Communication and Cultural Studies

Dark Ages Religious Conflicts and their Literary Representations: *The Winter King*, by Bernard Cornwell

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Abstract: This paper analyses the religious situation in Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries as reflected in Arthurian literature. This reflection usually depicts religious strife which brought a political division between the British kingdoms. This, in turn, provoked the final defeat against the Anglo-Saxons. Four religious creeds will be dealt with: the native Celtic religion and the cults that the Romans brought with them from the Eastern Mediterranean, including Christianity and the mysteries of Isis and Mithras. All of them are represented in Bernard Cornwell's trilogy The Warlord Chronicles. We will concentrate on how these creeds influenced the lives of Britons in the age represented and exemplified in the first book of Conrnwell's trilogy, *The Winter King*. Despite the fact that religion has always been one of the most common topics in *Arthuriana*, modern literature deals with it in a different way to previous texts, linking it with history and politics.

Keywords: Religious Clashes; Politics; Arthurian Literature and Times

From all the stories, legends or, maybe, actual events in Western Europe, one of the best known and most widely studied is that of King Arthur. Unlike the Greek and Roman legends, only proper to those literatures, Arthuriana is a group of texts and oral lore which all the Western European cultures share in common. This legacy went beyond these geographical limits to be dealt with in other languages, such as Russian, Tagalog or Hebrew. The mention of titles such as *Mabinogion*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *Le Roman du Graal*, *Das Buch der Abentauer*, or *Tres hijuelos había el rey*, shows how the legend has travelled not only to different cultures and literatures, but also through the ages as well.

The twentieth century proved to be a new golden age for Arthurian literature and scholarship, partly favoured by research done by people like John Morris,

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Christopher Snyder, Ken Dark or Richard Barber, to mention some of the best known scholars, and partly thanks to the publication of popular books of Arthurian fiction by writers like Rosemary Sutcliff, Stephen Lawhead, Marion Zimmer Bradley or Bernard Cornwell.

If every author leaves part of his own life and thoughts in his books, indeed Cornwell is no exception with his trilogy on Arthur written between 1996 and 1998. In The Warlord Chronicles, formed by *The Winter King* (1996), *Enemy of God* (1997) and *Excalibur* (1998), the topic of religion stands out prominently and must be understood as one of the moving forces for the characters. Cornwell's own life has been strongly influenced by religion. Shortly after being born, he was adopted by a family who belonged to a sect called *Peculiar People*, nowadays extinct, who took Puritan ideas to extremes. Therefore, Cornwell grew up attracted by all that the sect prohibited. It was maybe all these prohibitions that compelled him to study and complete a degree in Theology, which ultimately helped him to extricate himself from the sect.

Likewise, religion has been one of the most pervasive issues in Arthurian literature, but the difference lies on the fact that, in this trilogy, the religious problem is more actively entangled with politics and society and it is in the background of historical changes. Besides, there is a clear contrast between religion in Cornwell and how it was depicted in medieval literature.

This paper explores the religious tensions of the Arthurian Age through Cornwell's literary adaptation and how these divisions fuelled, if not originated, the political problems. In his trilogy, Cornwell mainly deals with four different beliefs and how their followers build up the tension which will lead to the political fragmentation.

Religion and Geography

Firstly, the religious differences were especially evident in the distinction between the countryside and the urban areas. Through the main character, Derfel Cadarn, Arthur's warrior and close friend, Cornwell compares Isca (modern Exeter), the capital of the kingdom of Dumnonia, with the countryside surrounding it, the reader gets the impression of a totally Romanized city against a countryside settled by people who tattooed their faces and followed ancient Celtic customs. After the Roman withdrawal in 410, most of the Celtic tribes held on to the Roman lifestyle,

namely those in the south of the country and especially in south and south-eastern Wales and south-western England (modern Devon and Cornwall):

There had been a time when all the tribes of Britain were separate and a man from the Catuvellani would look quite differently from a man of the Belgae, but the Romans had left us all much alike. Only some tribes, like Cadwy's, still retained their distinct appearance. His tribe believed themselves to be superior to other Britons, in mark of which they tattooed their faces with symbols of their tribe and sept. (Cornwell, *TWK*, p. 133)[1]

Ken Dark (2002) defends the idea that if "a "Late Antique" Romano-Christian culture existed anywhere in fifth- and sixth- century Britain we might expect to find it in this westernmost province of the Western Roman Empire" (p. 105). He develops the idea by saying that the polities in the southern and western fringes of the British Isles "had a shared Romano-Christian culture, preserved Roman-period styles of dress and symbolism, and maintained an intellectual life based on both classical and Christian scholarship" (p. 227). Snyder (1998) also follows this same opinion, which has been debated over and criticised by other scholars[2], which have taken archaeological findings, and the cessation of coin minting as proofs of the decay of *Romanitas* in the British Isles. Bernard Cornwell deals with both theses in his trilogy. He talks about the lack of coinage, when Derfel goes to Glastonbury Abbey to collect taxes for the army, Bishop Sansum gives Derfel "gold from Emperor Adrian" (p. 357), only to find out later is not gold, but a brass sesterce. Adrian had been the Roman Emperor 400 years before the historical events took place, so the use of such a coin suggests a total stop in coin minting. On the other hand, Cornwell also talks of urban activity, following the Roman style of life, as in the quote above.

Nevertheless, if the Romans had managed to bridge the social gap between the different tribes by creating a polity common to all of them, they did not succeed in religion. In fact, the Romans made of religion a problem of differentiation, mainly because those beliefs which travelled with the Romans (Christianity and the mysteries of Isis and Mithras), were "bound up to the city life" (Johnson, p. 31). At the same time, the countryside and the less Romanised areas were experiencing a resurgence of the old pagan religion. Anne Ross (1998) confirms that, by the fourth century, there was an upsurge of the local pagan religion, mainly in the southern

[1] When mentioned, the titles in the trilogy will be abbreviated to TWK, EofG and Exc.
[2] For more information, see Alan Lane in bibliography.

rural area, as other scholars, such as Thomas (1995), assert. Dr Margaret Murray even suggested that paganism "continued to form a concealed background to British religion throughout the first millennium AD, and surfaced briefly in the Middle Ages as an aspect of the various witch cults" (Thomas, p. 266). When the Romans were gradually leaving the British Isles in the fourth and fifth centuries, the native Britons reoccupied or rebuilt the Iron-Age hill-forts that the Mediterranean conquerors had occupied. Judging from the quantity of votives found in those Iron-Age hill-tops (Maiden Castle in southern England or Dinas Powys in south Wales, to give two examples), the practice of the native pagan religion found it easy to flourish and it might have posed a threat to the Christians in some parts of the country. (Johnson, 1980, p. 33) (Alcock, 1989, pp. 209-212)

Druidism. Sacrifices

The Romans did not write a positive propaganda towards Celtic religion in general, and the Druids in particular, especially at the early stage of the conquest. Paradoxically, they were usually tolerant towards the cults of the peoples they conquered, to the point of adopting their new gods for their own pantheon in an example of syncretism. A proof of this is the fact that, parallel to their own pantheon, the Romans also brought to the lands they conquered other cults. This process was completed by the Romanization of the native gods (Turcan, 1996, pp. 12-15).). In fact, Julius Caesar, in some of his writings (especially in *De Bello Gallico*) compared the Celtic and the Roman gods by the characteristics they shared in common. After the conquests, the Romans built up temples where the native gods had been previously worshipped; the new veneration was carried out under a dual name, one Celtic and another Latin. The most famous of these temples stood at Aquae Sulis (modern Bath), devoted to the goddesses Minerva and Sulis. This clearly exemplifies that the Romans assimilated the British pantheon and it may prove that they did not despise the Celtic religion, but they feared their representatives. They tried to get rid of the upper intellectual classes, for the simple reason that they could oppose them, or stir their people against the new invaders. To this end, the Romans wrote against these "barbarous tribes" inhabiting the British Isles. Julius Caesar talked about human sacrifices in the Celtic rituals performed by the druids, especially in caves. Even MacCulloch (1911) listed four types of sacrifices and pointed out that the Celts of Britain, Galatia, and Gaul were especially keen on the practice of *haruspicium*. However, it seems that human

sacrifice, performed very likely in ancient times, was no longer a common practice by the time the classical authors wrote. Pomponius Mela wrote in his *De Chorographia* in AD 43 that the custom of human sacrifice was obsolete by then.

This intentional misinformation enabled the Romans to justify the killing of Druids on Anglesey in AD 60.[1] About that year, the Roman General and Governor Suetonius Paulinus launched an attack on the isle. The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus describes the attack, where the "heroic Roman soldiers drove howling priests and black-clad, screaming women from bloodstained groves, presumably the site of human sacrifices" (as collected in Mackillop, p. 17). In a similar account, Derfel's partner, Princess Ceinwyn, has a vision of how the killings on Anglesey might have happened. Cornwell is echoing Tacitus here; even though he has embellished the story

There were… great hunting lines of soldiers and their sword arms were bloody to their shoulders because they just killed and killed. They came through the forests in a great line, just killing. Arms going up and down, and all the women and children running away, only there was nowhere to run and the soldiers just closed on them and chopped them down. Little children, Derfel! (*EofG*, p. 115)

The Romans used human sacrifices in the Celtic society to compare their *civilitas* against the Celtic *barbaries*. This was a hypocritical and intended exercise of misinformation, since under the emperorships of Caligula and Nero human sacrifice in Rome became common practice. Hypocritically, Julius Caesar, who criticised human sacrifice in Celtic society so vehemently, acceded to Vercingetorix's execution in the Tullianum after dragging him through the streets of Rome as booty conquest.

Too many lies have been written about human sacrifices in the Celtic society. Until relatively recently, many scholars believed the Roman and Greek texts to be unquestionable. J.G.Frazer's (1890) is a good example of this. He followed not only Julius Caesar's but also Posidonius's ideas and declared that the Celts in the Scottish Highlands carried out human sacrifices, in the same way the Gaulish did, as late as the second century B.C.:

Condemned criminals were reserved by the Celts in order to be sacrificed to the gods at a great festival which took place every five years. The more there were of

[1] There is no common agreement regarding this massacre. Some authors, like MacKillop (2004), state that it happened in AD61. Dodd (2003), points at AD60 the year when it took place. For Cunliffe (1999) the Romans slaughtered the Druids in year AD59.

such victims, the greater was believed to be the fertility of the land. When there were not enough criminals to furnish victims, captives taken in war were sacrificed to supply the deficiency … by the Druids or priests. (p. 592)

We must consider this account very carefully. Firstly, it cannot be denied that the Celts had performed rituals of human sacrifices. There is evidence that they did so: skeletons have been dug out confirming this. Barry Cunliffe (1999) says that there is abundant evidence of human sacrifice in Celtic society. Nevertheless, when mentioning Strabo (63 BC- 23 AD), Cunliffe emphasizes that the Greek geographer uses the past tense when dealing with human sacrifices in the Celtic world.

However, we must be cautious as to what extent those rituals were human sacrifices to appease or thank the gods or, on the contrary, if they were *just simply* executions of war prisoners. In *TWK*, there is an example of the former, when Morgan sacrifices a young Saxon called Wlenca whose spasms, death-throes and decease are interpreted as a good omen for Mordred's reign. That sacrifice is similar to the one described by Diodorus Siculus, and collected by Cunliffe (1999):

They devote to death a human being and stab him with a dagger in the region of the diaphragm and when he has fallen they foretell the future from his fall and from the convulsions of his limbs and, moreover, from the spurting of the blood, placing their trust in some ancient and long continued observation of these practices. (p. 192)

Queen Boudicca took a score of female Roman prisoners and put them to death in a similar situation as the one described above. Some of them were even impaled. Nora Chadwick in her book *The Celts* (1972) held the idea that human sacrifice was a not a common ritual, and, if made, it may be thought somewhat as the ritual killing of prisoners of war rather than as an appeasement to the gods. This is also corroborated by Miranda Green, who explains that even though there is a relatively high number of abnormal burials in Britain, we cannot be sure whether those corpses "were demonstrably the victims of specific ritual murder" (Green, *Dictionary*, p. 184). All human sacrifices seem to have been taken place long before the arrival of the Romans, such is the case of the burial of Garton Slack, in South Yorkshire, where two corpses were pinned together with a stake driven through their arms. Below the pelvis of one of the skeletons there was a foetus, expelled when the mother was unconscious. (Green, 1998) Taking all these elements into account, it is very unlikely that the Celts performed the *haruspicium*

or any other sort of propitiatory sacrifice in the Arthurian Age. Therefore, we must assume that Cornwell has used them as a poetic licence.

We can conclude that human sacrifices ceased to be performed *en masse* in the first millennium BC. They had been a common practice to all the Indo-European peoples and cultures: in the pre-Homeric Greece, pigs and humans were sacrificed to placate a certain dark goddess, as MacCulloch (1890) and Campbell (2001) attest to. However, superstitions such as sprinkling the foundations with blood to free the house from evil spirits were still known centuries later, as Nennius's and Geoffrey of Monmouth's texts show.[1] This has a parallel in the Iron Age hillfort of South Cadbury, dug out by archaeologist Leslie Alcock in the late sixties, where a young man had been buried in a pit in what seems an offering to the gods to appease the evil spirits of the new building.

Religious Multiplicity

The fifth and sixth centuries was an age of religious division, which mirrored the social and political changes occurring at the time. Politically speaking, Britain started the fifth century as part of the Roman Empire and ended it as an independent isle populated by countless tiny kingdoms. The religious transformation ran parallel, and it might have started in the previous century, since Snyder (1998) observes that the "fourth century began with pagans in the majority, and ended with Christians perhaps pulling even." (p. 237)

Cornwell shows this multiplicity with Mordred's coronation after his grandfather's death. There are some Celtic rituals mixed up with Christian ones. Among the former, as we have stated above, we have got the sacrifice of a Saxon prisoner of war stabbed above the diaphragm, whose death would be interpreted for Mordred's reign. Amongst the latter, some children present the new baby king with bread, a whip and a sword, symbols for Mordred to feed his people, dispense them justice

[1] It is the famous chapter in which Vortigern wants to build up a castle. Every night, the castle collapses, destroying what had been built up in the day. Vortigern consults his druids, who advise him to sacrifice a fatherless boy and sprinkle his blood on the grounds of the castle. Merlin (Ambrosius in other retellings) is that boy who, thanks to his powers, tells him the reason why the castle keeps collapsing, saving his own life this way and becoming Vortigern's personal adviser. Similar accounts to this are not uncommon in Celtic Literature. In an Irish tale, the Druids decree the immolation of the son of an undefiled couple, whose blood should sprinkle the land of the king of Erin. The mother requests that a two-bellied cow be sacrificed instead and when they do so, two birds are found. In another example, the palace of Emain Macha, the dwelling of the Irish High King, is built upon a human victim.

and defend them.[1] Following this parallel, Mordred is also given two tutors who will be in charge of his personal and cultural education: Nabur, a Christian magistrate, and Derella, a Celtic bard. It can be inferred that Cornwell is using here two historical aspects for literary purposes. Firstly, a situation of two powerful religions eager for more power and control. Inevitably, Druidism and Christianity must have coped, or even collaborated, with each other at some point in history, as defended by Anne Ross (1999) when she says that in the process of Christianization of Ireland, "the Druids, in some guise or another, survived" (p. 148); some important Christian saints, such as Brigit, were raised by druids. Furthermore, we cannot forget that in medieval texts, Arthur, a Christian, is helped by Merlin, still clearly depicted as a Druid. It seems quite probable, following Ross's ideas (1998) that the Druidic beliefs went on, especially in the Goidelic area: St. Columba was "alleged to have encountered a Druid, named Broichan, near Inverness, in the seventh century AD". (p. 144) Ross thinks that Druidism continued even when Christianity was the official religion, but their main representatives had lost the political and religious power. Some texts, like *Vita Patrici* tells of druidic tricks that the saint carried out in a contest against Druids, for instance. All these point at a probable period where both beliefs worked together or were used in conjunction. Secondly, the Celtic custom for the sons and daughters of noble men and kings to be fostered by other kings and druids, a situation which, for some authors, continued until the eighteenth century in some parts of Wales.[2]

Christianity

Medieval authors succeeded in Christianizing some of the originally pagan topics, such as the Grail. The main aim was, of course, to extol Christianity against other faiths. Modern Literature is not unaware of this religious appeal, although in some of the best known cases, Christianity is severely thrashed, as in Zimmer's *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) for instance. Cornwell's trilogy also follows this pattern. While in Cornwell's *TWK*, Celtic religion is mainly described in positive terms,

[1] The act of breaking or presenting the bread was present in "the cult agapes practiced in Mediterranean antiquity, especially in the Mysery religions". (Eliade, 1982, p. 342) Hence, it also has a pagan origin. The whip and the sword also have a clear pagan origin.

[2] In Historia Regum Britanniae, for instance, Constans is fostered in the monastery of St Amphibalus, while his brothers Ambrosius and Uther are fostered by king Budic of Brittany. Steve Blake and Scott Lloyd mention this custom of fostering in Wales until the 18th century in The Keys to Avalon. Shaftesbury (Dorset): Element, 2000.

Christianity is mostly regarded with contempt, a feeling which becomes more obvious along the trilogy. The criticisms start on the first pages both through facts and words: Derfel states that the monks at Glastonbury swear that the thorn in their premises is the same one that Joseph of Arimathea brought with him some centuries before, after Christ's passion, only to find out that the thorn is changed every year and it is just a business to attract people to the monastery.[1]

Attacks against Christian religion are also verbal. Morgan describes a holy man and some Christian women on the road to Glevum as "an errant priest accompanied by his wife and holy whores." (Cornwell, 1996, p. 47) while Nimue, another druidess and Merlin's lover, describes a saint as "A dead Christian" (Cornwell, 1996, p. 151). We should not be shocked by this statement, were it not for what she adds afterwards: "They should all be saints". (Cornwell, 1996, p. 151) Both Culhwch, Arthur's cousin, and Merlin lead the finest and most acid attacks against the Christians. In *EofG*, before the Christian uprising takes place, Arthur and Derfel stop at Isca, Culhwch's place, on their way to Kernow to see justice done in the dispute between King Mark and Tristan, his son, over Queen Iseult. Culhwch tells them that the Christians are backing Lancelot to become king, since he has got a fish on his shield and the Christians have taken this as a symbol sent by God. The dialogue between the three men has comic nuances:

"A fish?" Arthur plainly did not believe Culhwch.

"A fish," Culhwch insisted. "Maybe they pray to a trout? How would I know? They already worship a holy ghost, a virgin and a carpenter, so why not a fish as well? They're all mad." (p. 287)

The demythologisation of the Christian religion and its more important characters cannot be more devastating. Merlin is also generous in his disapproval of Christianity. When asked by Derfel about Rome, Merlin states that Rome was a filthy place. I thought the Vandals might have cleaned it up, but the place is still full of priests and their plum little boys, so I came back here. Ban's harpists are much prettier than Rome's catamites. (*TWK*, p. 271)

The equation homosexuality = Church hierarchy seems to be a constant theme in Cornwell's trilogy. Bishop Sansum, one of the most negative characters in the book, is no exception. In the second chapter of *TWK*, two more novices join the

[1] It is well known the ruse that the monks at Glastonbury carried out in the times of Henry II, when they claimed to have found the corpses of Arthur and his wife Guinevere in the premises of their abbey.

monastery led by the bishop and we read that they are mere boys with unbroken voices, and Sansum has taken it upon himself to train them in the ways of Our Most Precious Saviour. Such is the saint's care for their immortal souls that he even insists the boys must share his sleeping cell and he seems a happier man for their company. (p. 114)

Another criticism against Christianity is reflected in the process of accommodation to the new religion. Some of the alleged Christians still kept their pagan superstitions, which Cornwell also reflects when one of the "whores" mentioned above firstly crosses herself when seeing the two druidesses, and then spits at them, one of the pagan ways to avert evil and to show one's contempt. Another example of "multiplicity of creeds" is when, moments before a battle, all the soldiers within the Dumnonian ranks, Christians included, start performing superstitious rites, some of which could be considered pagan, since, as Derfel explains, all of them "also believed that my presence in their ranks brought them good luck because I had once escaped from a Druid's death-pit". (p. 145) Cornwell seems to have in mind John Morris's ideas:

But conversion to Christianity did not mean that the convert ceased to be a pagan. As among many modern peoples, the same mind could accommodate several different religions at the same time; the Church Fathers might proclaim that "the same mouth cannot praise Christ and Jupiter", but the poet Ausonius, consul and prefect, gave them the lie by composing hymns to Christ and also to Jupiter; and for centuries church councils found it necessary to disapprove of families who attended mass on Sunday morning, and sacrificed to their household gods on Sunday afternoon. (p. 27)

This process of acclimatization could not have happened overnight or without any difficulties. Unlike the Roman and Pagan religions, Christianity is mainly exclusive, since the adherents can only accept one truly God, a fact that some believers ignored, because they "happily added Christ to their personal list of favoured deities." (De La Bédoyère, p. 230) Cornwell's Bishop Bedwin is an example of this: a Mithraist and an adorer of god Bel, as well as Christian Bishop of Dumnonia.

The Christian Characters

Of all the Christian characters in the book, only four are described in positive terms: two bishops (Emrys and Bedwin), Galahad, Lancelot's half- brother, and the main character of the book, Derfel, who is a monk at Dinnewrac, in Powys, writing down his memories of the time when he was a young Mithraic warrior at Arthur's service. King Tewdric, is depicted in a variable way: he abdicates to go to live in a monastery, and his son Meurig succeeds him. Tewdric is one of the few Christians inclined to dialogue with other religions. He leaves his cell and takes up his sword in order to help Arthur and Merlin in the famous battle of Baddon, which is dealt with in the first part of *Exc*. However, after the Christian uprising against Arthur, this issues some new laws aiming to do away with the Christian privileges in politics and taxes that his father had allowed, which provokes a Christian rebellion that Tewdric applauds. This opposition of the church in Cornwell's trilogy mirrors the anti Arthurian propaganda in the Welsh hagiographies, where Arthur's picture "is sometimes at odds with the heroic image found in many of the chronicles and romances." (Lupack, p. 22). However, the aim of these texts was to validate the political claims of the Church over a land, or to show their power over the secular lords. As Padel put it: "Their purpose was to glorify their saint and the monastery where he was honoured, if necessary at the expense of rival saints, secular rulers or other figures." (p. 37)

The rest of the Christian characters are heavily condemned, especially Meurig and Sansum, a bishop whose only aim is to get richer and more influential in politics. He first appears in the trilogy in the High Council that decides who should be the successor to Uther's High Kingship over all the Welsh Kingdoms. Sansum's speech has more a political goal, rather than a religious one. In fact, Cornwell must have based this discourse on Gildas's invective against the tyrannical rulers of his age; for him, the island of Britain, once loved by God, is now being conquered by the Saxons as the inhabitants have lost their faith and love for Him. Cornwell develops this idea, and also introduces the threat of the pagan revival, when stating that

There might be few Druids left in Britain, yet in every valley and farmland there were men and women who acted like Druids, who sacrificed living things to dead stone and who used charms and amulets to beguile the simple people. (*TWK*, p. 56)

This commentary is similar to that by Morris expressed above. Nimue, the druidess who accomplishes Merlin's horrifying death at the end of the trilogy, uses similar

ideas to attack the Christians: "We will be abandoned by the Gods and left to the brutes. And those fools in there, the Mouse Lord and his followers, will ruin that chance unless we fight them. And there are so many of them and so few of us" (p. 57). [1] These three accounts (and especially the original one by Gildas) derive ultimately from the prophecies of Jeremiah and God's choice for His people, as Bedwyr Lewis Jones noted: "Gildas's message is the same as that of prophet Jeremiah: all the tribulations which his people has suffered were the wages of sin". (p. 21)

In *EofG*, Sansum marries Arthur's sister, Morgan, who undergoes a striking change from the most ferocious attacker against the Christian religion to its staunchest defender. We can plainly see that she loves him, but he has married her because, in doing so, he sees a better way to prosper and get more powerful. By the time Derfel is putting Arthur's (hi)story to parchment, Sansum is a widower and a bishop who forbids his men to get married, while other bishops still allowed their brethren to marry. This leads us to think that Sansum might belong to the Order of Saint Ambrosius, whose ideas were based on the monastic life that the Egyptian ascetic monks led.[2] This is not the first hint of Sansum's belonging to Saint Ambrosius's Order. At the very beginning of the trilogy, in a bitterly cold winter, Derfel states that: "It is cold today (…), but Sansum will surely refuse us the blessing of a fire. It is good, he says, to mortify the flesh" (3). These mystic and ascetic ideas swept across Wales from the third and fourth centuries throughout the Middle Ages. Many bishops decided to live in the countryside where they set up abbeys to live a simpler life than the cities and towns of the age could offer.

Christian Divide

The British were not only split by different religions. Christians were also divided by a new heresy: Pelagianism. Pelagius, a theologian probably born or brought up in Britain, went to Rome to study law and he was appalled by what he saw there.

[1] "Mouse Lord" is the nickname that Derfel and Nimue give to Sansum. The name of the Celtic god Lughtigern (or Luchtigern, depending on the text), derives from the words Lugh, meaning "brightness, light" (cf. the name of the Welsh god Lugh) or Luch (mouse) and tigern (lord).

[2] Saint Ambrosius was the Bishop of Milan between 371 and 397 and criticized the luxurious life that the Pontifex Maximus, Damasus (pp. 366-384), led. This ascetic way of life that Ambrosius adopted against the Pope's opulence is the basis for the figure of the monk and has two antecedents. Diocletian, emperor between 284 and 305, heavily prosecuted the Christians, whose main personalities took refuge in the safer countryside imitating, in turn, the Christian Egyptians who had previously left the cities for the desert.

Christian ideas were deeply influenced by St. Augustine's theses, but Rome's moral situation and the social disorder which affected both the city and the clergy changed Pelagius's ideas. Cornwell provides us with a reflection on this with the words quoted above after Merlin's trip to Rome.

According to St. Augustine (pp. 354-430), it was only God who could save people according to His will. Human beings were too frail and not able enough to achieve salvation by themselves. Pelagius attacked this doctrine by saying that men could control their own destinies, thus provoking a heresy that denied original sin.

Despite the fact that the ruling elite in the British Isles was rapidly conquered by these Pelagian ideas, some scholars think that this heresy and the ruling elite were two concepts apart and totally irreconcilable. Francis Pryor finds it difficult "to understand how religious beliefs such as Gnosticism and Pelagianism could have been espoused by an elite whose very existence was under threat from outside" (p. 146). However, it is exactly that sense of threat which caused the elite to embrace a new belief whose ideas corresponded to the way they felt: the more importance and autonomy Pelagianism attached to men, the better for those in power. Cornwell deals with this heresy in his trilogy, specifically in *Exc.* This heresy, even when Christian in form, attached more importance to men, and it is understandable, where Arthur confesses that if he were a Christian, he would choose to be a Pelagian.

Rome sensed trouble in this new belief and the Pope sent a powerful bishop and general called Germanus to Britain. His two visits to the country are recorded in several authors' texts and chronicles, which state that Germanus condemned and cursed Vortigern, since he favoured the heresy. In fact, Vortigern is presented in early Welsh texts clearly as a Pelagian and so is Arthur in some of them: in the hagiographies, Arthur "appears as headstrong and capricious, but not hostile to the saints or to Christianity in general" (Padel, p. 41). Can we see in this statement an Arthur more worried in material, tangible things, than in his salvation as such? One of the clearest examples is provided in *Vita Cadoci* (twelfth century), where St Cadoc shelters Ligessauc, a man who has killed three of Arthur's men. The saint comforts the fugitive by advising him not to "fear those who kill the body, for they cannot slay the spirit, but rather fear Him who can send both spirit and body into hell". (as collected in White, p. 15) Arthur's probable Pelagianism could explain the hostility of most of the Saints' Lives towards him, especially when Arthur is never "a pagan king opposing the saint's work of conversion". (Padel, p. 41)

Cornwell's Arthur seems to be a truly Christian believer, but all points that he was deemed as a Pelagian.[1]

Denying that Pelagianism appealed the British ruling leaders would be useless. Otherwise, how could it be understood that St. Germanus had to return back to fight the heresy in 445? It is quite clear that this heresy lasted longer in the British Isles than in the rest of Europe, mainly because the Pope's influence was not as strong here as on the continent. There are documents describing councils convened as late as 592, where Pelagianism was heavily condemned.[2]

Sansum's speech at Glevum is a clear attack not only on other religions, but also on Pelagianism. Authors like Rosemary Sutcliff, especially in *The Lantern Bearers* (1959), blame this heresy for the political divide, in which Vortigern as the leader of the Nationalists is a Pelagian and Ambrosius, leading the Imperialists, is a Christian.

Eastern Beliefs

If the situation looks complicated enough to divide the British kingdoms, there are two more beliefs with which Cornwell deals. Both of them originated in the eastern Mediterranean area and in the Middle East, and the Romans troops brought them into the island with their conquest: the cults of Isis and Mithras. These cults were practised throughout the Roman period in the British Isles but they mainly thrived in the last century or so of the Roman rule, since "there was some dissatisfaction with the state religions of the time" (Johnson, p. 32), a quote that also hints at the resurgence of the native druidic religion and the Pelagian heresy which would trouble the British Christian Church for some time.

The cult of Mithras was especially important among the military, judging from the relatively numerous ruins of temples devoted to the Persian god and found in several places in Britain, especially in those where the army or the trade were especially important, like in Rudchester, Housesteads and London. The Mithraic ideals of probity and discipline fitted perfectly into the Roman troops and Rome

[1] Cornwell remakes this story in the third book of his trilogy and, in an interesting narration, he turns the plots of the hagiographies upside down, presenting a coarse, boastful, ill-mannered and rude Ligessac (in Cornwell's text) confronting a gentle, nice and courageous Arthur.

[2] This heresy was so influential and long-lasting that John Morris (1998) held the idea that it might have been the basis of the Protestant schism. Some 70 Pelagian texts were copied or re-copied throughout the Middle Ages in Northern Europe.

did not proscribe the cult, as they found no threat in this new belief. Derfel Cadarn is initiated in the mysteries of Mithras when taken to a cave, a symbol for the entrance to another life, and a representation for the world itself. He is told to carry out a series of tasks naked, another indication of a new life:

We stopped by a cave entrance where Sagramor instructed me to lay my weapons aside and strip naked. I stood there shivering as the Numidian tied a thick cloth about my eyes and told me I must now obey every instruction and that if I flinched or spoke only once, just once, I would be brought back to my clothes and weapons and sent away. (Cornwell, *TWK*, p. 223)

This is probably based on the description that Burkett (1987) made of these rites of passage, depicted on the murals preserved at Capua Vetere, in the Italian Campania: "[The candidates are] blindfolded, hear the sounds of ravens and of lions, and some (most likely those at a certain grade) have their hands tied with chicken guts and are made to stumble into a water basin" (p. 103). He also adds that the initiated heard some sounds of lions and ravens in some of the ceremonies, while the initiation of the lion involved some rites with fire. Derfel makes a very similar description of the rite which he has to endure. He is made to drink a beverage which causes strange visions "of bright creatures coming with crinkled wings to snap at my flesh with open mouths. Flames touched my skin, burning the small hairs on my legs and arms" (*TWK*, p. 224). Derfel is also ordered to kill: "It's a child under your hand, you miserable toad … an innocent child that has harmed no one," the voice said, "a child that deserves nothing but life, and you will kill it. Strike!" (p. 224). Afterwards, once he is made to drink the blood of his sacrifice and the cloth is stripped off his eyes, he realizes that he has killed a lamb. Although some human bones have found in the remains of some *mithraea*, there is still a debate on whether or not human sacrifice was practiced. In contrast, animal sacrifices were carried out in Mithraic ceremonies (Turcan, p. 234). Mithraism was very popular in the British Isles, mainly in the soldier ranks, as the vast majority of *mithraea* found here are close to where the Roman legions camped.

The final blow for Mithraism seems to coincide with the third century crisis that the empire suffered and it was accelerated with the conversion to Christianity under the emperorship of Constantine I and his followers; their strict rules forbade the cult of Mithras because of its rites, which were carried out in caves and considered diabolic by the new religion. The legions and soldiers who had worshipped Mithras turned against him in order to maintain the graces of the Emperor. Albeit Constantine wagered with the *Sol Invictus*, a Syrian deity who was designated as

Comes Imperatoris in the coins minted until 320, Christianity was to be the eventual victor. Afterwards, Mithraism experienced a gradual, but effective, decline. The last *mithraeum* was built c. 408, and although some isolated groups of Mithraists may have existed, the Persian creed died altogether from the public sphere and, above all, from the political elite. Bernard Cornwell may be dealing with these last pockets of Mithraism with Derfel and his comrades. However, it seems very unlikely that this worship was still carried out as late as the last decade of the fifth century in the British Isles.

Some authors have pointed out the rivalry between the beliefs of Mithras and Isis. Escartín Gual (1996) points out that the cult of Isis bloomed thanks to the restrictiveness of the cult of the Persian god. In another example of the typical Christian syncretism, Escartín Gual also says that the crescent moon sometimes associated with the Virgin is the same that Isis had on her head. In the trilogy Guinevere worships the Egyptian goddess and adopts the moon as the symbol for her banner. Although Isis had different roles in the Egyptian religion, all of them coincided in the concept of femininity, even though she is represented executing tasks fit for a god, such as dividing Earth and Heaven. There is an interesting parallelism between Guinevere and Isis in this "manlike" aspect. Guinevere is presented as an independent woman, atypical for the fifth century. In *Exc.*, she will take part in the battle of Mount Baddon and part of the victory is assigned to her.

Women had an important part in the rites of Isis. Indeed, in Guinevere's shrine, men seem to be forbidden altogether at night:

"This," she said, letting go of my hand and pushing the door open, "is the shine of Isis that so worries my dear Lord."

I hesitated. "Are men allowed to enter?"

"By day, yes. By night? No." (*TWK*, p. 241)

Women had to wear a linen robe in the rites, never cotton (born by the *gentiles*) or leather, as this was an animal product; the robe was a token of their obedience to the goddess. Guinevere is wearing a transparent linen robe when Derfel meets her after a battle against the Saxons from which Arthur takes some jewellery as loot to give it to his wife: "White clouds heaped in the blue sky, but what made my breath catch in my throat was that the sunlight was now flooding through Guinevere's white linen shift" (242). The cult of Isis will bring Arthur to his misery in *EofG*, after secretly observing one of the rites where Guinevere is playing the role of Isis

in an orgy. This as a symbol of the triumph of the strong female (Guinevere) over the weak man (Arthur) and, as such, this trilogy poses a peculiar example of feminist literature. This religious scandal will trigger, in turn, the Battle of Camlann and Guinevere's redemption.

Conclusion

We have seen that Britain was torn apart by religion in the fifth and sixth centuries. As we have already pointed out, some of these religious differences in the Celtic kingdoms caused, in turn, political and social problems which eventually led to their fragmentation and the ultimate Saxon success.

Cornwell reflects in his characters the quarrels and strife common at that time due to religious differences. All this religious animosity strikes the reader but it has to be understood as a source for social and political struggle. Morgan's personal change of faith, from a fierce Celtic druidess to a firm and devoted Christian, after getting married to a dishonourable bishop, shocks us even more as readers, as we are accustomed to a deeply pagan and anti Christian Morgan, touched with devilish features. This religious transformation is to be understood as another example of the religious duality with which we have dealt above, with people practising both Christian and pagan rites.

While the Saxons triumphed in politics and conquests, Christianity did so in religion. One of the ways it attracted more people was by adapting other religion's festivals, rites or even myths for its own purposes, in a clear process of syncretism. In the case of Mithras it was not difficult, since Christianity had been adopting and mimicking the Mithraic rites for a time. It took longer with the Celts, until 601, when Pope Gregory I put out an edict in which he ordered any missionary to respect the Celtic water sources and wells and put them into the service of the new religion. Sadly enough, history tells us that these differences in religion have caused many wars, battles and international problems, and it seems that our modern world has not learnt that lesson that history teaches us.

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