

ERRATUM

The word “cruche” was erroneously translated as “cross” instead of “jug” in Philippe Walter, “The Stars, Mildew, Rust and The Waste Land in The Story of the Grail”

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We apologise for the error and any inconvenience this has caused.

THE STARS, MILDEW, RUST AND THE WASTE LAND IN THE *STORY OF THE GRAIL* *

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When the Grail emerged unobtrusively for the first time shortly after 1180 in *The Story of the Grail* authored by Chrétien de Troyes it was hardly noticeable. It emerged in the context, viewed from certain angles, of a table ritual on the occasion of a feast presented by the Fisher King to young Perceval whom he invited to share his table. When it appeared before the two table guests it did not stop in front of them but disappeared into a side chamber. It was accompanied by a plate, a serving dish on which to carve meat. But it was also preceded by a bleeding lance whose presence at the feast seemed wholly out of context and inexplicable. The rather cryptic description of the grail, replete with hidden meanings and ambiguities, started a myth, more evocative than anything the Middle Ages had ever known. The Grail theme remained in evidence throughout the Middle Ages, then disappeared from the 16th to the 19th century, then sprang into life vividly once more in the form of Wagnerian opera as *Parzifal*. Today all manifestations of the Grail are egregiously misrepresented as if it had always been the Holy Grail. It behooves us to take another look at its earliest manifestation before all the transformations and Christianisations to which it was subjected by western culture¹. In fact, the original Grail had nothing at all in common with Christianity.

FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE GRAIL

Contrary to popular belief, the Grail of Chrétien de Troyes was not a chalice. According to the Cistercian monk Hélinand de Froidmont, part-contemporary of the narrator, a Grail is a large, shallow plate used as a serving dish at table², by no means rare, even common in the dinner service of aristocratic households. In fact, the Grail

* Translated from the French into English by Oswald Davies

is frequently mentioned as part of the inventory of castles established at the time of the succession, which goes to prove that there is nothing out of the ordinary about the grail, except that it is mostly found among the possessions of rich people. In the case of Chrétien it is imbued with an air of mystery. No-one knows its content, and Perceval, who notices it in passing during a meal, would have had cause for concern had he noticed anything unusual about it. However in this instance he makes no comment on the appearance of the grail. The narrator comments from a distance and notices nothing unusual about the grail, thus introducing ambiguity.

What is most memorable about the Grail in medieval times, after its first appearance in the literary work of Chrétien de Troyes, is its striking radiance. It is enveloped in a mysterious play of light and shadow. When it appears at night it is suffused by a radiance that eclipses the candlelight, inviting comparison with starlight as in the following verse:

..... And as
 She walked into the hall,
 Holding this grail, it glowed
 With so great a light that the candles
 Suddenly seemed to grow dim,
 Like the moon and stars when the sun
 Appears in the sky. (ll. 3224-3229)³

The idea of a Grail that emits a bright light contradicts the medieval theory derived from a belief commonly held in antiquity. Ptolemy held that the eyes projected a flux of brightness⁴ and by striking against objects gave them their shape and colour (the idea is propagated in Aristotle's *Meteorologica* but was refuted by Al-Hazen who (not unreasonably) held that if the projected-flux idea were true people would be able to see everything at night). Exactly the opposite is proposed in Chrétien's story: it is the Grail that projects the radiance, with the eyes bearing mute testimony to the spectacle; elsewhere the extraterrestrial light is compared to that of sun- or moonrise. This breakaway conception of optics is consonant with that of the sage Al-Hazen, belatedly recognised in the 13th century by Jean de Meung in his *Roman de la Rose* and thereby laying a foundation for modern optics⁵. Comparison of the Grail to starlight generated a spate of astrological and astronomical speculative literature around the Grail episode. Chrétien de Troyes himself added impetus to this movement by expressing the view in his romance *Erec et Enide* on the authority of Macrobius that astronomy was the most superior of all the arts⁶. In his time astronomy was not clearly distinguished from astrology.

The explanation of the radiance emitted by the Grail is given in the following verse. Here it must be understood that this Grail is covered or partly set with numbers of precious stones:

Was made of the purest gold
 Studded with jewels of every
 Kind, the richest and most costly
 Found on land and sea.
 No one could doubt here
 Were the loveliest jewels on earth.

That was all. Chrétien never specified the exact nature of the precious stones. He merely suggested that they produced the bright luminosity of the Grail that seemed to give it the magical ability to emit radiance. Doesn't the Grail look as if it belongs to another world, a fairytale realm? A world where anything becomes possible, where a light shines that is neither solar nor lunar, but otherworldly.

The presence of precious stones in the Grail would be most surprising if it is a plate intended for table service. Normally there are no gems in such plates because they would hamper the use of the object for the said table service. So what was the purpose then?

If the jewels are to be taken as factual it seems appropriate to note that the foremost function of bejeweled portable objects is religious: and reliquaries are abundantly in evidence in this regard. But recent discoveries relating to Celtic archaeology allow us to probe far back in time in this regard. Celtic communities used to have ceremonial objects like the well-known cultic vessel referred to as the Gundestrup cauldron, which bears a wealth of decorative detail of elaborately significant symbolism on the precious-metal base beset with precious stones. The vessel had 12 facets, like the months or zodiacal signs of the year⁷, which means that it had a purpose relating to ritual divination rather than a simple utilitarian purpose relating to table service.

CULTIC OBJECTS OF THE CELTS

Current access to the Celtic civilisation is gained by way of either archaeology or a literature that persistently dominated European culture throughout the Middle Ages, that is to say, the period extending from the appearance of Irish mythical texts up to and including the advent of Arthurian legend. The association between objects (sumptuous in some instances) excavated at archaeological sites, and Celtic oral tradition transmitted via their own original language before being transcribed during the Middle Ages and then adapted for inclusion in various bodies of vernacular literature (eg. French) remained unsuspected. A recent publication brought to press by Professor Venceslas Kruta⁸, eminent specialist in the field of Celtic civilisation, comprised a very impressive dossier of photographs providing a visual record of a ceremonial Celtic cross discovered in Brno in 1941 with a text of great scientific interest for antiquarians as well as medievalists.

Far from being the fruit of an artisanship operating under the banner of 'art for art's sake' (non-existent in ancient times), the surface of this cross is inscribed

with cosmic imagery, especially that of a starry sky as conceived at the beginning of the 3rd century BC. In essence the inscriptions reflect the ancient druidic notion of astronomical science. Analysis revealed that the cross actually represents two sectors of the firmament that dominated the sky above Brno on the night of the erstwhile feast of Beltaine at the advent of the clear season on 14 June in 280 BC (approximate date when the cross was made), which is the equinoctial equivalent of Samain, which falls on 21 November and marks the beginning of the dark season of the yearly cycle. The position of an observer from one of the angles corresponds with that of the stars surrounding Aldébaran, a bright star in the constellation of Taurus, in relation to the stars of the neighbouring constellations of the Boar and Orion. Put differently, the astral firmaments represented by this cross are those of the two great festivals of Celtic civilisation, marking the crucial turning points in the yearly calendar, which are accompanied by a complex of rituals⁹.

Just as a sidelong glance confirms consciousness of the presence of an object that looms prominently in a person's ambit, so the importance of Celtic astral mythology is evidenced by the medieval texts that embodied much more than residual evidence in that regard. Merlin was certainly not a diviner by accident. Julius Caesar lauded Celtic astronomical expertise which, as in Greece, was not distinguished from astrology. Several publications¹⁰ have defended the proposition that Arthurian mythical themes can be read with due reference to the astro-mythological substrate. Other multidisciplinary researches of the same type will probably be forthcoming to prove that the hypothesis is in fact well-founded, now that the close relationship between literature, mythology and Celtic astronomy has become apparent from the medieval texts (Irish, Gallic, or Arthurian French) that preserved an essential part of the Celtic *Weltanschauung*.

WOLFRAM'S ASTRAL READING

The precious stones set in the Grail are like celestial bodies suggesting an astral interpretation of the Grail episode at the time of the Fisher King's sickness, but by the same token a marker indicating the *barren earth* theme associated with the grail. This interpretation is boldly proposed by Wolfram von Eschenbach, the German adapter of *The Story of the Grail*.

The Franconian poet Wolfram von Eschenbach (verses 1170 – 1220) is a seasoned reader and exegete of Chrétien de Troyes¹¹). He considerably elaborated the symbolism of the Perceval narrative in its German adaptation which he produced at the beginning of the 13th century. Whereas the original Grail comprised various gems, Wolfram's version is furnished with only one precious stone which he called *lapsit exillis*. This mysterious name is probably a phonetic aberration of the Latin expression *lapis ex caelis* ('stone from heaven'). Is that the astral origin? In any case it is reminiscent of the black stone, also of heavenly origin, venerated by Muslims

at Mecca¹². Wolfram gives a detailed description of the marvelous properties of the gem he calls the Gral:

By virtue of the Stone the phoenix is burned to ashes, in which he is reborn – Thus does the phoenix moult its feathers! Which done, it shines dazzling bright and lovely as before! Further: however ill a mortal may be, from the day on which he sees the Stone he cannot die for that week, nor does he lose his colour. For if anyone, maid or man, were to look at the Gral for two hundred years, you would have to admit that his colour was as fresh as in his early prime, except that his hair would grey! – Such powers does the Stone confer on mortal men that their flesh and bones are soon made young again. (IX, v. 13927-13952)¹³.

But every Good Friday the Gral stone will supply an abundance of food and drink from which a fragrance will spread abroad. The Gral stone sits on a table made in magnificent style of a single precious stone: a huge hyacinth that casts a dark red reflection. The beneficial qualities displayed by Wolfram's Gral resemble those of the precious stones of the lapidaries. Some manuscripts recording versions of *Parzival* and its extensions refer to the stone as jasper (*iaspis exillis*), which is one of the dozen types of stone that constitute the foundation of the celestial city in *The Book of Revelations* by Joh v.21, 18-2). In a commentary on the text bishop Marbodius of the 12th century explains that jasper propagates the verdure of faith that, for all perfect people, never loses its strength and affords unflinching protection against the devil¹⁴. This quality is typical of the watchful protection of the grail. The Bavarian poet Brecht von Scharfenberg is a perpetuator of Wolfram's *Parzival*. In his *Nouveau Titirel* he deposits the Grail in a temple, set with every imaginable precious stone, like the celestial New Jerusalem. Like the jeweled grail, so the sky and earth, the human and the divine meet to incarnate the mystery of the conjunction of opposites¹⁵. With the German continuators of Wolfram the Holy Grail has somehow returned to the heaven whence it had temporarily fallen for a brief earthly sojourn.

Wolfram effectively turned the Grail into a precious stone that fell from the sky, thus making it a fragment of a star. In this regard, G Dumézil¹⁶, referring to a text of Herodotus, adduced proof of the heavenly provenance of the mythology of supernatural objects imbued with talismanic meaning. In fact, the Scythians tell that the first man who inhabited their country had three brothers. Then one day objects of gold fell from heaven to earth in Scythia: a plough and a yoke, a hatchet, a goblet. Two brothers wanted to grab the gold but failed because the gold was burning. Only the third managed to take hold of the objects because the gold fire had lost its heat. The other two understood that he alone could claim the privilege of royalty. J. Grisward¹⁷ (1979) emphasised that the version told by Chrétien and the text authored by Herodotus definitely hailed from a common Indo-European source (they could not have influenced each other). They prove the extraterrestrial nature of the regalia in question as suggested by the evidence (sacred objects that could only belong to a king). An important fact should be noted here about Chrétien: if the bloody point of the spear is made of iron the end is made of silver and the Grail is golden. This

triad of metals, on closer inspection, is a critical factor in understanding the mythical function of the objects at issue, with particular reference to the iron spear point in relation to the golden grail.

By giving a specific name to the precious stones that Chrétien de Troyes passes over in silence, Wolfram and his successors have actually moved Chrétien's work closer to the Biblical texts and Christian allegory. Wolfram was the first to interpret the malady of the Fisher King astrologically, thereby drawing attention to the planetary movement of Saturn. But there is another conjunction that Wolfram passes over, which is the underlying scorched-earth theme of Chrétien's version. In fact this expected devastation of the earth does have a reason. As always, in the mythical tradition of ancient fatalism, the causes are cosmic¹⁸. Chrétien de Troyes's text should therefore be revisited in an attempt to understand the association between the scorched-earth theme and the Fisher King's maiming.

THE STORY OF THE GRAIL AND THE FEAST OF BELTAINÉ (1 MAY)

Of the two great festivals that are astrally connected to the Celtic cross of Brno *The Story of the Grail* falls incontestably within the context of the former. The feast of Beltaine marks the advent of summer, thus indicating that the romance starts as a troubadour's song celebrating the return of the green, that is, the moment when spring reclothes nature all round, the definitive turning point being 1 May:

The season was spring, trees
Were sprouting leaves, meadows
Were green..... (ll 69-71)

A bit further into the text the narrator mentions the feast of Pentecost (*It happened at Pentecost*, v. 2787), the movable feast of the medieval calendar which falls in May or at the beginning of the month of June. It must therefore be confirmed beyond any possible doubt that the first movement of Chrétien's narrative takes place around May in close proximity to Ascension Day (preceded by the three days of the Rogations) and of Pentecost. The chronology of events in this part of the narrative was established with conclusive accuracy at the time when the work was created¹⁹, but no further conclusions about interpretation of the text itself can be drawn from these facts.

Springtime (April-May) coincides with the critical turning point on which the future hinges. This is the period currently referred to as 'April moon' (Coussée 1996), the period when the waxing moon starts in April (after Passover) and becomes a full moon towards the end of April or at the beginning of May. The French folklorist Pierre Saintyves has called Pliny in his *Natural History* to witness in this matter. Pliny was a renowned scientist not only in his own time but also during the Middle

Ages, which is the reason for the currency at that time of his explanation of the misfortunes occurring with the April moon. The following belief is still commonly circulated among gardeners and peasants:

It is commonly believed that exposure of the bedewed crops to the hot sun causes blight in the wheat and black rust in the vine: I believe that this is not entirely correct because black rust needs cold weather, while the sun plays no part in it. With some reservation, the following is a firm belief: since this blight is never seen except at night, before the sun has gained its strength, it follows that it is completely dependent on the influence of the moon because the condition does not survive beyond the conjunction or the full moon or, to be precise, in the two cases where the star is most active²⁰.

The misfortunes that come with the April moon, thus Pliny, are referred to as follows: for some it is rust, for others it is the scorching sun, for yet others it is coal, but for all it is sterility. He then proceeds to explain that the peasants particularly dread three periods where harvesting is concerned (especially the last days of April and the first two weeks of May):

This is why so many ceremonies and feast days, the Robigalia, the Floralia, the Vinalia, were instituted. The Robigalia were instituted by Numa during the 2nd year of his reign, to which end the 7th calends of May (25 April) are celebrated because this is the time when the mildew (*robigo*) infests the wheat²¹.

This testimony is specifically important since Pliny was a naturalist of high repute during the Middle Ages, on par with Ovid, the Latin poet who committed to memory the myths and rituals that attended the period extending from the end of April to the beginning of May in his *Fastes*. This is the period of the Robigalia that became the Rogations of the Middle Ages²². There is a material link between these two festivals, which occur at exactly the same time of the year²³. The name ‘Rogations’ comes from the verb ‘rogare’, to ask, because the purpose of the processions forming part of this celebration is to petition God to save the crops. The initial letter of both words (‘Robigalia’ and ‘Rogations’) is the same, Robigalia being derived from the name of a divinity called Robigo, actually a demon causing the mildew infestation currently known to be attributable to a fungal parasite that attacks wheat, but was ascribed in ancient times to direct astral intervention, with the result that mildew caused devastation and putrefaction of the crops. The English word for the infestation is mildew, as attested since the XIVth century when it denoted a plant disease that is notably characterised by a whitish deposit on the plant, known in Old English as *meledeaw* or *meldeau*, which meant ‘honeydew’. The term denotes the sweetish substance that appears on the stems and leaves of certain plants at an exactly recurrent time of the year, particularly when the new growth of spring appears.

Comprising six books that correspond with the first six months of the year, the *Fastes* are an invaluable source of information about the rising and setting of the stars, and about the associated feasts and rituals of ancient Rome. The erudite

commentary on Ovid's *Fastes* delivered by Sir JG Frazer illuminates passages from that text, with particular reference to those concerning the Robigalia:

The festival of Robigus takes place at the fifth milestone on the Claudian Way, lest mildew (robigo) should harm the corn. A sacrifice is offered and games are held by runners both men and boys" (Praenestine calendar). According to Pliny, the festival was instituted by Numa in the eleventh year of his reign, and the reason for holding it on the twenty-fifth of April was because at that season the crops were attacked by mildew"²⁴

To hold off the menace of the contagion a red or russet-coloured dog had to be sacrificed to Robigo. The intriguing question is: How were these notions transposed to Chrétien's narrative? Consider in this regard that for his first exploit Perceval had slain a vermillion (ie. metonymically) a red knight, a destructive personage, the evil demon who is an agent of terror and death at Arthur's court and the Other World. The Red Knight represents the deadly menace of the spreading contagion that infects all regions. This menacing figure has a number of doubles that Perceval has to overcome as part of his mission: the overbearing landlord who performs a similar destructive role in the narrative. One of his victims is a young woman whose flesh appears "..."with cracks and burns that had been made/ by heat and cold and hail and frost"²⁵

Perceval claimed a further victory over a knight who, albeit the aggressor who seeks to ravage Blanchefleur's domain, bears the ironic name of Clamadeu (he who pleads with the Lord), a name that harks back to the festival of Rogations. This assailant reduced Blanchefleur's domain to a Waste Land, causing famine and desolation while laying siege to the young woman and her subjects in their stronghold.

The scourge of rust is especially hard on the Fisher King's domain, which it reduced to a Waste Land, evidenced in particular by the bleeding lance. Instead of asking why the spear is bleeding, it would be more appropriate to ask what the connection between the blood and the iron is. Quite simply, the blood stands for the rust²⁶. The context of the April moon removes all doubt about this interpretation.

Philology teaches us that the word *rouille* comes from the vulgar Latin word *robicula*, the diminutive of the classical Latin *robigo*, which referred to rust (iron oxide) that affects iron in Old French. Chrétien de Troyes knew the word well (cf. verse 2656 of *Erec et Enide* : *Molt estoit riches li haubers [...] N'onques n'i pot coillir reoille*: ("The hauberk was extremely costly [...] Rust could not gather there")²⁷). However, there is a masculine form, *roïl*, that refers specifically to the fungal infestation that affects wheat, also known as the mildew of OE derivation (Wartburg 1950, t.10, 430b), and mentioned in the *Psautier d'Oxford* (Oxford Psalter²⁸) of the XIIth century (Michel 1860, 77, 51). As in Ancient Roman times, the condition termed *rouille* referred to metallic objects as well as soil in medieval times²⁹. In the Grail narrative a close associative link was attributed to these two types of destructive agency (organic and inorganic). The barren Waste Land of the Fisher

King is symbolised by the bleeding lance following in the Grail procession. Perceval is given a forceful reminder to that effect by a Hideous Damsel:

The Fisher King made you
 His guest, you saw the bleeding
 Lance, but you couldn't be bothered
 To open your mouth and speak,
 Asking why that drop
 Of blood came rolling down
 From the point of that shining spear! (ll. 4653-4659)

Because of Perceval's silence the Fisher King could not recover from his malady and his domain remained a barren Waste Land:

..... Ladies will lose
 Their husbands, countries will be ruined,
 Girls will have no guidance
 And be forced to linger as orphans,
 And a host of knights will die, (ll.4679-464683)

Could it be that the Hideous Damsel, bald and hirsute, who reproaches Perceval is the embodiment or direct incarnation of the fatal April or Pink moon speaking the language of malediction? It is not incumbent on Perceval, after all, to exorcise the misfortunes imposed by the April or Pink moon on the regions that he encounters on his travels. In the manner of Christ who healed the sick with the power of his word alone, he sought a word that he could utter with magical power that would save the world. But he could not match the fatal power. His lack of spiritual penetration prevented him from exorcising the Evil.

In conclusion, the importance of the extraterrestrial provenance of the Grail cannot be overemphasised. If Wolfram emphasises its stellar origin there could be many reasons why Chrétien de Troyes might think the same. Since that time it has become a matter of heavenly knowledge (the mythology of the stars) that should be consulted to understand the scorched-earth theme associated with the bloodied spear that accompanies the Grail in Chrétien's narrative. Pliny and Ovid shed distinctive light to afford insight into the meteorological beliefs associated with the period around 1 May which Chrétien de Troyes expressly chooses as the temporal context of his narrative. Far from being intellectually sophisticated, his beliefs were shared by a large and widely dispersed peasant population, and they are actually still with us. In medieval times the rift between the scholarly world and the world of popular knowledge was unbridgeable where natural phenomena were concerned. To understand the civilisation and literature of medieval times we need to relinquish our modern urban mentality and rediscover the thought patterns of a civilisation that was essentially rural and comprised of people who lived close to nature in a context of wide open spaces: It was constantly aware of the seasonal rhythms, the vicissitudes,

the inhabitants (wild and domestic animals) and products (fruits and flowers of the earth) of the medieval world. Everything in that world pointed to a hidden store of knowledge to which anyone could gain access.

NOTES

1. Roger Sherman Loomis *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*, Princeton University Press, 1991.
2. Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes et le mythe du graal*, Paris, SEDES, 1972., pp. 1-12.
3. All quotations of Chrétien's grail narrative are from: *Perceval: The story of the Grail*, translated by Burton Raffel, New Haven and London,
4. Cf. G. Simon, *Le regard, l'être et l'apparence dans l'optique de l'Antiquité*, Paris, Seuil, 1988.
5. Phillipe Walter, « Le miroir selon Jean de Meung ou la découverte de l'imaginaire au XIIIe siècle », dans : C. Fintz éd., *Le miroir : une médiation entre imaginaire, sciences et spiritualité*, Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2013, p. 17-27.
6. Idem, « Chrétien de Troyes et Macrobe (*Erec et Enide*, v. 6730-6733), » dans : M. Courrent éd., *Transports. Mélanges offerts à J. Thomas*, Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 2012, p.325-337.
7. C Goudineau (editor.), *Religion et société en Gaule*, Paris, Errance, 2006, pp. 53-77.
8. V Kruta, *La cruche celte de Brno. Chef d'œuvre de l'art. Miroir de l'Univers*, Dijon, Faton 2007.
9. F Le Roux et C Guyonvarch, *Les fêtes celtiques*, Rennes, Ouest-France, 1995.
10. P Walter, *Canicule. Essai de mythologie sur Yvain de Chrétien de Troyes*, Paris, SEDES, 1988 and *Tristan et Yseut. Le porcher et la truie*, Paris, Imago, 2007.
11. Cf J Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1991.
12. Annie Faugère, *Les origines orientales du Graal chez Wolfram von Eschenbach. Etat des recherches*, Göppingen, 1979
13. All references to this work are from: ` Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, Translated by Arthur Thomas Hatto, New York, Penguin Classics, 1980.
14. Marbode, *Poème des pierres précieuses*, Translated from Latin to French by P. Monat, Grenoble, Jerome Millon, 1996, pp.87-88.
15. M Stanesco, *La légende du graal dans les littératures européennes*, Paris, Librairie générale française, 2006.
16. G Dumézil, Les trois trésors des ancêtres dans l'épopée narte, *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 157, 1960, p. 141-153.
17. J. Grisward, Trois perspectives médiévales, dans : J. C. Rivière éd., *Georges Dumézil à la recherche des Indo-européens*, Paris, Copernic, 1979, p. 197-218.
18. Marie Delcourt, *Stérilités mystérieuses et naissances maléfiques dans l'Antiquité classique*, Paris et Liège, Droz, 1938.
19. J. Frappier, La composition du *Conte du Graal*, *Le Moyen Âge*, 1958, p. 62-102 et Ph.

- Walter, *La mémoire du temps*, Paris, Champion, 1989, p 106-111.
20. Pliny, *Natural History*, XVIII, 68 in Saintyves, *L'astrologie populaire étudiée spécialement dans les doctrines et les traditions relatives à l'influence de la lune*, Paris, Nourry, 1937, pp. 73-74.
 21. P. Saintyves, *L'astrologie populaire étudiée spécialement dans les doctrines et les traditions relatives à l'influence de la lune*, Paris, Nourry, 1937, pp.73-74.
 22. P Walter, « L'or, l'argent et le fer. Etiologie d'une fête médiévale les Rogations », *Le Moyen Age*, 99, 1993, p. 41-59.
 23. Geoffrey NATHAN, "The Rogation ceremonies of late antique Gaul", *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 49, 1998, p. 275-303.
 24. James George FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*, London, Macmillan and Co, 1933, p.421.
 25. « elle l'ot crevee et arse, / De noif, de gresle et de gelee » (v. 3728-3729).
 26. P Walter, *Perceval, le Pêcheur et le graal*, Paris, Imago, 2004, pp.163-168.
 27. Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, Edited and Translated by William W Kibler, New York and London, Garland, "Garland Library of Medieval Literature, volume 25, Series 1, 1987, l.2606, line 2606.
 28. *Psautier d'Oxford, Oxford Psalter*, ed. by. F. Michel, Oxford, 1860.
 29. A Ernout and A Meillet *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1967, p.575.

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THE STARS, MILDEW, RUST AND THE WASTE LAND IN THE *STORY OF THE GRAIL* *

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When the Grail emerged unobtrusively for the first time shortly after 1180 in *The Story of the Grail* authored by Chrétien de Troyes it was hardly noticeable. It emerged in the context, viewed from certain angles, of a table ritual on the occasion of a feast presented by the Fisher King to young Perceval whom he invited to share his table. When it appeared before the two table guests it did not stop in front of them but disappeared into a side chamber. It was accompanied by a plate, a serving dish on which to carve meat. But it was also preceded by a bleeding lance whose presence at the feast seemed wholly out of context and inexplicable. The rather cryptic description of the grail, replete with hidden meanings and ambiguities, started a myth, more evocative than anything the Middle Ages had ever known. The Grail theme remained in evidence throughout the Middle Ages, then disappeared from the 16th to the 19th century, then sprang into life vividly once more in the form of Wagnerian opera as *Parzifal*. Today all manifestations of the Grail are egregiously misrepresented as if it had always been the Holy Grail. It behooves us to take another look at its earliest manifestation before all the transformations and Christianisations to which it was subjected by western culture¹. In fact, the original Grail had nothing at all in common with Christianity.

FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE GRAIL

Contrary to popular belief, the Grail of Chrétien de Troyes was not a chalice. According to the Cistercian monk Hélinand de Froidmont, part-contemporary of the narrator, a Grail is a large, shallow plate used as a serving dish at table², by no means rare, even common in the dinner service of aristocratic households. In fact, the Grail

* Translated from the French into English by Oswald Davies

is frequently mentioned as part of the inventory of castles established at the time of the succession, which goes to prove that there is nothing out of the ordinary about the grail, except that it is mostly found among the possessions of rich people. In the case of Chrétien it is imbued with an air of mystery. No-one knows its content, and Perceval, who notices it in passing during a meal, would have had cause for concern had he noticed anything unusual about it. However in this instance he makes no comment on the appearance of the grail. The narrator comments from a distance and notices nothing unusual about the grail, thus introducing ambiguity.

What is most memorable about the Grail in medieval times, after its first appearance in the literary work of Chrétien de Troyes, is its striking radiance. It is enveloped in a mysterious play of light and shadow. When it appears at night it is suffused by a radiance that eclipses the candlelight, inviting comparison with starlight as in the following verse:

..... And as
 She walked into the hall,
 Holding this grail, it glowed
 With so great a light that the candles
 Suddenly seemed to grow dim,
 Like the moon and stars when the sun
 Appears in the sky. (ll. 3224-3229)³

The idea of a Grail that emits a bright light contradicts the medieval theory derived from a belief commonly held in antiquity. Ptolemy held that the eyes projected a flux of brightness⁴ and by striking against objects gave them their shape and colour (the idea is propagated in Aristotle's *Meteorologica* but was refuted by Al-Hazen who (not unreasonably) held that if the projected-flux idea were true people would be able to see everything at night). Exactly the opposite is proposed in Chrétien's story: it is the Grail that projects the radiance, with the eyes bearing mute testimony to the spectacle; elsewhere the extraterrestrial light is compared to that of sun- or moonrise. This breakaway conception of optics is consonant with that of the sage Al-Hazen, belatedly recognised in the 13th century by Jean de Meung in his *Roman de la Rose* and thereby laying a foundation for modern optics⁵. Comparison of the Grail to starlight generated a spate of astrological and astronomical speculative literature around the Grail episode. Chrétien de Troyes himself added impetus to this movement by expressing the view in his romance *Erec et Enide* on the authority of Macrobius that astronomy was the most superior of all the arts⁶. In his time astronomy was not clearly distinguished from astrology.

The explanation of the radiance emitted by the Grail is given in the following verse. Here it must be understood that this Grail is covered or partly set with numbers of precious stones:

Was made of the purest gold
 Studded with jewels of every
 Kind, the richest and most costly
 Found on land and sea.
 No one could doubt here
 Were the loveliest jewels on earth.

That was all. Chrétien never specified the exact nature of the precious stones. He merely suggested that they produced the bright luminosity of the Grail that seemed to give it the magical ability to emit radiance. Doesn't the Grail look as if it belongs to another world, a fairytale realm? A world where anything becomes possible, where a light shines that is neither solar nor lunar, but otherworldly.

The presence of precious stones in the Grail would be most surprising if it is a plate intended for table service. Normally there are no gems in such plates because they would hamper the use of the object for the said table service. So what was the purpose then?

If the jewels are to be taken as factual it seems appropriate to note that the foremost function of bejeweled portable objects is religious: and reliquaries are abundantly in evidence in this regard. But recent discoveries relating to Celtic archaeology allow us to probe far back in time in this regard. Celtic communities used to have ceremonial objects like the well-known cultic vessel referred to as the Gundestrup cauldron, which bears a wealth of decorative detail of elaborately significant symbolism on the precious-metal base beset with precious stones. The vessel had 12 facets, like the months or zodiacal signs of the year⁷, which means that it had a purpose relating to ritual divination rather than a simple utilitarian purpose relating to table service.

CULTIC OBJECTS OF THE CELTS

Current access to the Celtic civilisation is gained by way of either archaeology or a literature that persistently dominated European culture throughout the Middle Ages, that is to say, the period extending from the appearance of Irish mythical texts up to and including the advent of Arthurian legend. The association between objects (sumptuous in some instances) excavated at archaeological sites, and Celtic oral tradition transmitted via their own original language before being transcribed during the Middle Ages and then adapted for inclusion in various bodies of vernacular literature (eg. French) remained unsuspected. A recent publication brought to press by Professor Venceslas Kruta⁸, eminent specialist in the field of Celtic civilisation, comprised a very impressive dossier of photographs providing a visual record of a ceremonial Celtic cross discovered in Brno in 1941 with a text of great scientific interest for antiquarians as well as medievalists.

Far from being the fruit of an artisanship operating under the banner of 'art for art's sake' (non-existent in ancient times), the surface of this cross is inscribed

with cosmic imagery, especially that of a starry sky as conceived at the beginning of the 3rd century BC. In essence the inscriptions reflect the ancient druidic notion of astronomical science. Analysis revealed that the cross actually represents two sectors of the firmament that dominated the sky above Brno on the night of the erstwhile feast of Beltaine at the advent of the clear season on 14 June in 280 BC (approximate date when the cross was made), which is the equinoctial equivalent of Samain, which falls on 21 November and marks the beginning of the dark season of the yearly cycle. The position of an observer from one of the angles corresponds with that of the stars surrounding Aldébaran, a bright star in the constellation of Taurus, in relation to the stars of the neighbouring constellations of the Boar and Orion. Put differently, the astral firmaments represented by this cross are those of the two great festivals of Celtic civilisation, marking the crucial turning points in the yearly calendar, which are accompanied by a complex of rituals⁹.

Just as a sidelong glance confirms consciousness of the presence of an object that looms prominently in a person's ambit, so the importance of Celtic astral mythology is evidenced by the medieval texts that embodied much more than residual evidence in that regard. Merlin was certainly not a diviner by accident. Julius Caesar lauded Celtic astronomical expertise which, as in Greece, was not distinguished from astrology. Several publications¹⁰ have defended the proposition that Arthurian mythical themes can be read with due reference to the astro-mythological substrate. Other multidisciplinary researches of the same type will probably be forthcoming to prove that the hypothesis is in fact well-founded, now that the close relationship between literature, mythology and Celtic astronomy has become apparent from the medieval texts (Irish, Gallic, or Arthurian French) that preserved an essential part of the Celtic *Weltanschauung*.

WOLFRAM'S ASTRAL READING

The precious stones set in the Grail are like celestial bodies suggesting an astral interpretation of the Grail episode at the time of the Fisher King's sickness, but by the same token a marker indicating the *barren earth* theme associated with the grail. This interpretation is boldly proposed by Wolfram von Eschenbach, the German adapter of *The Story of the Grail*.

The Franconian poet Wolfram von Eschenbach (verses 1170 – 1220) is a seasoned reader and exegete of Chrétien de Troyes¹¹). He considerably elaborated the symbolism of the Perceval narrative in its German adaptation which he produced at the beginning of the 13th century. Whereas the original Grail comprised various gems, Wolfram's version is furnished with only one precious stone which he called *lapsit exillis*. This mysterious name is probably a phonetic aberration of the Latin expression *lapis ex caelis* ('stone from heaven'). Is that the astral origin? In any case it is reminiscent of the black stone, also of heavenly origin, venerated by Muslims

at Mecca¹². Wolfram gives a detailed description of the marvelous properties of the gem he calls the Gral:

By virtue of the Stone the phoenix is burned to ashes, in which he is reborn – Thus does the phoenix moult its feathers! Which done, it shines dazzling bright and lovely as before! Further: however ill a mortal may be, from the day on which he sees the Stone he cannot die for that week, nor does he lose his colour. For if anyone, maid or man, were to look at the Gral for two hundred years, you would have to admit that his colour was as fresh as in his early prime, except that his hair would grey! – Such powers does the Stone confer on mortal men that their flesh and bones are soon made young again. (IX, v. 13927-13952)¹³.

But every Good Friday the Gral stone will supply an abundance of food and drink from which a fragrance will spread abroad. The Gral stone sits on a table made in magnificent style of a single precious stone: a huge hyacinth that casts a dark red reflection. The beneficial qualities displayed by Wolfram's Gral resemble those of the precious stones of the lapidaries. Some manuscripts recording versions of *Parzival* and its extensions refer to the stone as jasper (*iaspis exillis*), which is one of the dozen types of stone that constitute the foundation of the celestial city in *The Book of Revelations* by Joh v.21, 18-2). In a commentary on the text bishop Marbodius of the 12th century explains that jasper propagates the verdure of faith that, for all perfect people, never loses its strength and affords unflinching protection against the devil¹⁴. This quality is typical of the watchful protection of the grail. The Bavarian poet Brecht von Scharfenberg is a perpetuator of Wolfram's *Parzival*. In his *Nouveau Titirel* he deposits the Grail in a temple, set with every imaginable precious stone, like the celestial New Jerusalem. Like the jeweled grail, so the sky and earth, the human and the divine meet to incarnate the mystery of the conjunction of opposites¹⁵. With the German continuators of Wolfram the Holy Grail has somehow returned to the heaven whence it had temporarily fallen for a brief earthly sojourn.

Wolfram effectively turned the Grail into a precious stone that fell from the sky, thus making it a fragment of a star. In this regard, G Dumézil¹⁶, referring to a text of Herodotus, adduced proof of the heavenly provenance of the mythology of supernatural objects imbued with talismanic meaning. In fact, the Scythians tell that the first man who inhabited their country had three brothers. Then one day objects of gold fell from heaven to earth in Scythia: a plough and a yoke, a hatchet, a goblet. Two brothers wanted to grab the gold but failed because the gold was burning. Only the third managed to take hold of the objects because the gold fire had lost its heat. The other two understood that he alone could claim the privilege of royalty. J. Grisward¹⁷ (1979) emphasised that the version told by Chrétien and the text authored by Herodotus definitely hailed from a common Indo-European source (they could not have influenced each other). They prove the extraterrestrial nature of the regalia in question as suggested by the evidence (sacred objects that could only belong to a king). An important fact should be noted here about Chrétien: if the bloody point of the spear is made of iron the end is made of silver and the Grail is golden. This

triad of metals, on closer inspection, is a critical factor in understanding the mythical function of the objects at issue, with particular reference to the iron spear point in relation to the golden grail.

By giving a specific name to the precious stones that Chrétien de Troyes passes over in silence, Wolfram and his successors have actually moved Chrétien's work closer to the Biblical texts and Christian allegory. Wolfram was the first to interpret the malady of the Fisher King astrologically, thereby drawing attention to the planetary movement of Saturn. But there is another conjunction that Wolfram passes over, which is the underlying scorched-earth theme of Chrétien's version. In fact this expected devastation of the earth does have a reason. As always, in the mythical tradition of ancient fatalism, the causes are cosmic¹⁸. Chrétien de Troyes's text should therefore be revisited in an attempt to understand the association between the scorched-earth theme and the Fisher King's maiming.

THE STORY OF THE GRAIL AND THE FEAST OF BELTAINÉ (1 MAY)

Of the two great festivals that are astrally connected to the Celtic cross of Brno *The Story of the Grail* falls incontestably within the context of the former. The feast of Beltaine marks the advent of summer, thus indicating that the romance starts as a troubadour's song celebrating the return of the green, that is, the moment when spring reclothes nature all round, the definitive turning point being 1 May:

The season was spring, trees
Were sprouting leaves, meadows
Were green..... (ll 69-71)

A bit further into the text the narrator mentions the feast of Pentecost (*It happened at Pentecost*, v. 2787), the movable feast of the medieval calendar which falls in May or at the beginning of the month of June. It must therefore be confirmed beyond any possible doubt that the first movement of Chrétien's narrative takes place around May in close proximity to Ascension Day (preceded by the three days of the Rogations) and of Pentecost. The chronology of events in this part of the narrative was established with conclusive accuracy at the time when the work was created¹⁹, but no further conclusions about interpretation of the text itself can be drawn from these facts.

Springtime (April-May) coincides with the critical turning point on which the future hinges. This is the period currently referred to as 'April moon' (Coussée 1996), the period when the waxing moon starts in April (after Passover) and becomes a full moon towards the end of April or at the beginning of May. The French folklorist Pierre Saintyves has called Pliny in his *Natural History* to witness in this matter. Pliny was a renowned scientist not only in his own time but also during the Middle

Ages, which is the reason for the currency at that time of his explanation of the misfortunes occurring with the April moon. The following belief is still commonly circulated among gardeners and peasants:

It is commonly believed that exposure of the bedewed crops to the hot sun causes blight in the wheat and black rust in the vine: I believe that this is not entirely correct because black rust needs cold weather, while the sun plays no part in it. With some reservation, the following is a firm belief: since this blight is never seen except at night, before the sun has gained its strength, it follows that it is completely dependent on the influence of the moon because the condition does not survive beyond the conjunction or the full moon or, to be precise, in the two cases where the star is most active²⁰.

The misfortunes that come with the April moon, thus Pliny, are referred to as follows: for some it is rust, for others it is the scorching sun, for yet others it is coal, but for all it is sterility. He then proceeds to explain that the peasants particularly dread three periods where harvesting is concerned (especially the last days of April and the first two weeks of May):

This is why so many ceremonies and feast days, the Robigalia, the Floralia, the Vinalia, were instituted. The Robigalia were instituted by Numa during the 2nd year of his reign, to which end the 7th calends of May (25 April) are celebrated because this is the time when the mildew (*robigo*) infests the wheat²¹.

This testimony is specifically important since Pliny was a naturalist of high repute during the Middle Ages, on par with Ovid, the Latin poet who committed to memory the myths and rituals that attended the period extending from the end of April to the beginning of May in his *Fastes*. This is the period of the Robigalia that became the Rogations of the Middle Ages²². There is a material link between these two festivals, which occur at exactly the same time of the year²³. The name ‘Rogations’ comes from the verb ‘rogare’, to ask, because the purpose of the processions forming part of this celebration is to petition God to save the crops. The initial letter of both words (‘Robigalia’ and ‘Rogations’) is the same, Robigalia being derived from the name of a divinity called Robigo, actually a demon causing the mildew infestation currently known to be attributable to a fungal parasite that attacks wheat, but was ascribed in ancient times to direct astral intervention, with the result that mildew caused devastation and putrefaction of the crops. The English word for the infestation is mildew, as attested since the XIVth century when it denoted a plant disease that is notably characterised by a whitish deposit on the plant, known in Old English as *meledeaw* or *meldeau*, which meant ‘honeydew’. The term denotes the sweetish substance that appears on the stems and leaves of certain plants at an exactly recurrent time of the year, particularly when the new growth of spring appears.

Comprising six books that correspond with the first six months of the year, the *Fastes* are an invaluable source of information about the rising and setting of the stars, and about the associated feasts and rituals of ancient Rome. The erudite

commentary on Ovid's *Fastes* delivered by Sir JG Frazer illuminates passages from that text, with particular reference to those concerning the Robigalia:

The festival of Robigus takes place at the fifth milestone on the Claudian Way, lest mildew (robigo) should harm the corn. A sacrifice is offered and games are held by runners both men and boys" (Praenestine calendar). According to Pliny, the festival was instituted by Numa in the eleventh year of his reign, and the reason for holding it on the twenty-fifth of April was because at that season the crops were attacked by mildew"²⁴

To hold off the menace of the contagion a red or russet-coloured dog had to be sacrificed to Robigo. The intriguing question is: How were these notions transposed to Chrétien's narrative? Consider in this regard that for his first exploit Perceval had slain a vermillion (ie. metonymically) a red knight, a destructive personage, the evil demon who is an agent of terror and death at Arthur's court and the Other World. The Red Knight represents the deadly menace of the spreading contagion that infects all regions. This menacing figure has a number of doubles that Perceval has to overcome as part of his mission: the overbearing landlord who performs a similar destructive role in the narrative. One of his victims is a young woman whose flesh appears "..."with cracks and burns that had been made/ by heat and cold and hail and frost"²⁵

Perceval claimed a further victory over a knight who, albeit the aggressor who seeks to ravage Blanchefleur's domain, bears the ironic name of Clamadeu (he who pleads with the Lord), a name that harks back to the festival of Rogations. This assailant reduced Blanchefleur's domain to a Waste Land, causing famine and desolation while laying siege to the young woman and her subjects in their stronghold.

The scourge of rust is especially hard on the Fisher King's domain, which it reduced to a Waste Land, evidenced in particular by the bleeding lance. Instead of asking why the spear is bleeding, it would be more appropriate to ask what the connection between the blood and the iron is. Quite simply, the blood stands for the rust²⁶. The context of the April moon removes all doubt about this interpretation.

Philology teaches us that the word *rouille* comes from the vulgar Latin word *robicula*, the diminutive of the classical Latin *robigo*, which referred to rust (iron oxide) that affects iron in Old French. Chrétien de Troyes knew the word well (cf. verse 2656 of *Erec et Enide* : *Molt estoit riches li haubers [...] N'onques n'i pot coillir reoille*: ("The hauberk was extremely costly [...] Rust could not gather there")²⁷). However, there is a masculine form, *roïl*, that refers specifically to the fungal infestation that affects wheat, also known as the mildew of OE derivation (Wartburg 1950, t.10, 430b), and mentioned in the *Psautier d'Oxford* (Oxford Psalter²⁸) of the XIIth century (Michel 1860, 77, 51). As in Ancient Roman times, the condition termed *rouille* referred to metallic objects as well as soil in medieval times²⁹. In the Grail narrative a close associative link was attributed to these two types of destructive agency (organic and inorganic). The barren Waste Land of the Fisher

King is symbolised by the bleeding lance following in the Grail procession. Perceval is given a forceful reminder to that effect by a Hideous Damsel:

The Fisher King made you
 His guest, you saw the bleeding
 Lance, but you couldn't be bothered
 To open your mouth and speak,
 Asking why that drop
 Of blood came rolling down
 From the point of that shining spear! (ll. 4653-4659)

Because of Perceval's silence the Fisher King could not recover from his malady and his domain remained a barren Waste Land:

..... Ladies will lose
 Their husbands, countries will be ruined,
 Girls will have no guidance
 And be forced to linger as orphans,
 And a host of knights will die, (ll.4679-464683)

Could it be that the Hideous Damsel, bald and hirsute, who reproaches Perceval is the embodiment or direct incarnation of the fatal April or Pink moon speaking the language of malediction? It is not incumbent on Perceval, after all, to exorcise the misfortunes imposed by the April or Pink moon on the regions that he encounters on his travels. In the manner of Christ who healed the sick with the power of his word alone, he sought a word that he could utter with magical power that would save the world. But he could not match the fatal power. His lack of spiritual penetration prevented him from exorcising the Evil.

In conclusion, the importance of the extraterrestrial provenance of the Grail cannot be overemphasised. If Wolfram emphasises its stellar origin there could be many reasons why Chrétien de Troyes might think the same. Since that time it has become a matter of heavenly knowledge (the mythology of the stars) that should be consulted to understand the scorched-earth theme associated with the bloodied spear that accompanies the Grail in Chrétien's narrative. Pliny and Ovid shed distinctive light to afford insight into the meteorological beliefs associated with the period around 1 May which Chrétien de Troyes expressly chooses as the temporal context of his narrative. Far from being intellectually sophisticated, his beliefs were shared by a large and widely dispersed peasant population, and they are actually still with us. In medieval times the rift between the scholarly world and the world of popular knowledge was unbridgeable where natural phenomena were concerned. To understand the civilisation and literature of medieval times we need to relinquish our modern urban mentality and rediscover the thought patterns of a civilisation that was essentially rural and comprised of people who lived close to nature in a context of wide open spaces: It was constantly aware of the seasonal rhythms, the vicissitudes,

the inhabitants (wild and domestic animals) and products (fruits and flowers of the earth) of the medieval world. Everything in that world pointed to a hidden store of knowledge to which anyone could gain access.

NOTES

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