



#### 40. THE ROUND TABLE AND THE QUEST FOR THE GRAIL - I

From the historical point of view, the novels of both the Round Table and the Grail suggest an underground current that emerged at a given moment. Soon, however, it retracted to become invisible, almost as if an obstacle or an imminent danger had been felt<sup>1</sup>. In fact, these novels appeared in a short period of time between approximately the last quarter of the twelfth century and the end of the first quarter of the 13th century<sup>2</sup>, a period marked by the first decline of the tradition in Europe.



##### 1. Gundestrup Druid cauldron

Where did this underground current come from? All the characters and events present in this literature appear in precise geographical areas: Ireland (*Iweriu*, lat. *Hiberia* or *Scotia*), Wales (*Cymru*, lat. *Cambria*), Scotland (*Caled*, lat. *Caledonia*), England (*Prydain* lat. *Britannia Major*) and Britany (*Prydain*, lat. *Britannia Minor* or *Armorica*). These lands represent the heart of the Celtic Tradition. Those who passed on these legends to Christianity were the Druids (corresponding to the *brāhmaṇas* of India), particularly the Bards, the priestly caste (sskrt. *jāti*) responsible for maintaining the relations with the knights (as *purohitas*). The Bards were the performers of royal rites, the composers of the epic and the mythological poems and to the keepers of the warrior genealogies (sskrt. *ksatriya vaiśācarita*)<sup>3</sup>. Although the vessel of the Grail is an esoteric symbol of Christian origin, in the Druidic tradition the “Caldron of the Daghdha”<sup>4</sup> performed a similar function, being the receptacle of the beverage of immortality.

The chronicle of these tales<sup>5</sup> starts with the collapse of the Roman Empire. The earth was devastated by violence and disorder caused by the marauding barbarians. The cosmic order needed to be restored with the foundation of a new Empire of peace and justice. Arthur<sup>6</sup>, the illegitimate son of King Uther Pendragon was destined to such feat His youth passed anonymously until he drew a sword stuck vertically into a rock. a sign universally recognized as worthy only of the legitimate King of Britain. It is self-

<sup>1</sup> J.L. Weston, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, G. Bell & Sons, London 1913, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Julius Evola, *Il mistero del Graal*, Ed. Mediterranee, Roma 1972, p.61. Except for the Evola’s serious doctrinal error, which absurdly considers action above knowledge, this book is an excellent collection of symbols, often brilliantly interpreted.

<sup>3</sup> Françoise Le Roux, Christian J. Guyonvarc’h, *I Druidi*, Ecig, Genova 1990, pp 563/564.

<sup>4</sup> “Most divine”, name of the God-priest of the Druids, the lord of knowledge, similar to the vedic *Brhaspati*.

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of the reader we will not present all the sources and versions of the account that are often contradictory. We only want to draw the general sense emerging from these novels. Many of these tales were written by poets and troubadour who recited secret information without having full awareness of their deeper meaning. Among the most discerning, however, we remember Chrétien de Troyes, Robert de Boron and Wolfram von Eschenbach. Thomas Malory (1415-1471), although aware of what he wrote, must be included in a hermetic current rather in association with the medieval chivalry. Ultimately, the analytical and philological reading loses sight of the spiritual meaning transmitted.

<sup>6</sup> The hypothesis that Arthur was the historical Lucius Artorius Castus cannot be taken for certain. Artorius lived in Britannia in the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century and was in command of the Sixth Legion in Armorica. A simple similarity of names cannot be considered a historical proof.



evident that the sword in the rock is the symbol of the polar axis crossing the globe. Its extraction represents the change of the polar star on which the earth axis points.



## 2. The sword in the rock

In fact, the previous ruler, Uther Pendragon, whose name means ‘Head of the Dragon’, represents the period from 4000 to 1000 BC, when the earth axis pointed towards the previous polar star,  $\alpha$  *Draconis* (*Thuban*<sup>1</sup>). Arthur, therefore, represents the new polar star,  $\alpha$  *Ursæ Minoris*<sup>2</sup>.



## 3. King Uther Pendragon, the Head of the Dragon

“Now a first philological observation is required. The exact form of the name given by the manuscripts in ancient French is *Artus* (subject) and *Artu* (in inflected cases) leading to the root *Art*, true philological basis of the name. The testimony of Celtic languages is formal: it is an ancient name of the bear [sskrt. *atri*].”<sup>3</sup>

The bear (gr.  $\text{\AA}\rho\kappa\tau\omicron\varsigma$ , read *àrctos*) in astronomy corresponds to both the constellations of the *Ursa Major* and *Minor* (sskrt. *Sapta ṛkṣa*) and its symbolism is closely related to “polar mountain” (*Meru*), which represents the *axis mundi*<sup>4</sup>. The polar-priestly element and the zodiacal-regal element converge in

<sup>1</sup> From the arab *thu' bān*, monstrous python, dragon.

<sup>2</sup> This corresponds surprisingly to the myth of *Dhruva* as the new polar star in Indian mythology.

<sup>3</sup> P. Walter, *Artù l'orso e il Re*, Arkeios, Roma, pp. 73/74. *Arthur, l'ours et le roi*, Paris, Imago, 2002/

<sup>4</sup> The adjective ‘arctic’, which derives from ‘bear’, is synonymous of ‘boreal’ This term is also closely related to the German *bär* and the English bear. However, it is also possible that in more ancient times *Borea* (gr. *Βορέας*, read *Boréa*, the North) derived from the term ‘boar’, (sskrt. *varāha*). This is certainly due to a reversal of the polar symbolism with the zodiacal one occurred with the beginning of the *kaliyuga*. In fact, even today the star called *Arcturus* is located near the zodiac, that marks the correct astrological position of the bear before the *kaliyuga*. Only after were the two bears identified with the two neighbouring constellations of the Pole. Inversely, *Libra* (sskrt. *tula*) was associated to the zodiacal level. Prior to that, *Libra* was the polar constellation and the present two *Ursæ* were the plates of *Libra*.



Arthur in an ambiguous fashion. In fact, we must keep in mind that, as Nennius<sup>1</sup> explained, “*Artur latine sonat ursum horribilem*” (Arthur in Latin sounds like ‘horrible bear’).



#### 4. Pendragon and Arthur as polar stars

In his fierce and violent appearance, he was however accompanied and guided by the Druid (sskrt. *Brāhmaṇa*) Merlin, the true architect and creator of Arthur’s reign.



#### 5. King Arthur

Therefore, in this symbolic tale is described the emergence of the dualism between the royal and the priestly functions corresponding to the medieval Emperor-Pope diarchy. This division of powers will lead to a mutual competition and destruction. In Gaelic, Myrddin (latinized into Merlinus Ambrosius, Merlin the Immortal)<sup>2</sup> is the name of a type of hawk. One can easily appreciate the discordance between the two powers, as hawk (like the eagle), represents the warrior caste. In fact, he is also known as the ‘boar of Brocéliande’, a typically priestly attribute<sup>3</sup>. At the beginning of the tale, Merlin is the *purohita*

<sup>1</sup> Nennius was the author of one *Historia Brittonum* composed between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>2</sup> In the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey de Monmouth, Merlinus Ambrosius is overlapped with Ambrosius Aurelianus, half-brother of Uther Pendragon. It is an ambiguity full of hidden meanings. In fact, the semi-historical figure of Ambrosius Aurelianus, winner of the Saxons, is in many ways symbolic. He was the last governor of Rome in Britain, son of a Roman patrician father and a Druidic mother. In him, therefore, converged the Christian-Latin and the Celtic sapiential traditions. Mortally wounded, he anointed Uther as the first King of Britain.

<sup>3</sup> In some tales Merlin is said to be the son of the devil, and in others it is described as a wizard. At the end of the Arthurian adventure, Merlin abandons his disciple Arthur to his fate to pursue love with Vivien, a fairy or nymph (sskrt. *yakṣiṇī*); a most inappropriate behaviour for a sage. Therefore, Merlin represents a priestly wisdom in decline, attracted to powers (sskrt. *siddhi*).



of the King and Arthur's *guru*. Following his instructions, Arthur founded in Camelot<sup>1</sup> the Round Table, around which the twelve purest, bravest and most loyal knights of the kingdom<sup>2</sup> were to sit.



### 6. Merlin instructs the young Arthur

If on one hand the Round Table in charge of the restoration of the order and the prosperity in the kingdom, as well as in the world, on the other it also represented an initiatic center<sup>3</sup>. Arthur gave the chivalry initiation to the most qualified warriors.



### 7. Merlin introduces Galahad to the Round Table

As errant knights they wandered from castle to hermitage where feudal lords and monks instructed them in the inner practices of the method (sskrt. *prakriyā*). At the same time, they continued devoting themselves to the protection of the weak, the orphans and the widows from the oppression of the wicked, accumulating merits (sskrt. *punya*), consolidating the order of the Kingdom reestablishing the peace. The center of the Round Table was holed. At the very center was the 'perilous Siege', a throne destined to the purest and most highly qualified knight.

Anyone who sat without possessing such qualifications would have sunk directly into hell. Only he 'the world's best knight', he who had passed the trial and concluded the initiatic path would be able to restore

<sup>1</sup> Probably this name derives from the first Roman capital in Britain, *Camalodunum*. Plinius, *Naturalis Historia*, II.75.118.

<sup>2</sup> From the point of view of the cosmic order, we can say that, symbolically, the twelve knights represent the twelve forms of the sun, the *Ādityas* of *Hindū* Tradition, in correspondence with the zodiac signs. In fact, every knight excels in a peculiar science and virtue. The same shape of the table recalls the symbolism of the wheel, in particular for the social and initiatic functions of the *Cakravartin*. In the *vājapeya* rite, as in the Arthurian cycle, the chariot race and the wheel affixed at the top of the sacrificial pole (sskrt. *stambha*) become symbols of the World in perennial movement. As we will see, however, Arthur represented only the royal function without ever being able to fulfil the imperial role of *Cakravartin*.

<sup>3</sup> This is reminiscent of the historical organization of the twelve Palatine Counts (or Paladins) founded by Charlemagne to restore the Western Empire



the Empire, take Arthur's place and transform the Kingdom of Britain into a Universal Empire<sup>1</sup>. Three were the knights who proved to be worthy of the *summum bonum* of the knightly (chivalrous) initiatic path: Parsifal (or Perceval)<sup>2</sup>, Bors<sup>3</sup> and Galahad<sup>4</sup>. Their final trial was the quest for the Holy Grail. The Grail is a complex symbol, because different traditional currents converged into it. As we have already mentioned, the Druids used a bronze or silver cauldron in which they boiled several sacred plants, among which the main one was the mistletoe, obtaining in this way the beverage of immortality offered in oblation to the Gods and distributed among the initiates<sup>5</sup>. Differently, the Christian esoteric tradition tells of a vessel<sup>6</sup>.



### 8. The Grail stone on Lucifer's crown

When Lucifer, the highest of the angels, rebelled against God, a great divine emerald, the *lapsit exillis*, fell from his crown down to earth, where angels sculpted it into a vessel. Whoever drank from it would acquire the knowledge of God.



### 9. An angel collects the blood of Jesus in the Grail

<sup>1</sup> Actually, Arthur's ambition was to conquer the entire world. However, he committed himself to this endeavour only with exterior means of war, neglecting the initiatic path that would have led him to become the esoteric *Imperator*. Only then he could have aspired to become the Emperor also in the temporal sense (as it happens in India with the ritual of sacrifice of the horse, *asvamedha*). According to the legend, with several expeditions he conquered Spain, Scandinavia and Germany and was preparing to wage war to what remained of the declining Roman Empire. However, he had to return to Britain to fight against his nephew, the usurper Mordred ('the death bringer', also called Modred, 'the limiting', 'he who hinders').

<sup>2</sup> 'He who opens the way'

<sup>3</sup> It could mean 'boar', which defines him in a priestly manner. He is the only one of the three knights who returns to Britain after the quest for the Grail. Sometimes he is replaced by the figure of Gawain, whose name indicates another type of hawk.

<sup>4</sup> 'The intrepid'.

<sup>5</sup> It is evident the analogy with the spontaneous 'boiling', the fermentation of the Vedic Soma in the oblatory bowl, to obtain the *amṛta*. This last Sanskrit term is etymologically identical to ambrosia (gr. ἀμβροσία, read *ambrosia*, immortality), the liquor of immortality of the Greek gods. Obviously, it is not by chance that Merlin was called Ambrosius, the immortal.

<sup>6</sup> The most accredited etymology for Grail is the Latin *gradalis*, vessel or bowl. "The term *graus* (subject form; in the complements, *grail*) is attested, in oil language, not as a proper name, but as a common name..." (G. D'Arconco, "Un romanzo per l'Europa", *La Grant Queste del Saint Graal*, Udine, Amm. Comunale, 1990, p. 23.) However, being a sacred knowledge, Grail could also derive from *gradualis*, which in Latin designates a sacred text, especially intended for acting or chanting. In fact, according to some novels written words miraculously appear on the surface of the vessel.



The vessel, handed down from generation to generation, was then used by Christ during the last supper to consecrate the Eucharist. Joseph of Arimathea kept it secretly and used it to collect the blood spurted from the chest wound Jesus during his crucifixion.



### 10. Joseph of Arimathea hides the Grail in Montsalvat

Consequently, the 'Saint Grail' has been interpreted as *Sang Real*, the 'Real Blood' or the 'Royal Blood'. Later, the two secret disciples of Jesus, the *cohen*-priest Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, representing respectively the spiritual authority and the temporal power, carried the Grail to Britain. The sacred vessel was covertly preserved by the descendants of Joseph, known as the Kings of the Grail, in an inaccessible castle located between two seas and in the middle of wild mountains<sup>1</sup> The knights who succeeded in beholding the Grail, became disciples of the King, living there for a long time in an Edenic state.



### 11. Joseph of Arimathea as first King of the Grail

Over the centuries, the number of arrivals declined dramatically due to the degeneration of the world and humanity. Thus, the King of the Grail, strived in transmitting the holy wisdom of the miraculous vessel and in generating a sufficient number of disciples. For this reason, the last Kings were described as sick or wounded in their generative faculty. The latest Kings idled in the mountain lake near the castle, fishing all day long<sup>2</sup>. The title of Fisher King, obviously, alludes to the fact that he was fishing for new disciples<sup>3</sup>, often leaving the walls behind, that is breaking the esoteric discretion. The Fisher King expected the arrival of the 'world's best knight' destined to become his beloved disciple and his successor as King of the Grail.

<sup>1</sup> The place where the Grail castle stands is called *Montsalvasch*, wild mountain, occasionally *Montsalvat*, saving mount. In following chapters, we will explain the initiatic meaning of these terms. The castle of Corbenic is placed on the peak of Montsalvat.

<sup>2</sup> "In the *Brahmaloka*, in the third level, the heaven [in *tribhuvana*], starting from this earth, there are two seas called *Ara* and *Nya*, where there is a lake full of delicious food, where there is a banyan that oozes ambrosia, where is seen the citadel of Brahman called *Aparājītā* (the impenetrable) and where is located a golden palace made by the Lord himself" (ChU VIII.5.3).

<sup>3</sup> In consonance with the evangelical passage, "...I will make you fishers of men." (Gospel of Saint Mark, I.17).



This spiritual son will heal him and bring the sacred vessel to the Round Table where, sitting on the thirteenth dangerous place, he will make the *Terre guaste* flourish again<sup>1</sup>.

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**12. Corbenic Castle**

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<sup>1</sup> The barren land, the disordered situation of the world caused by humanity's spiritual decline in this period of darkness. This spiritual decay was the very cause of the "initiatc" sterility of the Fisher King.