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Holidays and Holy Days: The Significance of the Pagan/Christian Calendar in the French Vulgate Account of King Arthur and His Round Table

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Holidays and Holy Days: The Significance of the Pagan/Christian Calendar in the *Old French Vulgate* Account of King Arthur and His Round Table

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Abstract

The *Merlin* section of the thirteenth-century *Old French Vulgate Cycle* focuses on Arthur's birth and the now iconic events that accompany his divine selection and coronation as King of Britain. A close reading of this account reveals that significant story events usually coincide with religious holidays. The transition from the pagan to the Christian calendar and the symbolic impact of the calendar on the early formation of the round table in the *French Vulgate Cycle* has been mostly overlooked by scholars. In this paper, I address this lacuna by examining the role the calendar plays in the development of characters and events during this pivotal moment in the evolution of the Arthurian legend. For example, both Uther and Arthur have significant experiences involving their crowns during Whitsuntide, which suggests that this holiday held important cultural implications. I pay close attention to the significance of the holidays that were transitioning from Pagan rituals to Christian rites for the *Vulgate* writers' thirteenth-century courtly audience. I argue that the frequent and consistent intersection of crucial story events and major holidays reveals the considerable role that cultural practices had on the early development of Arthurian legend.

The legend of King Arthur has permeated social consciousness for over 1,400 years, and it continues to inspire new generations through popular culture venues like film, television, and fiction. While Arthur, as depicted in literature, did not exist, it is possible to situate the exploits of the Knights of the Round Table in the sociocultural context of the time they were first imagined. One aspect of Arthurian legend that has captured the imagination of its readers is the fantastical role of magic and pagan elements. Although the interplay of Christian versus pagan in Arthurian texts has been discussed at length, little scholarly work has been done to interpret the texts through the lens of the pagan culture that was thriving during the sixth century CE when the historical events occurred that eventually led to the birth of Arthurian myth in the seventh century CE. The absence of current scholarly work in this area can likely be attributed the prevalence of the hermeneutics of suspicion[1] and skepticism that has reigned over postmodern and emergent literary theories for over twenty years (Cusack 24). Despite contemporary resistance in the academic community to attempting to extract Iron Age, pagan, and cultural significance from medieval texts, I argue that there is a wealth of information that Arthurian works have to offer that is overlooked when this method is eschewed. The *Story of Merlin* section of the thirteenth-century *Old French Vulgate Cycle* tells the Arthurian story from Merlin's birth through the birth of Lancelot and includes the stories of Arthur's conception and eventual rise to becoming King of Britain. Major events from this section, such as the sword in stone scene, Kay's knighting ceremony, and the times the text specifically indicates Uther (Arthur's father) and Arthur wear their crowns, coincide with important religious and cultural

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[1] The hermeneutics of suspicion has had a negative effect on this field since it proposes that texts reveal and conceal the nature of a subject.

holidays that, while presented as Christian, have pagan origins. Since these holy days are the

interpretive lens through which I am going to address elements of the story, it is worthwhile to

briefly discuss some of the trends, ideas, and problems that scholars in this field of history have

raised.

Ronald Hutton, professor at the University of Bristol and leading expert in pagan British

history, notes that there is contention among folklorists about how these documents and

references should be approached and interpreted (*Stations* xi). He also suggests that financial

constraints prevent many university libraries from acquiring the resources that make the

competent study of folklore possible. Other problems that often arise in this field include how

information from texts should be interpreted and determining whether the source is credible.

When it comes to translating and contextualizing words of uncertain meaning in a text, scholars

often arrive at two very different conclusions—with each providing excellent evidence to support

their respective positions. Postmodern skepticism and the deconstruction of texts led to a trend in

both the study of literature and folklore where the text, content, and author are no longer trusted

due to their constructed natures and subjective interpretive value. A modicum of suspicion is

valuable and contributes to a critical assessment of a text; however, too much suspicion

sometimes serves to obscure valid information that may have otherwise been clear. Scholars

regularly question whether legitimate cultural information can be drawn from the texts of

medieval literature, but it should be noted that writers of both romances and chronicles often

drew from the same sources (Trachsler 24; McCracken 36). Few texts describing the religious

practices of pre-Christian Britain exist, and a great deal of what is known about these pagan

cultures is derived from historiographical texts generated by colonizing powers, works of

literature, and the work of historians, folklorists, and archaeologists. Further complicating the

study of early British folklore, some Welsh authors in the Early Modern era produced

reconstructed texts and fraudulently presented them as authentic documents that provided crucial

information about the religious practices of the druids (Hutton; *Pagan Religions* 139-40). These

fraudulent texts complicate folkloric study because innocent readers and modern practitioners of

reconstructed pagan religious orders are often unaware of the falsity of these authors' works, and

they proliferate the information contained therein as fact. When exploring in this vein, it is often

the case that a researcher must wade through multitudes of websites, articles, and books from the

New Age, Wiccan, and reconstructionist pagan/heathen religious movements; although

terminology or ideas to pursue may be gleaned from these sources, they rarely include references

to credible, academic information.

Thankfully, historians who do publish scholarly works on this topic, like Ronald Hutton,

uncovered and incorporated reliable evidence from their historical source materials. One final

complexity that should be addressed is that many cultures and peoples contributed to the pagan

beliefs and practices of the early British Isles. Thus, when trying to trace the origins of a practice

in Britain, research could easily lead to sources dealing with the religious rites of Norse or

Germanic peoples; coupled with the influence of the Roman empire and Christianity, the matter

of interpreting the meaning and significance of holidays in medieval literature is no small feat.

For the purposes of this paper, I will primarily focus on specific pagan religious traditions, like

the use of ritual fires and beliefs about seasons, as they relate to the holidays which intersect with

significant moments in the text of *The Story of Merlin* in the *Old French Vulgate Cycle*.

Several holidays are mentioned repeatedly throughout *The Story of Merlin* section of the

Vulgate. Instead of organizing the discussion of the text by holiday, however, it is more

productive to examine the text by focusing first on the plot and secondarily on the corresponding

holiday or calendar event. Although not every instance of a Christian holiday in the text has an

easily identifiable link to pagan or Christian symbolism, I argue that the inclusion of these holy

days testifies to the importance of the original, pagan holidays to the early Welsh and British

peoples among whom the Arthurian narrative originated. Further, since relatively few documents

accurately detail the practices and beliefs of the pagans in the British Isles, it is not likely that

contemporary readers of the texts would be able to identify the significance of events occurring

at certain points in the ritual year. However, it is worthwhile to pursue linking key plot points to

the pagan holy days and rites of which we are aware so that their meaning may be understood as

our knowledge of the ancient peoples of Britain grows. The influence of the transition from

pagan ritual year to the Christian liturgical calendar on Arthurian literature can be best seen in

the now iconic events of the thirteenth-century *Old French Vulgate Cycle*, including the

symbolism of the round table, Uther wearing his crown and Arthur's coronation, Arthur's

accession to the throne of Britain, and Sir Kay's knighting ceremony.

The round shape of Arthur Pendragon's famous table evokes the idea of the wheel of the

year, "which involves the combination of the naturally-occurring quarter days and the 'cross-

quarter days,' the Celtic festivals of Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lughnasa" (Cusack 29).

Although not specifically calendar related, the shape of the table also echoes the importance of

the circle to Celtic spirituality (Hutton; *Pagan Religions* 52). More than the simple symbolism of

a common shape, however, the *Vulgate* text provides details about the round table that also elicit

implications of a connection between the table and the calendar. *The Story of Merlin* relates that,

in Uther's arrangement of the table,[2] there are seats for fifty knights, a seat for King Uther, and a seat that is to be kept empty—fifty-two seats in all (Lacy 197). I posit that these fifty-two seats correspond to the number of weeks in a year. When considered alone, it may beg credulity that the table has any actual connection to the cycle of the year, but an examination of how Arthur's arrangement of the same table also relates to the divisions of a year makes the claim more likely. His arrangement includes thirteen seats—one for him and each of his twelve knights. A year is comprised of thirteen, four-week lunar cycles; the organizations of the round table, coupled with the associations of circles to the Celtic wheel of the year, present a strong possibility that the round table was intended to connote a connection to the calendar. Uther first reveals the round table during the festival of Whitsuntide, a holiday that Hutton notes may have had Anglo-Saxon origins because of the association of games with the holy celebration (Lacy 197; *Stations* 277). Whitsuntide, also known as Pentecost or Rogationtide, was a time for blessing fields, baptisms, and celebrating the descent of the Holy Ghost on Christ's apostles (Hutton; *Stations* 277). As is stated in *The Story of Merlin*, Uther's table is the last of three tables that represent the Christian Trinity, with Uther's symbolizing the Holy Ghost (Lacy 197). Given the saturation of intersections between narrative events and holidays in the text, it is plausible that Whitsuntide was chosen for the holy day associated with Uther's table because of the shared connection to the Holy Ghost. As seen in this first example, the text is fraught with connections to the calendar, which continue in the next scenes from the *Vulgate*.

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[2] There is only one round table, but Uther and Arthur each implement a different arrangement of the chairs surrounding the table.

After becoming enamored of Ygraine, two of Uther's friends recommend that he hold

court at Whitsuntide so he that can see her again; Uther holds court at Carduel on other quarter

and cross-quarter days, so his request for his barons to visit at Whitsuntide is not unusual. What

is curious about this scene is that "on that Whitsunday the king was of a mind to wear his crown"

(199). No explanation is given for Uther's decision to wear his crown, and no reason makes itself

apparent upon a closer reading of the passage. However, this scene foreshadows his son's future

coronation on Whitsuntide and creates a parallel between Uther and Arthur. Uther's decision to

wear his crown on Whitsunday sets a precedent for his family and the throne of Britain being

connected to the Holy Spirit, a connection that becomes more apparent and important later, when

Arthur becomes king. Although Arthur pulls the sword from the stone on three separate

occasions, his coronation does not take place until the Whitsuntide after he completes these

actions (214-5). Thus, the use of Christian and pagan religious holidays in the text creates an

implied subtext in the narrative that operates in the *Vulgate Cycle*. Arthur is often interpreted as a

Christ-figure, and the timing of his coronation fits with the narrative of the traditional date of his

birth; the *Story of Merlin* does not indicate when Arthur was born, but tradition places his birth

on Christmas Day. Arthur's Christmas birth serves as both a Christian and pagan symbol. As a

Christian symbol, the timing of Arthur's birth is an obvious parallel to the traditional date of

Jesus's birth. Ironically, the similarity of Arthur's birth to that of the Christ also functions as a

reference to pagan religion. Though only predating the institution of Christmas by roughly a

century, the festival of Saturnalia and the Feast of the Unconquered Sun were Roman festivals

that occurred around December 25th (Frodsham 81). English Christianity later capitalized on the

play of words between *sun* and *son* to appropriate the pagan holiday as its own. If Arthur is a

parallel to Jesus, then he is also a part of the sun/son wordplay, which would give Arthur a

somewhat deified position as the Unconquered Sun. The circumstances of Arthur's conception

also echo the situation surrounding the Christ-child. Christian tradition holds that Jesus was

immaculately conceived in Mary, a virgin, by the Holy Ghost; Arthur's conception, though not

virginal, evokes the same idea of the miraculous. Merlin uses his arcane knowledge to magically

obscure Uther's identity to allow him to initiate amorous relations with Ygraine—which results

in Arthur's mysterious conception. Looping back to Arthur's coronation, if he is a Christ-figure,

it logically follows that the endowment of his kingship would be in some way related to the Holy

Ghost; Jesus's ministry began with a similar endowment from God as can be seen in this passage

from the Bible: "And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a

voice came from heaven, which said, thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased" (*KJV*,

Luke 3.22). Arthur's coronation, which takes place at Whitsuntide, the time when the Holy Spirit

descended on the apostles, may likewise connote Arthur's investiture by God as he begins his

work as King of Britain.

Arthur's accession to the throne of Britain is dependent on his ability to pull the sword

from the stone that appears in front of the church on Christmas Eve (Lacy 212). Arthur first pulls

the sword from the stone on Christmas, with subsequent repetitions of this feat also occurring at

Candlemas and Easter (214-5). If Christmas is taken as the already discussed metaphor of the

Unconquered Sun, then Candlemas continues this idea by providing light at "the traditional

opening of spring, when the darkness was in full retreat before the lengthening daylight"

(Hutton; *Reformation* 96). The third, and final, time Arthur pulls the sword from the stone occurs

at Easter, which is thought to have come from a pagan, spring celebration of the goddess Eostre

(Cusack 25). Arthur's third display of worthiness finally convinces the nobility that he is fit to

ascend the throne; the nobility's unwillingness to accept Arthur as king is reflective of the noble

French conception of and attitudes towards kingship; they "were very wary of making

unexamined concessions to actual royal power" (Simpson 208). It is therefore likely that the

unwillingness of the nobles to accept Arthur as king in the account in the *Vulgate Cycle* is an

example of a French influence on a British narrative. As noted earlier, the absence of concrete

sources denoting the rites, practices, and beliefs of early British pagans makes it difficult to

ascertain why certain events were symbolic in relation to specific holy days. Unfortunately, as

Eostre is a reference to the even older and more obscure goddess Hretha, Easter/Ostara is one of

the holy days whose pagan origins are unclear and debatable (Cusack 23); however, Arthur's

accession at Easter does serve to further cement the narrative of Arthurian legend as securely tied

to Christian themes.

Sir Kay, King Arthur's adoptive brother and loyal retainer, is knighted on All Saints' Day

(Lacy 213). All Saints' Day occurs at the same point in the seasonal year as does the Celtic

festival, Samhain. One difference between the two holy days is that All Saints' Day occurs

toward the end of the Christian year, but Samhain marked the *beginning* of the Celtic year.

Predictably, Christianity sought to suppress the Celtic rites associated with the holiday because

of their associations with communing with the dead and the practice of magic (Hutton; *Stations*

361-2). This assertion is not to say, though, that All Saints' Day has no roots in Christian

tradition; fourth-century Christians living in the Mediterranean region participated in feasts of

remembrance around this point in the year for the martyrs of the Roman empire (Hutton; *Stations*

364). As a way of further associating Arthur's household with Christian holidays and traditions,

Kay's knighting ceremony serves perfectly. One rite from the later practice of Samhain offers

further symbolic depth to the time of the year in which Kay is knighted. May Day rites and

Beltane fire festivals were observed as protective magic against witches and other evil in the

spring, and scholars suspect that similar rites were used at Samhain to ward off malevolent spirits or the evil creatures that roamed freely on this night (366-70). Kay's knighting at Samhain/All Saints' Day may have been an attempt to ascribe additional protective qualities to him in his duties as a knight. As Arthur's older brother and seneschal, it is fitting that Kay is imbued with holy, protective qualities. Even if one is skeptical of the implications this holiday carried in the minds of the original audience or in the intentions of the author, it should be clear that holidays played a substantial role in the cultural identities and imaginations of both the Christian and pagan peoples of the early British Isles.

Extricating folkloric meaning from literary texts requires diligent work, careful attention to detail, and a lessening of the skepticism that prevails over many schools of postmodern theory and criticism. With the aid of historical and folkloric scholarship, literary scholars can examine medieval literature to discover new interpretations of existing symbolism; as long as interpretation is tempered, it is possible to rejuvenate texts that have been read and written about for centuries. Arthurian literature, because of its rich references to holidays and holy days, lends itself particularly well to examination through this method. *The Story of Merlin*, from the *Old French Vulgate Cycle*, well embodies Arthurian legend's propensity to be the subject of folkloric study through the intersection of now world-famous events, like the establishment of the round table and Arthur drawing the sword from the stone, and holidays from the medieval calendar that was transitioning from centering around pagan rites to Christian liturgy.

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