

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE NART SAGAS
AND ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

A RE-EVALUATION OF THE PROPOSED CONNECTION BETWEEN
THE NART SAGAS AND THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

By

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ABSTRACT

C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas' assertion that the core of the Arthurian legends is ultimately rooted in a Sarmatian heroic tradition is challenged. It is argued that, at best, the Arthurian legends contain several names and motifs of possible Sarmatian origin that have been borrowed into what Arthurian scholars have long recognized as an inherently Celtic tradition. Several agencies for their introduction into the Arthurian cycle are considered. It is proposed that two names and at least one of the motifs were introduced by Iazyge cataphractarii stationed along Hadrian's Wall in 175 AD. The other motifs, however, are thought to have been introduced at a much later date -- possibly by returning members of the crusader population in the East during the twelfth century.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
ABSTRACT.iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	v
LIST OF TABLES.	v
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION.	1
CHAPTER 2 - A REAPPRAISAL OF THE SUGGESTED PARALLELS BETWEEN THE NART SAGAS AND THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS	7
Thematic Similarities	7
Structural Similarities	16
Onomastic Similarities.	23
Explaining the Similarities	29
CHAPTER 3 - A CONSIDERATION OF HOW THE ELEMENTS IN QUESTION MIGHT HAVE ENTERED THE ARTHURIAN TRADITION: LITTLETON AND THOMAS' IAZYGE AND ALAN HYPOTHESES	30
An Examination of the Early Welsh Literature and the Works of Geoffrey de Monmouth. . .	30
A Second Hypothesis	40
CHAPTER 4 - A LATER CONNECTION.	49
The Crusader Presence in the East	49
Paths for the Transmission of Tales	55
The Tales in the West	63
CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSIONS	65
REFERENCES CITED.	70

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		page
1	Location of Various Sarmatian Tribes During the 2nd Century A.D.	2
2	The Crusader Presence in the East	53
3	Kingdom of Jerusalem and Its Principalities in Relation to the Kingdoms of the Caucasus. .	57

LIST OF TABLES

Table		page
1	Structural, Thematic, and Onomastic Similarities Noted by Littleton and Thomas (1978) and Littleton (1982a, 1982b) between the Nart Sagas and the Arthurian Legends.	5

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Sarmatians were an ancient Iranian-speaking people whose history is one of various tribes and groups moving successively into the North Pontic Steppe and then farther west as they yielded to pressure from neighbouring groups to the east (Sulimirski 1970). The earliest Sarmatians, the "Sauromatians" of Herodotus, inhabited the lower Volga steppe-land east of the Don and the southern Urals during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. At the beginning of the fourth century B.C. the Sauromatians of the lower Volga crossed the Don and conquered the Scyths replacing them as rulers in the North Pontic Steppe. Two centuries later, pressure from kindred Sarmatian people east of the Don, in particular the Roxolani, forced the Sauromatian rulers to abandon the Black Sea steppes. Their main refuge was the Crimea, although some of their numbers, namely the Iazyges, retreated westward to the lower Dniester steppe and the Danube Delta. The Roxolani then became the leading power in the North Pontic Steppe, to be followed in turn by the Aorsi and the Alans (Ibid.).

Nearly two centuries after their arrival in the Black

Sea steppes, the Roxolani were forced across the Dnieper as a new wave of Sarmatian tribes, the Aorsi and Alans, retreated before the Huns in the east. The Roxolani settled in the steppe-land between the Dnieper and the Danube ousting the Iazyges. A large branch of the Roxolani soon penetrated

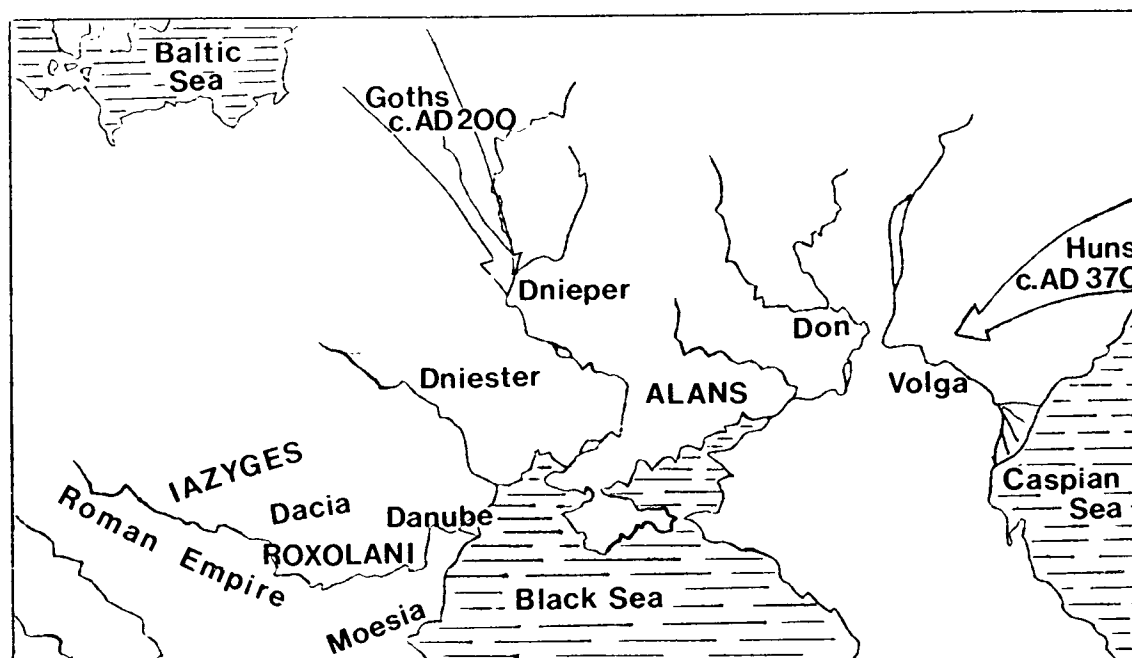


Figure 1. Location of various Sarmatian tribes during the 2nd century A.D. The advance of the Goths (c. 200 A.D.) and the Huns (c. 370 A.D.) are also shown (after Sulimirski 1970:143).

farther south into the Walachian plain and invaded Roman Moesia in A.D. 69 and again in A.D. 86. These were the first in a series of incursions into Roman territory by the Roxolani. The Iazyges, then in the Hungarian plain, also proved to be far from quiet neighbours. In A.D. 117-119 they

attacked Roman Dacia and later participated in the Marcomanian Wars (A.D. 116-172 and 177-180) as one of Rome's chief adversaries (Ibid.).

At the same time as the Iazyges and Roxolani were making their presence felt on the fringe of the Roman Empire, the Alans, who were the rearguard of Sarmatian peoples retreating before the Huns, entered the Black Sea steppes, where they held sway until the beginning of the third century A.D. The Gothic invasion of the Ukraine around A.D. 200 brought an end to Sarmatian domination in the North Pontic Steppe, but Ostrogothic rule was destined to last no longer than that of its predecessors. In A.D. 370 the Huns entered Europe and moved across the lower Volga and Don steppe, breaking the powerful Ostrogothic Kingdom. Their advance marked the beginning of a new era in Eastern Europe and the decline of the Sarmatians as a distinct people (Ibid.). Several splinter groups of Alans escaped to the West. Some took service with Rome. Others joined the Vandals and Sueves in plundering Gaul and Spain (Bachrach 1967, 1973). Of the Sarmatian peoples who remained in the Hungarian and Romanian plain, many were settled within the Roman Empire by Constantine, some were absorbed by Germanic tribes, and the rest were scattered by the Huns. By the sixth century they had all but disappeared from the historical record (Sulimirski 1970).

Today little remains to remind us of the Sarmatians and their presence in the West: several place names (Bachrach 1973:68-69; 133-137), some items in Polish heraldry (Sulimirski 1970:151-155), and a number of artifacts unearthed by archaeologists. Recently, C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas have suggested that the stories of King Arthur and his Knights be added to this list.

In an article entitled "The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origin of the Arthurian and Holy Grail Legends" (1978), they note certain structural, thematic, and onomastic similarities between the Arthurian legends and the Nart sagas¹ of the Ossetes, an Iranian-speaking people of the northern Caucasus whose ancestors were Alans who penetrated the mountainous regions south of the Volga steppe following the Hunnic invasion. Littleton and Thomas argue that these similarities (summarized in Table 1) reflect a genetic relationship between the two traditions. That is, the Arthurian legends and the Ossetic Nart sagas are thought to stem from the same source: an ancient Sarmatian heroic tradition. They suggest that this Sarmatian heroic tradition was introduced to the British Isles in the latter part of the second century A.D. by a detachment of Iazygian cataphractarii, or heavy cavalry.

¹ The term "Nart" refers to the band of heroes around whom the sagas revolve.

Table 1. Structural, Thematic, and Onomastic Similarities Noted by Littleton and Thomas (1978) and Littleton (1982a, 1982b) between the Nart Sagas and the Arthurian Legends.

A. Thematic Similarities

1. The death of Arthur and the death of Batradz.
2. The struggle for possession of a magic cup or cauldron.
3. The obtaining of a sword from a woman associated with water.

B. Structural Similarities

1. Hamyc, Batradz's father, and Uther Pendragon
2. Sozryko and Kay
3. Uryzmäg and Bedivere (Bedwyr)
4. Syrdon and Mordred
5. Satana and Morgan le Fay

C. Onomastic Similarities

1. "Magnon," the name of the brother of the wounded Grail King, and "Nartyamonga" or "Amonga," the name of the sacred cup of the Narts.
 2. The Arthurian name "Bedwyr" and the Altaic [sic] word bahādur meaning "military commander."
 3. The Arthurian name "Pendragon" and the Turkish word ban-Tarkan meaning "Father Leader."
 4. The Arthurian name "Kay" and the Iranian name "Kai" or "Kay."
-

Littleton and Thomas (1978) point out that in 175 A.D. the Iazyges invaded the Roman province of Pannonia but were decisively defeated by Emperor Marcus Aurelius. According to the historian Dio Cassius, writing some fifty years after the

event, the Iazyges were forced to supply 8,000 cataphractarii to the Roman legions, 5,500 of which were posted to Britain to bolster the garrisons along Hadrian's Wall. From the archaeological evidence², it appears that many of the Iazyge cataphractarii remained in Britain, settling on the periphery of the Roman forts at Ribchester and Chester. These Sarmatian enclaves, especially the one at Ribchester, may have existed for several centuries (c.f. Richmond 1945, Sulimirski 1970).

Littleton and Thomas of course note that the Arthurian legends "differ markedly in specifics - personal names, place names and the like" (1978:522) from the Ossetic Nart sagas, and that many of these details as well as a number of important figures such as Gawain, Lancelot³, and Guinevere are clearly of Celtic origin. What they argue is that the "core" of the Arthurian legends, in particular the prototypes of Arthur and his knights as well as the quest for

² As presented by Littleton and Thomas, this includes: (1) an inscription dedicated to the Romano-Brythonic god Apollo Maponus that was sponsored about A.D. 238-244 by "numerus Equitum Sarmatarum Bremetennacensium Gordianus"; (2) a funeral stele with a relief carving of a Sarmatian cavalryman; (3) an artifact (now lost) that from an account given by Camden in 1607, seems to have had an image of a mounted warrior on it as well as the word 'Sarmatae'; and (4) a number of "Sarmatian-type" pots and tools.

³ Although this is a somewhat problematic name (for one possible derivation see Loomis 1927:91-93), Lancelot corresponds in many respects to the Irish Lug.

the Grail, is ultimately rooted in a Sarmatian heroic tradition.

The present work attempts to challenge this assertion and to suggest instead that the Arthurian legends contain several motifs and names of possible Sarmatian origin which have been borrowed into what Arthurian scholars recognize as an inherently Celtic tradition. It also attempts to explain when and where such borrowings might have taken place, as an examination of the available evidence indicates that not all of the possible Sarmatian elements are likely to have been introduced by Iazygian cataphractarii.

CHAPTER 2

A REAPPRAISAL OF THE SUGGESTED PARALLELS BETWEEN THE NART SAGAS AND THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Littleton and Thomas (1978) have noted certain structural, thematic, and onomastic similarities between the Arthurian legends and the Ossetic Nart sagas. Do these similarities reflect a genetic relationship of the type they suggest between the two traditions? The answer to this question is to be found, at least in part, in a detailed examination of the similarities themselves.

Thematic Similarities

A. The Death of Arthur and the Death of Batradz

Of the parallels which Littleton and Thomas (1978) note perhaps the strongest is that between the death of Arthur and the death of Batradz, the leader of the Narts.¹

¹ Joel Grisward (1969) first drew attention to the similarities between the two episodes, in particular, the motif which he refers to as "l'épée jetée au lac" or the sword thrown in the water.

In Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur,² a grievously wounded Arthur is brought to a chapel near the sea by Lucan and Bedivere. There, he commands the latter to take his sword Excalibur and cast it into the water. Twice Bedivere betrays the dying king by hiding the sword and reporting that he has done as Arthur bid. Twice his deception is revealed by his response to Arthur's question: "What saw thou there?" When Bedivere finally carries out Arthur's command an arm rises out of the water, catches the sword, brandishes it three times, and then disappears beneath the surface. Soon afterwards Arthur is placed aboard a barge on which there are three maidens and is transported to Avalon for the healing of his wounds.

As Littleton and Thomas point out, the episode is curiously similar to Batradz's death which they describe as follows:

Mortally wounded, Batradz is brought to the shore of a sea (or lake) by his faithful Nart companions. He commands them to throw his magical sword into the water so that he may be released from his suffering. However, the grieving Narts are loath to obey this last order, and they attempt to deceive their dying chief. Hiding the sword, they report back that it has been disposed of according to his wishes. But when Batradz asks what occurred when the sword entered the water, their answer reveals their deception, for only he knows what will happen. Finally, and with great reluctance and effort (for the weapon is so heavy that only their leader can

² J. Cowan (Ed.) Middlesex: Penquin Books, 1969.

wield it with ease), the Narts carry out Batradz's command, and when in fact the sword is hurled into the water the sea turns blood red and becomes extremely turbulent. Shortly thereafter Batradz dies, secure in the knowledge that his destiny has been fulfilled. (1978:515)

It should be noted that their description of the Nart leader's death differs in several important respects from Georges Dumézil's "Conte 19 - variante a", which they cite as their source:

Il [Batradz] leur dit qu'il était satisfait de sa vengeance et consentait à mourir lui-même; "mais, ajouta-t-il, je ne pourrai mourir tant que mon épée n'aura pas été jetée à la mer: ainsi en a décidé le destin." Les Nartes tombèrent dans une nouvelle désolation: comment jeter à la mer l'épée de Batraz? Ils résolurent de tromper le héros, de lui persuader que son épée était jetée à la mer et que c'était pour lui l'heure de mourir. Ils s'approchèrent donc du malade et lui jurèrent que la condition du destin était remplie. "Quels prodiges avez-vous vus quand mon épée est tombée dans la mer?" leur demanda-t-il. -- "Aucun," répondirent les Nartes, tout penauds. -- "C'est donc que mon épée n'est pas jetée à la mer; autrement vous auriez vu des prodiges." Les Nartes durent se résigner: ils déployèrent toutes leurs forces, attèlerent plusieurs milliers d'animaux; à la fin, ils réussirent à traîner l'épée de Batraz jusqu'à la côte et la jetèrent dans la mer. Aussitôt s'élevèrent vagues et ouragans, la mer bouillonna, puis devint couleur de sang. Les Nartes étaient dans un étonnement et dans une joie sans bornes. Ils coururent raconter à Batraz ce qu'ils avaient vu: convaincu, il rendit le

dernier soupir.³ (1930:69)

It appears that Littleton and Thomas have read into Dumézil's account certain contextual details which are not present, thus exaggerating the degree of similarity between the two episodes. For example, in Dumézil's account (1) there is no mention that Batradz is brought to the shore of the sea; (2) Batradz does not "command" the Narts to throw his sword into the water so he can be released from his suffering, rather he tells them how they can be released from their suffering, that is, his vengeance on them, by disposing of his sword in

³ He [Batradz] told them that he was satisfied with his vengeance and agreed to die, himself. "But," he added, "I will not be able to die as long as my sword has not been thrown into the sea. Thus it is decided by destiny." The Narts were desolated: how were they to throw Batradz's sword in the sea? They resolved to trick the hero, to persuade him that his sword had been thrown into the sea and that it was now time for him to die. Thus, they approached the ailing hero and swore to him that his destiny was to be fulfilled. "What marvels did you see when my sword fell into the sea?" he asked them. "Nothing," replied the Narts crestfallen. "In that case, I know that my sword was not thrown into the sea; otherwise, you would have seen wonders." The Narts resigned themselves. Deploying all of their forces they harnessed several thousand animals. They finally succeeded in dragging Batradz's sword to the coast and threw it into the sea. At once waves and hurricanes arose. The sea boiled and then became the colour of blood. The Narts were both wonderstruck and euphoric. They ran to recount to Batradz that which they had seen. Convinced, he died peacefully. [Translation - my own]

this manner; (3) it is not clear that Batradz is suffering or is mortally wounded; (4) the Narts are hardly grieving, nor are they "loath" to carry out the task - they despair because they are unable to get his heavy sword to the sea; and (5) they do not hide his sword, rather, they merely report that they have taken it and thrown it in the sea.

Nonetheless, there are quite obvious parallels between Arthur's death and Batradz's. Both heroes are deceived by a person or persons obliged to carry out a specific task. In each case the deception is revealed by their answer to a question to which only the hero knows the answer. Moreover, the death of the hero is finally brought about by throwing his sword into the water, suggesting that his life is intimately connected with his sword. Lastly, when the sword is thrown into the water, marvelous things happen. In short, although the similarities between the two episodes are not as striking as Littleton and Thomas suggest, they are clearly "of more than a passing interest" and provide the strongest evidence for a connection between the two traditions, as it is highly unlikely that any two peoples would have hit upon the particular combination of rather peculiar details separately.

B. Struggle for Possession of a Magic Cup or Cauldron

A second thematic parallel, noted by Littleton and Thomas (1978) and discussed in more detail by Littleton (1979), concerns the struggle for possession of a magic cup or cauldron. They point out that the role played by the Nartyamonga, or "The Sacred Cup of the Narts", is analogous to that played by the Holy Grail in the Arthurian legends (c.f. Dumézil 1941, Yoshida 1965). In both traditions a band of heroes vies for access to or control over a sacred vessel which appears fortuitously at feasts and of itself provides food for those present. Moreover, to be deemed worthy of possessing the cup or cauldron the hero must be "sans tache" (without stain). Others are excluded for one reason or another. In the Arthurian legends Lancelot fails to achieve the Grail as a result of his indiscretions with Guinevere. In the Ossetic material various Nart heroes are prevented from obtaining the Nartyamonga because of their failure to exhibit certain qualities, as seen in Littleton's translation of "Conte 41" from Dumézil's Légendes sur les Nartes:

The Narts quarreled among themselves over the subject of the Nartyamonga. "I," said Uryzmäg, "I have supported your expeditions; without me you would have achieved nothing, so return the cup to me." But Soslan, Sozyryko [sic], and Batradz responded: "No, we do not give the cup so easily. We give it only to those among the Narts who live as heroes without stain."

Then Uryzmäg said: "In truth, among the Narts I am the hero without stain!" "No," said Batradz, "that is not true: one day a

vulture lifted you from the place where the Narts were having a discussion, carried you over the sea, and deposited you on an island; how can you pretend that you are a hero without stain?"

Then Soslan said: "Among the Narts I am the hero without stain!" "How dare you pretend that?" replied Batradz. "One time you went to bed across the sea, and the army passed from one shore to the other on you as if you were a bridge. But your back became tired by the hooves of the horses, you bent your body, and the whole world fell into the sea!"

Then Sozyryko said: "Thus, among the Narts it is I who am the hero without stain!" "No," said Batradz, "When Barsag's Wheel (Barcadzy calh), rolling toward you, cried: 'Sozyryko! I come to you; receive me!' you asked it: 'How must I receive you?' The Wheel replied: 'With your front!' --and when you received the Wheel on your front, your eyes blinked. How can you pretend to be the Nart without stain? Isn't that a proof of your pusillanimous nature?"

After that, Batradz said: "It is I and I alone who am, among the Narts, the hero without stain, isn't that true? What reproach can you make toward me?" The Narts could find nothing to say, and the cup was therefore awarded to him. (Littleton 1979:327)

There are, however, as Littleton (1979) himself indicates, some important differences between the Ossetic and Arthurian traditions of the Sacred Cup. The Holy Grail is, almost by definition, a Christian symbol. It is the Chalice of the Last Supper which according to legend was brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea. The Nartyamonga, on the other hand, is a "pagan talisman." Furthermore, the reasons why Lancelot fails to achieve the Grail are much more

sophisticated than those that prevent Uryzmäg, Sozryko, and Soslan from being awarded the Nartyamonga. In fact, the quest for the Grail is essentially "a search for self-realization, glossed within a Christian framework but extending far beyond it" (Littleton 1979:329). This aspect is entirely lacking in the Nart sagas.

Littleton (1979) argues that these differences merely indicate that the Grail theme had, by the time of its appearance in the later Continental romances, evolved beyond its Ossetic counterpart and that this should not detract from the observation that the central elements of the theme are similar in both traditions. While neither of these elements, in itself, is particularly odd, their combination is, thus decreasing the probability of independent invention.

C. Sword from a Woman Associated with Water

A third thematic parallel, not mentioned in Littleton and Thomas (1978) but discussed briefly by Littleton (1982a, 1982b) with respect to Thomas' and his original argument, concerns the manner in which the chief hero obtains his sword. In both traditions he is aided in obtaining his magical weapon by a woman associated with water. Arthur receives Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake, while Batradz is helped in the acquisition of his sword by Satana, the

principal female figure in the Nart sagas, who is impregnated while bathing in a stream. What Littleton fails to point out, however, is that the incidents themselves are quite different. When Arthur breaks his sword (presumably the "sword in the stone") in battle with Pellinor, Merlin takes him to a lake in the middle of which a hand holds up a sword which a damsel fetches by walking over an invisible bridge. In the Ossetic version Batradz obtains his sword by killing Sajnäg-äldar, his father's murderer and owner of a marvelous weapon. Satana's role, by contrast, is less active than that of the damsel in the Arthurian episode. She simply tells Batradz where to find Sajnäg-äldar and how to kill him:

"Sajnäg-äldar aime tellement ses chevaux qu'il n'en confie le soin à personne qu'à lui-même: tu le trouveras avec ses troupeaux. Tâche, par de belles paroles, d'entrer dans ses bonnes grâces, demande-lui de te montrer sa chère épée; dis que tu veux la faire copier par un artiste, et tâche d'obtenir qu'il te la confie: c'est par elle seule qu'il peut périr, ainsi en a décidé la providence. Cette épée est l'oeuvre du Dieu des Armes, du forgeron Safa; d'un côté de la lame brille le soleil; de l'autre, la lune; sur la lame se reflète tout ce qui se passe dans le monde. Mais prends garde! Sajnäg-äldar a coutume de tendre son épée la pointe en avant: cela veut dire qu'il compte tuer celui qui veut prendre l'épée. Fais bien attention à tout cela!"⁴ (Dumézil 1930:62-63)

⁴ "Sajnäg-äldar likes his horses so much he will not entrust them to the care of anyone but himself. You will find him with his herd. Try, by means of flattery to enter his good

The parallel, it would seem, is not a particularly strong one given a comparison of the Arthurian and Ossetic material. There is, however, a West Circassian Nart saga entitled "How Far-Seeing Satanaya Rescued Warzamaj" (Hadaγaǰ'a 1968:158-164) in which Satanaya (Satana) gives the hero, Shebatinuquo, his weapons: a lance, some spur-like implements and presumably a sword (for although the tale does not mention Satanaya giving one to him, he is in possession of a sword when he arrives at the Nart council). Here, Satana's role is more akin to that of the female figure in the Arthurian story. While the parallel is not as strong as the two previously discussed, it lends additional support for the idea that the Arthurian and Ossetic traditions are somehow related, by virtue of the fact that it is uncommon for a hero to obtain his weapon from a female figure, much less one who is associated with water.

graces. Ask him to show you his precious sword. Say that you want to have an artist make a copy of it and try to get him to entrust you with it. It is by his own sword alone that he can be killed; thus, it is decided by destiny. The sword is the work of the God of Arms, the smith Safa. From one side of the blade shines the sun, from the other, the moon. All that happens in the world is reflected on the blade. But beware! Sajnäg-äldar is accustomed to holding his sword with the point advanced. That means that he intends to kill anyone who wants to take the sword. Pay close attention to all this." [Translation - my own]

Structural Similarities

Before turning to the "structural similarities" themselves, it is important to note that Littleton and Thomas' (1978) discussion of the matter is problematic for several reasons. First, their use of the phrase "structural similarities" is not clearly defined. It appears to refer to both the idea that certain characters in the Arthurian legends stand in the same relationship to one another as do those in the Nart sagas and the idea that specific characters in the Arthurian tradition have recognizable counterparts in the Ossetic material, that is, the characters in question have similar attributes or careers. Secondly, the similarities or resemblances, as they see them, are not defined.

D. Hamyc and Uther Pendragon

Littleton and Thomas state, for example, that Hamyc, the father of Batradz, and Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, are "structurally cognate." But, other than the fact that both figures are the father of the chief hero in either tradition, the two bear little resemblance to one another. In the Ossetic sagas, Hamyc, with the help of Satana, gives birth to Batradz from a boil between his shoulder blades. In

the Arthurian stories, Uther, in the shape of Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall, begets Arthur on the latter's wife Ygraine. Moreover, Hamyc's death is a central element in the Ossetic accounts of Batradz and his exploits. Batradz's career is essentially one of vengeance for his father's murder. Uther's death, on the other hand, is of little consequence in the Arthurian legends. Although he dies at the hands of the Saxons who are later also Arthur's enemies, the vengeance theme is not developed.

E. Kay, Bedivere, Sozryko, and Uryzmäg

Littleton and Thomas also state that "two of the most important Nart heroes, Uryzmäg and Sozryko, would seem to parallel, respectively, Sir Bedivere and Sir Kay" (1978:518). Furthermore, "the relationship between the two knights closely resembles that which exists between Uryzmäg and Sozryko" (Idem). Yet, it is not clear what they have in mind when they refer to the relationship between the two heroes, other than the fact that Bedivere and Kay are both chief members of a band of heroes as are Uryzmäg and Sozryko in the Nart sagas. In the Ossetic accounts, Uryzmäg is a sort of surrogate father to Sozryko. A similar relationship, however, does not exist between Kay and Bedivere.

Contrary to what Littleton and Thomas state, there is

little about Bedivere himself which resembles Uryzmäg or about Kay that parallels Sozryko. Bedivere, along with Kay, is one of the earliest and most loyal of Arthur's knights. In the early Welsh poetry Bedivere (or Bedwyr) is known as the swiftest of men, an attribute not associated with Uryzmäg. He is also considered a formidable opponent in battle. Hundreds are said to have fallen before him. In Malory, it is Bedivere who throws Excalibur into the lake. In the Ossetic accounts of Batradz's death, however, the task of throwing the hero's sword in the sea is not that of Uryzmäg or of any individual Nart for that matter. Uryzmäg's career is very different from that of Bedivere. He proves himself by winning Satana and accidentally kills his own son.

In the early Welsh poetry, Kay is the mightiest of Arthur's warriors and has a number of mythical properties: his breath lasted nine days and nine nights under water; he could exist the same amount of time without sleep; no physician could heal a wound from his sword; when he wanted he could make himself as tall as a tree; when it rained whatever he carried remained dry a hand-breath above and below his hand; and his natural heat could keep his companions warm when they were cold (Bruce 1958:49-50). None of these properties are associated with Sozryko, although he does have the ability to change shape; that is, he will turn himself into a fog or surround himself in one so that he can

attack his enemies unseen. Kay more closely resembles the Irish hero Cu Chulainn in the above buada, or excellences. Cu Chulainn's ardour, it is said, could heat three cauldrons of water. Moreover, he could go without sleep from Samain until the following harvest and any wound that he inflicted could be healed only by himself (Sjoestedt 1982). These similarities suggest that Kay is of Celtic rather than Sarmatian origin.

Kay's mythical properties, it should be noted, do not survive in the later romances where he is known for his boastful and quarrelsome nature. Sozryko is also boastful and quarrelsome. Yet, these two qualities alone hardly constitute sufficient evidence for a genetic relationship between the two figures.

F. Mordred and Syrdon

By the same token, the mere fact that both Mordred and Syrdon are "evil" figures, as Littleton and Thomas point out, does not indicate that the two are descended from a common prototype. Syrdon is a trickster figure; Mordred is not. Furthermore, Mordred's career -- his incestuous birth, his treachery, and his wounding of Arthur at the battle of Camlan -- is not paralleled by that of Syrdon. In fact, the stories of his birth and abduction of Guinevere have clear

counterparts in Irish mythology suggesting that Mordred is also of Celtic origin.

In Malory, Mordred is begotten by Arthur on his sister, King Lot's wife. Later:

Arthur let send for all the children born on May-day, begotten of lords and born of ladies; for Merlin told King Arthur that he that should destroy him should be born in May-day, wherefore he sent for them all, upon pain of death; and so there were found many lords' sons, and all were sent unto the king, and so was Mordred sent by King Lot's wife, and all were put in a ship to the sea, and some were four weeks old and some less. And so by fortune the ship drove unto a castle, and was all to-riven, and destroyed the most part, save that Mordred was cast up and a good man found him and nourished him till he was fourteen year old. (Le Morte D'Arthur 1969:58-9)

As Loomis (1927:339-341) points out, the story of Mordred's birth is similar to that of Fiachu Fer-mara in Irish mythology. Like Mordred, Fiachu Fer-mara is born of an incestuous union, set adrift on the sea, and discovered by a fisherman who raises him to adulthood. Loomis also notes that "the fact that Mordred is the offspring of brother and sister, and also the opponent of his father in battle recalls the tale of Eochaid Bres, who was the offspring of the son and daughter of Delbaeth, and unwitting opponent of his father in sword-play" (1927:341). Moreover, the story of his abduction of Guinevere appears to be derived from Cu Roi's

abduction of Blathnat (Ibid.).

G. Morgan le Fay and Satana

Littleton and Thomas also suggest that Satana "bears a close resemblance to Morgan le Fay or the Lady of the Lake" (1978:519).⁵ As mentioned in the previous section, both are associated with water and help the principal hero to obtain his magical sword. In addition, both are seeresses with healing powers. Yet, Morgan can be clearly traced to both the Irish Morrigan and, through the Welsh Modron, to the Celtic goddess Matrona. All three of these figures are likewise associated with water and have special healing powers (Loomis 1956:96-102).

In short, the "structural similarities" noted by Littleton and Thomas are slight by either or both meanings of the phrase discussed at the beginning of this section. In those cases where there are some points of resemblance between characters, it can be argued that the similarities pertain to such general features (i.e., evilness, fatherhood, healing powers) that they are not specific to the Arthurian and Ossetic traditions. Or, it can be shown that there are

⁵ Although Morgan le Fay and the Lady of the Lake are found opposing each other in the later Arthurian romances, it appears that the two were originally the same character (Loomis 1927).

stronger affinities between the Arthurian legends and Irish mythology than there are between the former and the Ossetic sagas.

Onomastic Similarities

The phrase "onomastic similarities" is used by Littleton and Thomas (1978) in reference to the linguistic evidence that they bring to bear in support of their argument. This evidence is of two types. First, a name which appears in the Arthurian legends is noted as being similar to one in the Nart sagas. Secondly, a name of an Arthurian figure is shown to derive from an Eastern European source, although it has no cognate in the Ossetic material.

H. "Magnon"

Only one example of the first type is given. Littleton and Thomas suggest that the name of the Nart cup, the "Nartyamonga" or "Amonga," may survive in the West, as Chretien de Troyes calls the brother of the wounded Grail King, "Magnon." It is possible that "Amonga" may have come into Old French as "Magnon" if it had come through a Celtic filter such that "Amonga" became *a-monga "the-Monga," and then *monga and finally "Magnon" (Colarusso, p.c.). In the

absence of an alternative etymology for Magnon, it appears that the name of the Grail King's brother may, in fact, be a Sarmatian borrowing.

I. "Bedwyr"

The other linguistic evidence which Littleton and Thomas present is of the second type. They argue that it is possible to derive the names "Bedwyr," "Pendragon," and "Kay" from "steppe-related sources." Helmut Nickel (1975), they point out, has suggested that the name "Bedwyr" is ultimately derived from the ancient Turkish or Altaic word bahādur, meaning "military commander," variants of which are found in a number of Eastern European dialects.⁶ According to Littleton and Thomas, "[g]iven the location of the ancient Sarmatian community, it is reasonable to assume that it, too, might have borrowed a variant of this and other ancient Turkish words" (1978:518). Contrary to what Nickel suggests, however, bahādur is Persian, not Altaic (Colarusso, p.c.). Moreover, it is unlikely that "Bedwyr" is derived from the word, for bahādur would have come into Welsh as *baddwr or *badwr via *baḡur (Colarusso, p.c.).

What is more, "Bedwyr" has a plausible Celtic

⁶ For example, Russian bagatyr and Hungarian batar (Littleton and Thomas 1978).

etymology. Colarusso (p.c.) has suggested that the name is derived from the proto-Celtic *bhodh-yo-widri, meaning "one who knows the grave." The first two elements *bhodh-yo ("dug" + adj = "that which has been dug" or "grave") would give *bhedh-yo, while *widri ("one knows" or "they know"), from the late proto-Indo-European *wid-r, would give the Welsh gwyr (Lewis and Pederson 1961:37; 44). Thus, *bhodh-yo-widri gives rise to bed-wyr where the w is preserved after the eclipsed vowel and dh becomes d due to the following w, or via *bed-gwyr (--> bedwyr) where d and g cause mutual prohibition of lenition (Colarusso, p.c.). Bedwyr, therefore, is "He Who Knows the Grave," an epithet which, as Colarusso (p.c.) points out, may refer to the fact that in Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur he is the only knight to attend to Arthur at the latter's death. This last observation, however, is somewhat problematic, for there is no account of Arthur's death in the extant Welsh material, where Bedwyr first appears. Although there is a single mention of Arthur's grave in "The Stanzas of the Grave" from the Black Book of Carmarthen, it has been suggested that the line in question reads: "Difficult (to find) is the grave of Arthur" (Bromwich 1959a:112) and that it attests to the Welsh belief in the survival or expected return of Arthur (Loomis 1959a).

Moreover, in the Vulgate Cycle⁷ it is Girflet not Bedivere who is with Arthur at his death.

Perhaps Bedwyr's epithet refers, instead, to his prowess as a warrior for he is said to have sent hundreds of men to their graves in battle. It is possible that Malory was familiar with the Celtic etymology of "Bedwyr" and thus substituted Bedivere for Girflet in his redaction of the Vulgate Mort Artu, feeling that the former was more appropriate in light of his epithet.

J. "Uther Pendragon"

Littleton and Thomas (1978) also subscribe to Nickel's (1975) etymology of "Pendragon." He suggests that the final element in the name "Pendragon" may derive from the "pre-Indo-European Anatolian word" tarkan, meaning "leader" or "chief," via the Turkish aba-Tarkan which eventually became ban-Tarkan or "Father Leader," and then Bandragon after passing into Sarmatian. Bandragon finally became "Pendragon." Yet, it is not clear that Bandragon would have come into Old Welsh as "Pendragon" (Colarusso, p.c.). More

⁷ A thirteenth century compilation of Old French prose romances of various authorship. It consists of five branches: "L'Estoire del Saint Graal", "L'Estoire de Merlin", "Le Livre de Lancelot", "La Queste del Saint Graal", and "La Mort Artu".

likely Bandragon would have looked like ?bandraen in Old Welsh (Lewis and Pederson 1961:28-29, 38). Furthermore, "Pendragon" has an obvious Celtic etymology. The name is clearly derived from pen(n)-*drugn, meaning "head of the troops." The first element, pen(n) is the Welsh word for "head" (Lewis and Pederson 1961:45) and the second element, *drugn, is the proto-Celtic word for "troop," variants of which appear in Irish as drong and Old Breton as drogn (Lewis and Pederson 1961:34). "Uther," likewise, has an obvious Celtic etymology. It appears to be derived from the Welsh uthr, meaning "wonderful" or "glorious" (Lewis and Pederson 1961:27). Thus, Uther Pendragon is the "Glorious Leader of the Troops."

K. "Kay"

Lastly, Littleton and Thomas argue that the name "Kay" is "a variant of the ancient Iranian warrior-king Kai Chosrau [sic], founder of the warlike Kayanid dynasty as described in Firdausi's Shahnameh, or "Epic of Kings") [and that] at least some of the Iranian-speaking Sarmatian clans might have preserved this name in their hero tales" (1978:518-19). Like "Magnon," "Kay" may also be a Sarmatian loan word. The Iranian name "Kai" or "Kay" is derived from the proto-Indo-European word *kowi or *k^wowi, meaning

"wizard" or "magician" via proto-Indo-Iranian *kavi (Dumézil 1986:1-24; Colarusso, p.c.). Proto-Indo-European *kowi, however, does not give the Welsh "Kei" or "Kay." The word would have come into Old Welsh, rather, as *cou, pronounced /kow/ (Colarusso 1987:p.c.). Thus, the name "Kay" may have entered Old Welsh via an Iranian source as Littleton and Thomas argue.

Nonetheless, it should be noted that "Kay" does have a plausible Celtic etymology independent of the Iranian one. It is possible to derive "Kay" from the proto-Celtic word *kage, meaning "hedge" or "field," variants of which appear in Welsh as cae, Old Breton as quae ("thorn hedge"), and Middle Breton as kae ("hedge" or "enclosure") (Lewis and Pederson 1961:29). Given that "Ysbaddaden," the name of the giant in the Welsh tale of Kulhwch and Olwen, can be derived from the Proto-Indo-European *sqhwija-t- (*skwiya-t-) meaning "Hawthorn" (Lewis and Pederson 1961:15; 21-4), "Thorn Hedge" is perhaps not so curious. The name "Kay" may mean "The Impenetrable One" (Colarusso, p.c.).

To summarize briefly, "Kay" and "Magnon" may, as Littleton and Thomas suggest, be Sarmatian loan words.⁸ The other linguistic evidence which they bring to bear in support

⁸ Although Kay bears a fairly close resemblance to the Irish hero Cu Chulainn and is likely of Celtic origin, this does not preclude the possibility that his name is a Sarmatian borrowing.

of their argument, however, does not stand up under close examination. As seen, there are major problems with the etymologies given for "Bedwyr" and "Pendragon" and in both cases a plausible, if not obvious, Celtic etymology can be found.

Explaining the Similarities

Clearly, the similarities between the Arthurian legends and the Nart sagas are notably fewer than Littleton and Thomas have proposed. In the final analysis, there are, in addition to the linguistic evidence which suggests that the names "Kay" and "Magnon" may be legitimate Sarmatian borrowings, strong parallels between the death of Arthur and the death of Batradz, and certain aspects of the Grail quest and Ossetic accounts of the Nartamonga. There is also a somewhat weaker parallel between the manner in which Arthur obtains Excalibur and the way that Shebatinuquo receives his weapons in a West Circassian tale. It is thus unlikely that the core of the Arthurian legends is of Sarmatian origin, as Littleton and Thomas assert. The number of parallels is simply not great enough to support such a claim. A much more likely hypothesis, and one which the available evidence allows, is that only certain motifs or names are of Sarmatian origin.

CHAPTER 3

A CONSIDERATION OF HOW THE ELEMENTS IN QUESTION MIGHT HAVE ENTERED THE ARTHURIAN TRADITION: LITTLETON AND THOMAS' IAZYGE AND ALAN HYPOTHESES

If the names "Kay" and "Magnon," the "sword thrown in a lake," "struggle for possession of a magic cup," and "sword from a woman" motifs are of Sarmatian origin, how might they have entered the Arthurian tradition? Littleton and Thomas, it would seem, have already provided the answer. Yet, if they were introduced to the British Isles by the group of Iazyges stationed along Hadrian's Wall in 175 A.D., one would expect to find traces of the names and motifs in the early Welsh literature as well as the works of Geoffrey de Monmouth, since both preserve elements of the early insular oral traditions associated with Arthur. These oral traditions presumably would have been influenced by the oral traditions of the Iazyges.

An Examination of the Early Welsh Literature and the Works of Geoffrey de Monmouth

A. The Character of the Early Welsh Literature

The early Welsh literature consists of prose tales, monologue and dialogue verses, and short lists of three persons, objects, and events known as Triads, all of which attest to the existence of "a considerable body of Welsh narrative material comparable in volume and variety to the Irish saga cycles" (Bromwich 1959a:114). This narrative material appears to have been the product of professional story-tellers or cyfarwyddiaid (singular cyfarwydd) and was probably first written down in the ninth century as their art began to decline. Although the Triads, speech poems, and prose tales have come down to us in manuscripts of the thirteenth and fourteenth century -- The Black Book of Carmarthen (c.1200); The Book of Taliesin (c.1275); The White Book of Rhydderch (c.1325); and The Red Book of Hergest (c.1400) -- traces of Old Welsh orthography and the occurrence of "Irish" rhymes indicate that they were originally transcribed several centuries earlier (Bromwich 1959a, 1959b, Foster 1959, Jackson 1959).

The prose tales are contained in The Red Book of Hergest as well as several other manuscripts. They were later collected and published (1838-1849) under the title The Mabinogion from the Llyfr Coch o Hergest and Other Welsh Manuscripts. Of the eleven tales in The Mabinogion, Arthur figures in five. But only two of these, Rhonabwy's Dream and Kulhwch and Olwen show virtually no trace of continental or

Anglo-Norman influence (Foster 1959). The former is a strange dream sequence in which Rhonabwy dreams of the eve of the battle of Mount Badon when all the troops are gathering. Arthur and Owain son of Urien play a game of gwyddbwyll during which Arthur's men attack Owain's ravens. In the end, a pre-battle truce is called and peace is restored. Kulhwch, on the other hand, is a collection of folk-tales woven within the framework of the familiar Giant's Daughter theme. The hero Kulhwch is given a number of anoetheu, or difficult tasks, by the giant Ysbaddaden, which he must carry out before he can marry the giant's daughter Olwen. Kulhwch is then made to seek Arthur's court and obtain the assistance of Arthur and his men in accomplishing the tasks.

That Kulhwch and Rhonabwy's Dream, as well as the other tales in the Mabinogion, belong to an earlier Welsh oral tradition is clear from the "extreme simplicity" and "economy" of the written prose. Of particular interest are, "the short staccato sentences for rapid movement, the use of direct speech in reported conversations; the beginning of successive sentences with a conjunction; [and] the fondness for the verb-noun" (Bromwich 1959a:106).

Similarly, there are clues which indicate that the Triads and the speech poems also belong to such a tradition. It appears, for example, that the Triads were inserted into the tales of the cyfarwyddiaid as a technical device

(Bromwich 1959a, 1959b). In their simplest form, the Triads consist of three names linked by a descriptive epithet:

Three Pillars of Battle of the Island of Britain; Dunawd son of Pabo Post Prydein, and Gwallawc son of Lleenawc, and Cynvelyn the Clumsy. (Bromwich 1959a:113)

Often, however, they give additional information about the stories to which they allude:

Three Faithful Warbands of the Island of Britain. The War-band of Cadwallon mab Cadfan, who were with him seven years in Ireland, and in all that time they never asked him for anything, lest they should be compelled to leave him. And the second that of Gafran mab Aeddán, who went to sea for their lord. And the third, the warband of Gwenddoleu mab Keidiaw at Arfderydd, who maintained the battle for six weeks after their lord was slain. (Bromwich 1959a:113-114)

As Bromwich (1959a, 1959b) has pointed out, the key-epithets usually contain obscure or archaic words which undoubtedly belong to the diction of bardic poetry. The words would have required an explanation of the cyfarwydd, thus eliciting more stories from his repertoire. From the manner in which they are introduced into the extant prose tales, it seems that the Triads also served as a means of increasing "the emphasis and impressiveness of the climax of their narrative" (Bromwich 1959a:114).

Like the Triads, the speech poems also appear to have been inserted into the tales of the cyfarwyddiaid. As Bromwich (1959a) has noted, the typical form of the Irish sagas is one in which the action is related in prose narrative while monologue and dialogue are expressed in verse. The same is likely true of the Welsh sagas for "the incomprehensibility of the allusions... [the speech poems]...contain would be accounted for if they [too] were dialogue and monologue verses from lost sagas" (Bromwich 1959a:118).

Arthur figures in a number of the speech poems and Triads as he does in several of the prose tales. Two poems in particular are of note. One is no. XXXI in the Black Book of Carmarthen and the other no. XXX in the Book of Taliesin. The Black Book poem is a dialogue between Arthur and his gatekeeper Glewlwyd. Glewlwyd asks who is at the gate and Arthur replies "Arthur and Kai the Fair." Then asked "Who travels with you?", Arthur names his men and describes their deeds. The second, Preiddeu Annwfn ("The Spoils of Annwfn"), recounts a disastrous expedition undertaken by Arthur and his men in his ship Prydwenn to Annwfn, the Celtic Otherworld, to obtain the magic cauldron of the Chief of Annwfn. Arthur also appears in several other poems including the Englynion y Beddau ("Stanzas of the Grave") mentioned in the previous chapter, Kat Goddeu ("The Battle of the Trees"), Cadeir

Teyrnnon ("The Seat of Teyrnnon") and Marwnat Uthry Pen ("The Death Song of Uther the Chief"), although little more than his name is given (Jones 1964). In the Triads Arthur is named among "The Three Red Ravagers of the Island of Britain," "The Three Mighty Swineherds," and "The Frivolous Bards." He also is responsible for disclosing the head of Bran the Blessed from the White Hill and the Dragons which Lludd son of Beli concealed in Dinas Emreis, among other deeds.

B. Thematic Elements in the Early Welsh Literature

From these Triads and speech poems, as well as Kulhwch and Rhonabwy's Dream, several common motifs or themes emerge. One such theme or motif is the hunting of a magic boar by Arthur. In Kulhwch and Olwen Arthur and his men help Kulhwch to obtain scissors, a comb, and a razor from between the ears of the savage boar, Twrch Trwyth, a king whom God had transformed into a swine. A variant of the same tale is alluded to in the Triad of the tri gwidveichyat, the "Three Mighty Swineherds" which in part reads: "And Arthur was trying to get one pig from among them either by deceit or by force, but he did not get it" (Bromwich 1959b:48). A second theme is that of the killing of Cath Palug, a cat-like monster, and is mentioned in both the Triads and poem XXXI in

the Black Book of Carmarthen. In the latter, the killing of Cath Palug is attributed to Kai along with the "piercing" of nine witches. The same poem also contains a reference to a third motif -- the slaying of an old hag or witch by Arthur, a variant of which appears in Kulhwch and Olwen. Here, Arthur playfully cuts the Black Witch in two to get her blood in order to prepare the giant Ysbaddaden's beard.

Another theme, and one which bears on the question of Iazygian influence on the early Welsh oral traditions, is that of a raid on an island by Arthur and his warriors to obtain a magic cauldron. Kulhwch and Olwen contains an account of an attack on the King of Ireland's steward to obtain a cauldron to boil meat for Kulhwch's wedding feast. Arthur sends a messenger to demand the cauldron of the King of Ireland. Refused, he sails across the sea in his ship Prydwenn and makes for the house of Diwrnach where Bedwyr seizes the cauldron and Llenllewac brandishes his sword Caledfwlch and slays Diwrnach and all his men. This, Arthurian scholars generally agree, is a euhemerized version of Arthur's expedition to Annwfn as recounted in Preiddeu Annwfn (Barber 1972, Ford 1977, Foster 1959, Loomis 1959). Here, as Littleton (1979) points out, the object of their quest resembles the Nartymonga in that it can be used only by those whose courage is beyond reproach: "It will not boil

the food of a coward; it has not been destined".¹

As the Irish cauldrons² often cited as prototypes of the Grail "lack one important feature shared by the Cauldron of Annwn [sic], the Grail, and the Nartyamonga, the capacity to accept or reject he who would possess it" (Littleton 1979:332), it is possible that at least two of the central elements of the Grail theme were introduced to the British Isles by the group of Iazygian cataphractarii stationed along Hadrian's Wall. The names "Kay" (or "Kei") and "Magnon" may also have been introduced by Iazygian calvarymen. "Kay" appears in many of the early Welsh manuscripts. While "Magnon" is not present in any, it does appear in Chretien de Troyes Conte del Graal, which Loomis (1963a) has shown to draw on Welsh oral traditions including those alluded to in Preiddeu Annwfn.

There is, however, no trace of the "sword from a woman" or "l'épée jetée au lac" motifs in the Triads, speech poems, or prose tales. It can be argued, of course, that these two motifs may have been present in the early Welsh oral traditions but simply did not survive in the extant

¹ Translation by Loomis (1956:135).

² The Irish vessels include the Cauldron of Dagda, chief of the Tuatha De Danann and coire aisic, Cauldron of Restitution that Cormac mac Airt established at Tarac. They appear, however, to simply be vessels of plenty.

literature. Yet, there is some basis for rejecting such an argument at least with respect to the "l'épée jetée au lac" motif. For one, it is unlikely that a motif clearly connected with the death of the central hero could co-exist with the popular Welsh belief in Arthur's survival. Secondly, in the Triads we have a glimpse of an early oral tradition about the battle of Camlan where Arthur fell and the events preceding it. But there is no mention of Arthur's sword being thrown in a lake or of Bedivere's deception. What is more, the same appears to be true of the works of Geoffrey de Monmouth.

C. The Works of Geoffrey de Monmouth

Very little is known of Geoffrey himself other than the fact that he was a Welshman or Breton born in Wales around 1100 and a "magister" at the secular college of St. George's at Oxford. Records at Canterbury show that he was later appointed Bishop of St. Asaph. Of his works, however, a great deal more is known. His first, the Prophetiae Merlini (c.1135), is as its title indicates a collection of prophecies attributed to Merlin, some of which have their source in earlier Latin and Welsh texts and Celtic tradition, but many were invented by Geoffrey himself. The Prophetiae Merlini was later incorporated into his Historia Regum

Britanniae (c.1136), which he had set aside to write the Prophitiae. The Historia, his most influential work, was written as a history of England from its founding by the Trojan Brutus through the reign of the Saxon Cadwalader. Its chief interest, however, lies in its presentation of the first account of Arthur's whole life. His third and final work, the Vita Merlini (c.1151), recounts the life and adventures of the prophet who was also the subject of his first work. As with the Prophitiae Merlini, Arthurian scholars generally agree that his sources for the latter two works include Latin and Welsh texts such as Nennius' Historia Britonum; Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica and Gildas' De Excidio Britanniae; the oral traditions of the Welsh and Bretons; and his own imagination. They dispute, however, the relative importance of each.

D. Thematic Elements in Geoffrey's Works

An examination of the three works reveals no trace of the "l'épée jetée au lac" motif as mentioned. This is of particular importance, given the observation that Geoffrey's account of the battle of Camlan from his Historia Regum Britanniae draws on insular oral traditions of the event. Mordred's treachery, the forced marriage of Guinevere, the pursuit of Mordred into Cornwall, and the transportation of

Arthur to Avalon for the healing of his wounds all appear to be derived from Welsh oral tradition (Loomis 1963:b). Similarly, there is no episode which approximates the account of how Arthur obtains Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake in La Suite du Merlin and the later romances, or for that matter how Shebatinuquo or Batradz obtain their swords with the help of Satana.

To summarize briefly, then, an examination of the early Welsh literature and the works of Geoffrey de Monmouth, both of which preserve elements of the early insular oral traditions associated with Arthur, suggests that it is quite unlikely that the "l'épée jetée au lac" and "sword from a woman" motifs, were introduced by the group of Iazyges stationed along Hadrian's Wall in 175 A.D. Neither motif is to be found in either the early Welsh literature or Geoffrey's works. Moreover, the available evidence suggests that their absence is not merely an historical accident. At best it can be argued that one of the central elements of the Grail theme as well as the names "Kay" and "Magnon" were introduced by Iazygian cataphractarii.

A Second Hypothesis

If not introduced by Iazygian cataphractarii, how then did the "sword from a woman" and "l'épée jetée au lac"

themes enter the Arthurian tradition? A consideration of when and where the two motifs first appear in the Arthurian literature may provide a clue. The motif of the "l'épée jetée au lac" first appears in La Mort Artu from the Vulgate Cycle (c.1205) and the "sword from a woman" motif, in La Suite du Merlin (Huth Merlin) from the early thirteenth century. Their initial appearance in the Continental romances suggests a Continental connection between the Arthurian and Sarmatian heroic traditions.

E. Arthur and the Alans

In an article entitled "From Swords in the Earth to the Sword in the Stone: A Possible Reflection of an Alano-Sarmatian Rite of Passage in the Arthurian Tradition" (1982b), Littleton has proposed such a connection as a corollary to Thomas' and his original Iazyge hypothesis. He argues that in the "sword in the stone" episode (wherein Arthur demonstrates his right to the British throne by pulling a sword from an anvil or stone), it is possible to detect "the reflection...of an Alano-Sarmatian (or at least Alanic) ritual associated with the assumption of chieftaincy and/or a rite of passage wherein young men proved themselves worthy of being members of the warband" (1982b:58). Littleton points out that the Alans -- who, it will be

recalled, were the last of the Sarmatian people to enter the North Pontic Steppe -- worshipped naked swords thrust into the ground. The practice is described by the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who wrote near the end of the fourth century A.D.:

...their only idea of religion [was] to plunge a naked sword into the earth with barbaric ceremonies and they worship that with great respect, as Mars, the presiding deity of the regions over which they wander. (xxxi. 4.22)³

The cult, Littleton notes, would no doubt have been carried westward by the Alans who settled in Western Europe during the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. (Bachrach 1967, 1973). Drawing further on Bachrach's observations (1973:21-24), Littleton goes on to suggest that "the act of removing the sword also probably played an important part in the 'barbaric ceremonies' alluded to by the Roman historian" (1982b:58). And, given that the Alanic and Sarmatian chiefs appear to have been selected from among the best warriors regardless of age, this aspect of the ritual may have been associated with the assumption of chieftaincy or a certain rite of passage and may thus be the source of the "sword in the stone" episode which first appears in Robert de Boron's Merlin and

³ The translation, also given by Littleton (1982b), is that of Yonge (1902:582).

not in the early Welsh literature or the works of Geoffrey de Monmouth.

Although his argument is tenuous, it derives some support from the fact that the "sword in the stone" episode, like the "l'épée jetée au lac" and "sword from a woman" motifs, has few if any clear parallels elsewhere including Celtic mythology. Moreover, with the exception of James Douglas Bruce's (1958) suggestion that the episode derives from the legends of Theseus and Sigmund,⁴ previous attempts to explain its origins are somewhat wanting. For example, Gaston Paris (1886) has suggested that the episode originates in biblical legend, specifically the story of the staff of Joseph, out of which a bird emerges in the De nativalale beatae Mariae Virginis and Joseph le Charpentier to designate the future spouse of Mary. Although the staff has the ability to discern the identity of certain individuals, the act of withdrawing is not present in the story. In a similar vein, Alexandre Micha (1948) has attempted to derive the episode from a passage in the Aeneid in which Aeneas must fetch a "golden bough" without which he cannot enter the Land of the Dead. But, as Littleton (1982b:55) observes, this is not the same thing as pulling a sword from a stone to

⁴ Theseus recovers his father's sword and sandals from under a rock. In the Volsungasaga Odin drives a sword into a tree, a sword which only Sigmund is strong enough to withdraw.

demonstrate one's right to rule.

Littleton's argument gains additional support from the fact that although an image of the ritual fails to persist among the Ossetes, as he himself points out, one does appear to exist in the Nart sagas of the Abazas, a neighbouring group of Northern Caucasian peoples living somewhat farther south toward the Black Sea coast but still on the northern slopes of the Caucasian massif. One Abaza tale entitled "Sawsreq^w a yah^w a" or "Sawsruquo's Sword" describes how the hero Sawsruquo (Sozryko in the Ossetic texts), not yet a man, obtains a magical sword by first pulling Tlepsh's anvil out of the earth and then plunging it eight layers deep back into the ground -- a task which several others attempt but fail:

"I'll make a sword from that scythe," he [Tlesph] said. "If anybody can lift this anvil (each of you will be given three attempts)," he said, "that of you who can do it, who can pick it up and put it back into its place, will get the sword made of this scythe." First was the oldest, he made an attempt. He couldn't move it. Once more he tried but couldn't. Three times he tried and three times he failed.

Sawsruquo also came there. He came and watched. Sawsruquo is a little boy, just two years old. Then the youngest brother tried. He moved it. He tried again and lifted it a little bit. The third time he tried he lifted it up to his knee but he couldn't hold it and it fell down. After it fell he asked Tlesph: "Is the scythe mine now?" "Yes, it's yours. Let it be for your good. I'll make a sword for you in three days," he said. "And

now this scythe is mine. You may go and come back in three days," he said. While they were talking Sawsruquo said: "Tlepsh, let me put this anvil back in its place again." (Tlepsh didn't know that it was him, Sawsruquo, who took it out of its place). Then the oldest said: "Go and suck your mother's breast." He didn't believe he could do it. "He is a baby," he thought. The middle brother said: "Don't tear out your guts." The youngest said: "What a full little boy you are."

After he said that, Sawsruquo became angry, grabbed the anvil and pushed it eight layers deep into the earth. (Salakaja 1975:170-3)

Here, at least, are the central elements of the ritual reconstructed by Littleton. A young man proves himself by driving an object into the earth as well as withdrawing it. This act appears to be one by which he "who stands before the Narts in courage and strength" is recognized (Allen 1965:168), for in a second Abaza tale Sawsruquo's removing of the anvil from the ground and returning it is given as the reason why he is allowed to taste the sana (drink of the gods). The fact that it is an anvil and not a sword which is plunged into or pulled from the earth may simply be the result of the tale's long history of oral transmission. Given the presence of a sword in the same story this is not altogether impossible.⁵ A practice similar to that above is

⁵ Incidentally, if such a tale, rather than the actual ritual, is regarded as the source of the Arthurian episode, and if (as argued in the next chapter) the tale was encountered at a much later date when it would have reached a

described in the tale of "How Far-Seeing Satanaya Rescued Warzamaj" (Hadaḡaλ'a 1968:158-164). As with Sawsruquo, Shebatinuquo's heroic nature is revealed by the fact that no one but he can draw his lance out of the earth into which he has driven it.

If then, as Littleton (1982b) suggests, the "sword in the stone" episode originates in an Alano-Sarmatian sword cult which may have survived among the Alans who settled in Armorica in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., could the "sword from a woman" and "l'épée jetée au lac" motifs not also have been introduced by these Alans?

F. Problems with the Hypothesis

With such an hypothesis, however, several problems need be noted. In particular, the precise agency by which they entered the Arthurian tradition remains unclear. The most likely candidates are Breton conteurs, who are thought to have been responsible for the diffusion and development of the Arthurian legends on the Continent (Loomis 1956, 1959b). As Bachrach (1967, 1973) has noted, one of the regions most heavily influenced by the Alans was Armorica or Brittany.

form much like the present one, it is possible to explain the rather puzzling fact that, in a number of the Arthurian romances, the sword is embedded in an anvil (or in an anvil embedded in a stone).

Their movement into the area began in the late fifth century at the same time as the earliest insular accounts of Arthur diffused to Armorica via Welsh refugees from the Anglo-Saxon invasions. It is possible that the oral traditions of the Alans intermingled with those of the Welsh emigrés, and that the stories of the Breton conteurs were born of the resulting "hybrid" tradition. Yet, the "sword in the stone," "sword from a woman," and "l'épée jetée au lac" motifs are not found in a number of works, such as Geoffrey's Historia Regum Brittaniae, Wace's Geste des Bretons (Roman de Brut) and Layamon's Brut, which have been shown to draw heavily on Breton oral traditions (Foulon 1959, Loomis 1959c, Parry and Caldwell 1959, Paton 1912).

An alternative, of course, is to suggest that the oral traditions of the Alans remained distinct from those of the Bretons until a relatively late date (i.e., the early thirteenth century at which point the three motifs first appear in the Arthurian legends) and were then either directly or indirectly incorporated into the Arthurian literature. The acceptance of such an explanation, however, depends on 1) the cultural isolation of the Alanic communities in Armorica and Western Europe in general, which seems unlikely; and 2) the survival of those communities until the thirteenth century, which remains to be shown.

In light of these problems it also seems unlikely

that the "sword thrown in a lake," "sword from a woman," and "sword in the stone" motifs were introduced by the Alans who settled in Armorica. What both Littleton and Thomas' Alan and Iazyge hypotheses fail to account for is the fact that the three motifs appear late in the Arthurian literature, that is, in the French romances of the early thirteenth century.

CHAPTER 4

A LATER CONNECTION

It can hardly be ignored that the period in which the three sword motifs first appear in the Arthurian literature follows at the close of a century that saw the creation of crusader states in Asia Minor and the Levant. Perhaps, then, the "sword in the stone," "sword from a woman," and "sword in the lake" motifs entered the Arthurian legends via members of that crusader population. It is possible that here, in or near the Latin-Norman kingdom of Jerusalem and its principalities, the crusaders encountered the Nart sagas of the Alanic peoples who inhabited the Caucasus. Some of the strange stories may then have been carried West, where a thirst for tales of adventure and the exploits of knights, coupled with a fascination for the marvels of the East, would have provided a ready pathway for their incorporation in the Arthurian cycle.

The Crusader Presence in the East (1097-1229)

When that time had already come, of which the Lord Jesus warns his faithful people every day, especially in the Gospel where he says, 'If any man will come after me, let him

deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me,' there was a great stirring of heart throughout all the Frankish lands, so that if any man, with all his heart and all his mind, really wanted to follow God and faithfully to bear the cross after him, he could make no delay in taking the road to the Holy Sepulchre as quickly as possible. (Gesta Francorum, trans. R. Hill 1962:1)

In the spring of 1097 a great host gathered at Constantinople with the purpose of conquering Jerusalem for the Christians of the West. Godfrey of Bouillon, with his brother Baldwin, led the crusaders of Flanders and Lorraine. Bohemund of Otranto and his nephew Tancred headed the Normans. Raymund of Toulouse along with the papal commissary, Bishop Adhemar, led the Provençals. By the beginning of May 1097 the crusader armies had crossed the Bosphorus and entered the dominions of the Seljuk Turks. After capturing the city of Nicaea (18 June) and defeating the field army of Kiliç Arslan at Dorylaeum (1 July), they marched southeast to Heraclea, where Tancred and Baldwin turned into Cilicia and began taking possession of the Cilician towns. The main army turned in the direction of Caesarea and from there marched southward again to Antioch. Midway between the two cities, Baldwin rejoined the army but soon left again to answer an appeal for assistance from the oriental Christians in and around Edessa. Baldwin took over the city, and in 1098 created the first crusader principality in the east, the

County of Edessa (Barker 1923:15-21, Prawer 1972a:21-24).

By the end of October 1097 the main crusader army had reached Antioch and had begun the seige of the city that lasted until 3 June 1098. The crusaders remained at Antioch until May 1099 when the leaders again pressed forward. Following the coast of Galilee they arrived at Jerusalem in the beginning of June. After a five-week seige (7 June - 15 July 1099) the city was finally captured. The First Crusade had ended and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was founded (Barker 1923:22-25, Prawer 1972a:24-27).

At its height, in 1131, the crusader kingdom covered a territory stretching along the coast from Beirut to el-Arish. (See Fig. 2.) Towards the north it was bounded by the emirate of Damascus. Its eastern boundary was formed by the valley of Baccar and the Ghor, or the basin of the Jordan and the Dead Sea. In the south it reached to Aqaba at the head of the eastern arm of the Red Sea. The three Frankish principalities of Edessa, Antioch, and Tripoli were also under the aegis of Jerusalem (Archer 1894:116, Barker 1923:30-31, Prawer 1972a:69-70).

The Latin power thus established in Asia Minor faced the caliph of Egypt in the south and a number of Mahommedan emirs in the north. As Barker points out:

The disunion between the Mahommedans of northern Syria and the Fatimites of Egypt,

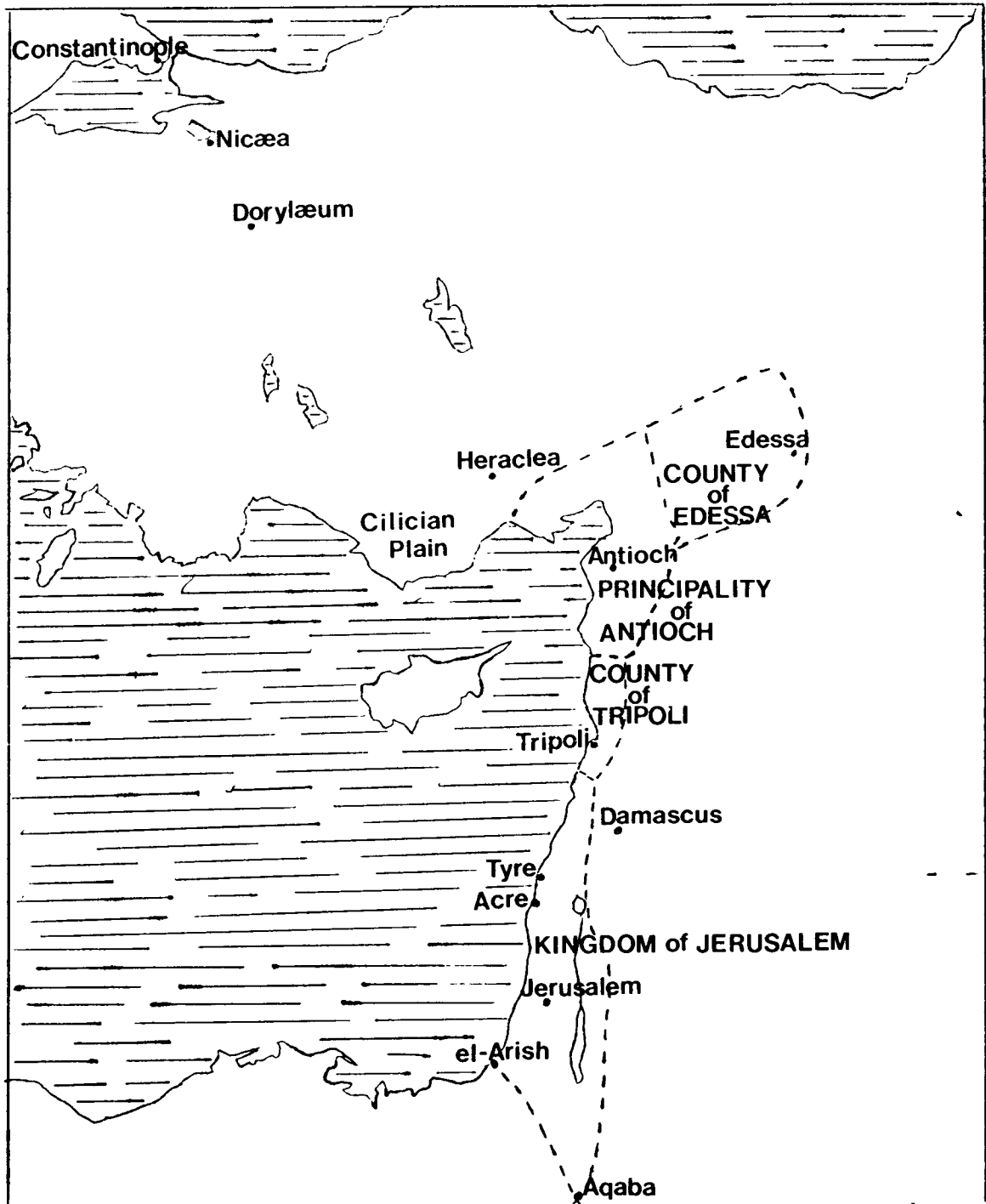


Figure 2. The Crusader Presence in the East c. A.D. 1130
(after Smal 1973:18, Mallouf 1984:inside cover)

and the political disintegration of the former, were both favourable to the success of the Franks; but they had nevertheless to maintain their ground vigorously both in the north and in the south against almost incessant attacks. (1923:32)

When the atabeg Zengi established himself in Mosul in 1127, however, the Franks began to lose the upper hand in the north. On Christmas Day 1144 Zengi captured Edessa. The loss of the city marked the beginning of the end of the kingdom. A Second Crusade reached the Holy Land in 1148 led by Louis VII and Konrad II. But, instead of attempting to recapture Edessa the crusader armies unsuccessfully attacked Damascus -- the one ally that could have helped the Franks stem the advance of Zengi's successor Nureddin. The siege lasted only four days. The Second Crusade was over and Nureddin renewed his attacks. The rest of the county of Edessa was conquered and several towns in the east of the principality of Antioch were captured (Barker 1923:51-54, Praver 1972a:34-36).

In 1154 Damascus fell to Nureddin. A year earlier, however, Baldwin III had taken Ascalon, and "by this stroke he might appear to have closed for Nureddin the route to Egypt, and to have opened a path for its conquest by the Franks" (Barker 1923:56). Yet, in 1164 Nureddin and Amalric I (the successor of Baldwin III) were fighting on Egyptian soil. Nureddin won and his Kurdish lieutenant, Shirguh,

became vizier of Egypt. Two years later Shirguh was succeeded by his nephew Saladin.

Despite the fact that the long-disunited Mahommedans now faced the Franks as a solid body, Jerusalem remained relatively unmenaced for the next sixteen years. Jealousy between Saladin and Nureddin kept both inactive till the latter's death in 1174. Saladin's attention was then drawn from the Holy City for another nine years while he tried to win Nureddin's Syrian possessions for himself. His ultimate aim, however, remained the holy war and the recovery of Jerusalem. In May 1187 Saladin's army struck through the Golan Heights at Tiberias; at Hattin the crusader army, some 20,000 strong was defeated; and on 2 October, after a fortnight's seige, Jerusalem was captured. By the end of 1189 only Tyre in the Latin kingdom, Antioch, and Tripoli remained in Christian hands (Barker 1923:56-60, Prawer 1972a:36-39).

Several crusades for the recovery of Jerusalem followed in the next forty years. The Third Crusade (1189-92) regained the maritime cities as far south as Jaffa for the Christians and saved the principalities of Antioch and Tripoli, but it failed to achieve its object. The Fifth Crusade (1218-21) attempted to restore the old kingdom by conquering Egypt and forcing the cession of all lands formerly held by the Christians. It ended in failure, but

seven years later Frederick II, the leader of the Sixth Crusade (1228-29) was able to conclude a treaty with the sultan of Egypt which gave the Christians the coastal towns already in their possession as well as Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem and a strip of land connecting Jerusalem with Acre (Barker 1923:61-79, Prawer 1972a:39-47).

Such is a brief description of the crusader presence in the East during the twelfth and early part of the thirteenth century. Much of what is known concerns the routes of the crusaders, leaders and rulers, battles and sieges, and territories conquered and lost. There is little information about the lives of the people, the extent of their interactions with the native populations, or their movements beyond or even within the political boundaries of the kingdom and the principalities. Nevertheless, several paths for the transmission of tales can be posited and a crusader connection pieced together.

Paths for the Transmission of Tales

A. Crusaders in the Caucasus

It seems likely that, as a beleaguered Christian community, the crusaders would have sought to establish ties with the nearest Christian powers, namely Georgia and Alania

(or Ossetia). (See Fig. 3). One would also expect the Alans and Georgians, to whom the Seljuk Turks also posed a constant threat, to have turned to the crusaders for assistance. Thus, the crusader presence in the East may have extended, however thinly, to the Caucasus.

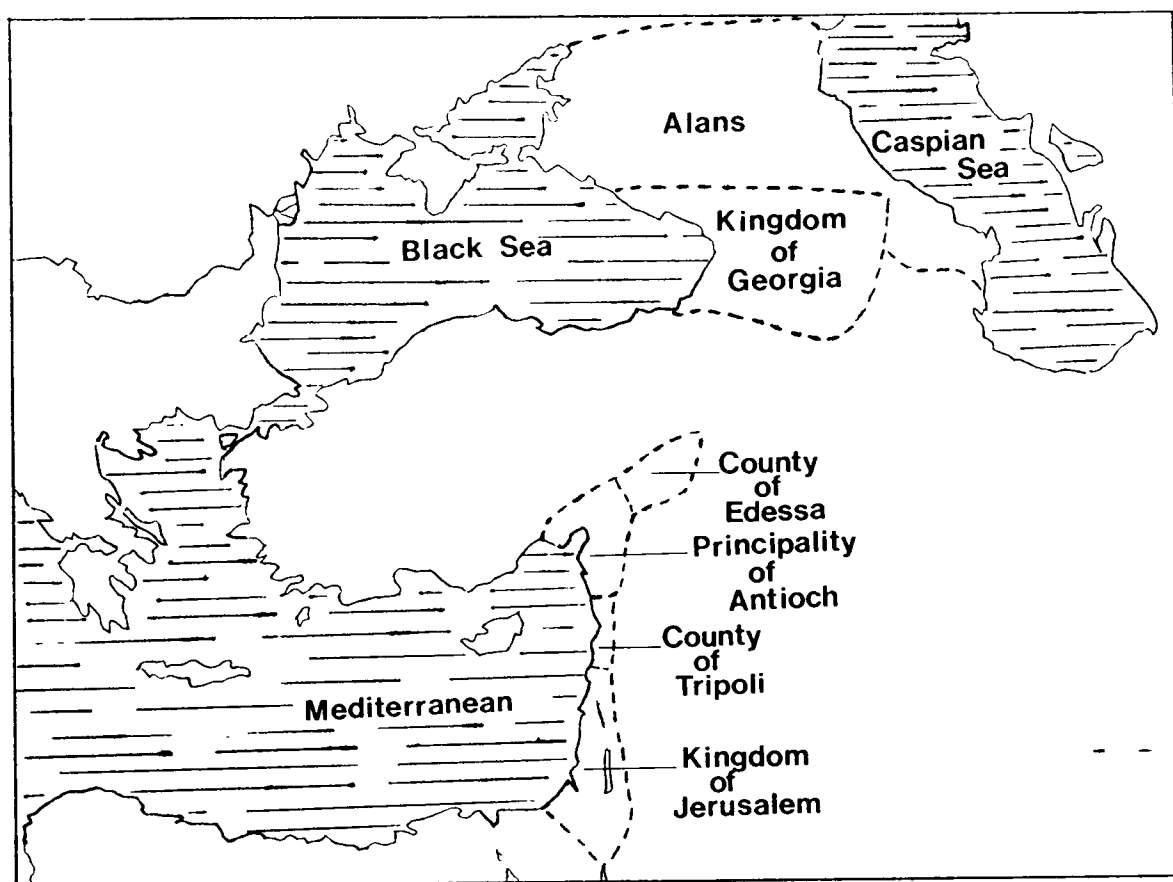


Figure 3. Kingdom of Jerusalem and Its Principalities in Relation to the Kingdoms of the Caucasus c. A.D. 1130 (after McEvedy 1961:65)

While such an hypothesis is difficult to confirm, there is, according to Lang (1966:111), an historical account

in which several hundred Frankish volunteers from the ranks of the crusaders are said to have fought as part of the Georgian king's army against the Seljuk Turks at the battle of Didgirr in 1121. This army was also comprised of 40,000 Kipchaks from the North Caucasus steppes (Lang 1966:111) and presumably many Ossetians as well, for David II, the Georgian king, is known to have recruited mercenaries from among both the Kipchaks and the Ossetes (Allen 1932:99). The Frankish volunteers may have heard stories of Nart heroes from the Ossetian mercenaries alongside of whom they fought or even the Georgians themselves.

For centuries the princes and princesses of neighbouring Alania intermarried with the royal house of Georgia. In fact, the Georgian Queen Tamara (1184-1211) was the daughter of an Ossetian princess. Her second husband, David Soslan, was a prince of Ossetia. In addition to marital ties, close political and economic relations existed between the two kingdoms. It is thus likely that Georgians were familiar with the Nart sagas of the Ossetes and other Alanic peoples. The Georgians may even have shared similar heroic traditions, for a related group of people, the Svans, as well as several Georgian-speaking tribes, the Racha, Khevsur, and Tush, all preserve Nart sagas (Dzidziguri 1971).

B. Caucasian Groups in the Crusader Kingdom and the Principalities

It is also possible for members of the crusader population to have encountered Nart sagas within the boundaries of their own kingdom or the principalities. There are no historical accounts which place Ossetes or other Alanic peoples within crusader domains. This of course does not rule out their presence. The chroniclers were, for the most part, concerned only with the native groups that the crusaders met in battle and not those to be found in their own lands. What is more, Ossetes may have been confused with Georgians whose presence in the Latin kingdom can be documented.

Georgians were well known to members of the crusader population. Jacques de Vitry, the Bishop of Acre, describes them in his letters:

There is also in the East another Christian people, who are very warlike and valiant in battle, being strong in body and powerful in the countless numbers of their warriors. They are much dreaded by the Saracens and have often by their invasion done great damage to the Persians, Medes, and Assyrians on whose borders they dwell, being entirely surrounded by infidel nations. These men are called Georgians, because they especially

revere and worship St. George,¹ whom they make their patron and standard bearer in their fight with the infidels and they honour him above all other saints. Whenever they come on pilgrimage to the Lord's Sepulchre, they march into the Holy City with banners displayed, without paying tribute to anyone, for the Saracens dare in no wise molest them. They wear their hair and beards about a cubit long and have hats upon their heads.²

The Georgians' association with the Holy Land was a long-standing one and extended beyond the pilgrimages mentioned by de Vitry. In the fifth century a Georgian monastery was built in the valley which led to Jerusalem. It was rebuilt by Justinian in the sixth century and remained in Georgian hands during the Moslem domination. Near Antioch Georgian monks resided in the ancient monastery of St. Simeon. Another of their monasteries was built on the banks of the Jordan and was washed away by floods before 1185. At the monastery of St. Chyrsostom, Georgian ascetics lived side by side with the Greeks of St. John and the Latins of Calamon (Conder 1897; Prawer 1972a). Like the Armenians, Jacobites, Nestorians, Copts, and Ethiopians whose ties with the Holy Land were equally old, Georgians were to be found in small

¹ The name "Georgians" does not derive from St. George. According to Lang (1966:18), it was coined by Western Europeans from the Arabic and Persian ethnic name Kurj or Gurg.

² Translation by Lang (1966:112)

enclaves throughout the kingdom and, in particular, in Jerusalem and the maritime cities (Praver 1972a, 1972b).

The extent of their interaction with the crusader population is difficult to assess. Some insight, however, can be gained from the reflections of an unnamed crusader chronicler quoted by Praver:

Consider, I pray, and reflect how in our time God has transferred the West into the East. For we who were Occidentals now have been made Orientals. He who was a citizen of Rheims or of Chartres now has been made a citizen of Tyre or Antioch. We have already forgotten the places of our birth; they have become unknown to many of us or, at least, are unmentioned. Some already possess homes and servants here which they have received through inheritance. Some have taken wives not merely of their own people but Syrians, or Armenians or even Saracens who have received the grace of Baptism. Some have with them a father-in-law, or daughter-in-law, or son-in-law, or stepson or stepfather. Here, too, are grandchildren and great-grandchildren. One cultivates vines, another fields. Both use the speech and idioms of different languages. These languages, now made common, become known to both races; and faith unites those whose forefathers were strangers (1972a:84).

Mixed marriages between the upper strata of the Frankish nobility and oriental Christians were a common occurrence (Munro 1935, Boase 1971, Praver 1972a). Such marriages, as Praver points out, "brought with [them] the oriental servants and attendants - whether Christian or Moslem - which abounded in every wealthy Frankish household" (1972a:83). Members of

the lower strata of Frankish society also intermarried with oriental Christians on their own social level. If Georgians, or Ossetes, were among these oriental Christians taken as spouses by members of the crusader population or brought with marriage as servants, it is possible that Frankish noblemen, knights, or burgesses encountered Nart sagas in their own households.

Language, it seems, may not have been a barrier to the transmission of tales. Stories could have been exchanged along with goods and services in the crowded bazaars and market-places of the cities. Jacques de Vitry tells of festivities where episodes from the Arthurian cycle as well as the fabliaux popular in Europe were performed (Prawer 1972a:91). At festivities such as these, Eastern storytellers may also have entertained men and women of the courts, recounting tales of Nart heroes.

C. Circassian Mamelukes

A third but rather less likely path for the transmission of tales also exists. Nart sagas may have reached Crusader ears via Circassian Mamelukes. Mamelukes were non-Mulsems, taken as slaves and employed as mercenaries in Muslem armies. Many were Circassians from the North West Caucasus. These slave soldiers frequently exploited the

military power they were invested with to seize control over established political authorities. In fact, under the Ayyūbid sultanate, Mameluke generals established a dynasty that ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 A.D. to 1517 A.D. (Glubb 1967, Encyclopaedia Britannica 1985).

While the initial appearance of the three sword motifs in the Arthurian literature antedates this period in which Mameluke influence was considerable, it should be noted that Circassian warriors were, nevertheless, widespread in the Near East during the twelfth century. The crusaders may have encountered these members of Muslem armies outside of battle.

D. Merging Paths

Whatever their immediate source, be it Georgians, Ossetes, or Circassian Mamelukes, some of the strange stories heard by the crusaders are likely to have been carried West by returning knights, pilgrims, merchants, traders, ecclesiastics, or others.

It is interesting that Robert de Boron, in whose work the "sword in the stone" motif first appears, may himself have been a knight. Toward the end of his Joseph, Robert refers to himself as Meistres Robers dist de Bouron (v.3155) and as messire Roberz de Beron (v.3461). The former would

suggest that he was a cleric and the latter that he was a knight. Since the prose version of the same work reads messires Roberz de Borron, Meistres may be a scribal error for Messires (Nitze 1953:280). Whether Robert participated in the Crusades is not known, but it is clear that he was well acquainted with others who did, including the lord of Montbéliard who embarked on the Fourth Crusade in 1202 and died in the Holy Land in 1212 (Idem). If the line je la retreis o mon seigneur Gautier from the Joseph (v.3489) reads: "I [Robert] tell it [the story] together with my lord," as some scholars suggest, Robert may have obtained at least some of his material from Montbéliard.

The Tales in the West

In the West, particularly in France, the thirst for tales of adventure and the exploits of knights that had made the stories of Arthur and his men popular, coupled with a growing fascination for the marvels of the East, would have provided a ready pathway for the incorporation of Nart tales in the Arthurian cycle. It seems that no sooner had Jerusalem been captured than every great chanson had its Eastern elements. For example, "Huon of Bordeaux has many adventures in Babylon and the East; Renaud de Montauban, in his later years, performs no mean exploits in the Holy Land;

Bevis of Hamptoun visits Jerusalem and Damascus and weds an emir's daughter; Richard Coeur de Lion's mother, like Thomas à Becket's, is in legend a Saracen princess" (Archer 1894:444). Audiences, it seems, were eager to hear of Eastern places and peoples. Just as such details were inserted into the old material of the chansons, so too might themes and motifs of Eastern origin have become a part of the Arthurian legends.

Thus can a crusader connection be pieced together -- a connection which perhaps offers the best explanation for the presence of certain Sarmatian-like motifs in the Arthurian tradition. Unlike Littleton and Thomas' Iazyge and Alan hypotheses, it can account for the initial appearance of the "sword in the stone," "sword from a woman," and "sword in a lake" motifs together in the French romances of the early thirteenth century.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the reappraisal of suggested parallels between the Arthurian legends and the Nart sagas of the Ossetes. First, and perhaps foremost, it is clear that the similarities between the two traditions are notably fewer than proposed by Littleton (1979, 1982a, 1982b) and Littleton and Thomas (1978). So-called "structural similarities" are slight. In those cases where there are some points of resemblance between characters, it can be argued that the similarities pertain to such general features (i.e., evilness, fatherhood, healing powers) that they are not specific to the Arthurian and Nart traditions. Or, it can be demonstrated that stronger affinities exist between the Arthurian material and Irish mythology than between the former and the Nart sagas. Onomastic similarities too are slight. While several Arthurian names bear a certain resemblance either to a name that appears in the Nart sagas or to a Persian word, detailed linguistic analysis reveals at least two (Bedwyr and bahádur and Pendragon and aba-Tarkan) to be false cognates.

At best, it can be argued that there are strong parallels between the death of Arthur and the death of Batradz, certain aspects of the Grail quest and Ossetic accounts of the Nartymonga, and Arthur's proving himself by withdrawing a sword from a stone and tales of Sawsruquo and Shebatinoquo's heroic nature being revealed by their ability to drive an object into the earth and withdraw it again. There is also a somewhat weaker parallel between the manner in which Arthur obtains Excalibur and the way that Shebatinoquo receives his weapons in a West Circassian tale.

These parallels are judged to be the result of historical connection rather than independent invention. The latter possibility is rejected on the basis of two criteria: 1) the complexity of the particular motif or theme in terms of the number and combination of its constituent parts, and 2) the arbitrariness of those parts. As Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm noted over a 130 years ago on the subject of resemblances between stories of peoples widely separated in time and space:

There are...some situations which are so simple and natural that they reappear everywhere, just as there are thoughts which seem to present themselves of their own accord, so that it is quite possible that the same or very similar stories may have sprung up in the most different countries quite independently of each other. Such stories may be compared with the isolated words which are produced in nearly or entirely identical

form in languages which have no connection with each other, by the mere imitation of natural sounds. We do meet with stories of this kind in which the resemblance can be attributed to accident, but in most cases the common root-thought will by the peculiar and frequently unexpected, nay, even arbitrary treatment, have received a form which quite precludes all acception of the idea of a merely apparent relationship. I will give some examples. Nothing can be more natural than to make the fulfillment of a request depend on the performance of some very difficult tasks; but when the tasks are the strangest imaginable, as they are in The Peasant's Wise Daughter (No.94), and when moreover they coincide, this can no longer be a chance agreement. That in cases of difficulty an umpire should be called in, is a thing which is clear to all, but that they are beings endowed with higher powers, that it is an inheritance which is to be divided between them, that this should consist of three magic things, and that finally the man who is summoned to make the divisions should craftily cheat the owners out of them (a man must use the rare opportunities which present themselves if he wants to win away from the dwarfs or kobolds their magic treasures), prove the connection between the traditions (Kinder- und Hausmärchen, trans. M. Hunt 1884:575-6).

Gradual diffusion of tales from one tradition to the other is ruled out in the present case, since there is no evidence that the "sword in the stone," "sword from a woman," and "sword thrown in a lake" motifs were known to the Slavs, Romanians, and other Eastern European peoples living between the progenitors of the Arthurian legends and the Ossetes and Circassians (Thompson 1955, Littleton and Thomas 1978). Direct borrowing as a result of historical contact between

the two groups is indicated.

This borrowing appears to have been from the Ossetic/Circassian tradition into the Arthurian, and not the other way around. This holds with the linguistic evidence which suggests that the Arthurian names "Kay" and "Magnon" may be legitimate "Sarmatian" loan words. What is more, the three sword motifs, in particular, do not look indigenous to the Arthurian tradition. They have a decidedly "foreign feel" and have continually resisted the efforts of Arthurian scholars to find Celtic precursors for them. Clearly, then, certain names and motifs, but not the core of the Arthurian legends, can be said to be of "Sarmatian" origin.

A second set of conclusions concerning when and where these elements might have entered the Arthurian tradition can also be drawn. It is possible that at least two of the central elements of the Grail theme (i.e., the struggle for possession of a magic cup/cauldron and the vessel's ability to accept or reject the person who would possess it), as well as the names "Kay" and "Magnon," were introduced by Iazyge cataphractarii stationed along Hadrian's Wall in 175 AD. It is quite unlikely, however, that any of the three sword motifs were so introduced. No trace of the "sword from a woman," "sword thrown in a lake," or "sword in the stone" motifs can be found in either the early Welsh literature or the works of Geoffrey de Monmouth, both of which preserve

elements of the early insular oral traditions associated with Arthur. These oral traditions presumably would have been influenced by the oral traditions of the Iazyges. Moreover, the available evidence suggests that their absence is not merely an historical accident.

It is also unlikely that the "sword from a woman," "sword in the stone," and "sword thrown in a lake" motifs were introduced by the Alans who settled in Armorica during the fifth and sixth centuries. The acceptance of such an explanation depends on 1) the cultural isolation of the Alanic communities in Armorica and Western Europe in general as well as 2) the survival of those communities until the early thirteenth century, for it is not until then that the three motifs first appear in the Arthurian literature. However, the first is improbable and the second remains to be shown.

It seems, rather that the three sword motifs may have entered the Arthurian tradition via members of the crusader population in the East who could have encountered Nart sagas among Georgians, Ossetes, and Circassians either within their own kingdom or the Caucasus.

While it is not surprising that the Arthurian cycle should show various influences from outside its central patrimony, Arthurian scholars have generally hesitated to look beyond the Celtic material for the source of otherwise

unexplainable names and motifs. It is Littleton and Thomas' as well as Nickel's and Grisward's achievement to have compelled these scholars to reconsider the role that other Indo-European traditions may have played in the development of the cycle by calling attention to one of the more distant and exotic influences: that of the Nart sagas of the Caucasus.

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