

ANTONELLA SCIANCALEPORE

*STRATIGRAPHY OF THE MOTIF OF KNIGHTLY
SYMPOSIUM IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE:
HYPOTHESIS OF A NEOLITHIC CONTINUITY*

1. *Hypothesis*

1.1. *The roots of Medieval chivalry*

Franco Cardini was one of the first scholars to deal with the deepest roots of Medieval chivalry, in an important work from 1981.

Obviously, Cardini's historical benchmark is the invasion theory of the Indo-European expansion: for this reason, he grounds his entire survey on the idea of a Scytho-Sarmatian origin of chivalry. In line with this view, this origin is tracked down in the so-called "steppe populations" that, having developed «between two walls», press both on the Danubian border and on the Chinese one, and that will be in charge later on both of European and of Mid-Asiatic chivalry. According to Cardini, it is the Iranian population of the Scytho-Sarmatians, in the zone of the Black Sea first (VIII-VII cent. BC.) and in the Danubian and Balcanic areas afterwards (VI cent. BC - I-II AC),

that, «deeply affecting at every level the Eastern Germanic peoples, and in particular the Goths, imprinted their original features to the warfare of the Middle Age: on the technical level for certain; but, I believe, on the spiritual level as well»¹.

When he focuses on the «spiritual level», he comes to highlight the ritual, or even shamanic nature of the relation the first chivalry-bearers had with the horse and the warfare, although he still bestows it to some presumptive Iranian ancestors. Moreover, he perceives how this fact is linked both with some present folkloric forms and with ancient religious traditions, such as Pythagorean cults and even Greek religion². Moreover, Cardini ascribes to the first knights the worship of weapons and the sacral character of symposium, especially in the connection – and often interchangeability – that takes place between the group-drinking moment and the fight³. In this ‘perspective flight’ of history, the Medieval knight goes back to the *berserkr*, a beast-like warrior that, after a magical-initiatic metamorphosis, acquires an heroic function in the extra-social dimension of the continual war.

All things considered, the demystifying quality of Cardini’s book lies in his way to follow the traces of a continuity between the ideology of Medieval chivalry and the system of beliefs, social structure, iconography and legends of previous populations, in order to bring back the prehistoric past of the phenomenon of the European chivalry, that is generally crys-

1. F. CARDINI, *Alle radici della cavalleria medievale*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1981, p. 13.
2. It is remarkable how the shamanic aspect of Greek religion and culture will be analysed in depth only later on, within the frame of the PCP (Palaeolithic Continuity Paradigm), by Paolo Galloni and Gabriele Costa under, respectively, an historical and an ethno-linguistic point of view. Cf. P. GALLONI, *Le ombre della preistoria. Metamorfosi storiche dei signori degli animali*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, special issue of «Studi celtici», 2007; G. COSTA, *Sciamanismo indoeuropeo*, in *Simboli e miti della tradizione sciamanica: atti del convegno internazionale (Bologna, 4-5 maggio 2006)*, Bologna, Carattere, 2007, pp. 85-95.
3. CARDINI, *Alle radici della cavalleria medievale*, pp. 107-108

tallized in a perennial given and deprived of any embarrassing primitive roots.

Moreover, Cardini cannot but admit the existence of another chivalry that had already developed at the time of the hypothetical transmission of the knighting practice from the Scytho-Sarmatians to the Germanics: Celtic chivalry. He even accepts as «doubtlessly very likely that the Germanics, before their impact at the East with Iranian populations, had acquired from the Celts many of the customs regarding the horse; religious ones, such as the burial together with the animal, and technical ones»⁴. He brings as evidence of it the Celtic etymology of the word *marach*, meaning ‘warhorse’. What is more, he acknowledges that in the Celtic knight

his “Homeric” way of fighting, his bent for personal exploits and for duel, would suggest several considerations about his restless, individualistic, roamer character. A “knight errant” *ante litteram*: and now we could note that the genre that will celebrate the figure of the knight errant in the XII century will be exactly the *roman breton*, which is of Celtic inspiration. But the historical ground on which this kind of statements move is too slippery, and I prefer to take another path.⁵

Therefore, Cardini already catches the link between Celtic culture and Medieval chivalry that will be the foundation of my research hypothesis. However, since he has built his argumentation within the frame of Kurganic-Sarmatian migration, he feels like ‘slipping’ on a fascinating but unknown ground, and prefers to forget that insight.

1.2. *The turning point: the Bell Beaker*

Once at the cul-de-sac announced by Cardini, I found the turning point in an essay by Francesco Benozzo, in which a

4 Ibidem, p. 21.

5 Ibidem, p. 24.

new hypothesis for the origin of Medieval chivalry is outlined⁶. Due to the importance of this article for my research, I'll sketch out its main points.

After having proved wrong the theory – dominant so far – of the derivation of Medieval chivalry from the steppe Scytho-Sarmatians populations⁷, Benozzo highlights the existence in Europe of other cultural complexes that may be responsible for the introduction of horse farming and horse-riding: in the Baltic and Scandinavian zones there were the Battle Axe (BA) and the Corded Ware (CW) cultures (IV millennium BC), whereas in the Western-Atlantic and Upper-Mediterranean zone there was the Bell-Beaker culture (BB) (III-II millennium BC).

After having proved the multiple origins of European chivalry, against the single-origin theory of the Iranian derivation, the article moves forward tracking down:

- a continuity between BB and Celtic cultures;
- a continuity between Celtic cultural features and the features of Medieval chivalry.

The first continuity is based on four arguments:

1. *Archaeological distribution*: BB dispersal, in the phase of expansion on Atlantic and West-Mediterranean coasts, fits rather well both with the area of European Megalithism (which, according to the PCP, is a Celtic

6 F. BENOZZO, *Radici celtiche tardo-neolitiche della cavalleria medievale*, «Quaderni di Semantica», xxviii, 2007, pp. 461-486.

7 Such a confutation is grounded on the linguistic fact that the equestrian vocabulary of Asiatic chivalry has got an Altaic, not Iranian, derivation. He provides as well archaeological facts that contradict the Ukrainian primacy in horse domestication, and prove impossible that the presumptive invaders from Chalcolithic could use horse in warfare; however, the archaeological facts support the existence of horses in Eurasia already 20,000 years ago: cf. *ibidem*, p. 446.

phenomenon)⁸ and with the areas that will become decidedly Celtic in the Iron Age. Moreover, the derivation-vector of BB (moving from Portugal and Britain towards East and South) matches perfectly with the PCP vision of Celtic expansion⁹.

2. *Paleoethnology*: most of the cultural features of BB are present in the Iron-Age La Tène and Halstatt cultures, which are unmistakably Celtic¹⁰. Among those, there are metallurgy, warfare ideology, social hierarchy and the presence of an elite characterised by possession of weapons, horse-riding, individualism, forms of sha-



Vessel belonging to a group of BB ceramic craft work, coming from Ciempozuelos (Madrid), dated from 20th-14th cent. BC. Found in 1894 as part of grave goods.

8. Cf. M. ALINEI - F. BENOZZO, *Megalithism as a Manifestation of a Celtic Primacy in Meso-Neolithic Europe*, «Studi celtici», VII-VIII, 2009, pp. 13-57.
9. Ibidem, p. 472. It is worth stressing how the PCP pattern of Celtic expansion is in open contrast with the traditional vision, which abdicates to explain in a plausible way the origin of the Celts and assumes an 'invisible' pattern of derivation from East towards two opposite directions, East and North-West (cf. infra).
10. Some of those cultural features are actually shared by CW and BA, like, for instance, the habit of group drinking; however, it is typical only of BB folk th metallurgy and trade, attributes, these ones, that explain the BB dominance in Europe in the following centuries. A further confirmation of the BB-Celtic continuity is that these attributes are the same that can explain the "colonial" dominance of the Celts in Europe in the

manic cult and – element that begins to have some interest for my survey – male-centred values linked with the group drinking. Such drinking had to be performed by means of the Bell Beaker itself: this item was very probably meant to contain inebriating beverages, like mead or fruit wine or wheat beer, as proved by the traces of millet, wheat and flavoured honey found in the bottom of the beakers¹¹.

3. *Linguistics*: many of the words referring to horse-riding and to the BB (among which the Latin name for wheat beer, *cervesia*), are of Celtic origin¹².
4. *Literature*: it is possible to identify in the literature belonging to Celtic areas some thematic correspondences with the BB culture. For instance in the Welsh epics of Brân we encounter knight-heroes – who, incidentally, are dressed with the same gaudy colours of the BB folk –, and a magical and symbolic object, the *Peir Dadeni*, a sort of cauldron of rebirth that can be assimilated to the BB both figuratively and linguistically.¹³ In another Welsh poem, the most ancient poem in a European vulgar language, the *Gododdin*, in the description of the heroes who died on the battlefield we frequently find reference to the horse-drawn war chariot. In order to stress the importance of these two literary references (the *Peir Dadeni* and the knights from *Gododdin*), it may suffice to say I shall treat them in depth later in the course of my discussion.

Iron Age: cf. *ibidem*, p. 479, and M. ALINEI, *Origini delle lingue d'Europa*, 2 voll., Bologna, il Mulino, 1996-2000, vol. II, p. 490.

11. BENOZZO, *Radici celtiche tardo-neolitiche*, pp. 469-470.
12. *Ibidem*, pp. 473-475.
13. The Celtic root *per/peir* designating the pot survives both in Romance and Germanic languages (cf. *infra*).

The second continuity is associated with the first one inasmuch as the Celtic words regarding the use of horse spread in many European languages; in addition to that, many thematic and structural traits of Celtic literary tradition passed down to Romance literatures. In this regard, Benozzo brings as evidence of this continuity the metric form of the assonancing *laisse* of Romance epics, which has its closest antecedent in the Welsh epic poems and in the Irish dynastic poems; the shamanic attributes that survive in the chivalric literature (as Cardini had already observed, cf. above); the resemblance of *moras* (Saracen women) in Medieval Romance literature, to fairies and other supernatural women belonging to Celtic folklore¹⁴.

At this point, it is possible to link the Celts of La Tène with the Germanics by means of the Celtic colonial expansion in the first millennium BC, through which the Germanic folks may have acquired the horse-centric ideology and its cultural surround.

A step further towards the trigger of my argument lies in an essay by Paolo Galloni in which, starting from Benozzo's theory, the author investigates the emergence of similarities between Celtic and Germanic culture as a consequence of the Celts in Central Europe and their influence on Germanic populations¹⁵. Moreover and rather significantly, these similarities would come through at the same time of the presumptive moment of formation of the oral epic cycles of both cultures.

The joint motif that Galloni examines is found both in literary sources and in archaeological evidence: it is «the presence, within the warrior *comitatus*, of a woman gathering the function of prophetess and cup-bearer of intoxicating beverages, mainly mead»¹⁶. Thus, Galloni links such a character

14. Ibidem, pp. 475-478.

15. P. GALLONI, *Escursioni sciamaniche*, «Studi celtici», VII, 2009, pp. 109-114.

16. Galloni makes reference to M.J. ENRIGHT, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1996.

with the Palaeolithic Picker, because she brings reference to honey and mead in her name, she is a donor of sovereignty inside the community and she is even endowed with a leadership role herself¹⁷.

In the characterisation of the group-drinking scenes of Celtic-Beaker source compared with those of other sources, the determinant element seems to be the presence of this figure of prophetess and cup-bearer inside the male group of knights and the fact that she was, as much as the Picker-Sovereign from Palaeolithic, «thought as wife or daughter of the community leader»¹⁸.

1.3. *Research hypothesis*

Based on these assumptions, my research aims to dig in the field of the roots of the Medieval chivalry in order to sift the hypothesis of the existence of a bond between BB and European chivalric culture. In particular, I shall focus on the group-drinking scenes because within the BB they were – together with the warfare – the essential moment for the construction of the identity of the elite group. The present analysis shall probe epic literary sources, Old French and not, and shall pay particular attention to the recurring elements in those scenes. Thus, I shall build a web of correspondences among them and, once excluded the improbable common textual derivation, I shall reconstruct the features of a cultural substratum that had to lay at the root of these literary works. Finally, I shall sketch an interpretation of the nature of such a substratum, in order to discover whether it coincides or not with the alleged Neolithic derivation.

17. According to Galloni, these two roles fit perfectly with the Irish queen Medb.

18. Ibidem, p. 114.

What I have examined is only a sampling of texts in which I have found thanks to the hints in essays that touch more or less pertinently the topic of the knightly symposium¹⁹. I am confident, nonetheless, that they may suffice to reach an answer, although temporary, to the initial issue.

2. *The Celtic and Germanic texts*

2.1. *The starting point: the «Gododdin»*

For what above stated, the testimonies of the atavistic practice of the knightly symposium connected with the BB should be searched in the Celtic culture and in its literary repository. Therefore I believe it useful to start my survey from the most ancient Celtic poetic text, the *Gododdin*²⁰.

This Old-Welsh heroic poem, written in the early 6th century, is composed of one hundred elegiac stanzas, each of which celebrates a warrior of Gododdin killed in the Catraeth battle. In the bare and rocky representation offered of the warriors' cosmos – or, for the reasons above, the chivalric cosmos – through sharp and significant snapshots, the warfare ethic of this culture emerges, revealing a violence whose roots dig deep

19. I am referring here to the following essays: A. FASSÒ, *Cortesia, mito ed epopea*, in *Omaggio a Gianfranco Folena*, vol. 1, Padova, Editoriale Programma, 1993, pp. 87-107; IDEM, *Pulsioni e loro destini. Raoul de Cambrai, Jaufré Rudel e Don Giovanni*, in *Interpretazioni dei trovatori. Atti del Convegno: Bologna, 18-19 ottobre 1999*, special issue of «Quaderni di Filologia Romanza», XIV, 2001, pp. 119-157; M. BONAFIN, *Gabbo: voto e vanto. Ipotesi sulla struttura (letteraria) e le origini (antropologiche) di un motivo medievale*, in IDEM (ed), *Testi e modelli antropologici*, Milano, Arcipelago Edizioni, 1989, pp. 13-33; IDEM, *I guerrieri al simposio. Morfologia di un motivo*, «L'immagine riflessa», II, 1993, pp. 1-37; P. BANCOURT, *Les musulmans dans les chansons de geste du Cycle du roi*, Aix en Provence, Université de Provence, 1982, in particular the chapter *Les sarrasines épiques*, pp. 571-666.
20. The original quotations of the text are from *Il Gododdin*, ed. F. BENOZZO, Milan, Luni Editrice, 2000. The translation is mine.

in a universe of beast-like warriors, like the *berserkr*, but could even date back to a totemic Prehistoric past.²¹ What interests me the most, however, is the continuous presence in the poem of mentions to the mead and to the drinking of it in a semi-ritual context during the male assembly of noble warriors. From the analysis of these explicit references, which can be called formulaic due to their insistence and repetitiveness, I may infer some conceptual and material features of this knightly symposium.

1) The battle fight and the mead are presented in a relation of economic mutuality, as if one were the payment of the other. As a matter of fact, there are frequently expressions in which the glorious death in battle is considered as the price for the mead drunk at the knight assembly, and vice versa the honour on the battlefield is rewarded with the symposium. This may well mean that «the men of the Gododdin fought in exchange of the mead lavished to them during the year of peace»²². In this sense, it is not only metaphorical to say that this knight «fed on honour» (l. 888):

price of the mead (ll. 32, 614), they paid for the mead-feast (l. 340), mead's wages (ll. 121, 408), in return for mead and wine at court (l. 757), reward for the feast,/ he bore us,/ war-band feast,/ to a blazing fire,/ to white seats/ and to a fresh drinking (ll. 815-20), in return for the mead (l. 65), for a cup of wine (l. 51), he deserved his wine (l. 256), you merited the mead (l. 366), he deserved the mead-horn (l. 864), he earned his own mead (ll. 381, 966), he earned wine and mead (l. 557).

21. I am mentioning it *en passant* because it is not the topic of my research, but I believe it is possible to relate these Gododdin warriors, often described as wolves, serpents and lions, with the cult of the animal guides, in accordance with the theory by Galloni (cf. GALLONI, *Le ombre della preistoria*); see also C. DONÀ, *Per le vie dell'altro mondo. L'animale guida e il mito del viaggio*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubettino, 2003.

22. *Il Gododdin*, p. 111

In the same conceptual field we may count «due to the feast of Mynyddog» (l.419) and «they fought for Eidin's wood and mead» (l.906).

2) We also catch some shifty pictures of the context and the modalities in which this alcoholic drinking took place: it consisted of an assembly, feasibly male, of warriors organised in a proto-court, as attested by the frequent references to a collective situation (ll.78, 713), to the hall (ll.65, 167, 212, 231, 250, 408, 493, 649, 699, 859; as a formula in strophe-opening line: ll.364, 372, 382 e 391). Furthermore, there are hints about other features of the knightly feast that we shall find again in Romance literature; one is the custom to engage in verbal challenges under the effect of the alcohol:

the hall's uproar,/ from the war-band, the clamour of wrangles.
(ll. 649-650).

Another feature is the practice of prodigality by means of gifts or abundance of libation:

bright was the horn/ in the hall of Eidin;/ his pomp in bidding/ his intoxicating mead (ll. 166-168), generous over mead (l. 299), the graciousness²³/ in offering his aid (l.467), he lavished sweet ensnaring mead (l. 700), at the banquet he was not harsh (l. 713), after a feast, his gift to a stranger (l. 963).

We can as well draw information about the occasion of the group-drinking: in confirmation of what written above, they took place during the year of peace:

they drank mead, gold and sweet, ensnaring;/ for a year the minstrels were merry (ll. 102-103), wine and mead from gold cups was their drink,/ for a year, as is the custom (ll.241-242).

23. Benozzo here uses the Italian word *cortesia* (courtliness), in order to translate the Welsh *mynut*, and he comments: «I am translating here 'courtliness', bestowing to this noun the value of 'royalty', 'leap of virtues connected with kingship', as Andrea Fassò makes clear» (*Il Gododdin*, p. 122).

It is noteworthy that another occasion was the imminence of the battle, if not the night before:

men went to Catraeth, keen their war-band;/ blue mead was their liquor, it was poison (l. 78-9), men went to Catraeth, mead-nourished band (l. 84), mead-fed the night before (l. 116), in the great hall I drank wine and mead (l. 212), of those who left the fort, after too much drink (l. 244), after a wine-feast (l. 289), after holding bright mead in hand (l. 335), after the wine and the mead (ll. 539 e 545), wine and mead and malt they drank (l. 548), silver his vessels for mead: he deserved gold./ Wine-fed was Gwaednerth son of Llywri (ll. 626-627), the sorrow after the banquet (l. 735), he drank the wine from the rim of the cups (l. 883), I drank deeply of mead before my journey, /wine-fed before Catraeth, in one gulp (ll. 913-914).

Because of the time contiguity with the battle, the symposium seems to be linked to a genuine propitiatory rite for the positive outcome of the fight. An evidence of it is that death and defeat are presented in logical contrast with such an auspicious ceremony:

in spite of the propitiatory rites (l. 82), although they drank bright mead by candles' light,/ though good was its taste, long detested (ll. 148-149).

In support of such ritual function there is the fact that those symposiums were meant to drive to drunkenness²⁴:

inebriation of pale mead (l. 338), after drunkenness, / draining mead (ll. 789-790).

3) Drinking abundantly at the knight assembly is a token of war-honour and it is tightly linked with the merit in battle: as a matter of fact, those expressions concerning drinking are al-

24. Concerning this topic, cf. Y. BONNEFOY, *Dizionario delle mitologie e delle religioni*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1989, according to whom the Germanic custom of drinking until intoxication, during the ritual banquet, a special ale prepared for that occasion, had a clearly sacred character. This definition, cited by Bonafin (*Gabbo: voto e vanto*) on the subject of the *Edda*, is valid also and especially for the symposiums in the *Gododdin* and in other Celtic texts I shall discuss below, and it may be considered as a further evidence of the Celtic derivation of this ritual.

ways paired with those exalting the heroism in fight. Consequently, the membership in a symposium becomes also the symbol of the acknowledgement given to a warrior by the community:

he drank vintage wine./ A reaper in war,/ he drank the sweet wine (ll. 169-171), in the great hall he was not kept out from the mead-drinking (l. 250), Genial and generous,/ great drinker of mead (ll. 305-306), he gulped a cup of mead (l. 776), Erf was not harsh at the banquet (l. 724), he was among those who drank from the cups (l. 833), wine-drinker (l. 933), for mead, for horn,/ for Catraeth's raiders/ I [...] sang the Gododdin (ll. 478-483), we must praise the sweet ensnaring mead (l. 745).

So much so that in the poem there are as well praises to the seat and to the portion bestowed to the knight in the feast, inasmuch as they are exterior tokens of the place the knight holds in the hierarchy of the community. The importance of those tokens will emerge again in another Celtic text I am going to analyse soon:

deservedly, he was seated at the table's head (l. 384), the champion's share at courts was for him (l. 894).

4) The strong tie existing between the battle and the feast – so strong that the two words become almost interchangeable – is proven by a series of images that merge the semantic field of one with that of the other, resulting in more or less metaphorical expressions. To a certain extent, I may say that the whole *Gododdin* is woven by the flows of blood and mead together:

wine in the blood of those you speared (l. 235), bright ranks around cups, joyful feast (l. 547), with his shield he would lift a spear/ like he were pouring wine from the cups (ll. 624-5), quickly you made blood flow/ as if you drank mead in the midst of laughter (ll. 674-5), in the rush of axes and sharp-edged swords/ there was a broad and rowdy banquet (ll. 780-781).

2.2. The *Beowulf*

After a geographical leap, although not moving my benchmark from the area of Celtic tradition, I shall examine now an

extract from *Beowulf*²⁵. This Anglo-Saxon poem, perhaps drawn up in the 7th century, is set in Denmark, and presents many group-drinking scenes, all the more so considering that the most of the action at king Hroðgar's court takes place in the feasting hall («the mead hall», l. 69)²⁶ of the royal palace “The Stag”. The scene I am quoting here comes from the opening of the poem, where the Geat hero Beowulf arrives at Hroðgar's court; in order to welcome him, the king convenes the Danish noblemen and prepares a feast:

Eode Wealhþeow forð,
 cwen Hroðgares, cynna gemyndig,
 grette goldhroden guman on healle,
 ond þa freolic wif ful gesealde
 ærest Eastdena eþelwearde,
 bæd hine bliðne æt þære beorþege,
 leodum leofne. He on lust geþeah
 symbol ond seleaf, sigerof kyning.
 Ymbeode þa ides Helminga
 duguþe ond geogoue dæl aghwylcne,
 sincfato sealde, oþþæt sæl alamp
 þæt hio Beowulfe, beaghroden cwen
 mode geþungen, medoful ætbær;
 grette Geata leod, gode þancode
 wisfæst wordum þæs ðe hire se willa gelamp
 þæt heo on ænigne eorl gelyfde
 fyrena frofre. He þæt ful geþeah,
 wælreow wiga, æt Wealhþeow,
 ond þa gyddode guþe gefysed.²⁷

[Wealhtheow, Hroðgar's queen, came forth, mindful of the customs: she greeted, bejewelled, the men in the hall. Thus, the noble lady offered the full cup first to the guardian of the East-Danes' homeland, bade him be blithe at the partaking of the beer, to the king beloved by his people. He took with delight the feast and the hall-cup, that victory famed king. Then, she went

25. All the quotations of this text are from LUDOVICA KOCH's Italian edition, *Beowulf* (Torino, Einaudi, 1987). The translation from Italian into English is mine.
26. It will be helpful noticing the structure of this hall, as L. Koch reconstructs it: «a rectangular pavilion [...] split in three naves by two rows of wooden pillars that supported the roof and on which would lean the “seats of beer” or “of mead”, all around the central fireplace» (*Beowulf*, p. 9).
27. *Beowulf*, ll. 612-630.

round about, the lady of Helmings, to veteran and youth, each of the groups, gave the precious cup, until the time came that to Beowulf, the ring-adorned queen of courteous mind carried the mead-cup. She greeted the Geat lord, thanked God with wise words and sure that her wish was to be fulfilled, that she would have a nobleman for comfort from wickedness. He took that cup, the slaughter-fierce warrior, from Wealhtheow, and then spoke solemnly, eager for war.]

In this scene is portrayed the development of what is immediately characterised as a traditional ceremonial.

According to the catalogue of recurring features in the group-drinking scenes compiled by Massimo Bonafin²⁸, it emerges clearly that, likewise what I already observed in the *Gododdin*, the context in which the drinking takes place is the assembly of the members of a male hierarchical military aristocracy. It is occasion for the collective consumption of an intoxicating beverage. Moreover, it takes place in a circumstance that, contrary to Bonafin's opinion, is not too far from the battle: "the Stag", in fact, is where the monster Grendel shows up, and for this reason it becomes the battlefield itself; in addition, the knights at symposium talk about the past and imminent fightings. Finally, we may infer from other passages in the poem that in this ceremony the final drunkenness is mandatory²⁹.

Nonetheless, new plugs enriched my reconstruction of the knightly symposium: one is the custom – occurring in many Romance texts as well – to pronounce vows or boasts while drinking. The other is the custom to make the beverage go around the table so to show the inner hierarchy of the group by means of the order and the quantity of the drinking.

2.3. *Cú Chulainn and the social value of the symposium*

In order to prove how the position inside the group

28. Cf. BONAFIN, *I guerrieri al simposio*, pp. 18-19

29. For instance, *Beowulf*, ll. 481 and 531.

drinking was the indicator of the social order in the warrior class, I bring the evidence of another Celtic work, Irish this time, belonging to the saga of Cú Chulainn, *The Feast of Bricriu*³⁰. This text, drawn up around the 8th century, part of the Cycle of Ulster, is centred on the quarrel instigated during a feast by Bricriu Nemthenga between the Ulster heroes Cú Chulainn, Conall and Loegaire for the possession of the Champion's Portion. According to the description that Bricriu gives of it, the portion consists in the meat of the best-fed boar and heifer, a hundred cakes of wheat cooked in honey and a gargantuan quantity of wine, described as follows: *in my house there is a cauldron full of generous wine, with room enough for three of the valiant warriors of Ulster*³¹.

In addition, it is worth noting that the first attempt to settle the controversy of the Champion's Portion is made by a female character as significant as the queen Medb. In this attempt, the hierarchical position of the three warriors is objectified by the assignation of a cup of different value to each hero: *to the winner, Cú Chulainn, a cup of gold was given, full of luscious wine; on the bottom it had birds chased in precious stone*³².

Obviously, the hero empties the cup in one gulp.

Finally, we catch a glimpse of the feast scene. It seems that in it, contrary to the other examples observed so far, the three heroes' wives take part in the banquet, together with their large retinue. Nevertheless, the circular position of the partakers and the tendency to drink until inebriation show up in this text, too: *they made a circle round the fire, the men got drunk and made merry*.³³

29. All the quotations of this text are from the Italian edition *La saga irlandese di Cú Chulainn*, vol. 2 of *Saghe e leggende celtiche*, eds. G. AGRATI and M.L. MAGINI, Milano, Mondadori, 1982. The translation is mine.

31. *Ibidem*, p. 74.

32. *Ibidem*, p. 93.

33. *Ibidem*, p. 77.

2.4. *The lady leader and the prophetess*

In the scene from *Beowulf* I detected a second new element: the presence of a woman, significantly the queen, who serves the alcoholic beverage to the warriors in accordance with the hierarchical order. Making reference again to Galloni's hypothesis illustrated above, that may be the trace of the recycling in a BB environment of the female sovereignty donor from the Palaeolithic.

The presence of ladies who hold a leadership role in warrior and male-dominated contexts is, however, considerably spread in Celtic literature. For what concerns the queen Medb, it is possible to observe how in the first part of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*³⁴ she proudly states her royal superiority over the husband. What's more, she represents herself as a real trifunctional goddess, using the terminology elaborated by Dumézil: indeed, she holds the territorial and juridical power; she is accustomed to exercise her generosity as well as to have several lovers; she owns excellent abilities in fighting and army-leading³⁵.

There are also historical instances of Celtic warrior-queens: it shall be enough to cite the most famous of them, Boudica, the queen of the Iceni tribe who at the time of the Roman occupation of England, according to Cassio Dio, lead her people to a violent, but disastrous, uprising against the invaders³⁶. In his *Roman History*, Dio describes the queen as standing up in triumph on the war chariot, armed with spear and dressed with the mantle cloak and the torque, in all similar to the Gododdin warriors. Nonetheless, the role of these women of power is not limited to the replica of the correspondent male role: in fact, in tight connection with their

34. All the quotations of this text are from the Italian edition *La saga irlandese di Cú Chulainn*, pp. 107-254. The translation is mine.

35. *Ibidem*, pp. 107-8.

36. CASSIO DIO, *Storia Romana*, ed. A. STOPPA & A. GALIMBERTI, Milano, Rizzoli, 1999; LXII, 2, 2-4.

juridical and military authority, they hold a religious function with a focus on the prophetic wisdom. This feature is shared by Medb and Boudica: the first one is never portrayed while prophesying, but distinguished herself from the other male military leaders for her obsessive search for omens and prophecies. For this reason, shortly before leaving for war against the Ulaid men, she consults a prophetess, who is characterised too as a warrior by the sword on her side and the chariot³⁷. Boudica, instead, is shown by our source right in the moment when she performs a divination in order to persuade her people to fight³⁸.

My last example of a woman who joins in herself political authority and sacral-prophetic authority is Veleda, the seer who, according to Tacitus, followed the Germanic tribe of the Bructeri. She was an authentic woman shaman and at the same time a judicial guarantor and a military leader for her people. The only difference in the comparison with the other two women considered above is that Veleda does not seem to blend in with the knight assembly and neither to ever show up personally in front of her people³⁹.

This figure, apparently far from the cup-bearer queen whence I started my path, is on the contrary linked through her name to the Danish queen of *Beowulf*. The name Veleda, according to Guyonvarc'h and Le Roux, may be of Celtic origin and would go back to the semantic root that is responsible for the Irish *fili*, word that was used to designate a member of the traditional elite of poets, and for the Welsh *grwelet*, which meant 'poet' or 'seer'⁴⁰. In accordance with Enright, Galloni suggests that the name Wealhtheow «may be an Anglo-Saxon mangling of the Celtic loan-word

37. *La saga irlandese di Cú Chulainn*, pp. 126-127.

38. CASSIO DIO, *Storia Romana*, LXII, 6, 1.

39. TACITUS, *Storie, Dialogo degli Oratori, Germania, Agricola*, ed. A. ARICI, Torino, UTET, 1959; IV, 61 and 65.

40. Cf. C. GUYONVARCH - F. LE ROUX, *I druidi*, Genova, ECIG, 1990 [original edition *Les Druides*, Rennes, Ouest-France, 1961], pp. 566-570.

correspondent to *Veleda*»⁴¹.

2.5. *The princess at the symposium*

In the light of the texts I have analysed so far it is possible to recognise a Celtic continuity of the motif of the knightly feast also in those contexts that are geographically Germanic, in particular when it is a woman who directs the ritual.

As a matter of fact, we can infer that the warrior group-drinking, within a civilization that was as war-concerned as the Celtic one was, had a sacral propitiatory character, as well as a function of social identifier. The lady that sometimes chairs such a meeting presumably gathered in herself the role of political and military sovereignty as much as a religious or shamanic role. Nonetheless, it is more than likely that at the time when the texts I have analysed were drawn up, that identification could not be knowingly recognised any more, but only traditionally conveyed as a literary convention.

In confirmation of what I have said, it is relevant to read an extract from *Historia regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth. There we find the description of the opening of the banquet in which the Saxon princess Renwein, in order to seduce the Britanic king Vortigern, gets him drunk.

Once they had arrived, Hengist invited King Vortigern to his home to inspect the new building and to review the warriors who had just landed. [...] While he was being entertained at a royal banquet, the girl Renwein came out of an inner room carrying a golden goblet full of wine. She walked up to the King, curtsied low and said: "*Loverd King, was hail!*" When he saw the girl's face, Vortigern was greatly struck by her beauty and was filled with desire for her. He asked his interpreter what it was that the girl had said and what he ought to reply to her. "She called you 'Lord king'", answered the interpreter, "and did you honour by drinking your health. What you should reply is '*drink hail*'. Vortigern immediately said the words '*drinc hail*' and ordered Renwein to drink. Then he took the goblet from her hand, kissed her and drank his turn."⁴²

41 GALLONI, *Escursioni sciamaniche*, p. 114.

42. GEOFFREY OF MOMMOUTH, *The history of the Kings of Britain*, ed. L. THORPE, London, Penguin, 1966, vi, 12.

It is worth specifying that the text above must not be taken as a testimony endowed with historical value: the motif of the seduction through inebriation is widely attested in all-time literatures and does not imply an real event behind it; even the populations the extract refers do not have to be intended historically⁴³. What is interesting for my survey, here as in other occasions, is the value of the scene as a cultural testimony.

It is possible to notice that the ritual is very similar to the one already described in the scene from *Beowulf*: a female ruler, distinguished for her qualities of beauty and intelligence, manages the order of drinking in the warrior assembly, physically handing down the goblet full with the inebriating beverage; she as well addresses to the most honoured banqueter titles of sovereignty, recognising thus his authority within the assembly⁴⁴.

However, it will be much more interesting to spot elements belonging to the Celtic symposium in Romance texts that are rather far – for language and setting – from the scene described by Geoffrey.

43. I consider appropriate to make a hint to the hypothesis of a Welsh derivation of the name Renwein, from *rhon* + *wen* (A. HUTSON, *Personal Names in the Historia Regum Britanniae*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1940, pp. 57, 120) or of an ancient English derivation from **Hrödwyn* (E.G. WITHYCOMBE, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, 3rd ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988). However, these two hypotheses have been contradicted by S.L. FRIEDEMANN and J. MITTLEMAN (*Concerning the Names Rowena, Rowan, and Rhonwen*, 1999, in <www.medievalscotland.org>).

44. The fact that in this occasion such proclamation of sovereignty is performed with deceitful purposes, does not erode in any way the similarity; on the contrary, it confirms the official – and thus beyond suspicion – importance of that acknowledgement.

3. *The Romance texts*

3.1. *The Celts in France*

Before proceeding, a question imposes itself: does it make sense to look for a similarity of long-time origin between Celtic and Romance traditions? I shall answer rather straightforwardly: France was Celtic, too. During the Neolithic, agriculture is brought and spread in that area by the LBK culture (Linear Pottery), which in the PCP frame is interpreted as Germanic: however, this takes place only at the end of the 5th millennium, with remarkable delay in comparison with the neighbouring areas. This delay may be realistically explained with the necessity of a longer time of acculturation due to the impact with the pre-existing Celtic culture. In the Late Neolithic, moreover, the Mesolithic disruption inside the French territory between Celtic North and Italic South is emphasised by the emergence in the North of the Seine-Oise-Marne culture (SOM). This culture shows all the features that will be distinctive of the Celts from the Proto-History onwards: the Megalithism, the gallery tombs, the warfare ethic, the trade initiative. Shortly after the SOM, on Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of France the BB makes its first appearance, a culture that can be interpreted as Celtic as well⁴⁵.

This analysis of the Celtic substratum in the French territory leads to the conclusions of the PCP, according to which «the Celts, as an Indo-European group already parted, settle since the Pleistocene in Northern and Middle-West Europe, and from there spread in the whole Western and Central Europe and beyond», whereas in the «Neolithic, starting with the Megalithism and then with the BB, the Celts blended with other Indo-European groups, to the extent that they determined important phenomena of hybridisation»⁴⁶.

45. ALINEI, *Origini delle lingue d'europa*, II, pp. 506-513.

46. Ibidem, pp. 535-536; on this problem, cf. now F. BENOZZO - M. ALINEI, *Les Celtes le long des côtes atlantiques: une présence ininterrompue depuis le*

That said, it is possible to infer realistically a pan-Celtic millenarian cultural continuity. In particular, in the French area this continuity emerges as a fossil of the pre-Roman and pre-Germanic substratum, through a «massive collection of poetic texts and legends that originated as a narrative core probably in the now Brythonic territories before the deglaciation, i.e. during the late Mesolithic»⁴⁷.

Clearly, this approach fits in with an archaeology of the Medieval epics as Grisward theorized it: according to this scholar, the epic songs would come from a narrative material of extremely ancient origin that was continuously revised and 'refunctionalised' throughout time⁴⁸. Nonetheless, the approach I am using goes beyond Grisward because it refuses the Germanic medium in the Indo-European origin of French epics. In accordance with Sergent, instead, it finds in those archaic traces some motifs that are more likely to stem from the Celtic tradition, although somewhat 'whitewashed' and hence harder to recognise in comparison with the same motifs in the literatures of the British Isles⁴⁹. Obviously, the perspective I am using is different from both Grisward's and Sergent's, insofar as mine isolates and interprets those archaic features of the Romance literature as a tangle of historical clues of a Celtic-Beaker prehistory of the French epics.

Paléolithique, in D. LE BRIS (ed), *Aires linguistiques / Aires culturelles*, Brest, Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique, 2012, pp. 55-76.

47. F. BENOZZO, *La tradizione smarrita. Le origini non scritte delle letterature romanze*, Roma, Viella, 2007, p. 40.

48. Cf. J. GRISWARD, *Archéologie de l'épopée médiévale*, Paris, Payot, 1981.

49. Cf. BENOZZO, *La tradizione smarrita*; A. FASSÒ, *La letteratura cavalleresca: nuove proposte*, in *La civiltà cavalleresca e l'Europa*, eds. F. CARDINI & I. GAGLIARDI, Pisa, Pacini editore, 2007, pp. 107-139; B. SERGENT, *Observations sur l'origine du cycle des Narbonnais*, «Romania», CV, 1984, pp. 462-491.

3.2. *Sone de Nansai*

My journey shall start from a rather obscure text: the *Sone de Nansai*, a romance of 20,000 octosyllables drawn up in the second half of the 13th century in the Brabant area⁵⁰. This biographical novel tells the story of Sone, the younger son of Henri de Nansai, who, after experiencing love woes, sets for a journey that will take him to Scotland first, then to Norway, where he fights on account of king Alain against Scottish and Irish armies. After the victory, he reaches France in order to take part in jousts and tournaments, but soon he goes back to Norway where he marries the king's daughter, Odée, and accedes to the throne. Afterwards, he becomes emperor and, before dying, witnesses the triumph of his four sons, who respectively obtain the kingdom of Sicily, Jerusalem, Norway and Rome (as pope).

The part that interests me here is when Sone, who has just reached the Scandinavian land, joins a series of ceremonies, more or less explicitly propitiatory for the forthcoming war: namely the welcome feast and, shortly before the final duel with the Scottish champion, the pilgrimage to Galoche monastery. In particular, I quote here the extract that refers to the welcome banquet offered by the king and his sons to Sone:

Li fil le roi ont Sone pris,
bas sont a une escame assis.
Dont veissies mes apoter
Aussi c'on les piosast en mer.
Chiervoise et vin partout avoit;
car lor coustume telle estoit.
Longement sisent au mangier
Tant qu'assés pëust anuijer
Qui ensi ne l'ëust usé.
Car il se sont si abuvré

50. All the quotations of this text are from *Sone von Nausay*, ed. M. MORITZ GOLDSCHMIDT, Tübingen, Bibliothek des litterarischen vereins in Stuttgart, 1899.

Que cascuns sa fable contoit,
 leur nus for[s] lui ne l'escoutoit.
 Tant erent en grant de parler,
 nus ne pëust tout escouter.
 Li tiers du jour fu en mangier.
 Cascuns estoit en haubregier,
 l'escu au col, ou poing l'espee.
 Toute ert Irlande a mort livree.
 Et ensi que cascuns disoit,
 que li rois d'Escoche i venroit
 et seroit li premiers tués;
 "Ses freres qu'est enprisonnés
 N'en istera, ce ne puet iestre,
 tant que Dieus sauve men brach diestre"
 Ensi partout se combatoient
 Et puis le hanap enbrachioient.
 Sones, qui n'avoit ce usé,
 les a a mierveille esgardé.
 Mieux amast son cheval veyr
 Que chiaus le hanap rasseyr.
 Leur hanas tout adiés aloit,
 joustes et bataille furnissoit.
 Li fil le roi Sone mout prient
 Par amours que ne li poist nient.
 "Ensi wellent le tamps passer
 En boire, en mangier, en parler;
 en manechief chiaus qui n'i sont
 l'usage de lor pays font.
 Et se premerains vous levies,
 d'yaus honnis et blasmés series".⁵¹

[The king's sons have received Sone, they have seated on low chairs. Then you would have seen bringing plates from everywhere as if they were drawn on the sea. Ale and wine were everywhere, since such was their custom. Thus they sat at the banquet such a long time that he who were not accustomed to it would have got bored. They drunk and ate so much that everyone told his story but nobody listened except himself. Indeed, they were so taken up eating that no one could listen to everything. Everyone was wearing his hauberk, the shield at his neck, the sword in his fist. Ireland sounded to be doomed. Everyone said that if the king of Scotland arrived there he would have been killed first. "His brother is imprisoned and shall never be freed, it cannot be, until God preserves my right arm". Thus, in words, they all endlessly fought and then grabbed the cup. Sone, who did not have that custom, stared at them with astonishment. He would have loved more to watch his horse than them rising the goblet. The cup passed ceaselessly among them, it provided them joust and battle. The king's sons

51. *Sone von Nausay*, ll. 3263-3302.

greatly pray Sone, for their love, that it may not weight too much on him. "They want to spend their time drinking, eating, talking; when they threaten those absent they follow the custom of their country. If you leave the table before, you will be dishonoured and blamed".]

This first part portrays a knightly feast, whose ceremonial importance is expressed by the length itself of the ritual (maybe not hyperbolically, we are told that it lasts a third of a day) and by the stress given to the necessity for the foreigner Sone to respect the custom if he wants to avoid the collective blame. In addition, another feature that distinguishes such ritual feast is the partakers' habit to utter solemn vows concerning their fighting value. These vows are often so hyperbolic to become mere boasts: as both Bonafin and Nyrop point out, they trace back to the Scandinavian tradition of the *heitstrengingar*, i.e. vows uttered in turn in occasion of the sacred banquets in which huge quantities of ale were consumed until drunkenness; but the same practice of giving war pledges between one cupful and the next appeared in the extract from the *Beowulf* as well⁵².

Moreover, it does not surprise to read in this scene the tight bond that I have highlighted from the very start between group-drinking and war: the knights obviously brag about their future war deeds; but most remarkably they are already dressed and armed as if they should fight, and the same flaming vehemence of their speeches turns the banquet into a battle⁵³.

Let us now move on with the feast:

Ensi che il se devisoient
et de plusieurs coses parloient,
li fille le roi a yalz vient,
c'un grant hanap en sa main tient,
et devant yalz s'angenouilla
et dist, ja ne s'en mouvera,

52. Cf. BONAFIN, *I guerrieri al simposio*, and K. NYROP, *Sone de Nansai et la Norvege*, «Romania», xxxv, 1906, pp. 555-569.

53. *Sone von Nausay*, l. 3288.

si averont tout but le vin
 et delivré le maserin.
 Chelle premiers a commenchié;
 apriès l'a a Sone baillié,
 si dist: "biau sire, bien buvés
 par chelle foi que mi devés."
 Sones lor us pas ne savoit,
 si dist que ja n'i buveroit,
 tant qu'elle fust agenouillie:
 ne set rien de tel courtoisie.
 Li fieus le roi dist: "Si ferés
 u ja series de tous blasmés.
 A nostre usage hounour vous fait,
 si le prendés a peu de plait,
 Bien sachiés que fille est le roi.
 Si sommes si freres ambedoi."
 quant Sones entent lor usage,
 bien li sanle plains de musage.
 Le coupe a la puchielle prist,
 .I. boire i out qui poi li sist.
 Mais ne dist pas quan qu'il pensoit:
 Aavec les leus ensi ulloit.
 Et quant ot but, si l'a bailliét
 chelui avec cui a mangiét.
 Chilz but, son frere le bailla
 et chilz tint la coupe meda⁵⁴,
 si l'a la puchielle baillie.
 Lors s'est sur ses piés redrechie.
 Puis dist: "Signour, vostre mierci
 du boire biel, c'avés fait chi."
 S'est a la cambre repairie,
 mais les trois damoisiaus n'oublie.
 Trois espees blanches a pris
 et trois lanches as fiers burnis,
 si l'a les dansiaus presenté,
 cui elle ot le boire porté.
 La premiere a Sone baillie,
 mais il ne le refuse mie.
 Cascuns de ses compaignons a
 la sieuwe; car on lor bailla.⁵⁵

[While they spoke thus and discussed about many things, the king's daughter comes forth holding a great goblet in her hands, she kneels down in front of him and says she shall never move from there before they will have

54. GASTON PARIS here emends 'et chilz tost la coupe voida' («Romania»), xxxi, 1902, p. 121).

55. *Sone von Nausay*, ll. 3303-348.

finished all the wine and emptied the cup. She has started first; then she has handed it to Sone, thus speaking: "Good lord, drink for the faith you owe me". Sone did not know their custom, therefore he said that he would not drink until she was on her knees: he ignores such a courtesy. The king's son said: "You will do so or you shall be blamed by everyone. According to our custom it makes you honour if you take the cup without arguing; consider that she is the daughter of the king and we are both her brothers". When Sone acknowledges their custom, he finds it highly despicable. He takes the goblet from the maiden, therein was a beverage he did not appreciate. But he did not say what he thought: he howled with the wolves. And when he had drunk, he passed it down to the one with whom he had eaten. He drank, passed it to his brother and he quickly emptied the cup; so he handed it down to the maiden. Then she stood up. And she said: "My lord, I say you grace for the nice drinking you have made". Then she withdrew to her room, but not forgetting the three young lords, she took three white swords and three iron-pointed spears, she handed them down to the young men to whom she had served to drink. She brought the first one to Sone and he does not refuse it. Each of his companions got one because she gave it.]

This scene brings me back directly and surprisingly to the episode told by Geoffrey of Monmouth. As a matter of fact, here, too, there is a princess who performs an identical ritual: she kneels down and, after drinking herself (new detail), gives drink to the noble guests. When, eventually, she looks to go off, she reappears from her room bringing spears and swords and makes out of them a gift for those to whom she offered the drink. This is a clear signal of the coincidence between drinking and fighting, and in particular of the military authority that this figure of the cup-bearer lady still held.

Facing the coincidence between the two scenes from the *Sone* and from the *Historia*, it is legitimate to ask oneself where this custom comes from. I have already rejected the possibility that the episode from *Historia Regum Britanniae* could be endowed with some historical credibility and thus be referred to a Germanic population. It is much more likely that the ritual arrived to Geoffrey from the humus of habits, customs and legends of the culture he belonged to⁵⁶. Concerning the episode in

56. All the more so since the author himself acknowledges the identity between the toasting habits of his time with the words exchanged between Renwein and Vortigern, and he even postulates an infeasible derivation from the Saxon custom («ab illo die usque in hodiernum mansit con-

Sone, Nyrop vehemently suggests a direct Scandinavian derivation of the scene: since it is objectively difficult to demonstrate a textual filiation between a Norwegian writing and a French one in this period, he naively assumes that the author had a trip to Norway⁵⁷. However, even Nyrop, although firmly convinced that the drinking habit described in the scene is not French but Scandinavian, must admit that it «n'〔est〕 mentionné, que nous sachions, dans aucune des vieilles *sagas* ou chroniques»⁵⁸. What makes this hypothesis unacceptable, though, lies much upstream in the very idea that it implicates of a purely authorial Medieval literature; nowadays it is not possible any more to uphold this idea realistically⁵⁹.

Back to the text, I shall try now to follow the trails of some morphological traits of the ritual described above also in other Romance texts.

3.3. *The vaunts: the «Voyage de Charlemagne»*

A first element into which it may be interesting to delve is the motif of the vow/vaunt. Bonafin dedicated wide part of his research to this topic, treating it mainly in a comparative manner; this is the reason why I shall temporarily follow his path⁶⁰. The starting point of his studies is the *Voyage de Charlemagne*, a humorous epic poem of less than 900 verses, drawn up around the half of the 12th century.⁶¹ It tells the story of the serio-comic pilgrimage of Charlemagne to Constantinople, with the

suetudo illa in Britannia...», GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, VI, 12).

57. NYROP, *Sone de Nansai et la Norvege*.

58. Ibidem, p. 561.

59. For a diffused argumentation of this issue, cf. F. BENOZZO, *Etnofilologia. Un'introduzione*, Napoli, Liguori, 2010.

60. Cf. BONAFIN, *Gabbo: voto e vanto*, and IDEM, *I guerrieri al simposio*.

61. The quotations of this text are from the Italian edition by IDEM (*Il Viaggio di Carlomagno* [1987]). The translation is mine.

purpose to find out whether the king of that city is better than him, as his wife the queen imprudently declared. Once arrived in the capital city of the Eastern Empire, the king and his twelve peers are welcomed with a lavish banquet, in which «a <e>spandant <l>ur portent le vin et le claret» [they bring to them wine and claret in abundance]⁶². But the moment of warrior vows comes afterwards: once the feast is over the knights go to sleep and in their room, while drinking some more wine Hugon has delivered to them, the twelve profusely utter hyperbolic and comic *gabs*. The tight link between the alcoholic drinking and the vaunts is repeatedly stressed in the text⁶³. However, the vows of the knights in the *Voyage* are rather different from those that would have been pronounced by Beowulf or the Norwegian knights that intimidated Sone. In addition, another apparently discouraging fact is that this text does not feature any of the characteristics of the chivalric symposiums analysed so far.

Nonetheless, I shall advance two considerations: the first is that, although they do not directly interest my research, the studies carried on about the morphological recurrence of the knightly vaunts has lead to the encouraging acknowledgement of a wide repertoire of the same motif in literary traditions that are geographically and chronologically far from each other⁶⁴. Moreover, these studies have concluded that this rite – and, by extension, the narrative repertoire related to that – have a common origin, inside a «milieu où sont venus se mélanger des sujets et des préoccupations nouvelles et le souvenir de mœurs, d'habitudes d'imagination e d'un folklore que peuvent remonter très loin», that is an age in which the traditions that in the Middle Age appear to us as diversified and distant, «appartenaient tous à une communauté à l'intérieur de laquelle la communication d'idées, de sentiments et des produits de

62. *Il viaggio di Carlomagno*, l. 412.

63. See also ll. 650, 653 and 665-6

64. Cf. IDEM, *I guerrieri al simposio* in particular.

l'imagination et de la poésie était encore possible et effective»⁶⁵.

In the second place, the circumstance that, from a motif such as that of the group drinking, in the French epics some attributes survive while others disappear is part of the physiological metamorphosis that any repository of culture and mythology undergoes in the process of re-contextualisation. Therefore, although the original ritual is not explicit but rather opaque, it does not mean the ritual did not exist in the first place, at least at the level of traditional collective heritage of myths and customs. This is demonstrated by the occurrence of different features of the ritual symposium in other texts, albeit isolated, altered and endowed with a new function. It happens in another French epic poem, *Gormont et Isebart*⁶⁶, written in octosyllables probably around the end of the 11th century.

Si vos servi come pulcele;
 le poun mis en l'escuele;
 unc n'en meustes la maissele
 (...) Trop estes vos vantés, bricun!
 Joe te conois assez, Hugon,
 qui, l'altr'ier, fus as paveilluns;
 si me servis de mun poun
 que n'en mui unques le gernun,
 si por floies dire nun.⁶⁷

[I served you as a maiden: I put the peacock in your bowl: never you moved your jaw at it. (...) You are too a boaster, you rascal! I well recognize you, Hugon, who were in my tent the day before yesterday: and you served me my peacock without me moving the jaw but to say something trivial.]

The scene is cryptic: it displays Gormont and Hugon holding against each other a fault inside a ritual that is only allu-

65. C. KNUDSON, *Serments téméraires et gabs: notes sur un thème littéraire*, in *Société Rencesvals, IV Congrès International*, Heidelberg, 1967, p. 259; quoted in BONAFIN, *I guerrieri al simposio*, pp. 24-25.

66. The quotations from this text come from *Gormond e Isebart*, ed. B. PANVINI, Parma, Pratiche, 1990.

67. *Gormond e Isebart*, ll. 244-246 and 256-61.

sively hinted at, probably because it was well known by the audience of that time. Such a rite must have included, in the context of a banquet, the utterance of vows of brave deeds as soon as the peacock arrived on the feast table; in addition, we learn that the bird was served by a maiden, and that the verbal competition took place exactly in the moment in which she used to allot the portions. This is the tradition, widely attested in the Middle Ages, of the *vœux du paon*, recorded also in Boccaccio's *Filocolo*⁶⁸. As a matter of fact, as well in Boccaccio's text, in the scene of a sumptuous banquet held for the king's birthday, we find the same elements cited in the *Gormont et Isembart*: the reunion of noblemen in a celebratory context, the importance of the moment of distribution of a dish, carried upon a precious stool, the fact that the distribution is carried on by a maiden considered the best for nobility and beauty (no less than the princess, in this case), the custom to brag about one's value during the distribution.

Due to the evident similarities with the ritual symposium, Bonafin himself points out that the vow of the peacock may be a variant of the *gab*; moving a little further, on the trail of the argument I have been conducting so far, it is even more likely that it was a descendant of the Celtic knightly symposium. If it is the case, however, the re-contextualisation of the ritual – and the courteous refinement of the original violent knight – could have switched the functional stress from the alcoholic drink to the game dish, limited the original aggressive spirit only to the verbal competitiveness, and watered the function of the queen who allotted the social distinction inside a simple – but still noble and beautiful – sutler.

3.4. *Orable/Guiborc, i.e. the Celtic queen*

Putting aside the *gabs*, I believe it to be useful to lead my textual exploration starting from the female figure, since she is

68. BOCCACCIO, *Filocolo*, II, 33-35.

somehow a specific trait of the Celtic ritual symposium. For this reason I shall analyse the character of Guiborc, Saracen queen with the name of Orable, then wife of Guillaume d'Orange in the homonym cycle⁶⁹: in this complex figure, rich with stratifications, we may indeed recognize several functions that were already owned by the Celtic cup-bearer queen⁷⁰.

3.4.1. *The goddess of the Other World*

An evident function of the Saracen queen is the magical-sacral one. Orable, as Blanchefleur suspects in the *Chanson de Guillaume*, is a magician: it is proved by her healing powers and her capability to create phantasmagorias and demoniac images⁷¹. It is worth noticing how both the first and the second are shaman talents: in particular, the knowledge of medicinal

69. The quotations from this cycle come from *Aliscans* ed. C. REGNIER, Paris, Champion, 2 voll, 1990; *Enfances Guillaume*, ed. P HENRY, Paris, Société des anciens textes français, 1935, *La Canzone di Guglielmo*, ed. A. FASSÒ, Roma, Carocci, 2007², *Prise d'Orange*, ed. C. REGNIER, Paris, Klincksieck, 1972, *Les Narbonnais*, ed. H. SUCHIER, London, Johnson Reprint, 1965.

70. For what concerns the following pages, cf. BANCOURT, *Les musulmans dans les chansons de geste du Cycle du roi*; K.A. CAMPBELL, *Fighting Back: a Survey of Patterns of Female Aggressiveness in the Old French Chanson de Geste*, in *Charlemagne in the North. Proceedings of the Twelfth International Conference of the Société Rencesvals, Edinburgh 4-11 August 1991*, Edinburgh, Société Rencesvals British Branch, 1993, pp. 241-251; C. LACHET, *Figures féminines dans Aliscans*, in *Mourir aux Aliscans. Aliscans et la légende de Guillaume d'Orange*, Paris, Champion, 1993, pp. 103-119; S. LUONGO, *La femme magicienne: Orable tra epopea e folclore*, in *Charlemagne in the North*, pp. 345-359; FASSÒ, *Cortesia, mito ed epopea*. For what concerns in general the elements of Celtic mythology and customs in the Narbonnais cycle, I refer to the hard-hitting essay by SERGENT, *Observations sur l'origine du cycle des Narbonnais*: among those elements, apart from the figure of the authoritative and warrior queen, the social status of the knights, the motif of the division of the world in five kingdoms, the inheritance of the power for the youngest son, the occurrence of the number seven, the importance of the beheading in war, the correspondence of some names with gods from the Celtic pantheon.

71. Cf. *Enfances Guillaume*, ll. 684-7, 1888-2000.

virtues of the herbs, so common to the Saracen women in the French epic⁷², is possibly linked with the Palaeolithic Picker I hinted above. For what concerns the apparition of the clamorous parade of demons, it is possible to associate it with the folkloric custom of the *charivari*, a ritual parade of people disguised as animals and beings from the Other World. Moreover, it is noteworthy that a particularly recurrent feature in the Saracen queens, although it is not explicitly shown in Guiborc, is clairvoyance, that is in fact owned by Mirabel in *Aiol* and by Bramimonde in the *Chanson de Roland*. It is superfluous to remind here the importance of the art of divination for the Celtic queens.

Finally, it may be the case to point out how Orable is the queen of a city that, according to Bennett, can be assimilated for its topological and functional features, to the mythological Other World⁷³. These features include the access through water or through a secret underground path or by means of a demoniac concealing; the presence of an indestructible tower of fabulous wealth, built on the very foundations of the earth; the fact that only a magic lady can master and fully know it.

As an other-world lady, Orable/Guiborc holds another function, not far from the first one: that of the sovereignty donor. Like many other ladies from epics and courtly romances, the erotic possession of her means the acquisition of the political and territorial power, all the more because her identity seems to blur with the land of which she is the queen. This identification is revealed both by her name (*Orable-Orange*⁷⁴), and by her actions, since every time she takes part in the battle

72. Bancourt brings as evidence, among the others, Floripas in *Fierabras* (ll. 2164-2156, 2209-2211), Alfamie in *Otinel* (ll. 1049-1051) and Margalie in *Floovant* (ll. 1775-1776).

73. P.E. BENNETT, *The Storming of the Other World, the Enamoured Muslim Princess and the Evolution of the Legend of Guillaume d'Orange*, in *Guillaume d'Orange and the Chanson de geste*, eds. W. VAN EMDEN and P.E. BENNETT, Reading, Société Rencesvals (British Branch), 1984, pp. 1-14.

74. Cf. Introduction to *La Canzone di Guglielmo*, p. 19.

her interventions are always defensive (such as when she throws stones on the besiegers of Orange, cf. below) and she appears as the caretaker of the drawbridge in several occasions in *Aliscans* (refusing the access first, and welcoming later on)⁷⁵. Finally, the identification with the city is shown by the fact that Orable seems the only person to know Orange, as proven in the episode in which the queen lets Guillaume and his men in the city⁷⁶.

Furthermore, several places in the cycle of Guillaume where the marriage conquest is symbolically connected with the territorial conquest make clear that «Orange as a whole is Orable's 'kingdom', and that possession of the territory goes with possession of the woman»⁷⁷. The same Bennett acknowledges the sameness of this type of queen with the Celtic territorial goddess whose prototype, Medb, I have already introduced: as the personification of her kingdom, she marks with her many betrayals the passage of sovereignty from a king to his successor, to such an extent that she appears in the chronicles as the bridge of every king of Ireland. The help given by Orable and many other Muslim queens or princesses to the Christian heroes, responds to the same ritual function. Their behaviour would not be explicable if it did not fit in the model of the «woman from a strange land, marriage to whom is the reward for the hero who is either summoned by her, or who is led to her by adventure, and who rescues her from an aggressive and occasionally diabolical enemy»⁷⁸.

3.4.2. *The sword and the cup*

Orable is characterised by a veiled but obstinate link with war, that emerges under various facets.

75. Cf. *Aliscans*, ll. 1983-2159 and 4228-44

76. Cf. *Prise d'Orange*, ll. 1398 ff.

77. BENNETT, *The Storming of the Other World*, p. 5.

78. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 8.

One, the most evident, is the fact that she herself fights: in the *Chanson de Guillaume*, Guiborc comfortingly promises to be ready to take arms, together with her retinue, to defend the city⁷⁹; in *Aliscans* she is portrayed while making the same promise when Guillaume leaves to ask for help from the king of France; she even puts this promise in practice in the moment of the Saracen assault, action that gains her some typically warrior epithets, as «Guiborc la vaillant» or «la contesse au vis fier»⁸⁰. Not the only Guiborc fights: again in *Aliscans* we find Ermenjart, Guillaume's mother, who, more promptly than her husband Aymeri, promises to provide an army to her son, and offers to fight herself⁸¹. However, the feminine aggressiveness in war always turns out in unconventional fighting methods: Guiborc, although perfectly armed, does not ever give a sword thrust but throws stones from the walls, like Aude does too; Floripas draws on her alchemical-magical knowledge in order to prepare an explosive potion and later on she uses a club to smash the head of a prison guard; Mirabel, in *Aiol*, draws an axe, leaving to Aiol the more 'civilized' sword⁸².

It is not a sufficient reason to give, as Campbell does, a reductive interpretation of the attitude to warfare of the epic queens; on the contrary, not only their dormant violence contributes to suggest the Celtic roots of these ladies⁸³, but the fact that the women warfare in the epics frequently shows some primitiveness seems a clue of its archaic derivation – perhaps Prehistoric. According to my interpretation, in Medieval literature the violence of the Celtic warrior princess coexisted with the courtly re-functionalisation of the woman more easily than it may seem to us.

79. Cf. *La Canzone di Guglielmo*, ll. 2444-51.

80. Cf. *Aliscans*, respectively ll. 2357-8; 4131-204; 4221; 4653, 4927.

81. Cf. *ibidem*, ll. 3100-14.

82. Cf. *Girart de Vienne*, ll. 4630-4; *Fierabras*, ll. 908 ff. and ll. 2089 ff.; *Aiol*, ll. 5901 ff.

83. Cf. SERGENT, *Observations sur l'origine du cycle des Narbonnais*.

Another aspect, more subtle, but heavier with implications, is Orable's involvement in the *adoubement* of the knight: in the *Aliscans*, she is the one who dresses and undresses of his armour the Narbonnais⁸⁴. But there's more: the lady herself gives the weapons, previously guarded by her, to her bridegroom and to her brother. In the *Prise d'Orange*, Orable, in order to guarantee the success in battle of the beloved Christian count, fetches from a chest in her room hauberk, shield and sword, the ones that were previously owned by Tiebaut⁸⁵. The same happens in *Aliscans*: Orable dresses in arms her brother Renoart with hauberk, helm and spear of the finest workmanship, endowed with a magical infallibility⁸⁶; in addition, also in this case the weapons had been donated previously to Tiebaut, which fact highlights how she is the real and only owner of those instruments and only hers is the power to give them to another knight. Eventually, she dresses her brother with those arms and – new feature – she teaches him their virtues and how to use them. In a similar manner, the daughter of the king of Gascony, Elissent, as she gets married to Beuve – and after having chosen him, instead of having been chosen –, presents him a sword, teaches him how to use it together with the attributes and virtues that a king must possess⁸⁷. The choice of the bridegroom, the flaunted knowledge of the royal qualities, together with the dexterity in the use of weapons: how can they not remind us of the queen Medb?

Furthermore, Orable does not only give weapons: in *Enfances Guillaume* she presents to the bridegroom Tiebaut a magnificent steed, Baucent, that

is represented with marks typical of fantastic animals: its bridle flickers with gold and silver, its saddle is golden and a precious cloth covers its back. Orable – in this facet adumbrating a figure from Celtic religious world, that

84. Cf. *Aliscans*, ll. 2425, 2192.

85. Cf. *Prise d'Orange*, ll. 941 ff.

86. Cf. *Aliscans*, ll. 4654–746.

87. Cf. *Les Narbonnais*, ll. 1233 ff.

of the goddesses protectors of the horses and the stables – had guarded the animal in a *sillier* for over seven years, without letting anyone mounting it.⁸⁸

After all, also in a passage from *Aliscans*, when Guion comes back from the battlefield, the queen does not hesitate to have a four-horse war chariot immediately built for him⁸⁹.

Therefore, Orable is donor of armour, protector of the war-horse and teacher of warfare skills: ultimately, she is a real goddess of chivalry. As a matter of fact, in addition to allotting the status of knight in the ways I have described above, she also cares about preserving the honour of the knight inside the society. This is the interpretation we must give to the calls to action of Orable/Guiborc to Guillaume in *Aliscans*, and that of Hermenjart to the entire knight assembly and her sons. Aware of the seminal role of his wife in the awarding of the war leadership, Guillaume cannot but obey her exhortation⁹⁰.

Such knightly nature of Elissent, Hermenjart and Guiborc is featured only by their homologous Celtic goddesses; this connection is so intuitive that Sergent is naturally lead to discard any Indo-European derivation of these figures, stated instead by Grisward, and draws the firm conclusion that «l'héroïne française est typologiquement irlandaise. [...] Pour Hermenjart et sa bru, c'est vers le Celtes, et uniquement vers eux, qu'on doit se tourner pour trouver des parallèles exacts à leur comportement»⁹¹.

Bound to the warlike role of the queen, there comes the role of cup-bearer: although apparently I drifted away from the scene of *Sone de Nansai*, here I am again pushed powerfully back to the starting point. The daughter of the king of Norway, after having offered the intoxicating beverage to the knights, returned inside her room, where, like Guiborc and

88. LUONGO, *La femme magicienne*, p. 346.

89. Cf. *Aliscans*, ll. 4926-46.

90. Cf. *ibidem*, l. 2148.

91. SERGENT, *Observations sur l'origine du cycle des Narbonnais*, pp. 475-8.

Elissent, she kept the weapons, and brought back fine spears and swords to give to the knights⁹²: that surely stands as evidence of the tight connection between the function of bearer of mead or ale at the chivalric symposium with function of donor of the status of knight and its attributes, such as the weapons. For this reason it is highly significant to find in the *Chanson de Guillaume* a scene like this:

Prist ses messages, ses homes fait mander
 tant qu'ele en out trente mille de tels.
 Les quinze mille furent si apresté
 Cum de ferir en bataille champel.
 Tuz les demeines en ad Guiborc sevez,
 sus al paleis les assist al digner,
 chançons e fables lur fait dire e chanter;
 Guiborc meimes les sert de vin aporter.⁹³

[She called her emissaries, summoned her men until she had thirty thousands of them. Fifteen thousands were got ready/ to fight in battle. Guiborc draws aside the leaders, up in the palace she takes them to banquet,/ songs and story she makes be sung for them; Guiborc herself serves them the wine.]

After all, it is true that already in the *Prise d'Orange* the queen, after evoking the moment in which she conferred the weapons to him, serves to Guillaume cranes, geese and spiced peacocks⁹⁴. However, in the scene from the *Chanson* much more is going on: it is Guiborc who summons the troops, orders them to get ready to battle, and, in the feast prepared shortly before the battle, during which as usual the knights boast to knock down their enemies, it is always Guiborc who serves the wine to the knights, echoing in this way the lady leader and the territorial goddess from whom she stems.

92. Cf. *Sone von Nausay*, ll. 3339-48.

93. *La Canzone di Guglielmo*, ll. 1232-39.

94. Cf. *Prise d'Orange*, ll. 1033 ff.

3.5. *La Prise de Cordres et de Seville*

The frame is completed by another text from the *Cycle des Narbonnais*, *La Prise de Cordres et de Seville*, generally dated back to the end of the 12th century or the beginning of the 13th, made of 3000 assonancing decasyllables⁹⁵. The plot develops a traditional theme, the loves of a Christian knight and a Pagan princess; the wedding of Guibert and Gaiete, though, are interrupted by the arrival of a Saracen army and the Christian knights Bertrand, Guillaume, Hernaut and Guibert are taken prisoners. The first three, locked up in Cordoba, are set free by Nubie, whom Bertrand will marry, while Guibert, brought to Sevilla, breaks free by killing his Saracen rival in love, in order to keep his wife for himself. The extract that interests me depicts the moment in which the daughter of the king of Cordoba, Nubie, in order to help the same imprisoned Christian knights, uses her magical skills so to put to sleep all the knights of the town. Here is how it happens:

Cant o palais furent les tables mises,
 si sont monté celle gent sarrazine,
 l'ève demandent et au mengier assidrent,
 li aumaors au fauldesteul meïmes.
 Oés que fist damoiselle Nubie:
 honques mais dame ne fut de si grand vide,
 si se porpance d'une molt grant boidie;
 ans mais pucelle ne fist tel deverie.
 Elle est montee en la sale perrine,
 mipart la presse de la gent sarrazine,
 vient a son pere, si s'est a genolz mise.
 "Pere," dist elle, "ne vos en poist il mie,
 je serivrai de la boutillerie,
 pour ceste feste qui si est haute et riche;
 c'iert grans honors de la gent sarrazine"
 [...] Une nef d'or a la pucelle prise,
 prist une bos, si l'a de vin anplie,
 puis s'an torna la cortoise meschine.

95. The quotations from this text are from *La Prise de Cordres et de Seville*, ed. O. DENSUSIANU, Paris, Didot, 1896. The translation is mine.

En une chanbre est antree Nubie,
 ne l'i sot honques hons de mere qui vive.
 L[e]anz destrampe et herbes et oblie
 Et en après i mist de la tubie:
 hons qui la boive ne puet longement vivre,
 se maintenant n'est faite la mecine.
 Puis lou repost, so mist en une tine.
 [...] La gentis dame destranpa les poissons
 en la nef d'or, c'onques nel vit nus hons,
 et en la tine la porta contremont,
 si l'i porterent dui Sarrazin felon
 en mi la sale ou li sarrazin sont;
 et la pulcelle les servit a bandon.
 Primes an porte son pere l'aumaçor:
 devient la table se mist a genoillons,
 en une cope lou geta a foisson...⁹⁶
 aval la table a force et a bandon.
 Et la puelle molt bien les an semont,
 si lor porta antor et environ.⁹⁷

[When in the palace the tables were laid, there the Saracen people climbed, asking for water, and even the commanders sat on the same seats. Hear what damsel Nubie did: never there was lady of greatest ability, thus she devised a great dodge. She mounted in the stone hall, cuts her way through the crowd, goes to her father, kneels down to him. "Father", she said "may it not bother you, I shall do as cup-bearer, for such a solemn and rich feast; it shall be a great honour for the Saracen people. (...) The maiden has taken a golden goblet, takes a jar, fills it with wine, then she retired, the courtly damsel. In a room has entered Nubie, no man born to living mother has seen her. There she blends herbs and host⁹⁸ and then she slips into it a drug spice: one who drinks it cannot live long, if soon it is not prepared the antidote. Then she puts it away in a fermentation vat (...) The fair lady mixed the beverages in the golden goblet, that no one saw, and from the vat she carried it up, there two Saracen felons carried it in the middle of the hall, where all the Saracens are; and the maid serves them aplenty. First she takes it to her father the commander: she kneels down in front of the table, in a cup she poured abundantly.. vigorously down the table. And the maiden much invites them to drink and carried it around the table.]

96. A verse is missing.

97. *La Prise de Cordres et de Seville*, ll. 1040-51.

98. I follow here Andrea Fassò's opinion, according to which this word would designate a crumbled paste, certainly a food similar to a host, if not a Christian host, all the same a magical food, endowed with supernatural properties (personal communication, June 2010).

The first thing we should notice here is that this lady holds, as usual, very little Saracen features, whereas her magical talent and her function of territorial goddess are pronounced: like Guiborc, since she is one with her own territory, she is the one to be conquered in order to get possession of the city, and she allows the access of the knights in her real, through a magical trick. A second point worth highlighting, and that would seem to undermine the credibility of my argument, is that here, as already in Geoffrey of Monmouth, the rite is carried out with a hidden agenda. On the contrary, it is helpful to stress that, exactly because in this case the ritual is used so to hide a deception, we may infer that it was a custom far from unusual.

In other respects, the scene speaks for itself: another princess magician-territorial lady, another knightly feast wherein our lady offers, in a precious cup, what everybody believes to be mere wine; once again the princess, on her knees, serves the guests according to a hierarchical order. Furthermore, our Nubie is portrayed while preparing and fermenting the mixture: even if we keep in consideration that in this scene we are dealing with the confection of a magical potion, the doubt is raised whether also when the beverage was mere mead or wine or ale, was the bearer herself the one who kept the secrets of its preparation. On this subject, though, I cannot go further.



Silver cauldron found in Guldenstrup (Denmark), 1st century b.C.; diameter 68,5 cm, probably made in Thrace. Decorated with episodes of the relations between men and gods, it is symbol of the divine powers of destruction and regeneration owned by the container.

One thing is for certain: now we are legitimated to doubt that a custom like the one described in *Sone de Nansai* could look so unfamiliar and revolting to a French 12th-century knight. If anything, it must have seemed to him extraordinarily ancient.

3.6. *The Grail and the Peir Dadeni: the circle is closed*

So far, I have demonstrated the continuity of the Celtic rite with the one attested, although only through hints, in the Romance literature. Nonetheless, I may still try to dig inside the stratification of the knightly symposium and take a close look at the bottom of the golden cup that so often we have seen in the queen's hands. What is it, in reality? Where does it draw its importance?

In order to understand it, I shall start from a quite different text from those I have seen so far: *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*⁹⁹. This courtly novel, written by Chrétien de Troyes allegedly after 1180 and left unfinished due to the death of the poet around 1190, tells about the wandering of the young Perceval who, grown up in the ignorance of the existence of chivalry, transgresses his mother's will and undertakes a long journey to become one of Arthur's knight. During this apprenticeship he makes many encounters and goes through many ordeals, but I am here interested to a single episode, mysterious as much as famous. The young man, looking for the way to go back to his mother, runs into a fortress rendered inaccessible because surrounded by water; luckily, a fisherman invites him to spend the night at his house, beyond a rock wall. Once on the top of it, our Perceval at first does not perceive anything, then magically catches sight of a castle, where before there was «nothing but sky and earth»; after walking the drawbridge, he enters the main hall, which is square and with a fireplace in the middle¹⁰⁰. I take a break to point out, as Carey does, at two facts: the otherworldly nature of the castle that appears all of a sudden and is inhabited by men who disappear the morning after; the shape of the hall, in all identical to the king of Denmark's mead hall in *Beowulf* as well as to the main hall of Galouche abbey¹⁰¹ in *Sone de Nansai*. In particular the

99. All the quotations from this text are from CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES, *Le Conte du Graal ou le Roman de Perceval*, ed. C. MELA, Paris, Librairie générale française, 1990. The English translation is mine.

100. *Le Conte du Graal*, ll. 2977-3052.

101. Sone, together with the king of Norway, makes a pilgrimage to Galouche abbey, situated on the bottom of a deep valley, in a fiord, on a tiny isle hidden by two rocks; the water of the fiord is deep, and the only way to reach the monastery is by means of a small boat conducted by two monks. Like Perceval's palace of the Grail, it is square; nonetheless, since it is endowed with four corner-towers, a taller central tower and a courtyard, it mostly reminds of the palace of Gorneman de Gornhaut. Inside the abbey a banquet takes place, during which the abbot tells the story of Joseph of Arimathea. according to him, Joseph, once landed in Norway, killed the king and got married to his daughter,

last one is as well, like the first fortress encountered by Percival, hard to be reached and surrounded by impassable waters¹⁰².

In the palace, the would-be knight is welcomed by a sick man wrapped in black, supposedly the king; during the conversation a page arrives and brings to the king a sword:

Dit: "Sire, la sore pucele,
vostre niece, qui molt est bele,
vos a envoié cest pressant.
Ainz ne veistes moinz peasant
do lonc ne do lé que ele a.
Vos la donrez cui vos pleira,
mais ma dame en seroit molt liee
se ele estoit bien employee
la ou ele sera donee."¹⁰³

[He says: "My lord, the blond damsel, your niece, who is very beautiful, sent you this gift. You have never seen lighter sword, for the length and width of this one. You may donate it to whom you wish to, but my lady would be more joyful if it will be fairly used by the one who shall receive it".]

Here we find the umpteenth lady donor of weapons who demands chivalric honour from the receiver, reason why this king does not hesitate in entrust the sword to his guest hero. At this point a banquet is set up, featuring the most refined dishes, but during which a strange rite takes place: a page holding a bloodstained spear, two pages holding two golden chandeliers and a beautiful maiden holding a grail solemnly parade through the dining hall, passing from one room to another:

Une graal entre ses II meins
une damoisele tenoit,

converting her to Christianity, but then, for divine punishment he falls sick and becomes a Fisher King (cf. J. L. WESTON, *Notes on the Grail Romances*, «Romania», XLIII, 1914, pp. 403-426).

102. Cf. J. CAREY, *Ireland and the Grail*, Aberystwyth, Celtic Studies Publications, 2007.

103. *Le conte du Graal*, ll. 3083-91.

qui aviau les vallez venoit,
 et bele et gente et bien senee,
 quant ele fu leianz antree
 atot lo graal qu'ele tint,
 une si grant clartez i vint
 qu'ausin perdirent les chandoilles
 lor clarté comme les estoilles
 qant li solaux luist o la lune.¹⁰⁴

[She held in her hands a grail, the damsel who had entered with the pages, and she was beautiful and fair and elegantly dressed; once she entered there with the grail she carried, such a light broke forth that the candles lost their brightness, like the stars when the sun or the moon rises.]

Among the many problems of interpretation offered by this scene, there is the mystery concerning the meaning of the word 'grail'. It takes on the legendary Christian acceptance we all know only at the end of Chrétien's poem, in lines that, however, look like the product of interpolation¹⁰⁵; it is explicitly interpreted as the goblet of the Last Supper only in the later *Joseph d'Armathie* by Robert de Boron. Initially, this French word designated a precious food-container bowl, but there are reasons enough to believe that the one Chrétien refers to was in fact a drinking cup, at its turn reduction and transposition of a cauldron.

John Carey discusses along an entire book the supposed derivation of the Grail from the Celtic cauldron of rebirth: while he clarifies since the first page that in the 12th-century stories about the Grail it had already acquired an explicit Eucharistic meaning, he is convinced nonetheless that the very exaltation of the spiritual sense of this item is a signal of the presence of a further underground semantic stratum characterising it. Besides, «there are many elements in the Grail stories – and especially in the earliest among them – which cannot readily be explained in terms of liturgical symbolism»¹⁰⁶.

104. Ibidem, ll. 3158-3167.

105. Cf. D.D.R. OWEN, *From Grail to Holy Grail*, «Romania», LXXXIII, 1968, pp. 31-53.

106. Cf. CAREY, *Ireland and the Grail*, p. xv

These elements invite us to an investigation of the mythical substratum of this story.

Carey finds a scene that is somewhat similar to Perceval's one, in the Irish tale *Baile in Scáil*, in which it is told that Conn, king of Ireland, in search of the meaning of a bad presage, finds himself with his druids in an unknown land. They run into a wealthy palace, inside which they see

a young woman [...], and a crown of gold was on her head. There was a silver vat with hoops of gold on its lip, and a cup of gold before her. They saw the phantom himself in the house, before them on his throne. There was never found in Tara a man of his size or beauty [...]. "My name is Lug son of Eithliu son of Tigernmas. This is why I have come: to relate to you the length of your own reign, and of every reign which there will be in Tara." And the girl who sat before them in the house was the Sovereignty of Ireland forever, and it was she who gave Conn his meal: the rib of an ox and the rib of a boar [...]. When the girl began to distribute drink she said, "To whom shall this cup be given?"; and the phantom answered her. When he had named every ruler from Conn until the Day of Judgement, they went into the phantom's shadow, so that they saw neither the enclosure nor the house. The vat and the golden dipper and the cup were left with Conn.¹⁰⁷

Here we find again a young woman, explicitly said to be the personification of sovereignty, who administers the cup with the alcoholic beverage, and while doing it she reveals and awards the political power of her royal – although ghostly – table companion. In addition, for the first time we discover that the cup is nothing but a temporary container for distribution, a sort of simplification of the original cauldron, which anyway was containing the inebriating liquor also in the *Feast of Bricriu*. For what concerns the resemblances with the scene from *Perceval*, I shall list the setting in a wealthy castle from the Other World, that disappears soon after the banquet; the presence, as ministers of the ritual, of a king with other-world features and a maiden holding an extraordinary golden container; lastly, the cauldron/grail brings here too a value of sovereignty. It is feasible, indeed, that since the question that Per-

107. Ibidem, pp. 17-8.

ceval holds back from putting is the same uttered by the woman with the ale cup, also the answer to that would have been the same as Lug's one: the acknowledgement of the value in battle and the awarding of the royalty to the banquet partakers¹⁰⁸.

The connection between the Grail and the Cauldron¹⁰⁹ is recognisable also in the comparison with the Second Branch of the *Mabinogion*, the *Branwen ferch Llŷr*¹¹⁰, in which the story is told of the wedding of Brân's second sister with the king of Ireland Matholwch. Since during the celebrations Evnissyen, Brân's brother, has outraged the bridegroom by maiming his horses, the Welsh king vows to repair the wrong by giving to him his magic cauldron, the aforementioned *Peir Dadeni*, «the virtue of the cauldron is this: a man of thine slain to-day, cast him into the cauldron, and by to-morrow he will be as well as he was at the best, save that he will not have power of speech»¹¹¹. The day after Matholwch asks Brân whence he obtained the cauldron, and finds out that he got it from an Irish creature that he had previously encountered in Ireland: «a big man with yellow-red hair [...] He was a monstrous man, big and the evil look of a brigand about him» that he had seen back then emerging from a lake called 'Lake of the Cauldron'¹¹².

It is noteworthy that all of the guardians of the cauldron are supernatural beings, as their gigantic size suggests: the lake creature, Brân himself, Lug. However, in this story the cauldron is charged with a new attribute: it is a place of ex-

108. Ibidem, pp. 19-20.

109. Such a connection is an established fact in the studies of visual semiotics (cf. J. L. COOPER, *Dizionario illustrato dei simboli tradizionali di tutto il mondo*, Padova, Muzzio, 1987, entry "Cauldron"). However, saying that two objects have equivalent functions is different from finding an historically-driven link between them.

110. The quotations of this text are from Gwyn and Thomas Jones' edition, *The Mabinogion*, London-New York, Dent-Dutton, 1961, pp. 25-40.

111. *The Mabinogion*, p. 29.

112. Ibidem, p. 30.

change between our world and the world of the dead, covering both the warrior function (since it churns out undead knights), and obviously the sacral function.

There are several connections between the story of Brân and that of Perceval: apart from the fact that both feature a vessel-like item endowed with a sacral meaning that fit together rather well, there is an evident correspondence between the foot wound of the Welsh king due to a poisoned arrow and the leg handicap of the Fisher King. Moreover, even in a romance in which the legend of the Grail is already wholly Christianised, the *Joseph d'Armathie*, the second keeper of the Grail, and shall become known as the *Riche Pecheur*, is interestingly named Bron. Finally, in *Peredur*, a Welsh tale similar to *Mabinogion* tales and which decidedly fits with Perceval's story, the young knight, in the parade homologous to Grail's one, witnesses the arrival, soon after the spear, of «two maidens with a great dish between them, and the head of a man on the dish, and much blood around the head». This macabre apparition does not look too aberrant if we think that the second characteristic feature of Brân is the capability to survive his death as a talking head for centuries; indeed, later in the story the reader learns that the severed head belonged to Perceval's cousin, a certain Brun Brandalis¹¹³. But I would better halt here in order not to exceed the topic of my research.

Looking back simultaneously at the three extracts exposed above, it is possible to notice that the common element featured by the three containers, a part from the warlike or royal characterisation, is the function of door to Other World and rebirth, mystery that in all of the three cases remains unutterable or marked by some obscurity in the explanation¹¹⁴. Now that I have discovered that the golden cup full of mead was, in reality, a cauldron originally endowed with the mystical function of threshold between life and death, I may remind

113. CAREY, *Ireland and the Grail*, pp. 247-50.

114. *Ibidem*, p. 330.

that previously, while treating the derivation of the Medieval chivalry from the BB culture, I hinted to the Celtic origin of a few words concerning the Neolithic-old knightly customs. Among them there are

a word linked to metallurgy like 'cauldron', as in Latin (cf., among its continuations, Occitan *par*, Lonnais *per*, Ferrarese *per* 'pot', French *pareau/ perreau*, Italian *paiolo*, etc.), as in Germanic languages (Old Slavic *hverr*, Anglo-Saxon *hwerr*), whose Celtic derivation is proved by the Old Irish *coire*, Welsh *pair*, Cornish *per*. We may reasonably infer that this root was exactly the one that designated the Bell Beaker.¹¹⁵

Therefore, if linguistically the Bell Beaker is the *Peir*, we may conjecture that even in the Neolithic it was an item sacredly connoted as a place for incubation and rebirth. For this reason it was protagonist of the propitiatory rites and of the ceremonies of construction of group identity that dealt with what of most sacred the BB culture held - the war. If it is so, such religious and social importance of the BB *Peir* well explains the thousand-year survival of the knightly symposium, even in literatures that apparently belonged to non-Celtic cultures and traditions, even going through all kinds of re-functionalisation, carrying along all of its distinctive traits, characters and objects.

4. *Conclusions*

4.1. *Mosaic*

In my wanderings through Celtic, Germanic and Romance texts, epics and romance, between the dawn of vulgar literature and the thirteenth century, I have encountered different traits that, from time to time, I have considered as being characteristic of the rite of knightly group-drinking. It is now time

115. ALINEI, *Origini delle lingue d'Europa*, II, p. 559, quoted in BENOZZO, *Radici celtiche tardo-neolitiche*, p. 475.

to piece together these tiles into a detailed and consistent picture.

The fact that emerges first is the connection between the drinking and the war. It is exteriorised as an economic exchange (*Gododdin*), but mostly as a metaphorical equivalence: somehow the symposium is already battle, since the knights take part in it fully armed (*Sone de Nansai*, *Chanson de Guillaume*), and since while drinking they boast about war deeds, each trying to stand above the other, as if they were already on the battlefield proving the veracity of their vows (tradition of the *gabs* and of the *vœux du paon*, *Sone de Nansai*); finally, such interchangeability is made evident by the continuous overlap of the two semantic fields at stake in metaphoric creations (*Gododdin*). Furthermore, I have ascertained that the link between drinking and war is also chronological: usually the symposium is performed less to celebrate the victory than to solemnise the eve of the battle, with an overt propitiatory function (*Gododdin*, *Chanson de Guillaume*).

Another aspect, related to the first one, is the sacredness of the drinking: evidences of it are the consumption of an alcoholic product to the drunkenness (*Gododdin*, *Beowulf*, *Festino di Bricriu*, *gabs*), but also the ritual scansion of the feast. This would seem to be articulated as follows: arrival of the beverage, brought to the banquet by a woman of acknowledged authority in the male group (*Beowulf*, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, *Sone de Nansai*, tradition of the *vœux du paon*, *Chanson de Guillaume*, *Prise de Cordres*, *Perceval*, *Baile in Scáil*), who kneels down to the most authoritative man in the assembly, in general the king (*Historia Regum Britanniae*, *Sone de Nansai*, *Prise de Cordres*); declamation of titles of sovereignty for the one who is being offered to drink (*Baile in Scáil*); drinking of the cup-bearer herself and of every knight, in turn, following a rigorous hierarchical order (*Beowulf*, *Sone de Nansai*); as a reinforcement of the legitimacy of the honour awarded, in the end we find the utterance of war vows (*Gododdin*, *Beowulf*, tradition of the *gabs* and of the *vœux du paon*, *Sone*) and the assignation of weapons (*Sone*).

This order highlights a third function of the group drinking, that is the social and political function, which, in such a warlike society, is inseparable from the first two ones. In the passage of the beverage and in its quantity is objectified the hierarchical order of the society (*Beowulf*, *Feast of Briciu*, *Sone*). Even the simple presence at the symposium grants the allotment of the war-honour (*Gododdin*, *Beowulf*; tradition of the *gabs* and of the *væux du paon*, *Sone*) and the social acknowledgement; for this reason it is a key political moment, especially for a foreigner (*Beowulf*, *Sone*). Finally, the most politically crucial point is the assignation of the drink on the behalf of the queen cup-bearer, that always coincides, as I have already pointed out, with the allotment of the sovereignty (*Historia*, *Sone*, *Baile in Scáil*, presumably *Perceval*).

These functions cluster around a character and an object: the queen and the cup.

If the context, i.e. a male assembly of warrior aristocracy, never changes, the role entrusted to the female character of the queen stands out, since I have recognised in her morphological stratifications dating back to archaic ages. She is a political authority and, before that, a military leader: it is proven by her role as a warrior and a strategist (*Medb*, *Boudicca*) and as a teacher of the chivalric virtues (*Medb*, *Guiborc*, *Elissent*), and by her inclination to fight, unappeased even in the Romance texts (*Medb*, *Guiborc*, *Hermenjart*, *Aude*, *Floripas*, *Mirabel*). This leadership is tightly linked with another innate power of the queen: her magical and prophetic skills (*Medb* and *Feidelm*, *Veleda*, *Boudica*, *Orable*, *Mirabel*, *Bramimonde*). I have also showed how the bond of this queen with her kingdom is so strong to echo a territorial goddess (*Medb*, *Orable*/*Guiborc* and most of the Saracen queens) or even an other-world goddess (*Orable*). Finally, another trait that emerges is the ancient relation of this authoritative woman with the inebriating beverage (and perhaps with its preparation): it is evident in her name (*Medb*) or in her mastery in the use of herbs and spices, both to healing and to harming (*Guiborc*, *Nubie*).

For what concerns the object in which the beverage is served, I have ascertained it is always made with a precious material (*Feast of Bricriu, Prise de Cordres, Baile in Scáil, Perceval*), and can be brought back to a more ancient container whose functions are markedly sacred and ritual, the cauldron (*Feast of Bricriu, Baile in Scáil, Branwen ferch Llŷr*).

4.2. *A fresh start*

I have recognised in the motif of the knightly symposium several traits that are typical of Celtic culture, on which I shall not linger since they have already been analysed. The fact that interests me here in order to give an answer to the starting hypothesis, is that I also found several more archaic traits.

- 1) First of all, the rite itself brings, as vital features, the warlike facet and the alcoholic beverage: these are, let us keep it in mind, the social foundations of the Celtic culture but, before that, of the BB cultural complex.
- 2) The regal female figure gathers in herself sacred, political and warlike functions in a way that these are almost interchangeable, as if she stemmed from an extremely archaic omni-functional figure, presumably preceding the alleged separation of powers in the three Dumézilian functions. Like a fossil of this very ancient role, this warrior queen fights with prehistoric weapons and shows skills that are typical of the Picker.
- 3) The goblet-cauldron not only linguistically hints to what may be the name of the BB (*Peir*), but also shows shamanic worship features, like the reference to ritual incubation and to rebirth, that probably date back to the Neolithic.

These conclusions, limited to the analysis of the rite of the knightly symposium, seem to confirm rather convincingly the

starting hypothesis of a Neolithic derivation of the Medieval chivalry.

However, what I have put forth so far is the outcome of an itinerary carried out on a few texts and in a random way: I have reason to believe that a detailed comparative analysis of a wider spectrum of texts – both Romance ones and not – could give rise to further demonstrations and, hopefully, to further fertile questions.