.), *Joannis Lelandi Antiquarii de rebus britannicis collectanea*, 1, 511; 2, 31.

¹⁰ John Wood, *Choir Gaure, vulgarly called Stonehenge, on Salisbury Plain: described, restored, and explained, in a letter to the Right Honourable Edward late Earl of Oxford, and Earl Mortimer* (Oxford, 1747).

¹¹ Geraint H. Jenkins, Ffion Mair Jones, and David Ceri Jones, with the assistance of Andrew Davies, *The Correspondence of Iolo Morganwg*, 3 vols. (Cardiff, 2007), I, 142; II, 268, 350, 398.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, 142, 721.

¹³ <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=chorea>

¹⁴ <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/gigans>

¹⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Sebastian Evans, revised by Charles W Dunn (London, Everyman, 1963), 164.

¹⁶ Christopher Chippindale, *Stonehenge Complete* (London, Revised Ed. 1994), 22n.

¹⁷ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain: An edition and translation of De Gestis Britonum [Historia Regum Britanniae]*, Edition by Michael D. Reeve; Translation by Neil Wright (Woodbridge, 2009), 172-5.

¹⁸ Henry Lewis (ed.), *Brut Dingestow* (Cardiff, 1942, reprinted 1974-5), 126.

¹⁹ J. Rhÿs and J. Gwenogvryn Evans (eds.), *The Text of the Bruts from the Red Book of Hergest* (Oxford, 1890), 166.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 173, 184.

²¹ John Jay Parry, *Brut y Brenhinedd Cotton Cleopatra Version* (Cambridge Mass., 1937), 144.

²² E. Stanton Roberts (ed.), *Llanstephan MS. 6: A manuscript of Welsh poetry written in the early part of the 16th century* (Cardiff, 1916), 72; Eurys I. Rowlands (ed.), *Gwaith Lewys Môn* (Cardiff, 1975), 71.