



Andrew Breeze

University of Navarra, Pamplona (Spain)

ORCID: 0000-0003-3429-7191

The Germanic Hero Wade and Wat's Dyke, Wales

Germański heros Wade a walijski wał ziemny Wat's Dyke

Abstract

Wat's Dyke is an earthwork running along the border of England and Wales, like its western neighbour Offa's Dyke. But it is the shorter of the two, stretching a mere thirty-eight miles (62 kilometres) from the coast of the Dee Estuary to the environs of Old Oswestry, an Iron Age fortress in Shropshire, England. Although Wat's Dyke is now dated to the early ninth century (some decades later than Offa's Dyke), its name has remained obscure. A solution is yet possible. It can be related to the legendary Germanic hero Wade, who figures in Old and Middle English verse (including that of Chaucer), Old Norse, Middle High German, and even (as 'Wat') medieval Welsh. Wat's Dyke thus has unexpected links with poetry in Wales and beyond. There is another surprise: for Wade will be the mysterious warrior appearing on Maen Achwyfan, a tenth-century cross near Whitford, a Welsh village neighbouring the Dyke. The arguments for all this can be set out in four parts. We start with accounts of Wat's Dyke; move on to Chaucer and others on Wade; discuss the 'Wat' praised by Welsh bards; and end with Wade as the hero of both Maen Achwyfan and a lost monument to the west of it at Meliden (near Prestatyn) recorded by Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709), pioneer Oxford archaeologist. Plenty to say, then, on the past (Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian) of this region, where north-east Wales borders the English counties of Cheshire and Shropshire.

Key words: *Wat's Dyke, Wade, Germanic mythology, Chaucer, Maen Achwyfan.*

Abstrakt

Wat's Dyke to wał ziemny biegnący wzdłuż granicy Anglii i Walii, podobnie jak znajdujący się na zachód od niego Offa's Dyke, od którego jest on jednak krótszy. Ma bowiem długość 38 mil (62 kilometrów) i ciągnie się od wybrzeża oraz ujścia rzeki Dee do okolic Old Oswestry, twierdzy z epoki żelaza w Shropshire w Anglii.

Wat's Dyke powstał na początku IX wieku (kilka dekad później niż Offa's Dyke). Jego nazwa pozostaje niejasna. Być może wiąże się ona z legendarnym germańskim bohaterem Wadem, którego imię pojawia się w staro- i średnioangielskich tekstach (w tym u Chaucera), w języku staronordyjskim, średnio-wysoko-niemieckim, a nawet w średniowiecznym języku walijskim (w formie *Wat*).

Z jednej strony wskazuje się zatem na związki wału Wat's Dyke z poezją walijską, z drugiej – zwraca się uwagę na postać tajemniczego wojownika (być może wspomnianego legendarnego bohatera), którego wizerunek widnieje na Maen Achwyfan, krzyżu z X wieku znajdującym się w pobliżu Whitford, w walijskiej wiosce sąsiadującej z Dyke.

Artykuł składa się z czterech części. W części pierwszej przedstawione zostały informacje na temat wału Wat's Dyke, natomiast w drugiej znajduje się omówienie tekstów Chaucera i innych autorów piszących o legendarnym bohaterze o imieniu Wade. Część trzecia stanowi omówienie postaci Wata, sławionego przez walijskich bardów. Z kolei w części czwartej Wade został ukazany jako bohater Maen Achwyfan; mowa jest również o jego zaginionym pomniku, który znajdował się na zachód od Maen Achwyfan, w Meliden (niedaleko Prestatyn) – pisał o tym Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709), pionier oksfordzkiej archeologii.

Słowa kluczowe: *Wat's Dyke, Wade, mitologia germańska, Chaucer, Maen Achwyfan.*

Wat's Dyke

First, Wat's Dyke, which starts above the Dee Estuary and was described by the Flintshire polymath Thomas Pennant (1726-98), born (and buried) at Whitford, between Holywell and Prestatyn. Researches by him and others are accessible in an early Victorian volume, with comments on how the Dyke zig-zags across country 'within a mile from the village of Northop' (between Holywell and Mold). Pennant is also mentioned for the twelve-foot-high Maen Achwyfan, showing 'exquisite workmanship' in its carved 'wreathings, or

knots, and running foliage', and with an enigma in its 'rude naked figure of a man, holding in his right hand a staff, or spear'. (Lewis, 1844, pp. 277, 433)

As regards Wat's Dyke, Pennant was again cited by Sir John Lloyd, who noted a suggestion of A. N. Palmer (1847-1915) on it as perhaps contemporary with Offa (d. 796). Lloyd yet played down the notion of a no man's land between the Dykes of Offa and Wat. (Lloyd, 1911, p. 299) Progress is indicated by remarks on these and similar earthworks (their ditches to the west) as Anglo-Saxon creations at first intended for defence, even if those of Offa and Wat were later thrown up to define 'an agreed frontier from Dee to Severn'. (Fox, 1948, pp. 105-22) Their course is traced on a map of seventh- and eighth-century Wales. (Rees, 1951, plate 22) Wat's Dyke was not then known as ninth-century work. Even Kenneth Jackson, a great scholar, dated Wat's Dyke to 'the seventh or early eighth century' on a boundary reached by the Mercians in about 650 CE. (Jackson, 1953, p. 211) Confusion on the matter has dogged all discussion until recent work by Tim Malim, who told the writer that Sir Cyril Fox actually related Wat's Dyke to the hero Wade. (Fox, 1955, p. 288) That proposal was cited in minimal form. (Davies, 1959, p. 176) But its effective impact has been zero. Like so much in linguistic and other investigation, it is ignored.

On the matter of dates, Sir Idris Foster attributed Wat's Dyke to Æthelbald of Mercia (ruled 716-57), styling it 'an artificial line of defence', albeit one 'more a mark of Mercia's conquest than an established boundary'. (Foster, 1965, pp. 213-35) Nothing on Wat's Dyke as of the following century and hence postdating that of Offa. Also somewhat misleading is a verdict on both as showing 'the organizing ability of a great Anglo-Saxon king' when two kings would be involved (Phillips, 1966, p. 19) In a guidebook is nevertheless the useful observation that Wat's Dyke is in Flintshire best seen east and south-east of Mold, near 'Buckley and Hope'. Beyond that county it is traceable north and south of Wrexham, respectively at 'Llay and Ruabon'. (Beasley, Brett, 1971, p. 140) Sir Frank Stenton mentioned Wat's Dyke with no word on date or purpose. (Stenton, 1971, p. 212 n. 2) It is proof of his exceptional gift for historical judgement and discretion. He was never the man for rash assumptions.

That compares with remarks of others on how Sir Cyril Fox 'magisterially' surveyed both great dykes. (Jack, 1972, p. 190) No inkling of the revisionism to come. Another dates Offa's Dyke to 'the late eighth century' with nothing on the date of its companion. (Jones, 1972, pp. 279-382) Thereafter, with misplaced confidence, is crisp affirmation on Wat's Dyke as 'attributed with great probability to Ethelbald [d. 757]. It set the seal on

Mercian domination of Cheshire.’ (Finberg, 1974, p. 97) Better is comment on the earthwork as some forty feet wide and (ditch bottom to bank crest) nine feet high, with grid-references on what survives and what (such as the part going ‘straight through Wrexham’) does not. The work is attributed to ‘one of Offa’s forebears’ in the early eighth century. (Houlder, 1974, p. 78) Then (with citation of publications by David Hill) a note of caution. Wat’s Dyke ‘could well be later than Offa’s Dyke’, representing an actual retreat of English power. (Sawyer, 1978, p. 109)

Thereafter, more revisionism. Fox’s conclusions on Offa’s Dyke had been ‘generally accepted’ until Hill’s excavations produced ‘serious doubts’ on them. Yet Wat’s Dyke was still thought ‘roughly contemporary’ with that of Offa. The poem *Widsith* (in the tenth-century Exeter Book) is mentioned in the same context for its reference to Offa’s Continental ancestor, another Offa, as well as to ‘a certain Wade’. Yet ‘such sources prove nothing.’ (Wormald, 1982, pp. 120-121) There is further uncertainty in statements on his Dyke, possibly even built ‘in the 970s or 980s against the Vikings’. (Davies, 1990, p. 73) For negativism of a different kind is the assurance that ‘Wat’s identity is a mystery.’ (Higham, 1993, p. 101) Also unhelpful is the statement that his dyke is ‘forty-nine miles (62 km) long’. (Worthington, 1999, p. 468) But sixty-two kilometres is thirty-eight miles, not forty-nine. Arithmetic is not some people’s forte. Elsewhere is the startling conclusion that radio-carbon analysis points to Wat’s Dyke as ‘constructed in the immediate post-Roman period’ and thus three centuries before Offa. (Welch, 2001, pp. 147-159) Hence a date ‘centring on AD 446’ in a historical atlas. (Koch, 2007, p. 163) Claims for the fifth century recur elsewhere. (Anon., 2008, pp. 926-927)

Concerning the name, there is silence in one volume. (Owen, 2008, pp. 239-49) The defence’s origins also remained obscure, with a cautious verdict that it ‘probably belongs to the Anglo-Saxon period’. (Charles-Edwards, 2013, p. 420) Wat’s identity was then termed ‘disputed’. (Owen and Gryffiths, 2017, p. 50) Now, fortunately, the question of dating is resolved by Tim Malim, who attributes Wat’s Dyke to Coenwulf, King of Mercia 796-821. (Malim, 2020, pp. 145-58) It provides a basic inference. The Dyke cannot relate to any Englishman called ‘Wade’. There were Anglo-Saxons so called. But they were obscure figures. Nobody would call a mighty defensive work after any of them, and all the more so if Wat’s Dyke can be placed in a period when there is no ‘Wade’ of significance in the history books. Attempts to relate it to anyone outside that period may be swept from the board. Malim’s scientific research therefore ‘indicates construction in the early ninth century’. (Naismith, 2021, p. 203) Our first section ends with a problem solved.

Wade, Hero of Germanic Legend

After a survey of Wat's Dyke, we come to Wat (or Wade) himself. Two aspects may be kept in mind. Evidence for Wade amongst the Germanic peoples is widespread; and they tended to call monuments after gods or heroes, like Woden or Weland. Together, these imply that Wade and Wat are the same person, or same being. Does analysis underpin the hypothesis?

Wade was given character-sketches more than a century ago. Chaucer mentions 'Wade's boat' twice, in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the tale of the Merchant, the latter a satire on an aging bachelor roué who marries a girl young enough to be his daughter. For this rich but foolish bridegroom, widows were out of play because they know all about 'Wades boot'. The remark puts editors on their mettle. Skeat noted allusions to Wade in the Old English poem *Widsith* and romances like the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (of about 1400), as well as Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. In late tradition Wade fights a fire-breathing dragon (like a true medieval knight). Older are Norse legends of him as the son of Weland or Wayland, a hero imprisoned by King Nidad (but escaping on magic wings). Skeat suggested that Wade took a leaf from his father's book, in his case building a magic boat to whisk him from place to place. (Skeat, 1900, pp. 356-357)

Chambers had more to say. For him, Wade was originally a sea-giant haunting the coasts of the Baltic and North Sea, with the 'Halsings' (whom he ruled) a people of (it appears) the region around present-day Lübeck. In a Norse translation (from about 1250) of a lost German text, Wade is mentioned as Weland's father (not son). In Middle High German itself is the poem *Kudrun*, called after its heroine, whom Wade comes to rescue by sea, his hand on a 'strong steering-rudder'. Wade features as well in folklore. West of Whitby in north Yorkshire was a heap of stones called 'Waddes Grave' (the 'Wade's Stone' of recent maps), its occupant said to have been eleven feet high. To the south of it is 'Wade's Causey', an ancient moorland road. Chambers further reproduced six lines of English verse discovered by M. R. James (of the ghost stories) in a thirteenth-century Latin sermon from a manuscript at Peterhouse, Cambridge. In it, Wade speaks of elves and adders and monsters that dwell 'bi den watere'. We shall return to these disagreeable snakes and water-demons when we come to Maen Achwyfan. Chambers referred as well to the twelfth-century writer Walter Map on a certain 'Gado' at the court of King Offa. Gado, who (as in *Kundrun*) is wise and white-haired, owns a marvellous boat which takes him to India and back. Chambers summed up Wade's oldest characteristics thus. He had

power over the sea; was a giant possessed of 'superhuman strength'; could be helpful (yet was sometimes 'the reverse'); and was no doubt 'supernatural'. He was not historical, unlike Arthur (d. 537) or Roland (d. 778) or the Cid (d. 1099); but was seen as 'a helper in time of need'. (Chambers, 1912, pp. 95-100) A Viking mariner familiar with danger might well take him as patron. An implication, then, for Wales's Maen Achwyfan, an inscribed monument with obvious Scandinavian characteristics.

In Chaucer's day, however, the 'scattered allusions' to Wade imply that his myth was a mere after-dinner wonder-tale. (Root, 1926, p. 474) Wade's Causeway (that Roman road near Pickering, North Yorkshire) is mentioned again with Wayland's Smithy (a megalithic tomb in west Berkshire) as an instance of 'attribution of ancient structures to individuals'. (Chadwick, Chadwick, 1932, p. 296). There is a translation of the line in *Widsith* on how 'Witta ruled the Swabians, Wade the Halsings', the latter a people living near the Baltic. (Mackie, 1934, p. 17) Observations on Wansdyke and Grim's Ditch in Wiltshire, both attributed (under different names) to the god Woden, are relevant to Wat's Dyke. (Gover, Mawer, Stenton, 1939, p. xiv) They show mythical beings linked to physical objects. Scraps of information on Wade can be found in a standard edition. (Robinson, 1957, p. 714) Demonstrating the hazards for research, *Wadshelf* in north Derbyshire was understood as 'Wade's Hill' and related (with other places in 'Wad-') to the 'mythical hero'. (Ekwall, 1960, p. 498) But later investigation discredits that, as we shall see.

At this point it is cheering to cite a discussion in Polish of *Widsith*, even if its author was concerned with the poem's historical aspects. No mention of Wade, therefore. (Labuda, 1961, pp. 188-194) A note on Malory's phrase 'wyghte [valiant] as ever was Wade or Launcelot' is also of interest, its 'Wade' not being in Malory's original text, but added by William Caxton, who printed the work in 1485. (Vinaver, 1967, p. 1436) R. M. Wilson (summing up the work of Skeat and Chambers) remarked none the less that, for Caxton, Wade was probably a mere name. (Wilson, 1970, p. 16)

Readers who have reached this point may think that the above has not got us very far. All the same, there are insights from Chaucer scholars. Norman Blake cited a 1966 paper by Wentersdorf on Wade as one who caused 'havoc' before escaping in a magic boat, with widows possessing similar traits. (Blake, 1980, p. 316) Wade has, however, no direct link with Wadshelf, Derbyshire, called after an eleventh-century namesake who owned the place. (Watts, 2004, p. 643) He was not the mythical Wade, with a reputation for 'romancing' or 'spinning a line'. (Mann, 2005, p. 931)

Recent accounts add little to the above. Wayland's Smithy and the like are noted for Dark Age attitudes to antiquities. (Williams, 2007, pp. 27-41) Walter Map now has a study to himself. (Smith, 2017) No mention of 'Gado' in it, however. On the reference to him in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (used by Thomas Malory), readers are directed to Wentersdorf's paper of 1966 and another of 2008 by Stephanie Trigg. (Stévenovitch, Mathieu, 2017, p. 524) Wade crops up again in a new translation of *Widsith*. (Williamson, 2017, p. 477) Finally, while Wade is absent from a further volume, it yet cites 'the ingenious suggestion by Barbara Yorke' that Offa's Dyke was called not after the eighth-century king but his fifth-century Continental ancestor; just as Wansdyke, between Bath (north-east Somerset) and Mildenhall (Wiltshire), was called after the god Woden, from whom some Anglo-Saxon kings also boasted descent. (Reynolds, 2020, pp. 245-275) It strengthens the case for 'Wat' as a legendary or mythical figure, not a historical one.

Bards on War of Wade

In contrast to the above, showing little advance since the days of Skeat and Chambers, is new material in medieval Welsh poetry. We learn two things from it. First, its 'Wat' is Wade and not (as some imagine) a Saxon king. Second, the bards (who also mention Offa) thereby provide data on Wade that are unknown to Anglicists. Three bards concern us: Gutun Owain, a gentleman of Dudleston (near Oswestry, Shropshire) who was active in the Wrexham area between about 1460 and 1498; Hywel Cilan, from Llandrillo (near Bala) in the Dee Valley of North Wales, and active in the period 1435-70; and Lewys Môn ('of Anglesey'), who lived for many years in north-east Wales and died in 1527. So all had links with the Flintshire-Denbighshire region. No surprise if they referred to Wat.

Gutun Owain has an (outstanding) edition by a French Celticist. In an elegy for Tudur ab Ieuan Llwyd of Bodidris (in the hill country between Ruthin and Wrexham), Gutun tells how Englishmen dread Tudur's 'vigorous hand', wielding a lance that made him a veritable Wade (*Wat ydoedd*). His editor, explaining 'Wat' as perhaps the 'roi saxon Wat, le constructeur du mur' (near that of Offa), noted allusions to 'Wat' by other poets (including Lewys Môn), as well as further references by Gutun to 'Watstay', the estate (near Ruabon) renamed 'Wynnstay' in the eighteenth century. (Bachelery, 1950-1, p. 220) It lies south of Wrexham, and Wat's Dyke ran through its park.

Praising Ieuan Gethyn of Llansilin (near Oswestry, but inside the Welsh border), Hywel Cilan compares him to Roland, Hector, Troilus, and Wat,

the last identified as 'Y brenin Saesneg a adeiladodd "Glawdd Wat".' (Jones, 1963, p. 59) But no word on when and where this 'English king who built Wat's Dyke' ruled. The real enthusiast for Wat was Lewys Môn. One Anglesey gentleman is addressed (in the context of the Red Sea and Aegean) as 'great Wade'; so is Robert ap Rhys (d. 1534), chaplain to Cardinal Wolsey (and as grasping as his master); Sir Roger Salesbury (constable in 1506 of Denbigh Castle) is termed *Wat o haelder* or 'Wade for largesse'; Sir Rhys ap Thomas (1449-1525), powerful Carmarthenshire magnate, is called *Wat Deheubarth*, 'the Wade of southern Wales', complete with a cwch or boat. All these are referred to a mysterious 'Wat' whom Lewys's editor also took as a Saxon king. (Rowlands, 1975, pp. 107, 175, 214, 317, 393, 421)

While the poems certainly indicate North Wales associations for Wat or Wade, recognition that he was no king, but a mythical Baltic sea-giant, removes various difficulties. For example, the editor of Lewys Môn was puzzled by allusions to the 'Greek Sea' and the Aegean and *Môr Rudd* or Red Sea. How could they relate to a Saxon ruler? He thus interpreted the second as an error for 'Aragon' (in Spain) and the third as *Môr Udd*, Middle Welsh for the 'Sea of the Continent' or North Sea, as shown by an Old Cornish cognate. (Breeze, 2007, pp. 267-268) But this, leaving the 'Greek Sea' unaccounted for, makes no sense. We may recall Walter Map's tale of how 'Gado' sailed to India and back. Lewys Môn's 'Greek Sea' and Red Sea and Aegean will be exactly what they seem. These exotic locations of Wade's marvellous voyage to India were evidently known to Lewys and his fellow-poets, who are all (we may add) surveyed in an excellent new book. (Carr, 2017) We conclude that 'Wat' was no Saxon king. He was Wade the mythical hero. If Chaucer knew of him and his boat, so did Walter Map and Lewys Môn. Wat's Dyke will be called after the resourceful and generous warrior of legend.

Wade, the Mystery Figure of Maen Achwyfan

The above helps too with Maen Achwyfan, near Whitford in the far north-east of Wales, as also with a lost stone from nearby Meliden, noted by Edward Lhuyd (1660-1709). On the former are words on 'a small ithyphallic (?) standing male figure, facing front, holding a staff or spear in the right hand and with the left arm raised, possibly grasping the head of a serpent (?), whose coils merge into the looped knotwork surround; a short sheath-like object (?sword) hangs from the left hip.' The identity of the figure (a huntsman?) was described as 'indeterminate'. (Nash-Williams, 1950, pp. 127, 129) This tenth-century cross has, despite obscurities, been related

to local Scandinavian settlements and place-names. (Davies, 1982, pp. 116, 118) One may compare sculpted figures from saga (Sigurd and his dragon amongst them) at a church in Navarre, Spain, which were commissioned, it seems, by Norwegian soldier-monks. Result: a riotous medley of pagan heroes and Christian saints. (Breeze, 1991, pp. 2-13) Like this Spanish artwork, Maen Achwyfan displays an encounter of sacred and profane.

If Nash-Williams was ready with question marks in 1950, later researchers are as mystified as he was. We do, however, have comment on the lost Meliden stone, with its 'naked man shown face on, with his arms stretched out horizontally to either side, and knees bent' as recorded in a drawing by Edward Lhuyd or one of his assistants. As for Maen Achwyfan (dated to between 925 and 1000), it 'seems to show a naked, armed warrior, with a serpent to his left which curls beneath his feet'. While it resembles (in part) some carved figures at Masham, North Yorkshire, the 'only close parallel' is on the stone of Meliden (perhaps by the same sculptor). Despite being 'heroic or possibly mythical', the nude warrior cannot be Sigurd. The verdict on both Welsh stones is glum. 'Therefore, it is no longer possible to identify the stories from which they came.' (Edwards, 2013, pp. 362, 371)

Fortunately, material assembled by Chambers in 1912 and Wilson in 1970 lets us 'identify the stories from which they came', as does Wat's Dyke itself. One may quote Chambers and Wilson for the Middle English fragment from the Peterhouse manuscript. In a sermon on humility, the preacher quotes Wade as saying (in translation):

Some send elves
And some send adders;
Some send monsters
That live by the water.
There is no man
But Hildebrand alone

– surely a fragment from a longer text, with a source common to the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*.

There can be no doubt that the armed man of Maen Achwyfan is Wade. He appears with a serpent; Wade of the Peterhouse verse speaks of adders. He is naked, immortals (especially those of the sea) having no need of clothes. He is a fighting man, with sword and spear; Gutun Owain similarly wrote of Wat's warrior lance. We have, then, an addition to (or correction of) comments on the dearth of evidence for stories about Ingeld or Weland or Finn or the like in Britain after 900 CE, in contrast to earlier centuries. (Neidorf, 2017, p. 101) So

we end with Wade in three guises: the hero of tenth-century Maen Achwyfan, where he is a giant grappling with a sea-serpent; a champion known to bards in north-east Wales, who mention his spear and boat and voyage to India; and the mythical being who gives a name to ninth-century Wat's Dyke. Local seafaring Vikings (and Englishmen) evidently thought much of this denizen of the ocean, who was brave and could be helpful (if he wanted). Hence Maen Achwyfan with his image; hence his name applied to a mighty earthwork, a creation worthy of a being who enjoyed superhuman powers, not least in combat with elves or snakes or water-demons.

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Dr. Andrew Breeze, FRHistS, FSA, who was educated in Sandwich at Sir Roger Manwood's School, and at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In 1984-6 he taught at the John Paul II University of Lublin; since 1987 he has been "profesor de filología" at the University of Navarre, Pamplona. Married, with six children, he is the author of many publications on medieval English and Celtic Studies, his latest book being British Battles 493-937: Mount Badon to Brunanburh (Anthem Press, 2020).

E-mail: abreeze@unav.es