

# OFF WITH THEIR HEADS! «SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT» AND THE NART SAGAS

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Осетины, потомки средневековых аланов, сохранили полученный от них в наследство эпос «Сказания о Нартах». Саги данного эпического памятника с ними разделили и другие народы, с которыми эти воины-кочевники имели контакты и среди которых часть их была рассеяна и позже ассимилирована. Подвергшееся обработке в разных повествовательных традициях, это общее наследие, тем не менее, идентифицируется в определенных фрагментах, что позволяет отслеживать их аланское происхождение. Сравнительный анализ среднеанглийской поэмы «Сэр Гавейн и Зеленый Рыцарь» артуровского цикла и двух нартских кадагов «Батрадз и Пестробородый уаиг» и «Сослан и сыновья Тара» позволяет предполагать, что данные сюжеты можно рассматривать как восходящие к аланам, которые, с одной стороны, могли передать их норманнам, а с другой — быть сохраненными аланами Центрального Кавказа. Исследуется набор совпадающих мотивов в британской и осетинских историях, а именно: 1) пир, 2) дерзкий чужеземный всадник, 3) добровольное обезглавливание, 4) игра на обезглавливание, 5) отрубание головы противника его же оружием, 6) унесение отсеченной головы, 7) игра на соблазнение. Число и характер этих параллелей дают основания для их интерпретации с точки зрения общего происхождения (моногогенеза) и распространения сармато-аланами по территории Евразии, а не случайного сходства в результате независимого творчества (полигенеза).

**Ключевые слова:** Артуровский цикл, нартские сказания, англо-саксы, осетины, аланы, кельты, среднеанглийский язык, осетинский язык, Зеленый Рыцарь, игра на обезглавливание, кефалофор, хроматический синкретизм.

The Ossetians, who descended from the ancient Alans, preserved their cultural heritage in the «Nart» kadags (sagas), which were shared by other peoples with whom these nomads had contact and in whose communities they were dispersed and subsequently assimilated. Disguised by different narrative traditions, this common heritage is still identifiable in certain parts of the world. Comparative analysis of the Middle English poem «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight» from the Arthurian cycle and two of the Nart sagas «Nart Batradz and the Giant with a Colored Beard» and «Nart Soslan and Tar's Sons» suggest that these plots trace back to stories carried by the ancient Alans, who transmitted the story to the Normans where it developed into one of the Arthurian traditions and was preserved by the Alans' descendants in the Caucasus region. In this paper we investigate sequential motifs in the British and Ossetian stories, namely, (1) feast, (2) audacious alien horse-rider, (3) voluntary beheading, (4) beheading game, (5) severing the opponent's head with his own weapon, (6) carrying away the dismembered head, and (7) seduction game. The number and the nature of these parallels suggests that their similarity does not arise from multiple acts of independent creation (polygenesis) but rather from a single source (monogenesis), one that was carried across Eurasia in Roman times by the Alano-Sarmatians.

**Keywords:** Arthurian cycle, Narts' sagas, Anglo-Saxons, Alans, Ossetians, Celts, Middle English, the Ossetian language, the Green Knight, decapitation game, cephalophore, chromatic syncretism.

The connection between the medieval Arthurian legends and the Ossetian Nart *kadags* (sagas) is an increasingly accepted scientific hypothesis. While a number of important and intriguing parallels have been identified between the two cycles (G. Dumézil, J. P. Mallory, J. H. Grisward, S. Littleton, A. C. Thomas and L. A. Malcor) [1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8], still others have yet to be revealed. Some of these can be found in a 14th-century alliterative poem, «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight» (*Sir Gawayn and þe Grene Knyzt*) [9] and the sagas on Narts Batradz and Soslan [10].

The anonymous author of this Anglo-Saxon poem is commonly known as the Gawain Poet or the Pearl Poet, since «The Pearl», «Patience» and «Cleanness» are the three other poems attributed to him. While Sir Gawain, one of the foremost Knights of the Round Table, comes first in the title, the «Gawain Poet» might just as deservedly be remembered as the «Green Knight Poet», because this ambivalent, mysterious, and contradictory villain is considered the «most complex character of the poem». Many investigators credit the Gawain Poet with creating a structurally whole narration that blends heroic epics with court chivalry. As a result of this synthesis the Green Knight who gate-crushes King Arthur's hall and intrudes on the New Year's celebration is a guest from a strange land and distant past, whose regional, ethnic or temporal characteristics are hardly identifiable.

#### Layers

The multi-dimensional poem provides the grounds for a variety of arguments from a multitude of disciplines and differing methods of analysis, stimulating discussions about its structure and the literary history of its motifs. It is impossible to attribute its distinction, as is the case with many other deservedly remembered and revered piece of art, to something different than the creator's talent. The Gawain Poet «must be credited with [both the] structure and... the theme» [11, 24]. In J. Gardner's

opinion, in this «coherent and balanced whole» we are dealing «not with borrowing, but with total transformation of old material, [so] the search outside the poem for the poem's meaning becomes pure pedantry» [12, 26]. Our understanding of the poem is guided by the motto ascribed to A. C. Spearing: «Never trust the Symbolism; trust the poem» [13]. Thus, we propose that this «transformation of old material» becomes «total» as the author interweaves diverse layers of poetic elements.

The nesting of stories starts at the beginning of the poem with the tale of Troy, the flight of Aeneas to Italy, the founding of Rome by Romulus, the discovery of Britain by Brutus, with the emphasis on all of the «marvels» associated with these stories. The next layer tells how of all the «marvels», most occur in the land of Britain. That layer wraps around the tale of Arthur within which is contained the story of «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.» These folds of the chivalry then hide a kernel of history within the resulting anticline [14]. In other words, pseudo-history encases the historical core, which is enclosed within the tale of the New Year's celebration at King Arthur's palace.

The New Year's feast is interrupted in a very timely manner for the entertainment-thirsty king, by the intrusion of a stranger, who enters the hall on horseback. He is «an ugly fellow and tallest of all men upon earth» («*an aghlich mayster on þe most on þemolde on mesure highe*» 136-137), «half a giant» (*half etayn* 140). The Knight, green from the tips of his hair to the hooves of his horse, is berated by the king for his impudence. First among those «who have hot blood, or temper unbridled», Sir Gawain severs the Knight's head from his shoulders with the latter's huge, green axe as part of a challenge to exchange seemingly absurd blows: the Green Knight, who is Bertilak de Hautdesert in disguise (another poem, «The Greene Knight,» calls him Bredbeddle), allows Gawain to behead him and promises that in a year and a day he will do the same

to Gawain. Gawain quite reasonably assumes that the Knight will not be able to return the blow, but the plot twists when the headless torso picks up the head and rides away.

In this layer of the story, the king and his court are the protagonists. The effect of *mise en abyme*, the story within a story, is enhanced by the interaction with the layer where Gawain is the protagonist. The poet not only makes his protagonists gasp at the intimate description of the frightening details of the Knight's monstrosity and behavior, but also he makes them eyewitnesses to the breathtaking development of his arrival. Active listening turns into active participation. Uninvited and unwelcome the Green Knight is, Arthur's traditional demand to listen to some unusual story heralds the supernatural antagonist's appearance:

«And there was another strange thing about him [Arthur] because of his noble birth, that he would not eat on these high days until he had heard some... tale of marvelous adventures, of... [feats of] arms, or else that some knight joined with another in jousting, life for life as hap would have it. This was the custom of the King when he was in court at each feast as it came amongst his noble household in hall».

(90-102) *and also an oper maner meued him eke*

*þat he þur<sub>3</sub> nobelay had nomen he wolde neuer ete*

*vpon such a dere day er hym deuised were  
of sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale  
of sum mayn meruayle þat he my<sub>3</sub>t trawe  
of of alderes of armes of oper auenturus  
oper sum segg hym biso<sub>3</sub>t of sum siker  
kny<sub>3</sub>t*

*to joyne with hym in iustying in joparde  
to lay*

*lede lif for lyf leue vchon oper  
as fortune wolde ful sun hom þe fayrer to  
haue*

*þis watz kynges countenaunce where he in  
court were*

*1at vch farand fest among his fremeny in  
halle [9].*

«At each feast» the king had been entertained by a «tale of marvelous adventures», unaccountably though, this time nobody provided his royal ear with the story of any «life for life» encounter. Or could it be, that this time the tale turned into action? Arthur waits to hear a tale, but the Green Knight rides into the hall and proceeds to pull Gawain out of the layer containing Arthur and his court into the layer of the underlying tale, one that was expected to be heard and not seen.

If we consider the first part of the poem as a relic of a single narrative, merged with the rest as a result of conflation, it is a story about the conflict at the feast which ended with decapitation of one of the participants. Such an outline affords to trace parallel to the outline of the story of Lucian Samosata «On Friendship» [15]. It tells about the Scythian Arsakom of the times of Scythian and Bosporian conflict. At least, it is possible to extrapolate the details and plot motifs to the story of the Green Knight.

Considering the Green Knight's poem in parallel with or from a perspective of Lucian's story can help to demystify the behavior of the uninvited guest at the feast of Arthur. Like Arsakom, the Green Knight could also come to claim retribution. His arrogance may be due to the importance of the diplomatic mission entrusted to him by his master — he came for the tribute. The hostility of the court of the King in this case is quite naturally understandable and is due to the reluctance to pay the required. The Knight's aggressive, but not absolutely hostile behavior is suggestive of a deep-rooted conflict.

It should be noted that the motif of the tribute allows to parallel the present poem with a story within the Arthurian cycle itself. The story is about the conflict described by T. Malory about King Arthur and 12 Romans. They, as well as the Green Knight, who came to Arthur with a branch of holly, appear in the banquet hall of Arthur with olive branches as a sign of a parliamentary mission entrusted to them by the Roman emperor [16].

T. Mallory's story can be gisted similarly: a feast — a conflict — an attempted decapitation — the war. The same motive is found in one of the Narts' *kadags*, when Mukara (or another hero with the same name) comes to the Narts to claim neglected tribute.

### The Beheading Game

As is the case with other supernatural characters in the Arthurian tradition, the Green Knight challenges the Knights of the Round Table and their king to test their worthiness. This is particularly true in stories about the quest for the Holy Grail, which is where we find most of the accounts of the beheading game. This motivation is also true in the *kadags* of the Narts.

In contrast, hagiographical tales focus on the miraculous interaction between the body and the head as a sign of spiritual purity. This cephalophore trope was very popular in hagiographic literature, but the reviewed case can hardly be compared to any of the 122 examples cited by R. Saintyves [17] or to any others, that have since been brought to light. In these cephalophores, such as that of Saint Gemolo, the beheaded saint leaves to reach his resting place or is seen at his resting place carrying his severed head. While some variants tell of the saint mounting a horse, others are nonspecific about how the saint travels to the place where he is to be buried. Like the saints, the Knight rides to the Green Chapel, a place that would be a logical burial place for him. So there is clearly Church influence on the story. Or the story's influence on the Church's tales.

Several medieval tales make use of this motif of «The Beheading Game», which some scholars think originated in the eighth-century Old Irish *Bricriu's Feast*, where the hero Cú Chulainn fills the role of Gawain and Cú Roí, King of Munster, disguises himself as a churl to take the part later played by the Green Knight. The motif next turns up in the Middle French *Life of Caradoc*, which is found in the First Continuation of Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte del Graal* [18]. This time the enchanter Eliavres appears at Arthur's

court and uses magic to replace his head after Caradoc chops it off. The Middle High German *Diu Crône* and the Old French «La Mule sans Frein» feature Gawain as the protagonist in the beheading game, which is part of his quest for the Holy Grail. In the thirteenth century poem «The Romance of Hunbaut» Gawain alters the game by actually killing the enchanter through the expediency of removing the challenger's magic cloak before he has time to reattach his head [19, XVI]. Yet another instance is found in the early 13th-century *Perlesvaus*, this time with Lancelot taking Gawain's role [20] and repeatedly passing the same test. Gawain reprises his role in the 15th-century «The Turke and Gowain», but this time the twist is that the Turk refuses to return the blow until Gawain travels with him through many adventures, proving his worth. In the 15th-century «Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle» the churl is back as the challenger and Gawain stabs him with a spear instead of beheading him with a sword [21]. (A related motif is that of the Headless Horseman, who is best known from W. Irving's much later story «The Legend of Sleepy Hollow».) As in the other stories, the carle/carl (churl) fails to die, but the part where Gawain is supposed to take the return blow is left out. The basic pattern of the motif, then, is that Gawain, who is sometimes replaced by another knight or a mythological figure, faces an enchanter or supernatural being who is usually in disguise and whose purpose is to test his trustworthiness.

In either case the story is very, very old, and it is this ancient material that forms the core of the poem.

### The Green Knight

With regard to the Green Knight, the aspect we would like to highlight is the alien nature of the guest. He is an outsider with respect to Arthur's world. His green coloring causes many people to associate him with the Green Man, who is often assumed to be a Celtic nature deity. The Green Man, however, first appeared in the Roman cult of Dionysus,



ca. 420 B. C. E. in Naples, Italy. Other examples appear throughout the Middle East, as far north as Constantinople and as far south as Iraq, and as far away as Nepal and India. Note that from the beginning the Green Man appears almost exclusively as a detached head and the knight in Gawain's story, entirely green including his horse, wastes little time in having his head separated from his body. The Green Knight carries his head by hair, a practice quite typical for executioner's demonstration of his work. Noteworthy, too, is the tradition of Celtic horse-riding warriors and steppe nomads attaching the heads of the slain enemies to their saddles.

The evidence indicates, then, that the motif of the Green Man was transmitted to Britain by the Church, likely during Roman times. He is a stranger to Britain, at least coming from the Continent and possibly from the supernatural world. In «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight» the knight is revealed to be Bertilak le Haut-Desert, «Bertilak» is thought to have derived from the word for «churl» in one of the Celtic languages. This fits well with what we know of the variants of the Beheading motif stories. While to modern eyes «Haut-Desert» looks like «High Desert,» it actually meant «High Forest» in the Middle Ages. This was a wild forested area of a type that is only found south of Cheshire in Britain and which was known as a place where horses grazed among oaks, hazel and hawthorn. The location of this terrain is interesting because the leading candidate for the home of the Gawain Poet is Cheshire.

The Green Knight could have acquired his unparalleled greenness as a result a mis-translation from Old Irish into Middle English, the latter of which has a more detailed color scheme than the former language [22]. Proto-Celtic \**glasto-*, is believed to mean green, in Middle Welsh *glas* has the meanings of blue, green' [23, 126]. Yet in all Celtic languages its known reflexes developed color syncretism and can designate either green, blue or grey. In Irish, Manx, Scottish, Gaelic, Welsh, Cornish and Breton *glas* can stand

for either of these three colors. The peak of its polysemy and valency took place during the Old Irish period, when the adjective *glas* could characterize plants, animals, human's complexion, and the color of metals. In neutral contexts, for example, illustrating grammar rules on the use of articles in Scottish Gaelic the phrases *eun glas* and *an t-eun glas* are translated as «a grey bird» and «the grey bird» respectively [24, 222]. In a fairy tale a bird could have acquired more interesting and more impressive color in translation. Probably, the choice of the paradoxical green for the knight was also motivated by the artistic vision of the narrator.

While transmitting the story between the Celtic and the Sarmatian-Alanian world this word could not have constituted a problem, since Celtic spectrum is similar to Ossetian in this respect, where the word *цъæх* denotes the same three colors as *glas*. Accordingly, theoretically *цъæх-барæг* can be a «green horseman» or a «blue horseman». But traditionally *цъæх-барæг* is a «grey horseman». In the story about Caradoc, which is textually nearest to the Middle English poem, the horse of the guest is also not green: «a knight on a grey horse came through a door» [25, 145-146]. In the poem conversely the description starts with the man and the color of the horse just serves to intensify the striking appearance of the rider.

### Timing

Many scholars have remarked on the timing of the events in «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.» The feast occurs at the «New Year», which is a bit of a problematic description when we are dealing with supposedly Celtic material that has been heavily impacted by the Church. In the Celtic tradition, the New Year occurs at Samhain, Halloween (All Hallows Eve) in our modern calendar. This is a case of the Church attempting to stop the celebration of an ancient festival by creating a new, Christian festival on top of it. On the night of Samhain the separation between the earthly world and the Otherworld supposedly became thin enough that spirits

to travel from one to the other. This is what led to people dressing up in disguises and knocking at neighbors' doors. The disguises not only prevented the spirits from taking the souls of those who ventured out into the night but also provided cover for people to demand treats from their neighbors, demands that were met because no one knew who was human and who was truly a spirit.

The whole aspect of the New Year feast marking the border between the past and the future is known in many Indo-European cultures. It is this concept, for instance, that gave us the two-faced Roman god Janus, who looks backward into the past and forward into the future. The Church adopted the Roman calendar, which is why the European year starts on January 1<sup>st</sup> (the month being named after Janus) and ends on the last day of December (originally the tenth month, but Julius Caesar's changes to the calendar wound up making it the twelfth month). In the Christian calendar the New Year falls on the Seventh Day of Christmas, which associated with the swan. The ending of the year is associated with the death of the swan, which is where we get the expression «swan song» from with its meaning of «an ending.» Swans are usually white, which is always a clue in stories, particularly in the Arthurian tradition and in tales told by the steppe nomads, that you are dealing with something supernatural. So here again there is a thinning of the border between Life and Death.

It is into this nebulous zone that the Green Knight rides. He is unnatural in appearance, and, while the removal of his head should have killed him, he remains alive. His challenge to Gawain is to repeat the miracle in «a year and a day.» That puts Gawain's attempt on the Eighth Day of Christmas, which is associated with milkmaids. In the *Lebornah Uidre* (*The Book of the Dun Cow*) milkmaids lead the monks of Lindisfarne to a site they choose as the final resting place of St. Cuthbert, over which the Normans later build a cathedral. Conflation caused by the similarity of names may have cause Cuth-

bert's story to be associated with that of Cú Roí, who is also known as Cubertmac Dáire who features prominently in the *Fled Bricrend* [*Bricriu's Feast*], a tale that includes the beheading game, which we will discuss in a moment. For the time being, keep in mind that Norman connection.

### The Narts' Kadags

The Ossetians (and some of their Caucasian neighbors) are «the bearers of the so-called Nart *kadags*. These are a set of heroic tales, somewhere between myth and legend in tone, which show numerous and striking parallels with the ancient Indo-European lore, particularly with, of all things, the Arthurian cycle» [6, 14]. This includes the story of «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.»

Beheading is rather a wide-spread motif in the Narts' *kadags*. Two cases of decapitation in particular lend themselves to comparative analysis.

The first is found in the *kadag* «Nart Batradz and the Giant with a Colored Beard», where there is a feast, the beheading of a giant with a multi-colored beard, and the carrying away of the head. In this *kadag* the feast is not a calendar celebration, but is held to plan a strategy against an external, devouring enemy. During the feast Batradz, a young and promising tribesman, is commissioned to defeat him. Then after a beheading game he takes the giant's head and carries it away on a stake as a war trophy to the land of the Narts. This recalls the Hunbaut variant of Gawain's story, where he prevents the challenger from reattaching his head while in most variants the challenger carries away his own head, sometimes in his hands and sometimes by reattaching it. Note that the challenger in this case is a giant with unnatural colors, signifying that he is not of Batraz's world, even though the Narts are themselves giants as are Arthur and his knights in some stories.

In the second *kadag* parallels are more systemic, and they can be found not only in the beheading game but also in the seduction game that follows.

In «Nart Soslan and Tar's Sons» there is a huge horse-rider; the desire to contest the famed and storied heroes, a beheading game with a sharp-edged axe, an attempt at a voluntary decapitation with the victim's own weapon and a woman exercising her charms on a man three times in order to alter the outcome of the beheading game.

In this *kadag* the setting is not a feast, yet there is the same abrupt change of atmosphere from joyfulness to fear and danger experienced by the feasting King and his subordinates at the sight of the Green Knight: «stone still they sat» (*ston stil seten*). Nart Soslan is singing with joy (*йæхицæн зарджытæ кæны*), when he manages to find grazing grounds for the cattle. But soon he sees a cloud, whirling at him, which turns out to be Mukara, the owner of these lands, who is furious at somebody trespassing on his property. Like the Green Knight, who «stood towering before [Arthur], higher than any in the house, by his head and more. («332-333: þe stif mon hym before stod vpon hy<sub>3</sub>t/herre þen ani in þe hous by þe hede and more)», Mukara is a horse-rider, and he is huge: «his horse is the size of a mountain» (*йæ бæх хохы йас*), «he himself is the size of a [hay] stack» (*йæхæдæз та цъынайы йас*) [10].

It is to be noted, that in both cases the protagonists are ethnically different. The ex-ethnicity of the Knight is highlighted by a detailed description of his unusual attire, unnatural and overall greenness and disproportionate physical immensity. This strange alien, an «aghlich mayster», half-giant, nevertheless, a man.

In terms of physical parameters of growth and stature the ethnicity of the hero is not identifiable, but giants in all traditions are of exogenous origin. Yet they are not total strangers, as both the Green Knight and Mukara had heard about the other side, so there must have been certain communication between their tribes. Mukara learns from Soslan, whom he takes for a shepherd, that the Narts dared to occupy his fields, and he gives way to his curiosity in and envy of the

fame of Soslan, the most renowned Nart of his time. The Green Knight, in his turn, challenges the knights of the Round Table, since they are the worthiest opponents:

«I am come because the fame of thy knights is so highly praised, and thy burgesses and thy town are held to be the best in the world, and the strongest riders on horses in steel armour, and the bravest and the worthiest of all mankind, and proof in playing in all joustings; and here, too, courtesy is well known, as I have heard say; and it is for these reasons that I am come hither at this time.»

(258-265) *bot for þe los of þe lede is lyft vp so hy<sub>3</sub>e and þy bur<sub>3</sub> and þy burnes best ar holden stifest vnder stel gere on stedes to ryde þe wy<sub>3</sub>test and þe worþyest of þe worlds kynde preue for to play wyth in oþer pure laykez and here is kydde cortaysye as I haf herd carp and þat hatz wayned me hider iwyis at þis tyme* [9].

Mukara, who had heard about the mighty Nart, and the Green Knight, informed about the excellence of Arthur's noble men, both have this vocational hazard: Both are eager to outperform their opponents and rival their fame. And here the motif of the game appears. The Green Knight himself suggests the terms of his game, while Mukara becomes curious of Nart Soslan's favorite pastimes and will readily engage in the most extreme of his games. Soslan grasps at this chance to slay the dangerous adversary and schemes to kill him in a mortal combat. He refers to the Narts' tradition to entertain Soslan:

- First, the mightiest sharpen their axes (*Нарты фæсивæды тыхджындæртæ сæ цирхътæ фæрсæссадскæныны*).

- Then Soslan must lay his head on a block (*стæй Сослан йæ бæрзæй къуыдырыл æрæвæры*).

- The Narts' youth start striking his neck, but to no avail (*йæ уыдонсæ тых, сæ бонæйцæвыны, фæлæ дзы æрду æмæ 'рдæгдæрнæ алыгкæныны*) [10].

Mukara is not in the least surprised by the dangerous nature of the game, since Soslan is reputed as a daring contender, audacious adventure-seeker, and self-assured

challenger. To Soslan's disappointment, this strategy does not bring him the outcome he desired: He strikes Mukara's neck with all his might, after the giant voluntarily puts his head on the block, but the Nart fails to hurt him. Soslan at last succeeds in beheading his enemy by using his enemy's own weapon.

While there are slight differences between Soslan's story and that of «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,» the parallels are more significant. For instance, Gawain takes one blow to behead the Green Knight, and Soslan takes several tries to sever Mukara's head. But notice that Arthur claims the Green Knight's axe and gives it to Gawain who uses it to cut off the Green Knight's head. Soslan takes Mukara's cutting edge and uses it to cut off his adversary's head. Two renowned warriors beheading two supernatural giants with their own weapon.

Having defeated Mukara, Soslan has to confront his even mightier brother Bybutz. This encounter eventually leads to a seduction game in which a female relative, in this case Soslan's mother, Shatana, helps her son outsmart the enemy, just as Lady Bertilak, the Green Knight's wife, offers to help Gawain outsmart her husband while he is off hunting. Each lady hosts the competitor on her own premises. Shatana three times tries to learn the secret of Bybutz's immortality, eventually finding them: a pillar of the house, a stone of its hearth, and an iron box at his Yellow Fortress where three doves (his soul, strength and hope) were kept. To defeat Bybutz, Soslan beheads the three doves.

Similarly, with the agreement that Gawain and Bertilak will exchange gifts at the end of the day, Lady Bertilak tries to seduce their guest. On the first day, while Bertilak hunts and heads a barren doe, Gawain and the lady talk of honor with many religious references before the lady kisses him. Kiss exchanged for the ribs of the doe (possibly a reference to woman being formed from Adam's rib), the story moves to the second day. This time Bertilak hunts and beheads a boar while the lady and Gawain talk of valor and

she kisses him twice. Gawain gives Bertilak a kiss on each cheek in return for the carcass of the boar. On the third day the lady kisses Gawain three times and gives him a girdle that will prevent the Green Knight from cutting off his head while Bertilak hunts a fox, which he skins but does not behead. At dinner Gawain kisses Bertilak three times but does not give him the girdle, and Bertilak gives Gawain the pelt of the fox that was not beheaded. Soul, valor and hope, the topics Gawain talks about with the lady and the items contained by the three doves does that Soslan beheads after his encounter with Shatana. The Green Knight feigns two blows at Gawain and slightly cuts him on the neck with the third for holding back the girdle Lady Bertilak had given him, so essentially Gawain defeats the Green Knight by keeping his head attached to his shoulders. Likewise Soslan defeats Bybutz.

In short there is an evident connection between the two traditions. So how did Soslan's story wind up in the tale of «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight»?

### Transmission

While the written text appears to transmit from Ireland to the Continent and from there back to Britain, the reverse is more likely true. In the Irish analogues, identified by J. Weston et al. (e.g., G. Paris and L. Benson) [26], it «seemed obvious that the beheading tales in the Fled Bricrend [*Bricriu's Feast*] contained elements that appeared in one or other, but not both, of the later romances» (i.e., «The Life of Caradoc» and «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; [27, 1]), so the motif is often said to be of «Celtic» origin. The search for the prototypical story in the Celtic world is quite self-evident, since here do the geographical, temporal, and ethnic bonds with the whole Arthurian cycle lie. Besides, the well-known role of the human head in the Celtic religion and rituals gives a favorable context for such interpretations. This conclusion based on only a portion of the evidence, though, is not as «obvious» as it seemed to Benson. The case



for «The Life of Caradoc» as a direct source of «Sir Gawain and the Green Knight» was «long ago dismissed for lack of evidence. It once had powerful advocates» in Sir Frederic Madden (who regarded it as its «immediate original»), Ernest Hoepffner, Bernhard ten Brink, and M.C. Thomas. Kittredge worked out an elaborate hypothesis involving at least three lost French intermediaries between the Celtic legend and the English romance [28]. W. Barron argues that, the «existence of three mutually contradictory theories must weaken faith in all three» and remains «unconvinced that the immediate source of Sir Gawain, in whole or part, has been identified» [11, 10].

Note, then, that the Irish variant is the geographic outlier, with the majority of the tales coming from the Continent and Britain. In the case of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Old French *Perlesvaus*, there is direct evidence of this transmissions since we know the provenience of the manuscript, which was copied for Brian FitzAlan when he visited the Continent and which he carried back to Britain with him. While the Irish variant also appears to pre-date the other tales, the earliest manuscript in which it appears, the aforementioned *Lebor na hUidre* (*The Book of the Dun Cow*) dates to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The text contains passages inserted from other sources by one of the scribes, and it is possible that the beheading

game is one of these since all of the evidence suggests that the story came from the Continent just as we find material from the works of Chrétien de Troyes in the Welsh story «Peredur son of Efwarg». The likely source for the transmission of these tales were the Norman nobles who invaded Britain in 1066 and Ireland in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

As mentioned above, both the story of the beheading game and the motif of the Green Man appear to have been carried to Britain from the Continent, specifically from Brittany most likely at the time of the Norman Invasion (1066 C. E.). A noble family from Brittany, the FitzAlans from whom Bryan Fitz Alan who was gifted with the *Perlesvaus*, accompanied William the Conqueror and were granted lands throughout Britain, including Shropshire County, which abuts the County of Cheshire, which is thought to be the Gawain poet's home. The FitzAlans were descended from the ancient Alans who crossed the Rhine River in 406 C. E. and some of whom settled in Brittany. The Ossetians, who tell the Nart *kadags*, also descend from the ancient Alans. Since we have no evidence of the Arthurian tradition transmitting to the Ossetians nor of the Nart *kadags* transmitting from Ossetia to Britain, the logical conclusion is that both tales came from a single source recounted by their common ancestors.

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