# *GRYNGOLET*, THE NAME OF SIR GAWAIN'S HORSE

*GRYNGOLET* is the name of Gawain's horse in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Although *Gryngolet* is known to be of Celtic origin, its meaning has been problematic. Tolkien, Gordon, and Davis note that it first occurs in this form (as a common noun *le gringalet*) in *Erec et Énide* and *Chevalier à l'Épée* from the time of Chrétien de Troyes. Although the horse of the hero Gwalchmei (Gawain's Welsh original) is called *Keincaled* in a Welsh triad, they regard that as perhaps an 'alteration of an earlier form', drawing this conclusion because they derive French *Guingalet* and *Gringalet* (the latter with intrusive *r*) from an original Welsh *Gwyngaled* 'white-hard'.[1]

Recent opinion on *Gryngolet* has added little to this. Hanna observes that 'the etymon of the first element is disputed, but the second is probably Welsh *galed*, *galet* "hard, tough"'.[2] Silverstein says *Gryngolet* is 'perhaps derived from an original like Welsh *Gwyngalet* "white-hard" (*i.e.*, bony)'.[3]

None of these accounts is quite satisfactory. The Welsh name for Gwalchmei's horse is not *Gwyngalet* (a form figuring in no Welsh dictionary), but *Keincaled*.[4] Common sense suggests this Welsh name is unlikely to be a corruption of a French name, itself supposedly borrowed from a Welsh name, which is not actually attested. This suspicion deepens when we realize that *kein* is a rare Old Welsh word meaning 'back, ridge' which was obsolete by the Middle Welsh period. Since *gwyn* 'white' and *caled* 'hard' are still common words, the implication is that *Guingalet* and *Gringalet* are corruptions of an unintelligible Welsh *Keincaled*, not vice versa.

The name *Keincaled* occurs in a fragmentary series of triads in the thirteenth-century Black Book of Carmarthen, which mention *keincaled m[arch] gualchmei* 'Keincaled, horse of Gwalchmei'.[5] The fourteenth-century bard Casnodyn says (in a poem to the wife of Sir Gruffydd Llwyd) that his horse is *eil kein galet* 'like Kein Galet'.[6] A triad in the fifteenth-century Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 47 refers to the Three Bestowed Horses of the Island of Britain, one of them being *Meingalet* 'Slender-Hard', horse of Gwalchmei. This last is surely a corruption of *Keingalet*.[7]

The evidence for Old Welsh *kein* 'back, ridge' is as follows. It is cognate with Old Cornish *chein* (glossing *dorsum*), Modern Cornish *cein* 'back, ridge', Middle

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1   *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1967), 91.
2   *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, ed. Ralph Hanna (Manchester, 1974), 134.
3   *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Theodore Silverstein (Chicago, 1984), 128.
4   John Lloyd-Jones, *Geirfa Barddoniaeth Gynnar Gymraeg* (Caerdydd, 1931-63), 124.
5   Lloyd-Jones, 124; *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, ed. Rachel Bromwich, 2nd edn (Cardiff, 1978), civ, 104, 105, 106; *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin*, ed. A. O. H. Jarman (Caerdydd, 1982), 12; cf. A. C. Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997), 28-9.
6   Lloyd-Jones, 124; Bromwich, 106.
7   Bromwich, 120.

Breton *queyn* 'back'. An eighth-century grant of land perhaps at Senghennydd (near Cardiff) refers to a *cecg* 'ridge'.[8] A ninth-century gloss *ceng ir esceir* 'back of the limb' (an arm) occurs in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F.4.32.[9] The senile Llywarch the Old, in a ninth- or tenth-century monologue, calls himself *kein vaglawc* 'bent-backed'.[10] The word still figures on the map at Llan-rhaeadr-yng-Ngh(e)inmeirch ('Ridge of the Horses'), south of Denbigh. Yet the best evidence for our present purpose is not Welsh, but Cornish, in the expression *war geyn margh* 'on horseback' in the fifteenth-century play *Beunans Meri-asek* 'The Life of Meriadoc'.[11]

The above proves *kein* was a word used of a horse's back, that it became obsolete at an early date in Welsh, but survived longer in Cornish and Breton. By the time Welsh *kein* 'back' was no longer understood, other elements would naturally be substituted for it. Hence, it would seem, *Meingalet* 'Slender-Hard' in MS Peniarth 47; hence also *Guingalet* and *Gringalet* from an original Brittonic substitute *\*Guingalet* 'white-hard'.

How should we translate *Keincaled*? Rachel Bromwich suggested a possible meaning 'bony' for *caled* in horses' names.[12] But this is not a sense of *caled* recorded by dictionaries; and 'Bony-Back' is a poor name for the steed of a hero.[13] The best translation seems the simplest one, 'Hard Back, Firm Back', which may be contrasted with *Gohoewgein* 'Lively-Back', the name of one of the Three Beloved Horses of the Island of Britain.[14] Even non-riders need little imagination to see that a warrior might well give the name 'Hard Back, Firm Back' to a horse on which he would be sure to keep his seat, even in battle.

The history of Gryngolet's name indicates two things. First, the archaic element *kein* places the origin of the name well within the Old Welsh period (before 1100). It must long predate Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century and the attestation of *Keincaled* in the thirteenth-century Black Book. Second, the name *Keincaled* 'Firm Back' suggests Gryngolet was originally a war horse, unfrightened by enemies or danger. This is still Gryngolet's character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a poem written (as I argue elsewhere) by a man who in 1378 had done military service in Aquitaine, who would know much about horses and warfare.[15]

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8  *The Book of Llan Dâv*, ed. J. Gwenogvryn Evans (Oxford, 1893), 73; cf. Wendy Davies, *The Llandaff Charters* (Aberystwyth, 1979), 112.
9  *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1950-    ), 390.
10  *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*, ed. Jenny Rowland (Cambridge, 1990), 415, 474.
11  *Canu Llywarch Hen*, ed. Ifor Williams (Caerdydd, 1935), 100.
12  Bromwich, 106.
13  Lloyd-Jones, 98; *Geiriadur*, 392.
14  Lloyd-Jones, 552; Bromwich, 103.
15  A. C. Breeze, 'Could Sir John Stanley (d. 1414) have been the "Gawain"-Poet?', *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature* (Vitoria, 1997), 27-31.