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## TRACING LINES IN THE HILBRE SANDS: A SPATIAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF ISLANDNESS AND OTHER FICTIONS

BY LES ROBERTS AND HAZEL ANDREWS

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**Abstract:** The Hilbre Islands are an archipelago of three small islands in the Dee Estuary at the border between Wales and England. Hilbre has long played host to myths, legends and spatial stories that speak to questions of identity, mobility and the betwixt-and-betweenness of place and cultural belonging. Travel to and from the islands today is still undertaken on foot, with navigation across the sands possible at low tide. Approached and conceived as a negative space, it is the social, cultural and spatial practices that are constitutive of Hilbre's very particular form of islandness that this paper sets out to explore.

**Keywords:** Hilbre Islands, islandness, spatial anthropology.

### Introduction: The Fiction of Islandness

In September 2001, a schoolboy from Wallasey on the Wirral peninsula, north-west England, chanced upon a curious discovery when surveying his local area on Google Maps. Planning a family walk to nearby Hilbre Island, Rory Chapman noticed that a place marker located on Middle Eye, one of the three islands which make up the Hilbre archipelago, was named 'Hole to the Centre of the Earth' (Daily Mirror 2021). It is not known how the icon carrying this curious toponym came to be there, or why. Moreover, soon after the story appeared in local, national, and international newspapers, the icon vanished as quickly and as mysteriously as it came. It should be self-evident to anyone who knows about such things that the place marker obviously does not relate to an actual topographic feature that matches the name it had been given (Fig. 1). Hilbre Island (as the archipelago is collectively known) is, to the best of our knowledge, a place not otherwise associated with Jules Verne-type subterranean fiction. So, what exactly it was that motivated someone to pin such an icon onto the island we will never know. But for our introductory purposes this does not much matter. What the example provides us with is a means by which to consider the way islands – or *this* island at least – may be thought of not as destinations or places of dwelling in their own right but as points of transition. In this

reckoning, the island functions as a gateway, portal (Hay 2006: 23), or staging post on journeys bound for Elsewhere, whether these be ‘real world’ geographies mobilised by the island’s constitutive islandness or other spaces procured by an ‘island imagination’ (Baldacchino 2004: 274) pitched towards horizons that lie beyond. Either way, it can be argued, islandness presupposes a consonant fictiveness.



Figure 1. Images used in newspaper articles reporting on the discovery of the ‘Hole to the Centre of the Earth’ icon on Google Maps. The image on the right, showing an actual hole in the ground (location not known), was used to illustrate an article about the story in Chinese news media (*China Times* 2021).

Our opening contention, then, is that a spatial anthropology of islandness necessarily begins from a point in space and time from whence the ineluctable fiction of islandness is first set in motion (Augé 1999; Roberts 2018: 83). This is not to say *fictitious* in the sense of fabrication. What it refers to is the spatial unfolding of a narrative practice – ‘spatial stories’ to use Michel de Certeau’s term (1984) – that proceeds on the understanding that fiction can ‘be the opportunity for the individual’s imagination and memory to experience the existence of other imaginations and other imaginary worlds’ (Augé 1999: 99). Much of what we are proposing in this paper – whether this relates to the imagined geography of the unknown author of the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or to the everyday islandness experienced by the crime writer Ann Cleeves in the late 1970s – is informed by this underlying contention. Whatever it is that colours and gives shape to our fiction of islandness amounts to what it is we feel we can say, or wish to say, about the spatial anthropology of Hilbre Island.

So when Rory from the Wirral tells the *Liverpool Echo* newspaper that ‘I have looked at Hilbre

Island on the map with my mum when we did geography in lockdown' (Liverpool Echo 2021), it is not difficult to imagine someone similarly housebound by the pandemic, whose time had also been spent trawling through the virtual worlds of Google Maps, and whose imagination, like Rory's, had alighted upon a small archipelago at the mouth of the Dee Estuary. Equally, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario where, in the midst of a global pandemic, islands take on very particular connotations, the trope of isolation resonating with more intensity and urgency than before (Foley et al. 2023: 5, 9). We could also imagine embarking on a further journey inward and downward: a subterranean vector of isolation that, having no other space left to go, plumbs the vertiginous depths of the underland (Macfarlane 2019). So yes, we could imagine all of that. But it would be a fiction: the spinning of a spatial yarn.

Like Rory and our cartographic trickster, our own journey towards the fiction of islandness begins within domestic interiors. And perhaps like they were, we are stationed at office desks strewn with papers, books, notes, maps, photographs, and other items of miscellanea which, along with our laptops and smartphones, provide us with a means by which to 'travel' to Hilbre Island. Once we are there, we find ourselves able to access other spaces of the imagination that we have been seeking all along. In other words, we journey to the island to then secure passage to somewhere else. This is probably no less true when applied to the actual journeys we have made to Hilbre Island, when the imagination finds itself tethered to landscapes that are not framed by a screen or buried in deep layers of text.

With these preliminary thoughts in mind, we set out a spatial anthropology of islandness in which Hilbre Island provides a space both to think with (Pugh 2013) and, as a spatial imaginary, to probe more deeply. As we will argue, islandness does not necessarily presuppose a theoretical or methodological disposition towards island-*centric*-ness. It can just as productively be explored by paying closer attention to what goes on around the island; to what it is that performatively constitutes its islandness, or which negates it; to the archipelagic connections the island has with mainland spaces that straddle national borders; to its mythopoeic fabric: its spatial stories and practices. In this respect, as with the symbolic inversion of the island that the Hole to the Centre of the Earth throws into relief, it is understanding Hilbre Island as a negative space rather than a fixed point on a correspondingly fixed map that we are keen to explore. As we shall see, this entails a process of tracing and delineating lines in the sands. Thinking about islandness in terms of a negation or inversion, where attention is cast not to the island itself but all that the island is not, is to populate Hilbre as a negative space made up of

lines and spatial stories. To frame what is otherwise an anthropological space (Certeau 1984, Merleau-Ponty 2014) as a negation is not to posit a rejection or repudiation of space in the terms Ingold (2009) sets out in his polemical essay 'Against Space'. It is to reverse engineer those processes whereby an island is perceived and understood as an island in the first place. In this respect, we are very much in step with Foley et al.'s take on islandness, which holds that:

*Although some of the oft-cited definitions of islandness highlight characteristics like sea-boundedness and comparative remoteness, the sea can also be envisioned as a road to the rest of the world, and there are traditions of seeing the land and the sea together, not the sea as a barrier, which are all helpful for imagining islandness more inclusively. (2023: 10)*

### **On Islands, Islandness and Archipelagos**

As Hilbre Island is not strictly speaking *an* island, but an archipelago, the terminology applied is by no means incidental. More so when we consider that for a large proportion of the day Hilbre is not an island at all, given that one can get there by foot and that it is only its elevation compared to the surrounding sand flats that confers on it the 'proper' island status when the tide rolls in. It does depend on what is meant by 'island', however. Islandness – understood here as a broadly anthropological orientation towards a discrete set of practices and imaginaries that coalesce around the *idea* of an island or islands – does not presuppose entanglement with an empirically verifiable topographic form that meets the defining characteristics of an 'island', however construed. Put simply, what an island is or what constitutes an island is not at all straightforward. Islands, as Edmond and Smith note, 'are the most graspable and the most slippery of subjects' (2003: 5). Much of the academic debate about the definition of islands proceeds from, or is in some way related to, the etymology of the word and an understanding of the related concept of islandness.

Writing as we are about a place that is located in the waters of a country in north-western Europe, Owe Ronström's (2009) discussion of the origins and meanings of words for islands is certainly instructive. Ronström points to the many different words applied to 'island' that exist in different languages. He lists 26 words in his native Swedish, 16 in Finnish, and ten in English, including *atoll*, *ait*, *reef*, *key*, and *isle*. Approaching islands from a linguistic and etymological perspective points to the many different forms an island can take – for example, names linked

to size of the landform, or to its composition or position – but also to how the meanings of island have changed through time and through the localised prism of socio-cultural milieux. Similarly, then, what is meant by ‘islandness’ in any given instance is no less contingent on the cultural, geographic, and linguistic specificities attached to islands from the vantage point of those whose islandness is being performatively put to work as a socio-spatial practice. A related point is made by Foley et al. who observe that ‘the physicality and sociality of islandness... are commonly defined subjectively’ and thus reflect the ‘biases and preconceived ideas’ of the definer (2023: 10). As such, Conkling’s assertion that ‘if the characteristics of islanders [and islandness] resonate through time and across space, then certain island qualities must transcend local culture’ (2007: 192) is sharply at odds with our own and others’ understanding of, and approach to, islandness.

Ronström notes (2021: 271), ‘[a] longstanding concern in island studies is what constitutes “the island”’, and that the object of study is informed ‘by the constant and wayward sliding between the physical places we call islands, and all the figures of thought that we attach to such places’ (ibid.). This may be useful in terms of the general understanding of islands that Ronström is drawing attention to, but it does not allow much room for closer consideration of what gives form to a particular island. For Vannini and Taggart, ‘islands are relational spatialities grounded in unique kinesthetic performances’ (2012: 228). In other words, islands and islandness come about through spatial practices. Islands, though, are so much more. How a particular islandness is practised will be influenced by ideas about islands in general. In their discussion of Malta, Nimführ and Otto (2020) refer to ‘landscapes’ (a term derived from the work of Cyprian Broodbank) as a useful analytical tool to consider the so-called ‘relational turn’ in island studies that seeks to move the association of islands away from ideas of insularity, backwardness, and disconnection. Thinking in terms of landscapes allows islands to be thought of assemblages, ‘embedded and entangled in broader discourses, infrastructures and ideas’ (ibid: 187). An island and the practice of islandness cannot be disentangled from the histories, mythologies and on-going stories that are woven in and around it.

Drawing on Deleuze’s study of Melville’s short story ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’, Stratford et al. (2011) argue that the relationships between islands that the archipelago speaks of points to a ‘world in process’: an archipelagic *becoming*. From this we understand the archipelago to be brought into being by the exchanges, connections, and movements between its different elements, emphasising the fluidity and assemblages that emerge in inter-island movements

(Pugh 2013). For Smith, the usefulness of the archipelagic is in the opportunity to explore networks of relationships and ‘that it need not be islands alone that fit this description’ (2013: 14). Both Rankin (2016) and Baldacchino and Tsai (2014) note that islands cannot be understood objectively as things. For the latter, the ‘facts’ of islands and archipelagos need to be discussed with the myths and metaphors associated with them (ibid: 15).

Discussing islands archipelagically thus emphasises connectivities and challenges potential assumptions that islands are isolated or insular (Foley et al. 2023: 9). Indeed, an island remains an island even though it may have fixed connections, but the connections may change the practice of the island concerned (Grydehoj and Casagrande 2020). Links between islands and other landmasses can serve to both contribute to the development and decline of an island. In a similar vein, Stratford (2013) and Stratford et al. (2011) argue that the archipelago allows us to think about the relations between islands, the connections and assemblages; that what the islandness of a particular island is will be linked to island-island relations rather than just island-mainland connections.

### **Situating Hilbre’s Islandness**

Hilbre Island, or Islands as the group of three rocky outcrops are sometimes referred to, is located at the mouth of the River Dee between Flintshire in Wales and the Wirral peninsula in England. The largest of the islands is Hilbre, followed by the Middle Eye and the Little Eye. At low water it is possible to see the bedrock that connects all three of the Hilbre islands. This suggests an earlier formation of one landmass as depicted in the Mercator map of 1564 (one of the sources of a map published by John Speed in the early 1600s), in which the landmass was labelled *Il Bre* (Chesterwiki n.d.). Similarly, a map by Robert Morden published in Edmund Gibson’s edition of William Camden’s *Britannia* (1695) depicts the three islands as one (Fig. 2). The accuracy of these early maps can be called into question (Anderson 1982: 4-5), not least by comparing them with other maps published around the same time, such as Grenville Collins’ 1689 map of the Dee Estuary (Fig. 3). However, depending on how far back in time one goes, it is worth acknowledging that the existence of one island may be feasible given the connective tissue of bedrock still visible around the islands, and the possibility that the sandstone structure was worn away by weathering and erosion to leave three islands in place of one.

For an overview of Hilbre’s history the most authoritative point of reference remains the 1982

collection *Hilbre: The Cheshire Island – its history and natural history*, edited by J.D. Craggs. Of the book's 19 chapters, 16 are focused on the archipelago's flora and fauna. The first three chapters, including a contribution from the crime writer Ann Cleeves, which we refer to below, address social and economic life on the islands. This covers questions of ownership (and disputes between England and Wales); the islands' sometime strategic role militarily, or as part of mercantile and maritime operations; as a smuggling hotspot; a monastic outpost; a hermitage; a (possible) site of pilgrimage; a telegraph station; a place frequented by fishermen; a mecca for birdwatchers; a lifeboat station; and, more recently, a destination for tourists and leisure-seekers (see Anderson 1982: 32-37).



Figure 2. Map published in the 1695 edition of William Camden's book *Britannia*. The map, by Robert Morden, shows Hilbre as a single island. For full map see Camden (1695: 552).

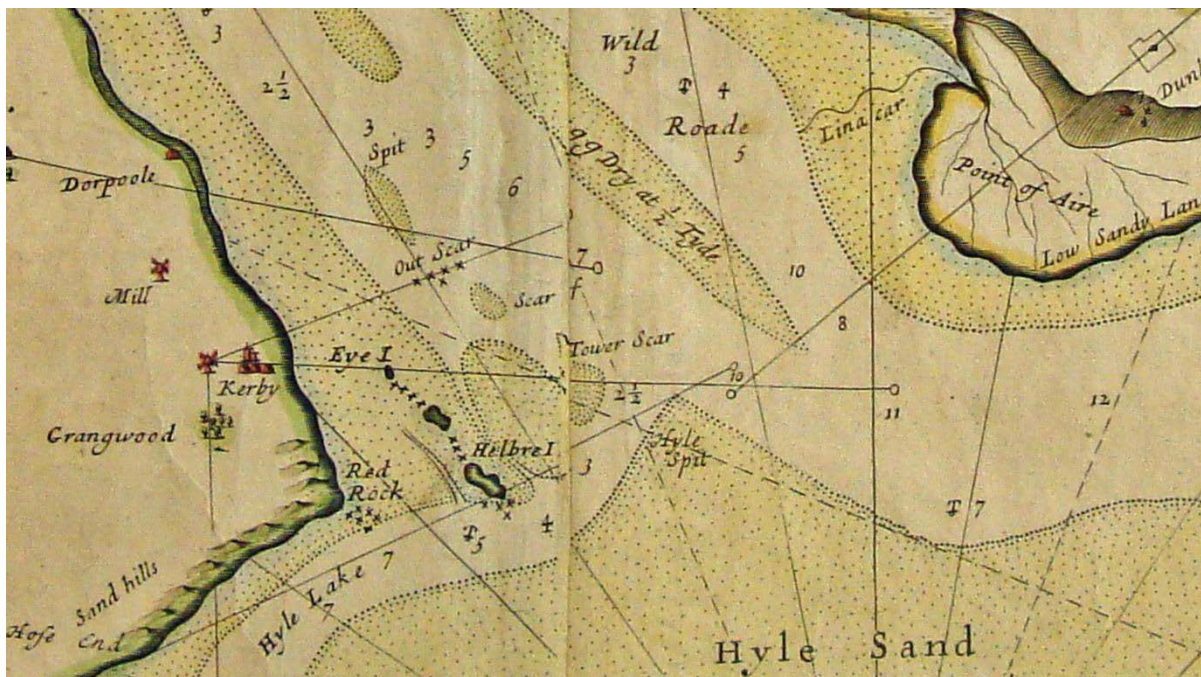


Figure 3. Detail of a 1689 map of the Dee Estuary by Grenville Collins, a hydrographer commissioned to carry out a survey of the coasts of Great Britain. Unlike Robert Morden's map, Collins' shows Hilbre as an archipelago rather than a single landmass. Note that north is pointing down in this map. Courtesy of Cheshire Archives and Local Studies.

For our purposes, however, it is Hilbre's mythological and folkloric associations that are the main focus of interest. There are several myths and legends associated with Hilbre (Craggs 2004-2005), two of which are discussed in more detail in the next section. Alongside Constable Sands (discussed below), which provides an important foundation for many of Hilbre's subsequent spatial stories, the legend of The Lady's Cave, set in the 1200s, recounts the tale of the daughter of the castellan of Shotwick who threw herself from a boat carrying her from England to Wales for an arranged marriage. Barely clinging to life, she was discovered by monks, to whom she told her story before dying near to the site of the cave (Fig. 4). There are also stories of a Hilbre Monster, which date to 1149. The monster was said to be in the form of a maelstrom that sucked people and ships to their deaths. Although the idea of a giant whirlpool has been largely discredited, reported sightings of a 'strange whirlpool' near Hilbre have since been made (Chesterwiki n.d.). In 2006, The Wirral Globe newspaper, having enlisted the services of a 'paranormal investigator', reported the case of a 13-year old girl who visited Hilbre in 1954: '[H]iding in Ladies Cave...', legend has it, the teenager 'encountered a

terrifying crab-like creature over six feet in length...with a pair of huge blood-red eyes' (Wirral Globe 2006). Other stories circulating online (from DIY local history resources such as Chesterwiki) have included sightings of a long-necked creature (sometimes with a hump, sometimes with a greyish, green body) moving at speed through the water, or tales of people being lured to their deaths, having heard what sound like calls for help but which are in fact monsters baiting their human prey.



*Figure*

*4. Lady's Cave on the west side of Hilbre Island facing out across the estuary towards North Wales. Authors' photograph.*

Having briefly sketched some of the background which informs approaches to the spatial anthropology of the Hilbre archipelago, the next section explores further the mythological underpinnings of Hilbre's spatial stories and the fiction of islandness these have engendered.

### **Lines in the Sand**

As we have already suggested, to trace the spatial practices that connect Hilbre Island with other spaces is to draw our own provisional line in the sand. It means orienting towards a spatial anthropology of islandness that is grounded in the mythopoeic terrain of spatial stories that can be mapped around Hilbre rather than focusing on topographic particularities of the

archipelago itself. Granted, those stories may very well place us squarely within the geographical boundaries of the archipelago in ways that reinforce a fiction of islandness anchored in ideas of settled dwelling or of Crusoe-like isolation. The imaginary of islandness at play here is an island that pulls its islandness around its shoulders, as if hunkering down for a period of settled, proximate and weather-beaten residence.

An evocation of this can be found in one of the two epigraphs included in opening pages of the aforementioned *Hilbre: The Cheshire Island* (Craggs 1982). It is a quote from Irish Blasket Island writer Tomas O'Crohan's 1934 book, *The Islandman*: 'This is a crag in the midst of the great sea and again and again the blown surf drives right over it before the violence of the wind, so that you daren't put your head out any more than a rabbit'. Echoes of this island imaginary can be found in Ann Cleeves' contribution to the collection, in which the future crime novelist recounts a year spent on Hilbre with her husband Tim, who served as warden of the island from 1977 to 1981. Observing how '[t]he weather plays a prominent part in this account' (Cleeves 1982: 48), Cleeves goes on to paint a vivid picture of the demanding day-to-day taskscapes of the island (Ingold 2000). Set against a dramatic backdrop of bitter north-westerly gales which made it 'difficult to hear or to breathe and every step... an effort' (Cleeves 1982: 51), these come to define the fiction of islandness that is presented in the chapter through their (re)iteration, repetition, and ritual observance. 'A year on Hilbre', as the chapter is called, may conjure an imaginary of a year spent *on* a land formation that is, by definition, 'cut off' or separated. However, such an imaginary belies the prosaic geography of everyday spatial practices that make *that* year on Hilbre what it was from the very particular vantage point of its author. This may seem a rather obvious or superfluous point to make. But it is a salient observation nonetheless, inasmuch as Cleeves' island story marks a point of contact wherein Hilbre enters the social world. 'A year on Hilbre' becomes 'The Cleeves' year on Hilbre', or, narrated as it is from the writer's authorial point of view, 'Ann Cleeves' year on Hilbre'.

This shifting of the semantic goalposts matters. The islandness that is being presented here is a product of the unique set of circumstances attached to the social and professional roles that make the Cleeves' islandness what it is for them. And that is clearly not a year merely spent 'on' the island, but a residency which required frequent journeys back and forth to the mainland, sometimes on foot, other times by Land-Rover; and which even extended to a three-week holiday on Fair Isle in the Shetlands, north of the Scottish mainland. In Ann's case, the period spent on the island coincided with her enrolment on a two-year postgraduate course at the

University of Liverpool. Cleeves describes how she ‘began to adjust to commuting across the sand every morning and back at night, and to planning my day according to the weather and tide table’ (1982: 50). Some of the island tasksapes that Cleeves found herself having to negotiate on a daily basis thus extended out beyond the island itself, highlighting the importance of sand, tide, and weather to the spatial practices by which Hilbre is – and long has been – invested with meaning and symbolic capital. When Cleeves describes an experience that brought home to her the inherent dangers of the tidal crossing, we arrive at the exact point in the narrative when her spatial story becomes intertwined with a much wider island mythology:

*One day at the end of October I had a frightening experience as I tried to walk from Hilbre to West Kirby in a thick fog. There are no landmarks at all on the shore and I realized in a panic that I was lost. In the fog, sound and light become distorted, and I lost all sense of time. It was a strange and dream-like experience. Just as I realized that the footsteps I had found and was following were my own, leading me in a circle, the fog cleared enough for me to make out the horizon and I arrived safely on the mainland. I came ashore, not at West Kirby but at Hoylake, and if the fog had not cleared I would have missed the Wirral completely. (ibid: 51)*

On the one hand, it is not hard to see how this account prefigures an imaginary of place – dream-like, mysterious, atmospheric, deadly, precarious – that would directly inform Cleeves’ later work as a writer of crime fiction. But it also alludes to a mythic provenance that has its roots in stories, historical narratives, legends, and apocryphal tales which, in their different ways, all revolve around the fear, threat or actuality of drowning (Simpson 1908: 87-88; Brownbill 1928: 33-34). In a rare instance of Cleeves writing a story actually set in or around Hilbre Island, rather than just inspired by it – the short story ‘Stranded’ (2014) – we are confronted with the ghost of a drowned girl. Dead for thirty years, the girl tries to entice the young Anthony Murphy, her would-be suitor, out towards the mouth of the River Dee. With no idea that the object of his affections is a ghost, Anthony’s reflections on what it is that keeps drawing him to Hilbre hint at the liminality of both the location and the uncertain, porous boundary between the living and the dead: ‘caught between two worlds... Halfway between England and Wales and stranded like a sandstone whale between the land and the sea’ (Cleeves 2014: 34). Set in 1978, the short story is itself clearly rooted in the fiction of islandness that was cultivated during the Cleeves’ Hilbre residency that spanned most of that year. The

fog-bound commute she recounts in 'A Year on Hilbre', where she nearly misses the mainland altogether, is revisited thirty-six years later in the figure of a ghostly siren luring the living out towards the open sea, and a certain death.

We might think of the sands of the Dee Estuary as a kind of negative relief map, where the Hilbre archipelago is flattened and the ridges and undulating dunes of the sands brought more prominently to the fore. Conceived of this way, attention is drawn away from the rocky elevation of the island crags towards all that is happening around them. The task of populating such a map – figuratively in pinning a spatial story to an author's spatial practices, or cartographically, as illustrated by the 'Cestrian Book of the Dead': a virtual map of deaths by drowning on the Dee Estuary (Roberts 2012; 2016; 2018) – sets in motion a project of spatial anthropology. We have already inducted Cleaves into our canon of Hilbre wayfarers. As authors, our reflexive complicity in the fiction of Hilbre's islandness means that we too have written our way into a space of representation that bears the inexorable imprints of our own lines in the sands. But in mythological terms, the lineation of Hilbre's islandness goes much deeper and geographically much further.

As we have already noted, the legend of Constable Sands is firmly anchored in the cultural and historical imaginary of Hilbre Island. For present purposes, let us strip this legend down to its barest elements. In the early 1100s Earl Richard of Chester embarks on a pilgrimage to St. Winefride's Well in North Wales (situated in Holywell in modern-day Flintshire). En route he is set upon by a 'band of Welsh marauders' (Craggs 2004-5: 21). A message is sent to William Fitz Nigel of Halton, the Constable of Chester (Brownbill 1928: 29). Fitz Nigel and his troops make their way to Hilbre, expecting to find there a ship to transport them across the estuary. Upon arrival at the island, with no ship at his disposal, the Constable sought spiritual guidance in the form of a prayer:

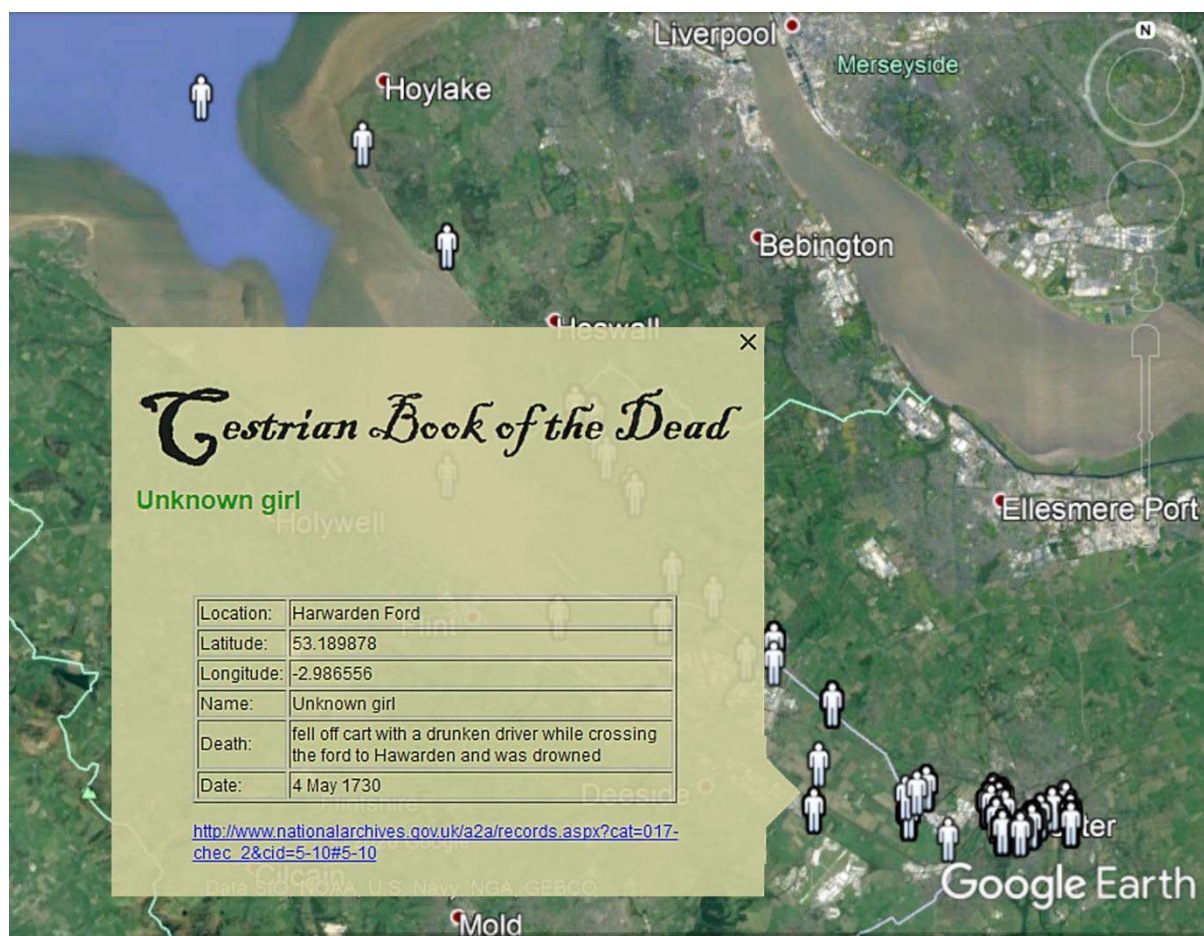
*O blessed Werburge and virgin pure,  
I beseke the mekely helpe me this day,  
That we may transcende this river safe and sure,  
To save and defende my lord from discomfiture.*

St Werburgh hears the prayer and obliges the Constable's request. The waves part and a safe passage across the estuary is secured, allowing Fitz Nigel to cross the sands and rescue the

Earl:

*For like as to Moises [Moses] devided the Redde See,  
And the water of Jordan obeyed to Josue [Joshua],  
Rhyt so the depe river if Dee made division,  
The sondes drye appered in sight of them echone.* (Leigh 1867: 3)

The 'dry sands' appeared to each one of Fitz Nigel's men: clearly a miracle of biblical proportions. Or, alternatively, a myth that stems from more earthly origins: the well-documented fords that snaked their way across the estuary at low tide (Craggs 2004-5: 21; Fiennes 2009; Young 1926; Heyworth 1972; Roberts 2012, 2018). By their very nature, these routes and pathways across the sands were forever shifting, making them all but unmappable. As a consequence, such cartographically elusive modes of travel exist only in their narration: spatial stories that chart anthropological spaces of everyday mobility that are legible as 'lines on the map' only to the extent that they have been committed to record and/or memory. The aforementioned map of deaths by drowning on the Dee Estuary between 1500 and the 1820s, which was compiled from Chester Quarter Sessions Coroners' Inquest records, provided one such means by which to trace these precariously navigable byways through the sands (Fig. 5). Another is Charles Kingsley's 1849 poem, 'The Sands of Dee', by far the most cited literary reference in narratives focused on the cultural and natural history of the Dee Estuary. The poem tells the tragic tale of Mary, a cattle girl, who ventures out onto the sands and is overtaken by the tide and drowns: 'The western tide crept up along the sand, / And o'er and o'er the sand, / And round and round the sand, / As far as eye could see. / The rolling mist came down and hid the land: And never home came she' (in Roberts 2012: 106.). Had Ann Cleeves' near-miss journey across the sands ended differently, this stanza could very well have served as a cultural point of reference in a footnote to her obituary.



Figure

5. Screenshot from the *Cestrian Book of the Dead* that marks the site of drowning of an unknown girl who was crossing the ford to Hawarden in 1730. Source: 'Dee Estuary' 53°14'29.66"N and 3°03'57.62"W. Google Earth. 10 April 2013.

While there is no question as to the existence of fords connecting the English and Welsh sides of the Dee Estuary, whether there was a navigable river crossing as far north as Hilbre is far less certain. Given the constantly shifting geography of the estuary (Hewitt 1922: 52–55; Marker 1967), it is not inconceivable that, even at its widest point (five miles from coast to coast), the Dee was at one time fordable via Hilbre Island. That said, despite the extensive sand banks that are visible at low tide, looking out across the expanse of the estuary from Hilbre today, the possibility of there once being a 'Constable Sands'-style crossing from Point of Ayr on the Flintshire coastline to West Kirby on the Wirral does require a stretch of the imagination. Stretching the imagined geography of the medieval Middle English poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to include a Hilbre stop-off – which is exactly what the historian John McNeal Dodgson does in an article on 'Sir Gawain's Arrival in Wirral' (1963) – reinforces a fiction of islandness in which Hilbre becomes part of a mythopoeic archipelago that reflects a wider cultural and historical geography than that merely localised to the three small islands

that make up the Hilbre archipelago. But however fanciful, speculative or far-reaching, such intertidal navigations are nevertheless deeply embedded in the folklore and mythology of the Deeside region (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Pub sign, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Golftyn Lane, Connah's Quay, Deeside, Flintshire (pub permanently closed at the time of writing). Authors' photograph.

The folkloric significance of the Arthurian Knight's epic journey to Deeside and the wider estuary region rests on one short part of the poem, lines 697 to 702:

*He wanders near to the north of Wales  
with the Isles of Anglesey off to the left.  
He keeps to the coast, fording each course,  
crossing at Holy Head and coming ashore  
in the wilds of the Wirral, whose wayward people*

*both God and good men have given up on.* (Armitage 2007: 37)

The exact point at which Gawain crosses over the estuary into the Wirral is not known (Tolkien and Gordon 1925: 691; Heyworth 1972: 124; Rudd 2013: 53). For the purpose of clarity, it might do well to rephrase this as: the exact point at which the fictional character Gawain is imagined to have crossed the Dee by the unknown author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not known. This distinction serves to place weight not on the detail of the textual geography of the epic poem but the imaginary of place and the ‘affective regionality’ (Campbell 2016: 158) that shaped sociocultural understandings of how a traveller in the early 1400s *might have* navigated the journey from North Wales to the Wirral peninsula:

*An audience which knew Wirral would know the crossings of Dee. It might seem very suitable, in the circumstances, for the poet to lead Sir Gawain’s strange journey into familiar country not by any of the usual crossings but by a legendary ford, and to enhance the legend by giving a familiar place at that ford a strange and unsuspected venerability through associating its name with that of the more famous place in Anglesey.* (Dodgson 1963: 25)

Despite the efforts of some scholars, notably Eadie (1983: 194), to maintain it is ‘probable’ that the author is referring to Holyhead in Anglesey, this clearly does not stack up if ‘Holy Head’ – ‘Holy Hede’ in the original – is where the crossing took place. Some interpretations of the poem have taken Holy Hede to be Holywell in Flintshire (Gollancz 1940: 107; Burrow 1965: 190-191; Rudd 2013: 59), which seems altogether more likely. But it is Dodgson’s account that is the most intriguing, as it places Holy Hede somewhere between the Point of Ayr and Hilbre Point, at the northeastern tip of the Wirral at Hoylake. For Dodgson, the fact that the poem refers to fords (in the plural) supports his thesis that the estuary crossing was conducted in two stages: from Point of Ayr to Hilbre, and then from Hilbre to West Kirby (1963: 20). Although he concedes that a means of crossing the first stage ‘seems improbable’, Dodgson goes on to remark that ‘[i]mprobability, however, is no discouragement of legend’ (ibid: 20, 21), citing the case of Earl Richard’s rescue by the Constable of Chester.

Dodgson does by no means brush off the question of probability or improbability. Indeed, it is highly probable that Dodgson himself did not seriously entertain the suggestion that a ‘stage 1’ crossing by foot would have been possible. What seems clear, though, is the historian’s

openness to the value of a fiction of islandness in which Hilbre's archipelagic connection with other spaces and its interpolation in other spatial stories are recognised as viable social facts. That the estuary is an historically unstable and contested border region makes these mythopoeic connections that much more resonant. In this respect, the authors of this paper share Dodgson's embrace of the constitutive fiction of islandness. His islandness becomes enfolded into and coextensive with our spatial anthropology of islandness. Holy Hede, for its part, becomes an *other space* that extends beyond the imprecision of historical geography – the question of where *exactly* it is meant to be in an empirical cartography of real-and-imagined journeys – in service of a re-imagining and performative restaging of a regional spatial story whose secure point of anchorage is the Hilbre archipelago.

### **From Hilbre to Holy Hede**

In this paper we have approached the study of Hilbre Island by following our own prescriptive lines in the sand. That is: to foreground Hilbre's topographic and symbolic status as an archipelago; to reverse engineer the dominant imaginary of Hilbre's islandness by conceiving of the archipelago as a negative space; to refuse to draw boundary lines around a spatial object known as 'Hilbre', and to thus be aware that an island edge is 'more than just permeable; perhaps it is actually the portal to roads and sea-trails fanning out to other (is)lands, a natural bridge to the world beyond' (Hay 2006: 23); to populate not so much the archipelago itself as the surrounding landscapes and sand flats by which Hilbre is constitutively connected with other spaces; to give voice to this mythopoeic constellation of archipelagic wayfarers by stitching spatial stories to – or archaeologically prising them from – the embedded and embodied spatial practices with which they are entwined; to show the workings of a spatial anthropology of islandness which proceeds on the understanding that what might be thought of as an 'island', or, indeed its correlate 'islandness', can only ever be provisional, open-ended and reflexively embellished by the spatial practices invested in the study of islandness itself; and, above all, to recognise that a spatial anthropology of islandness necessarily begins from a point in space and time from whence the ineluctable fiction of islandness is first set in motion.

With that last prescription in mind, our starting point was schoolboy Rory Chapman's discovery of the 'Hole to the Centre of the Earth' on Middle Eye. Can a credible link be made between the Jules Verne story this very nearly namechecks and the sea monsters and 'terrifying crab-like creature over six feet in length' encountered at Lady's Cave? Yes, why not? Such a link can demonstrably be made by virtue of our just having do so. By embracing the fiction of

Hilbre's islandness we rebut the charge that we are merely 'making stuff up', as if concocting a dubious fiction to sit alongside the myriads of others that proliferate in the unbounded mythosphere of the world wide web (which is not to say that we are not.) As a scholarly constellation of spatial stories, this narrative will go on to have a life of its own much like any other. Or not. It is no less a space awaiting the careful excavation of the curious than that of the rugged terrain of Hilbre Island itself. As a portal to deep time – to prehistoric fictions of dinosaurs and giant marine reptiles – Hilbre's islandness is poised precariously on the edge of a gaping abyss that plunges as deep as any subterranean wayfarer is prepared to go in the quest for their quarry.

But at the same time, we recognise that such a fiction has its limitations. If left unchecked, the trope of excavation or of penetrating the layered stories of Hilbre's mythohistorical underland ends up propping up a fiction of islandness we have been seeking to dismantle. The spatial stories that have drawn our attention in this paper are those that require a method whereby such stories are traced along lines in the sand. Movement is lateral not vertical, binding together the quotidian geometries that chart connections of the historically living not those of a past that is interred: a repository of ghosts, of the walking dead. It is not the dead who are walking when we follow in the footsteps of Gawain. If we imagine Gawain to be the proxy of his unknown creator, then it is the living in conversation with the living by which these lines in the sand are set in motion. Hilbre's islandness is our islandness insofar as it is a mutuality of fiction and a space of hospitality in which such a fiction can be nourished and sustained. Reimagining Constable Sands as a spatial story rather than merely a legend is not to confer on it some kind of historical 'truth'. Its fiction is no less a fiction. The difference is that it has assisted in the task of populating Hilbre's islandness, by which we mean giving life to the real-and-imagined spaces that the archipelago inhabits as a work of fiction. In this sense, the spatial anthropology of islandness can be likened to a quest for a mythical Holy Hede. To embrace the spatial play of islandness is to embark on such a quest equipped with the knowledge that Holy Hede – like any other utopic space (Marin 1984) – can only ever have value to the extent that it succeeds in outpacing the cartographic impulse that seeks to fix it to a point in space and time. Hilbre, like Holy Hede, is as mobile and unbounded as the islandness that puts Hilbre into practice.

A spatial anthropology of islandness can encompass many things but what it clearly does not have any truck with are universalist claims, à la Conkling, that seek to 'transcend local culture'

or disentangle island spatial stories from the embedded particularities of everyday social, cultural, and spatial practices. As the example of Ann Cleeves' Hilbre residency has shown, paying attention to the documented taskscapes that constitute the elemental doingness of islandness (Vannini and Taggart 2013) throws into sharper relief the spatial production of island imaginaries and the mythopoeic tapestry that stretches out beyond the island conceived of as a bounded spatial form. The performative threads of Cleeves' spatial stories become woven into this tapestry alongside the myriad others that we have traced in this paper, our own included. Some of these lines and threads may fray over time, others may need restitching. But what endures is a living and organically vital space of islandness that cannot and should not be merely pinned down to staid representational form.

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