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FAILED REPRESENTATIONS OF THE HEAVENLY JERUSALEM IN LA QUESTE DEL SAINT GRAAL

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Abstract: *Historically and socially the medieval city has been described as the place where merchants and bankers prospered, while the castle of the city has often been perceived as an administrative centre, supervising urban activities. However, in medieval romances a city is only an appendix of a castle, and is always supported by and reliant on it. In *La Queste del Saint Graal* the most important cities are Camelot, Corbenic and Sarras, as the sites where the Grail is seen, only to be taken away afterwards.*

*In this article the author wants to discuss these cities, and she will focus on the way these urban spaces are structured in order to favour knightly, as well as spiritual, pursuits. The importance of the castle and of its chapel will be underlined, as these castles are places where significant events, in connection with the Quest, occur. The author starts from the 21st chapter of the Revelation when analysing the physical structure of the Heavenly City, and from Saint Augustine's work *De Civitate Dei*, when highlighting the spiritual features of the City of God. Norman John Greville Pounds' insightful study on the life in *The Medieval City* will be used to discuss the medieval realities and to see their importance for the highly spiritualised events illustrated in *La Queste*.*

Although, all these cities are blessed by divine grace – since Camelot is the place where the Holy Grail feeds all the knights, Sarras is repeatedly called the “spiritual palace”, and Jesus Christ shows Himself in the Holy Grail at Corbenic – it will be argued that none of these places can attain the flawlessness and the brilliance to emblemize the Heavenly City. Searching for an alternative location, which would fulfil better the requirements entailed by such a deeply religious image, the author suggests the wilderness, which is a complementary material space, where Jesus Christ can also be physically encountered.

The existence of a Heavenly Jerusalem as an ideal city has biblical roots, and it has been a point of reference, not only in theology, but in literature, as well. The image of a city where the righteous rejoice, cleansed by divine light and grace, has always been an enthralling picture, even though those who revealed details about this spiritual bliss, namely the saints, had only glimpses of it.

In *La Queste* there are many instances of people experiencing heavenly harmony when the Holy Grail descends in their proximity. There are three cities where the Holy Grail is seen: Camelot (at the beginning of the Quest), Corbenic (where twelve knights including the three successful questers participate in the celebration of the mass and are fed from the Holy Grail by Jesus Christ Himself, and where Lancelot,

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also, has his most intense encounter with the Grail) and finally Sarras, the “spiritual palace” (where Perceval, Bors and Galahad see the Grail daily for two years and Galahad has the ultimate experience, looking inside the Grail).

In this article, the author wants to analyse these three cities and to ascertain to what extent they can be considered images of the Heavenly Jerusalem, as it was perceived by the 13th-century Christians. The roles of the castle, the cathedral and the churches are discussed as well as their importance in the progress of the questers.

The Ideal Medieval City – Mental Projections of the Heavenly Jerusalem

The idea of a perfect place where people live without any worries, enjoying God’s love after a life of hardship has always been part of the Christian horizon of expectations. The hope to reach Paradise was comforting for medieval people and they did not show fear or despair faced with the inevitability of death, regardless of their social position or wealth. They were accustomed to this idea, and Philippe Ariès shows that, by the 12th century, they had devised a ritual that worked as a careful preparation for that moment and helped them to accept their passing away calmly and sensibly as inevitable, displaying a “traditional familiarity with death” (Ariès 27). Death may even become a desired reality, when it means encountering God and experiencing the mysteries of Heaven, and the reader of *La Queste* finds such an example in Galahad’s attitude¹, as he prays for death on his way to Sarras, while travelling close to the Holy Grail, which is covered “d’un samit vermeil, et estoit fez en semblance de touaille” (*La Queste* 273, “by a piece of bright red samite in form of a chalice veil”, QHG 279).

The image of the city of the elect, located in Heaven, and described in the bible², was well-known to medieval audiences, and this is proven by the fact that the same vision is present in the 14th-century poem *Pearl*³. In this text, the city of the fortunate can be seen by mortal eyes in a dream, and it is described as a perfectly square place with a golden inner radiance and populated by pure-hearted people. The earthly Paradise is often considered to have a regular geometrical outline, which corresponded with the medieval idea of harmony and order. The inner symmetry of

¹Once he has partaken of the Holy Communion from the hands of Jesus Christ at Corbenic, and while he is on the ship that would take him to Sarras, Galahad prays to be granted freedom from this earthly life: “fesoit sa proiere a Nostre Seignor que de quelle hore qu’il Li requeist le trespassement de cest siècle, qu’il li envoiast” (*La Queste* 273, “he besought Our Lord that at the hour of his asking he would grant him release from this life, QHG, 279).

² Revelation 21:16 The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its breadth; and he measured the city with his rod, twelve thousand stadia; its length and breadth and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, a hundred and forty-four cubits by a man’s measure, that is, an angel’s. 18 The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every jewel; ... 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

³ I saw the city beyond the stream,/ Jerusalem the new and fair to behold, Sent down from heaven by power supreme./ The streets were paved with precious gold,/ As flawless pure as glass a gleam, Based on bright gems of worth untold,/ Foundation-stones twelfefold in team;... (*The Pearl* 986-992).

the structure implied the coherence of the spiritual and physical details of the Celestial City.

Medieval conceptions of Paradise were part of the complex system of metaphors that included architectural motifs. [...] The Heavenly Paradise was understood by medieval exegetes as a kind of interpretative force, or standard, that transformed the scriptural events of Christian history into a panorama of sacred symbols, with the New Jerusalem as the edifice that spans all meanings, earthly and spiritual.” (Meyer 171)

Therefore, when reading descriptions of the Heavenly Jerusalem it is important to be aware that the physical details of the architecture have a spiritual significance, in other words there is a correspondence between the material and the transcendental reality. What is specific to *La Queste* is that there are no descriptions of architectural details (like the number of towers of the castles or cities or the size of the yard), and both terms: “city” and “castle” are used as generic names. Nevertheless, concepts, like that of a castle or a city, have hidden significances and they must be interpreted allegorically, not only physically. For instance, the Castle of the Maidens (*La Queste* 46-50, QHG 72-76) is later on referred to as a symbol of Hell, whereas the young maidens stand for the souls of the just which are imprisoned there (QHG, 79, “Par le Chastel as Puceles doiz tu entendre enfer et par les puceles les bones âmes qui a tort i estoient enserrées”, *La Queste* 55).

Moreover, sometimes real events have an unexpected spiritual meaning for the person witnessing them, and it is quite a challenge to be able to interpret (ordinary or extraordinary) occurrences correctly. Such a situation is the tournament witnessed by Lancelot between the knights dressed in white and those wearing black (which may be interpreted as the conflict of the angels with the demons, the fight between virtues and sins, and others). The historicity of the event (which is not a vision, but a conflict with earthly causes and a final outcome) does not preclude its allegorical significance, which is equally real⁴. The interpretation of the tournament itself is elusive, but it is essential to comprehend that all the events happening in the physical reality can and should be associated with the knight’s inner mystical life.

The knights’ desire to fight in tournaments or to joust against any opponent, just because they are bored, is an outrageous misunderstanding of the idea of adventure⁵ during this Quest. This misinterpretation is best exemplified by Lancelot’s first reaction when he approaches the site of the tournament. He thoughtlessly joins the fight and is shamefully defeated (as the black knights lose the fight). Lancelot only understands his error when the significance of the tournament, considered, also, a symbolical representation of the Quest, is explained by the hermit.

Avant ier, le jor de Pentecoste, pristrent li chevalier terrien et li chevalier celestiel un tornoiement ensemble, ce est a dire qu’il comencierent ensemble la Queste. Li

⁴ “Et neporquant sanz faillance nule et sanz point de decevement estoit li tornoicmenz de chevaliers terriens; car assez i avoit greignor senefiance qu’il meismes n’i entendoient” (*La Queste* 143, “The jousting, however, without any question or deception, took place between mortal knights, who themselves were far from realizing its full significance”, QHG, 158).

⁵ Gawain kills Owein the Bastard in such a senseless joust (*La Queste* 153, QHG 168).

Cultural Representations of the City

chevalier qui sont en pechié mortel, ce sont li terrien, et li celestiel, ce sont li vrai chevalier, li peudome qui n'estoient pas ordoié de pechié (*La Queste* 143). The day before yesterday, on the feast of the Pentecost, the earthly knights and the celestial (heavenly) knights engaged in a tournament together, which is to say they all embarked upon the Quest. The earthly knights, being those in mortal sin, and the celestial (heavenly) knights are the true knights, the good (righteous) men who are unsoiled by sin (QHG 159).

Therefore, there is a spiritual battle, materially represented by a clash between competing knights, but those “soiled by sin” see only an ordinary tournament and miss its real significance. At the same time, those who are destined to rejoice in the City of God will understand the profound meaning of such a battle, as well as of other events that occur within this blessed space.

The superior knights are aware that the relevant fight is not with a fellow knight, but rather with their inward weaknesses and with temptations. This inner strive is presented in Augustine’s work as well: as the inhabitants of the City of God do not rest in motionless bliss, but rather there is a continuous spiritual fight to preserve their state of virtuousness. In his *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine shows that being virtuous is a learnt ability and, on the contrary, it is the vice which is inborn and needs to be held in check, by our self-restraint, i.e. “temperance”.

...virtue, which is not among the primary objects of nature, but succeeds to them as the result of learning, though it holds the highest place among human good things, what is its occupation save to wage perpetual war with vices – not those which are outside of us, but within; not other men’s but our own – a war which is waged especially by that virtue [...called] temperance” (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Book 19, chapter IV, 612).

In the 14th-century *Pearl* there is clear boundary between the realm of the Heavenly City and our world, namely death, as no human being can enter it before he or she dies. Nevertheless, in Saint Augustine’s work there is no strict overlapping between the concept of Heaven and the City of God, as the latter is considered to be the community of those who are pious and receive divine revelations, because they dedicate their life to God and have a close relationship with Him.

Saint Augustine’s depiction of the Celestial City does not portray it as an isolated material citadel, situated far away, in a certain location, on the contrary when he talks about the “City of God” he refers to the society of the elect, and the “progress of the city” is actually the history of humanity, recounted from a theological point of view. The final objective of the pious inhabitants of the City of God is, predictably, salvation. In opposition, the “city of the world” (*civitas mundi*) appears as an image of the world that moves towards destruction because of its sins and lack of faith.

In discussing the two cities, Augustine focuses primarily on mankind and its attachment to God – or conversely, to its own, worldly pride. He therefore defines affiliation in either city by the nature of what the individual loves. [...] Augustine is primarily interested in the social interactions of people in the world, in their loves, rather than in God’s love for them. The cities are two distinct entities living side by side in the same human society. ... (Zissell 337)

When trying to identify the Celestial City in *La Queste*, one realises that it is associated with a state of spiritual contemplation, and there are instances when several knights have vivid spiritual revelations at both Corbenic and Sarras, but such divine insight does not always occur in either of these places, and very few of the inhabitants of these two cities have such enlightening experiences. Moreover, the ordinary people who live there are not helped spiritually by the presence of these celestial or mystical knights, who do not disseminate Christian knowledge or preach about the benefits of virtuous life.⁶

The feeling of beatitude is not necessarily associated with a holy city in *La Queste*, because Lancelot feels elated not only when he sees the Holy Grail at Corbenic, but also when he is on the miraculous ship (“Car je voi orendroit mon cuer en si grant joie et en si grant soatume que je ne sai se je sui en terre ou en paradis terrestre”, *La Queste* 247, “My heart is so moved with such great delight and rapture that I do not know whether I am on earth or in the Earthly Paradise”, QHG 254). Perceval, too, experiences the same sentiment of happiness, when he is a prisoner in Sarras and is fed by the Holy Grail daily. However, this emotion is similar with what he feels when he talks to the wise man coming on the white-sailed ship, “Si li plaist tant sa compaignie que s’il ert toz jorz avec lui ne li prendroit il talent ne de boivre ne de mengier, tant li sont ses paroles douces et plesanz”, (*La Queste* 101, “He takes such a delight in his [the wise man’s] company that had their converse been prolonged for ever, he would have had no wish for meat or drink, so sweet and so refreshing were the words he heard”, QHG 120-121). So the state of harmony and/or bliss is not strictly associated with either Corbenic or Saras, but rather these are just two of the locations that welcome the divine presence and the blessings that accompanied the Grail.

An important feature of the City of God is the interdiction imposed on the sinful people, who are not allowed in there, a fact emphasised by many writers including Saint Augustine⁷. Such a moment of exclusion from the divine secrets occurs at Corbenic, when, at the hour of the vespers, the divine voice orders King Pellés and his dependants, to leave the hall, since it is the moment when the true knights will be fed with food from heaven, i.e. the Grail will be revealed to the twelve knights. Another instance of interdiction that occurs at Corbenic is the exclusion of Hector, Lancelot’s brother, who arrives at the gates of Corbenic and is not allowed to enter. Nevertheless, since the Grail is not always present at Corbenic, these interdictions are also temporary.

A remarkable fact about Camelot is that the Holy Grail feeds the knights without exception, and there is no exclusion, since all Arthurian knights are called to join the Quest. On the other hand, the descent of the Holy Grail at the Round Table

⁶ At the same time it seems that all clerics (priests and hermits) are aware of who Galahad is (the best knight in the world and the one who will fulfil the Quest) and also of what must be done by the other knights in order to be able to accomplish this journey. So all those who want to embark on this spiritual journey have all the information they might need in order to accomplish it.

⁷ In Book 21, chapter 27, Saint Augustine mentions the fact that those who do not stop from doing a sin, and will persist in committing it, will not be forgiven, and thus will not enter The Kingdom of Heaven.

actually signals the dissolution of the elevated community at the royal court, because the knights abandon King Arthur and his wondrous Round Table in order to pursue the elusive Holy Grail. The image of Sarras is built almost in contrast to Camelot, as only the three successful questers can participate in the state of bliss brought about by the descent of the Holy Grail, while all the other people living in Sarras are excluded. Since the city as a whole cannot be a representation of the City of God, it seems necessary to focus on parts of the city, like the castle with its chapel and the churches of the city.

Symbolic Approaches to the Physical Space – the Castle and the Church – Focal Points of the Medieval City

Soon after the Norman Conquest a castle was built in many of the important cities or in other locations which needed to be controlled by the conquerors (it is the case of London, York – Clifford's Tower, Exeter – where Rougemont Castle was built – and others). The urban castles were originally royal, in most of the cases, and they were meant to be the new military and administrative centres of the cities.⁸ Quite often in an attempt to reorganize the structure of the cities, the Normans or the bishops appointed by them, built cathedrals or enlarged (i.e. remodelled) the old ones (in Norwich, Rochester, York, and others). Thus, in many cities, people gravitated between these two centres: the spiritual one symbolically represented by the cathedral (or an important abbey, if the city was not an episcopal see) and the political one, whose sign was the castle.

In several cities which were episcopal sees, the bishop was sometimes influent enough to have authority over the newly built castle (which implied he was given both military and administrative powers). In these situations the cathedral was close to the castle (the ruins of the Old Sarum Cathedral are in the circular outer bailey of the former castle, and in Rochester, the cathedral faces the castle). Therefore, the castle as well as the cathedral (if there was one in the city) and the churches were the city's representative buildings:

“In any medieval city the scale of its church building is a rough measure of its wealth and prosperity... Panoramic drawings and engravings, which began to multiply toward the end of the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, depicted the churches prominently, even exaggerating their scale and allowing them to dominate the urban landscape.” (Pounds, 88)

I have showed in the precedent chapter that the heavenly Jerusalem is often described with many physical details. These earthly attributes (rigorously measured walls, twelve pearly gates and foundations made of precious stones) offer a certain amount of physicality to the Heavenly Jerusalem and projects it in the real world, a fact which suggests the possibility of a direct interaction between our material world and the spiritual Celestial City. “Therefore a squared built form provided a link between heaven and earth: a sacred geometry that gave new towns a symbolic

⁸ Alternatively, a town was built to provide support for a castle or simply grew around a castle or a monastery. The town is, in such instances, designed according to a regular, well-arranged plan.

purpose” (Lilley 53) In other words, designers of ordinary cities tried to emulate heavenly harmony.

On occasion, even the streets were built following a regular arrangement, with right angles.⁹ It has been noticed that, although in the 11th century many streets were straight, they did not have an orthogonal design, but “by the end of the 13th century there were new towns to be found all over Europe with layouts that are highly regular in form and perfect in their geometrical arrangements of streets and plots. These are towns of truly orthogonal form, with ruler-straight streets and street blocks and right-angled corners” (Lilley, 63). These harmonious cities were material representation of a well-proportioned Celestial City which was populated, but not crowded, and bright, but not ostentatious.

Very often, the main axis of the city had the castle and the cathedral at its ends, and each had an important role in the prosperity of the area. Whereas the cathedral (or an urban influential abbey) organised the religious life of the city, the castle usually was its political centre, and it was a source of both prosperity and oppression for the town. The presence of a castle could mean more trade for the town’s workshops and even a more significant status for the town. It can be said that “many towns and cities depended on the castle for their trade, their markets and their arts and crafts. This was a constant feature of the landscape: the castle relying on the city, the city depending on the castle” (Warnke 41). This conventional situation, when the townsfolk need the castle, or rather the knights who live there, in order to protect them from enemies can be found in *La Queste*, too. The citizens are very grateful when Bors, who is a guest in the castle, saves the lady who is the rightful heiress of the lands from her greedy evil sister (*La Queste* 172-173).

Conversely, a ruthless baron could demand submission from the surrounding area and he might want to influence directly the political and economic affairs of the town (or towns) depending on him. Such a demand might be resented by the citizens especially when the prosperity of the town is threatened. In *La Queste*, there are some instances when the inhabitants of the castle are oppressive towards the city, for instance Galahad is guided by a divine voice and he goes and saves the people from the tyranny of the seven evil brothers, who have conquered the castle (The Castle of the Maidens).

Galahad defeats the evil and illegitimate rulers in battle and they run, but after being given the keys of the castle, he is required to stay and organise those who depended on the castle. “Nos volons, fet la damoisele, que vos mandez les chevaliers et les vavasors de ci entor, [...] et lor fêtes jurer, [...], que ja mes ne maintendront ceste costume”. (*La Queste*, 49, “We would have you summon the knights and vassals of the locality [...] and make them swear that they will not revert to that evil custom again”, QHG 74). The priest also tells him about the beginning of the seven brothers’ tyranny, showing how they have been able to subjugate the entire area.¹⁰

⁹ It is the case of the towns which were built in order to support a castle in a hostile area and to supply it with servants or the necessary goods, from the market, etc. Conwy, in Wales is such an example.

¹⁰“Et quant li frere orent ce fet, si pristrent tout le tresor de laiencz et mandèrent chevaliers et serjanz et comencierent la guerre contre çaux de cest país. Et tant firent que il les mistrent au

Noticeably, no conflict is presented in any of these three cities under discussion and the relationship between the inhabitants of the castle and the townsfolk, is not tense. Moreover, while the Heavenly Jerusalem acquires in many descriptions a certain materiality, the readers perceive the opposite process in *La Queste*, as the cities mentioned in the text lack any physical description of material elements related to a conventional city as it has been described in this chapter. There is no depiction of workshops, trade or other urban traditional activities, in the proximity of any of these castles. Such an omission might emphasise the symbolic significance of these cities, which appear to be only ideal projections. Nonetheless, another reason may be suggested: the desire to highlight the actions of the noble knights, who are able to pursue a spiritual path, to the exclusion of the middle class inhabitants, who are not given this opportunity. Nevertheless, this emphasis does not deny the existence of cities that complemented the castles, since prosperous castles, bustling with inhabitants and glad to receive guests, cannot survive in isolation.

So Camelot and Corbenic have associated cities, as well as Sarras, although the actions of their inhabitants are rarely mentioned. In Sarras, the citizens (“cil de la cité”) are only visible when they arrest the three protagonists (at their lord’s request) and later on when they compel Galahad to be their king, obeying the divine voice they have heard. So it seems that the citizens are, most of the time, spiritually irrelevant.

In *La Queste* the city of Sarras is repeatedly described as a spiritual palace¹¹, because of its history, namely the fact that Josephus (son of Joseph of Arimathea) was ordained bishop in that city. Galahad is sent together with Perceval and Bors to “la cité de Sarras, ou pales esperitel” (*La Queste* 271). This trip is prompted by the fact that the Grail must “leave the kingdom of Logres this same night (“cest saint Vessel [...] anuit se partira dou roïaume de Logres en tel manière que ja mes n'i sera veuz, is ne des or mes n'en avendra aventure”, *La Queste* 271) “and neither it, nor the adventures it gave rise to, shall ever more be seen there” (QHG 276). This harsh sentence, which impedes Corbenic from ever enjoying the blessings of the Holy Grail, is due to the people’s insensibility to it. The city of Corbenic is unworthy because the citizens “n'i est mie serviz ne honorez a son droit” (*La Queste* 271, “neither serve, nor honour it as it is its due”, QHG 276-277), and this confirms the fact that Corbenic is dimmed spiritually unsuitable for such grace. The knights hear this judgement from the Saviour Himself when, at Corbenic, He talks directly to them. Unfortunately the past glory of Sarras cannot be witnessed in the present state of the city, as the citizens are equally insensitive to and unmoved by the presence of the Holy Grail in their midst. Therefore the Holy Grail is taken away from the city of Sarras, too, when Galahad’s soul ascends to Heaven. Both cities are discarded, one by one, as possible locations for a continuous revelation of the Holy Grail, and thus for being representations of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

desoz et reçurent lor fiez d'aux.” (*La Queste* 50) “Having done this much, the brothers proceeded to seize the castle treasure, summoning knights and foot-soldiers, set about waging war on the neighbouring lords, till they forced them all to submit and become their vassals” (QHG 75).

¹¹ *La Queste*, 268, 271, 275.

Camelot is regarded as a place where the earthly knights can display their prowess and consequently as a symbol of terrestrial glory. Its heavenly dimension is only visible when miracles occur (the sword taken from the floating stone or the descent of the Holy Grail). Nonetheless, these marvels, although expected¹², cannot bestow an enduring spiritual significance upon Camelot, as they are the inherently connected with the one who triggers them, namely Galahad. It is his presence at the royal court which triggers some “adventures” and gives meaning to them, and he makes this very clear when he asserts that the adventure of the floating stone is not “theirs”, i.e. the other Arthurian knights’, to fulfil.¹³ King Arthur, himself, confesses the limitations of the other knights and the fact that Galahad’s presence was necessary in order “que vos parfaçoiz ce que li autre ne porent onques mener afin” (*La Queste* 11, “to bring to conclusion all those things that no other was ever able to resolve”¹⁴, OHG 40). King Arthur’s words point out to a startling theory, namely that an ideal world is not a place where unexplained events occur, but rather a place where people can lead a serene and peaceful existence, which is only possible, if they have strong and direct connections with God.

In the chapels of Corbenic and Sarras castles, great miracles happen, and only those most pure and elect can witness them, but neither of these places can be considered a valid representation of the Celestial City, because their influence is limited and does not radiate outside their walls. The citizens living outside these castles are not spiritually affected by the presence of the Holy Grail or inspired towards religious devotion by the three knights’ prayers. The conclusion is that none of these three cities can be a credible portrayal of the City of God, and neither their elements, the castles or the chapels in the castles can be regarded as depictions of the Celestial City so what remains to identify is whether the text supports such a representation in a different area.

Alternative Locations for the City of God

When trying to identify where or what is the representation of the City of God as it appears in *La Queste*, one can assert that it is firstly condensed in the areas

¹² Kay, the steward, points out which is “la costume de ceanz” (*La Queste* 5, “the custom of the court”): “vos a haute feste n'asseiez a table devant que aucune aventure fust en vostre cort avenue”, (*La Queste* 5), “On feast-days we have never seen you seat yourself at table before some adventure has befallen the court” (QHG 34).

¹³ Sire, fet Galaad, ce n'est mie de merveille, car l'aventure estoit moie, si n'ert pas lor (*La Queste* 12, Sire, said Galahad that is not to be wondered at, for the adventure was not theirs, but mine, QHG 41).

¹⁴Gawain is also aware of this fact, namely that Galahad is inherently connected with miracles (supernatural occurrences) that have taken place in the realm and which are perceived as something negative. More than this, Galahad is expected to rid the land of these enchantments: “Sire, fet messires Gauvain, et vos et nos le devons servir come celui que Diex nos a envoie por délivrer nostre pais des granz merveilles et des estranges aventures qui tant sovent i sont avenues par si lonc tens”. (*La Queste* 11; Sire, said Gawain [addressing King Arthur], both you and we should serve him as one sent by God to free our country from the enchantments and the strange events that have troubled it so often and so long; QHG 40)

surrounding the Holy Grail. Although, apparently, only the three Grail-finders rejoice (repeatedly) in its presence, and, therefore, they are undoubtedly inhabitants of the City of God, there are hints that other knights may also belong to the Heavenly City. The nine knights that join the three successful questers at Corbenic, as well as Lancelot may some of these fortunate seekers.¹⁵ On their way, they listen to the wisdom of hermits, which they find in remote areas, and never in the cities. Sometimes they change their behaviour and even their thoughts¹⁶ to conform to the religious precepts, which are explained by these priests and/or hermits. Since the City of God cannot be found in important cities, it is possible to identify it in less significant locations.

The spiritual dimension of smaller towns is represented by churches and priories and, usually, there is a close connection between the castle and the religious community. The most frequent situation is the one when the lord of a castle founds a priory at the same time with the foundation of the castle. It is the case of Thetford (Norfolk), Lewes (Sussex), Kenilworth (Warwickshire) and many others. Therefore, very often the structure of a medieval town grew around two centres: the castle and the religious house.

As I have pointed out, the map of *La Queste* is studded with monasteries (which are not, related to any castles, tough). Regardless of the importance of the castle chapels, as places where the Holy Grail is revealed, the questers learn spiritual lessons and find out most of the information about the Grail in monasteries, which are situated outside cities, in the wilderness.

Although this analysis shows that the Celestial City cannot be restricted to a certain location, but rather it is a spiritual state, the celebration of the liturgy is a moment when its presence is felt in a physical space, by the Christians attending the ceremony. This happens at Corbenic and Sarras, when different knights (Lancelot, Galahad, etc) witness the miracles of the Holy Grail, and are deeply moved by them. Such a moment of emotional outburst occurs also at the monastery when Bors “comence a plorer trop durement” (*La Queste* 167, “bursts into heavy tears”, QHG 167) when he is shown the Host.

The only way questers are allowed to participate, in actual fact, in the Adventures of the Holy Grail is through confession, as the hermit explains to Bors (*La Queste* 164-166). Once a knight undergoes this ritual, he becomes *chevalier Jhesucrist* (*La Queste* 163, 275, etc) and is granted the chance to move in this blessed world, but it does not mean that he cannot regress. Those few, who are given this pious opportunity, might miss it, just like Melias, who, when faced with a challenge at the crossroad, makes a wrong choice, and is left behind when Galahad moves towards his goal.

The knights’ sinfulness bars them from having any contact with the world of the virtuous and perhaps the most obvious situation is Lancelot’s immobility when he finds the Grail without having confessed his sins. Lancelot arrives at a chapel, which seems deserted, and falls in a trance-like sleep so he can only witness, unable to react, the healing of the young knight when the Holy Grail descends. It is one of the instances

¹⁵ However, after the ending of the Quest, Lancelot will fall into carnal temptation again.

¹⁶ Lancelot is perhaps the best example of such a change, but also Perceval becomes more mature spiritually.

when the Holy Grail appears in the *gaste lande* (*La Queste* 57), and Lancelot sees it, after he tries (and fails) to follow Galahad. So the main feature of this *gaste land* is isolation rather than emptiness or desolation and it can be associated with the Christian wilderness rather than with barren, waste land.

Furthermore, even when the presence of the Grail is not felt, the knowledge about it is acquired in the monasteries situated in the wilderness. The dwellers of hermitages or monasteries/nunneries are the preservers and conveyers of most of the information about everything related to the Adventures of the Holy Grail including the identity of Galahad. Such a preference for the solitude of natural environment is not unexpected in Christian mentality.

In its origin Christianity was an urban faith. It was borne by its earliest missionaries from city to city... And yet Christianity always had a certain affinity with wastelands and solitary places. The wilderness was where Christians went for contemplation and spiritual refreshment. (Pound, 85)

The presence of Christ in the chalice at Corbenic Castle seems to be a climax of the miraculous manifestations in this place, and He also announces the ending of the period of time when the Holy Grail has been seen at Corbenic castle, as it will leave the “roiaume de Logres” (The Kingdom of Logres) for ever. But Jesus Christ also appears in a chapel in the wilderness. The three successful questers notice and follow a stag (*cerf*) who is accompanied by four lions, and once arriving at a chapel, they all change their appearance, and he becomes Jesus Christ and is surrounded by an ox, a lion, an angel and an eagle (the symbols of the four evangelists). The priest celebrating the liturgy cannot see this transformation, but when he is asked about the significance of this marvel, he comments and explains it, as he has the theoretical knowledge to do so (*La Queste* 234-236). Unsurprisingly, he also states that this event will not occur again, as if the intervention of the three questers stops such extraordinary incidents, too. Completing the Quest also implies the ending of such divine visions, which were meant to guide the questers on the right path.

“li Hauz Sires, en cest païs et en maintes terres, mostré as preudomes et as chevaliers en tel semblance come de cerf et en tel compaignie come de quatre lyons, por ce que cil qui le veissent i preissent essample. Mes bien sachiez que des or en avant ne sera nus qui en tel semblance le voie nule foiz. (*La Queste*, 236) “The most high Lord has shown Himself in this and other lands of good men and to knights in the same likeness of a Hart and escorted by the same four lions, so that those who saw might draw a lesson from it. Be assured, though that from this day on none shall see Him in that guise again” (QHG, 245).

When comparing the positions and roles played by the physical city/castle and wilderness in *La Queste*, the conclusion is that there is no opposition between them, but rather complementarity. The Quest started in Camelot – a city (and castle) – and ended in Sarras – a city (and castle). In between lies the blessed wilderness which is the background for the Adventures of the Holy Grail.

In an attempt to identify the configuration of the City of God, one has to focus on the relationship of the characters with God, as well as on the spiritual connections

between them. The clerical advisers of the knights are in an implicit communion with God, since they can reveal the meaning of the cryptic dream-visions the knights have received, as well as the fate reserved for the knights they talk to. There is a serenity that characterises some of these people, as if they already live in the proximity of God. Perceval's aunt is such an example.

There are also instances when men resembling angels appear to guide the protagonists (the white knight who offers the shield to Galahad, or the wise man in the white-sailed boat who converses with Perceval). Their presence is restricted to isolated places and they do not interact with other mortals (the white knight tells the squire that He will only tell the story to Galahad and the squire can listen if he wants, and equally the wise man dressed in white talks only to Perceval). As they appear to be inhabitants of the Celestial City, it may be said that the Celestial City is located in the wilderness, which is inhabited by people doing the will of God rather than in any actual city, regardless of the presence of the Grail in the castle chapels.

After Galahad's death, or perhaps one should say, his ascend into Heavens, the remaining two protagonists live for a time in a hermitage, outside the city. "Perceval se rendi en un bermitage defors la cité, si prist dras de religion" (*La Queste* 279). So they have to leave the city of Sarras (holy or not), in order to be able to pursue their religious vocation. After Perceval's death, Bors, who, unlike Perceval, does not become a monk, goes to Camelot to tell the story of their adventures. His actions show that not only the hermits, but also the inhabitants of cities are beneficiaries and preservers of spiritual knowledge. The adventures of the Grail are important for the spiritual progress of people, but those living in the city are unable to experience the mystical ascent to heaven, so they can only be informed about this sublime reality.

The first important conclusion is that in *La Queste* there is no description of the cities as a group of dwellings where ordinary citizens live, pursuing mundane activities. It is as if the world of *La Queste* is a wilderness (forests, islands, etc.) dotted with monasteries, priories or hermitages. A few castles with adjacent town-cities are mentioned, either led by vicious rulers or blessed with saintly monarchs and sometimes the Grail appears in the chapels of castles, but it can also be found in the chapels in the wilderness.

Secondly, the world of *La Queste* in its entirety can be considered to be a blessed space, as all the adventures of the Grail have a spiritual nature and all the pure knights interact harmoniously with each other and with the hermits, anticipating the serene existence in the Kingdom of God. At the same time, the physical space is populated with spiritually inferior knights, who are incapable of experiencing these adventures, and are blind to them. This inability to perceive the miracles is a type of exclusion, as they are not citizens of the City of God.

Thirdly, the Heavenly Jerusalem is not taken as a model for any of the castle-cities represented in *La Queste*, but rather some protagonists find in two of these places (Corbenic and Sarras) a state of religious ecstasy. However, this is an individual occurrence and it is not shared with the others, regardless of their spiritual level. Not even the three protagonists, Galahad, Perceval and Bors feel any genuine bonding; although they all live in the presence of the Holy Grail, they do not share thoughts, emotions, but rather they internalise the incidents separately and in a distinctive and personal way, and this is why there is a different outcome in each of their cases. The

area which might share some features with the Celestial City is the wilderness, or, more precisely, the chapels that can be found there, either in the monasteries or solitary in the wasteland.

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