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ROAMING THE SEA TOWARDS SALVATION IN *LA QUESTE DEL SAINT GRAAL*

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***Abstract**: In order to unravel the multi-layered significance of the sea in* La Queste del Saint Graal, *of the Vulgate Cycle, the author will emphasise the connections with another famous medieval literary text, namely* The Voyage of Saint Brendan. *Both these works insist that the sea is the best medium for spiritual revelation, which is the declared target of all the protagonists' peregrinations. The focus of the article is on the complex role of the sea which unites the questers in a mystical brotherhood and, at the same time, isolates them from the rest of the world in order to facilitate a feeling of spiritual introspection.*

These specific features are not restricted to the sea, but a similar role can be ascribed to the Egyptian desert. This comparison, between the Celtic sea and the Egyptian desert, will reveal other meanings of the sea in the two texts. The ambiguous identity of the characters that help the protagonists will be discussed and the magical/mystical features of the world which is the background for the adventures will be analysed. Travelling on the sea becomes in these literary texts not only a test of courage, but also a test of faith, and boarding a miraculous ship is both a confession of Christian devotion and an assertion of the believer's purity and piety.

***Keywords**: Arthurian literature, mystical adventure, Celtic Christianity*

In medieval times travelling on seas was a perilous endeavour, but despite the dangers, there were many reasons which made such a voyage not only necessary, but also appealing. The material/commercial reasons that motivated the travellers are not relevant for this romance, but rather, the spiritual role of the sea and its complex significance must be emphasised and the opposition community (and cooperation) versus isolation should be analysed.

Firstly, since the sea provided a means of transport, the initial assumption for our study is that the sea was considered a way of connecting people. However, the sea could also be used as a place where Christians can experience a feeling of separation from the world in order to feel closer to God. In the first centuries of Celtic Christianity, monks felt the impetus to go on small (or large) vessels with little food and sometimes with no oars, with the declared purpose of following the will of God. Thus, they went in search of sacred places or holy people and they trusted God to keep them safe. Going to sea becomes a spiritual test as well as an opportunity for the Christians, who share the same aspirations to travel together and feel closer to one another.

In this paper, the author will attempt to ascertain to what extent the questers in *La Queste* experience the sea as an element that binds them with other people or as a means of isolating them from the world in order to experience the connection with God more strongly.

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1. **Instances of spiritual advancement, while travelling on the sea**

For Celtic Christians, the sea was often an opportunity to show their complete trust in God and simultaneously to display their total commitment to God. Such an example appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which logs, for the 891 entry, that: "And three Scots came to King Alfred in a boat without any oars from Ireland; whence they stole away, because they would live in a state of pilgrimage, for the love of God, they recked not where" (*Anglo Saxon Chronicle*). A similar example is recorded in *The Life of Patrick by Muirchu*, when Macc Cuill binds himself and travels in an oarless boat (as he was commanded by Saint Patrick) until he reaches a wonderful island with saintly people (Davies 108-109).

One of the best-known medieval examples of people travelling with a spiritual purpose is Saint Brendan, whose adventures were recorded in The *Voyage of Saint Brendan the Abbot* (written in Latin, *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*, in the 9th century).[1] In this voyage, several monks under the direct guidance of Saint Brendan started a seven-year journey with the declared purpose of finding the island of the Blessed. There have been comparisons between *Navigatio* and the Old Irish tradition of sailing stories, *immrana* (sg. *immran*), developed around the 7th century, which recorded various adventures mostly happening at sea.

When comparing *La Queste del Saint Graal*, of the Vulgate Cycle, with *The Voyage*, one can see that there are many common aspects, and one of the most important seems to be the complete trust both Saint Brendan and Galahad have that God will guide and protect them. It is made clear several times, both in *The Voyage* and *La Queste*, that the main characters accept unquestionably the guidance of God while they travel.[2]

Brendan and his men wander obeying the will of God, because, although they have a definite destination for their journey (The Island of the Saints), they do not know how to reach it, so, serenely, they let God guide them. "'Ship your oars!' Brendan shouted. 'Unfurl the sails and let God steer us where He will.' And so they were carried back and forth for twenty days till God raised up a fair west wind for them" (*The Voyage* 50-1).

Equally, Galahad does not seem distraught by the fact that he does not move straightforwardly towards his desired destination, and this situation is made even more obvious when they go aboard the Miraculous Ship. "Quant ils furent venu a lor nef, si entrèrent enz ; et li venz se fu feruz ou voile, qui tost les ot esloigniez de la roche. Et quant ce fu chose avenue que la nuiz lor sorvint, si comencierent a demander li uns a l'autre s'il estoient près de terre. Et chascuns endroit soi dist qu'il ne savoit" (*La Queste* 229), "Directly they got to their ship and they went on board; and the wind, catching and filling the sail, carried them

[1] The text was printed in *Lives of the Saints: The Voyage of St Brendan. Bede: Life of Cuthbert. Eddius Stephanus: Life of Wilfrid*, and it will be abbreviated as *The* Voyage. It is a narrative written in Latin, probably in Ireland, which describes how St Brendan, a sixth-century early Irish abbot, goes on a journey to the Promised Land of the Saint and has various fantastic adventures (Johnston). *Navigatio* was translated into Anglo-Norman, probably soon after the Norman Conquest by Benedeit so it became part of the literary/cultural/Celtic/Anglo/Norman/French tradition.

[2] Although in *La Queste* they travel mostly on land, they do not have a straight trajectory, but rather they let God guide them. The text emphasises the fact that Galahad "erra mainte jornee une hore avant et autre arrière, einsi come aventure le menoit. Si trova laienz mainte aventure qu'il mist a fin, dont li contes ne fet mie mencion, porceque trop i eust a fere s'il vousist chascune dire par soi" (*La Queste* 195), "spent many days roving now his way, now that, at the beck of chance. He met there with many adventures, which he brought to an end, and which the story passes over, forasmuch as it would be too great a task to relate them one by one" (QHG 207). This complete reliance on God's benevolence is very explicit when the three protagonists are on the miraculous ship, as it always moves by itself, guided by divine will.

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swiftly away from the islet. When night was come upon them they began to wonder aloud if they were close to land, but each in turn confessed his ignorance" (*The Quest* 238).

In *The Voyage*, this physical movement is a metaphor for St Brendan and his companions' spiritual advancement as it becomes obvious that the more they travel, the higher they feel spiritually. In *La Queste* the journey undertaken by the knights does not always bring enlightenment, because most of them return disappointed and sad, since they are unable to find any revelation or adventure. Some, like Bors' brother, Lionel, become worse than when they started and others die pointlessly due to their carelessness or restlessness.

However, there are some notable exceptions, for example Percival, who needs instruction and who, in the first pages of *La Queste*, is close to falling into temptation several times. While Perceval lives isolated on an island, he is taught by a man wearing white clothes who comes on the sea in a white-sailed ship, and as a result of their dialogue he experiences profound spiritual revelations. Lancelot, also, feels elevated spiritually and uses efficiently the *preudome*'s advice. The voyage on the miraculous ship and especially the days spent with his son enlighten his spirit and as a result he is allowed to see the Grail partially, and to experience its divine power.

The sea has also a positive role for Galahad's spiritual advancement, as he and his two companions find out about the mysteries of the miraculous ship from Percival's sister. Moreover, according to various inscriptions, entering this ship should be interpreted as a test of faith, and, consequently, as a courageous deed, as actually only a devoted and chaste Christian is allowed to step onto that ship. So travelling by boat becomes another confirmation of the three questers' state of purity and piety, as well as a confession of their Christian devotion. In addition, Lancelot is also allowed to walk on this miraculous ship, and while praying, he receives an intense spiritual revelation.

Saint Brendan and his monks, during their legendary voyage, reach different islands which are miraculous places, with an intense mystical radiance. In their case the sea provides the medium for their progress and the people they encounter in each new place offer further insight into the significance of their voyage and strengthen their determination to follow their quest for the island of the saints, which they eventually find.

The sea also appears in such instances as a catalyst for spiritual introspection, and additionally it makes it possible for the protagonist(s) to focus on their spiritual aspirations by separating them from the ordinary reality and immersing them in a mystical world, populated by holy people as well as demons. The sea is not the only environment that facilitates the divine contemplation, but also the desert and the forests are such places of solitude where people could achieve a strong connection with God.

2. **Substituting the Desert in The Desert Fathers**

The wilderness, as a place of solitude, was, in the Middle Ages, one of the most important tenets that guided religious people. Egypt offered vast uninhabited spaces, where many hermits could find the necessary isolation to shape a strong connection with God. Neither the British Isles nor the Breton peninsula could provide such an environment. Nevertheless, the world depicted in *La Queste* resembles the wilderness of the Egyptian desert where there were numerous hermitages and monasteries, which are far from one another, but despite the distance they usually communicate with one another.

The Celtic-British monks could not follow this example of hermitical life, although the spiritual mind-set was present in their mentality, too. So an alternative needed to be found, in order to discover the required space for introspection, so they went to sea – which could

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provide the isolation – or chose to live on deserted islands, some of them connected to the mainland, when the tide allowed it. "As it travelled further north, the *topos* of the desert activated new geographies of reception. It ultimately colonized the ocean. Atlantic islands and islets thus became the abodes of Irish hermits and the ocean their *apeiron*, the new frontier of Celtic spirituality" (Dora 139).

Therefore, a mental association could be formed between the Eastern deserts and the Western sea as equivalent *loci* for spiritual revelations. What is essential, therefore, in these journeys or forays into the desert and/or the ocean (sea) is the desire of finding the "wilderness," i.e. a place of solitude where a profound connection with God can be established through a mystical revelation achieved after a continuous and arduous life of prayer and contemplation. Both the desert and the ocean could play this role of providing the necessary environment for the Christian believer to find God.

The correlation between Saint Brendon and the Desert Fathers is clearly stated when, on one of the miraculous islands he visits, Brendan meets Saint Paul the Hermit, who "for the audience of the *Navigatio*, represents monastic perfection" (Mackley 217). As it is to be expected, the encounter with Paul the Hermit, who is the epitome of Christian piety, prompts Saint Brendan to analyse his own life, and to find it lacking. The tradition is based on a legend, told by Jerome, who mentions the fact that after having spent some time in the desert, Saint Antony, who started to feel proud of his endeavour, met Saint Paul, who had been there before him, and thus Saint Paul the Hermit, and not the more famous Saint Antony,[3] is traditionally considered the first Christian hermit.

Asceticism in Egypt became a substitute for martyrdom, when the persecutions had finally ended. Practising self-denial and austerity became the hermits' way of giving up their lives in order to embrace God completely. Similarly, Celtic monks went to sea in simple boats, trusting God's will completely, thus renouncing their former selves. Such a gesture of surrendering to God's will erases their former identity and allows them to forge a new one during the expedition, in accordance with God's will.

This hazardous journey could also be regarded as a form of pilgrimage, as a means of finding God and witnessing a divine revelation at the end of a painful journey. "Celtic Christianity […] developed a wonderfully allegorical form of pilgrimage as travel simply for the sake of God, with no particular material object or goal to attain" (Elsner 19). Such a description could be applied to Saint Brendan's voyage and to the questers, but in both cases they have a "goal," even though it is not material.[4]

The similitude in the roles of the desert and the sea has been mentioned before: "it is noteworthy that early Christianity, which produced holy men, like Saint Columba's friend Baitan, who set sail 'to seek a desert in the ocean,' also provided at least part of the background to [the] mystical theory in which both desert and ocean appear as symbolic expressions of the divine nature" (McGinn 163). The purpose of these travellers was as much to dedicate their life to God by entering the wilderness of the ocean, as it was to find new

[3] Saint Anthony, who has been regarded as an epitome of asceticism and spiritual contemplation, chose to live almost alone in the desert (away from the bothering crowds of Christians who admired him) as a way to achieve salvation. It has been said that he felt nostalgia after the period of martyrdom and chose to live a hard life in the desert as a way of mortifying his body in order to uplift his soul and as an alternative to martyrdom: "He [Anthony] himself experienced a longing for martyrdom, for the opportunity to testify with his blood. This may be incomprehensible to us today. […] His whole life already consisted of dying [to self] in Christ, and so he would have been ready also to imitate his divine Master totally by giving his life" (Görg 30).

[4]The materiality of the Holy Grail is not relevant, but rather its spirituality and its transcendental power of uniting men with God.

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lands where they could spread the word of God. In other words, sometimes a missionary purpose was attached to the voyage.

Such an instance can also be found in *La Queste* when Perceval receives the visit of the wise man travelling on a white-sailed boat, while he is stranded on the island. The wise man, whose identity is not clarified, instructs Perceval in the same manner as the hermits who live in the wilderness and give advice to the Arthurian knights that pass by. The desert is also associated with the idea of temptation, as it is the place where Jesus Christ was tempted by the devil. Therefore, in the desert the believer's faith is tested (not only his physical endurance). The correspondence of the sea with the desert is complete when temptation, in the shape of the beautiful woman, also arrives in Perceval's island.

In addition, it was argued that for the medieval Russian believers the dense forest of the taiga more that any image of desert or ocean could create the background for spiritual devotion to God, and for the mystical contemplation (Louth 123-124). This mystical contemplation is central in *La Queste*, as this is the attitude specific to religious peregrinations, because it creates the perfect background for spiritual advancement towards Heavens.

3. **The Sea as a Connecting Principle**

I have pointed out the importance of the sea as a catalyst for spiritual introspection, because it can provide the means to achieve a state of seclusion and isolation, either on the ship or on a desert island. This awareness is present both in *The Voyage* and in *La Queste*. However, I want to point out that the opposite is also true, namely the sea can be a means of uniting Christians, because the unity with God can be achieved by being part of the community of Christians. When Christians travel together, either on pilgrimages or in search of a closer connection with God, they all share the same wondrous experiences and learn to live harmoniously under a close divine guidance. The voyage brings together Brendan's monks, as well as the three Grail companions, and they all benefit from this pious atmosphere.

In *La Queste*, the most appropriate place for instruction and for preserving the ancient knowledge is the ship, namely the miraculous ship. So another important significance of the sea must be emphasised, namely the role of the sea as the repository and the carrier of knowledge and wisdom.

At the same time, the spiritual unity is achieved by sharing the Holy Communion, which is a common occurrence during a pilgrimage, and it is also what the three fortunate questers do whenever they have the opportunity. Besides being a constant reminder of the Eucharist, the Holy Grail becomes a unifying principle, since all the Arthurian knights are united by the hope to find it, although most of them are not aware what this undertaking implies.

The Holy Grail, which provides nourishment for all the knights when it descends at Camelot, brings harmony and blissfulness to all those who are able to see it and find delight in its proximity. The mystical vessel is brought to Sarras on the ship, after a sea voyage during which it was guarded by the three successful questers. So the sea is a crucial element in the completion of the quest and provides the background for the most significant movement, the arrival of the Holy Grail in Sarras.

There are many subtle elements that are shared by saintly people (Saint Brendan and Galahad, among them) and such a quality is the ability to see the hidden meaning of things, i.e. to witness the miraculous (and sometimes to control it) in situations when ordinary people are oblivious of the mysteries unfolding in front of them. In other words they can make the

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correct choices as they can read the signs of nature correctly, i.e. they recognise the divine grace flowing through every aspect of their lives, and they realise that nothing happens randomly or without divine supervision. This certainty gives them the guiding lines to interpret reality and to choose the correct path.[5] As a confirmation of the strength of the divine grace that was bestowed upon them, both Galahad[6] and Brendan[7] are able to cast demons out, after witnessing the "machinations of the evil one" *(The Voyage*, 38).

The climax in each story is the final revelation which can be summed up as the bliss of experiencing the divine presence while living on the Land of Promise of the Saints and respectively Galahad's joy while looking inside the Holy Grail.[8] This absolute revelation is only granted after a long period of suffering the tribulations of the journey with patience and fortitude.

The constant guiding principle that moves the protagonists is the divine revelation which is experienced very openly on the ship. It is through this divine power that the unity of the Christians is established and consolidated. The knights in *La Queste*, as well as Saint Brendan's monks, have departed on their perilous journeys with the declared purpose of finding a revelation[9] and feeling closer to God. In both cases (Brendan's monks and the Arthurian knights) the ultimate final goal is salvation, which implies crossing the border that separates the Kingdom of God from our realm. In other words, they search unity and communion in the Kingdom of God.

In both these stories, the next step, after successfully enduring all the trials, is death, which is perceived as part of the harmonious order of the universe and, at the same time, it is considered a blessing, since the virtuous can finally meet God. Not only does the text show that Saint Brendan lives and dies like a saint, but also Galahad's ascent to Heaven is praised by angels, which confirms his sainthood.[10] Equally, Percival's sister seems to be regarded as such, since her body is buried in a sacred place in Sarras, probably in the chapel of the palace (*el palés*), the place where the Holy Grail will later descend.[11] Moreover, as Lisa Robeson argues, when they leave her body on the miraculous ship, an account of her life is written in the manner of hagiographical writings, as "it provides exactly the information [… necessary]

[5] When Galahad and Melias, whom he has just knighted, arrive at the crossroad, Galahad chooses the correct path, whereas the young knight chooses the path of vain glory and is later on punished for his pride (*La Queste*, 41, 45).

[6] Which he does immediately after he comes back from acquiring the shield (QHG 62).

[7] When a sinful monk repents Saint Brendan is able to cast out a demon: "the monks stood up to see a little Ethiopian boy pop out of the culprit's breast and cry out: 'Man of God, why are you expelling me from the home I have lived in these past seven years?'..." (*The Voyage* 39).

[8] If Galahad achieves the Holy Grail Quest when he peers into the Grail, then the Quest must be for the divine revelation he experiences (De Looze 241).

[9] Mackley mentions the fact that it has become a Celtic-Christian tradition: "Irish monks sought seclusion on deserted islands where they could contemplate God in silence" (Mackley 51). And also: "Irish pilgrims travelled across the seas to find the solitude they needed for their contemplation" (Mackley 132).

[10] When he returns with his shield and casts a demon out of a tomb, he is addressed to as "sainte chose" (most holy one) by that devil: "sainte chose, je te voi si avironné d'anges que mes pooirs ne puet durer encontre ta force" (*La Queste* 36), "most holy one, I see thee so girt about by angels that my power cannot endure against thee" (QHG 62).

[11] Although the text does not explain clearly the place where the silver table of the Grail is taken or where Perceval's sister is, it does state that she is buried with all the pomp required by her high social status. "la prennent a tôt le lit et l'emportent el pales; et l'enfûïrent si richement come len devoit fere fille de roi" (*La Queste* 276), "they lifted the bed and carried her on it up into the palace where they buried her with such ceremony as befitted a king's daughter" (QHG 281).

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to authenticate sainthood."[12] Her body is miraculously taken to Sarras by the ship sailing by itself, which shows once again the important role of the sea in uniting the protagonists.

When the story of Galahad and that of Saint Brendan are compared, the surrounding world, which is the background for their adventures, seems to be profoundly infused with divine grace. Both protagonists and their companions move in magical-mystical worlds, and witness wondrous happenings which are just steps towards the ultimate revelation. In both cases there is an ultimate border,[13] namely death, which actually makes possible the desired (re)union with God.

Death is not a frightening occurrence, nor is it a threat. Quite the opposite, it is a desired event, for which Galahad prays very often and which comes as a blessing. Saint Brendan can also feel that death is a reward and welcomes it gladly. The difference in the way death is perceived by the two heroes consists in the physicality associated to death in Brendan's voyage. For Brendan and his companions the border between our world and the world of the dead is delineated by the waters of the sea, and hell itself is perceived as an island, whereas on another island they find Judas, in constant fear of the demons' torture. For Galahad, death is only a spiritual movement and the angels sing when his soul rises towards heaven, a movement which finally answers his prayers.

In *La Queste* the sea also unites places, since the cities where the Grail resides (Corbenic and Sarras) are both located on the sea. Thus, the sea plays the role of a connector, making it possible for various knights to reach Corbenic, and later on the Holy Grail itself as well as Perceval's sister's body are taken to Sarras, without any human interference in guiding the ships.

Conclusion

When trying to discern the various significances of the sea in *La Queste*, the reader has to place this medieval text in the cultural context of its time, especially the religious one. Firstly, it has to be said that voyaging signifies surrendering to God's will or obeying and trusting God, because the sea is a place where man has very little control. Moreover, according to the Celtic tradition, the sea is a means to achieve seclusion and isolation, necessary for spiritual contemplation and deep introspection. Furthermore, since the questers witness God's power in the unpredictable movement of the sea, the voyage becomes a test of faith as well as courage.

At the same time, the sea provides all voyagers with knowledge and information, given by the people living on the various islands they encounter or from other people who sail at sea. Therefore, the sea becomes the background for the spiritual lessons they learn and its depth is also a symbol for the inscrutable divine mysteries. The pious travellers share this magical/celestial environment and become spiritually enlightened while praying here, either in devout groups or alone.

Thus, the sea teaches and assures solitude, but it also brings people together, as they must live close together on the ship, help each other and support each other for the duration of

[12] "Perceval writes a letter containing a presentation of his sister's parentage, the manner of her death, and her role in aiding the knights in their quest. He does this, he says, so that if her body is found in a strange country, they will know who she is. The ship sails away by itself with the body of Perceval's sister. Lancelot enters it several days later, discovers the woman's body, and finds the letter" (Robeson 440-1).

[13] The reality beyond this border is known and can be either fortunate, as in the case of the Galahad, Perceval and his sister, or dark as it is the case of the sinful people, like Judas, two of Saint Brendan's companions, and probably some of the iniquitous knights, like Lionel.

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the journey, while they participate in the same adventures. This bond does not only stem from the fact that they have a common interest, namely to overcome all the obstacles, but it is also a result of their love for God, which implies loving their fellows and unifies them all in Christ.

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