



# The Community of the Round Table

## *Celtic Tradition – Britain and France*

Arthur had been silent for a long time as he watched, with a reflective half-smile, the knights and ladies gathered in the great hall of Camelot. He enjoyed the meetings of the Round Table community, especially the annual Pentecost meetings, when all the members, scattered throughout the known world, came to Britain to renew their bonds and vows of fellowship. The great hall was filled with an impressive variety of people with their individual demeanours and traditional garments, each following the fashion of their countries of origin. There were women wearing high and low headdresses, men exhibiting large moustaches, some with long beards, others with short beards, a few clean shaven, all according to the customs of their respective kingdoms.

The music of violas and flutes filled the hall, but it did not silence the rumble of the conversations, peppered here and there with laughter and loud guffaws. To Arthur's right sat Queen Guinevere, his wife, who seemed to be cleaning a wine stain on her dress with the help of Cunneware of Lalande, a well-known lady of the court. To his left, on the other side of the Siege Perilous (always remaining empty waiting for the arrival of the finest knight of all time), sat the invincible Lancelot and his step-brother, Ector of Maris. Roars of thunderous laughter came from this group when Sir Dinadan arrived always ready with a joke for the enjoyment of the comrades.

Arthur thought that the Round Table had always been a blessing, not only for the good of his kingdom, but also throughout his life. The atmosphere of companionship and true fellowship which pervaded the mood around the table was always a relief, an escape for his

government obligations. It was an environment of pleasant emotions and joyful feelings which made him feel truly alive. Here he could recover and relax for a while in this humble place of being one among his friends, instead of being the sovereign of one of the most powerful kingdoms in Europe.

And the Round Table was precisely like that. It was round so that none of those gathered there could occupy a special or prominent place among all their companions. Here, everyone had equal status. At the Round Table, no one was excluded and everyone sat there, shoulder to shoulder, regardless of their social status, race or religion.

Arthur remembered the day when the immense table, at which 150 people could sit, arrived at Camelot. It was the wedding present from Guinevere's father, King Leodegrance of Cameliard. Previously it had been given to him by Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon, at the suggestion of sage Merlin. Merlin, to whom some attributed magical powers, had been the principal of his father's counsellors and, subsequently, after Uther's death, also his own. Arthur remembered Merlin's words when the table came from Cameliard:

'This table is round because of the roundness of the world and the spheres of the planets and the elements of the sky,' the sage had said. 'The Round Table is a symbol of the world and, beyond that, a symbol of unity.'

Merlin had told Arthur that the table would be crucial throughout his reign, that at it he should gather the best, purest and noblest knights of the world. He also advised that Christian baptism should not be a requirement to be part of this esteemed fellowship, and proposed a vow by which all knights were expected to swear an ethical code about attitude and behaviour. This had to be reconfirmed annually at the May meeting, at Pentecost, by each member of the Table.

According to this vow, the knights would never fight against, or among, themselves, except for love or in those traditional tournaments which took place periodically. They committed to exemplary behaviour, straightening any perpetrated injustice of which they might have knowledge. They pledged to defend women, children and the elderly, making themselves the supporters of the weak in the face of the powerful, avoiding violence whenever possible. They also vowed to be

merciful to all those vanquished who asked for forgiveness, and never fight for an unjust cause, even if it was for love or profit.

In this way, the knights of the Round Table became a powerful force guaranteeing social order and ensuring peace, but always in a measured way, with moderation, trying to avoid unnecessary violence in a time when violence was part and parcel of daily life. With those first knights –kings, princes, nobles and knights from other countries had not yet arrived– Arthur managed to establish a lasting peace throughout his lands. And so, he brought abundance to his kingdom. Over the years, the crops increased their yield, because they had not been destroyed and replanted after the successive wars of the past. The forests grew and were not chopped down in order to build siege towers and weapons like catapults, spears or shields. Furthermore, the people in the towns and cities of Logres kept their lands of labour and businesses without having to start from scratch whenever a war had devastated the region. The kingdom of Logres flourished, and its people felt happy.

Thus, mature and young knights from all corners of the British Isles assembled. They included Sir Lucan and Kay –Arthur’s foster brother and Seneschal– and the old knights –some of whom had served with his father, such as Ulfius, Brastias, Baudwin, Pellinore of the Islands, Uriens of Gore or Ector, his adoptive father. Knights like the Irish Marhaus and Mador de la Porte, the Welsh Bedivere and Lamorak, the incomparable Tristan from Cornwall, and the ever present Scots Gawain, Gareth and Gaheris, sons of Loth, king of Lothian, Orkney and Norway also joined the fellowship.

At first Arthur believed that the Round Table would be a means by which he could ensure the loyalty of the best knights of his kingdom against the threats from other kingdoms. It would also be a way to win the favour of noble warriors from other parts of the world, warriors who, in other circumstances, he would have hired as mercenaries. But Merlin made him see that such a perception was wrong by explaining to him that the Round Table was an instrument of peace, not war. Its peace would not be derived from the dissuasive power of the knights gathered around it, but from the power of friendship and fellowship. Over time, Arthur ended up understanding the meaning of Merlin’s wise words.

Following the first years of his reign, Arthur began to invite honourable and just kings and princes to be part of the Round Table. He even invited those kings who he had opposed and sometimes quarrelled with in the past and who, after signing a peace treaty, and noting that they were noble men of good will, had gladly accepted to join the increasingly prestigious gathering. The Round Table might have had the appearance of a warriors' table, but in reality it was a table of peace. Importantly, it was one at which kings, princes and nobles who, in other circumstances would have fought and waged wars against each other, would sit together getting to know each other, linked to each other, thus preventing future conflicts between them.

What better way to bring all these men together than by making them eat and drink side by side, laughing, joking and making fun of each other at this magnificent table?

And when, despite all this camaraderie, some disagreement arose between neighbouring kings, instead of resolving their disputes independently in accordance with their own rules, they discussed their differences at the Table face to face. In this way, the rest of the fellow kings, princes and knights acted as mediators.

This was how Arthur's peace spread throughout Britain and the islands, even beyond the channel. It was a prolonged period of peace, which made Arthur finally understand, after many years of having established the fellowship, the subtle role that this immense wooden table was fulfilling.

Shortly afterwards, when the virtues of Arthur's kingdom and the prestige of his courageous fraternity began to spread throughout Europe, knights and nobles from other countries and regions of the world began to arrive. Among them, Sir Urre of Hungary, the Danish Melias de Lile, the Greek Cligès, or the Constantinopolitan Segramore le Desirous; and, above all, a true army of Gauls, with Bors and Bleoberis of Ganis, Sir Lionel, and the great Lancelot du Lake at the head. There were even knights who had other beliefs and worshiped other gods, including the Saracens Palomides, Safere and Segwarides, the Saracen from Tuscany Priamus, or the African pagan Feirefiz, king of Zazamanc, who was half black and half white, because he was son of Queen Belakane of Zazamanc and the Frank Gahmuret d'Anjou. It was only

then that Arthur understood Merlin's dictate that Christian baptism should not be a requirement for those wanting to be part of the community.

The idea that no one should be excluded from the Round Table also led Arthur to integrate into the fraternity people who, in another time, could never have aspired to be part of such a prestigious society. Thus, the Scot Sir Fergus, who had been a peasant, and Sir Tor, the son of a shepherd, received Arthur's accolade and became part of the egregious table. Sir Segramore, who suffered from epileptic seizures was welcomed. And there was Sir Evadeam, known as the Dwarf Knight, whom Arthur conferred knighthood much to the amusement of the fellowship, only to end up ashaming them all with his heroic feats. Other members of the fellowship were Sir Ginglain, son of a fairy, and the astute and provocative Sir Dinadan who, being a magnificent knight, questioned the conventions of chivalry with his jokes, liking the company of the most beautiful of his comrades, and not hiding his rejection of female love.

Finally, the words 'No one should be excluded' led Arthur to realise that he had forgotten the most important people in his kingdom and in the world: women! He deemed that they should also be part of the Round Table, they could not be excluded, and that their presence would greatly enhance the concept of the Round Table, changing it from just being a society of armed man. In times of peace, it was not weapons that should prevail.

And so, in addition to Queen Guinevere, Arthur's wife, the Round Table would also host many women of proven wit and insight, who were able to offer wise advice and skilfully mediate conflicts. These women included the ladies Elaine of Astolat and Cunneware of Lalande; Guinevak, the sister of Guinevere; Evaine, mother of Bors and Lancelot's aunt; the wise and learned Morgan le Fay, Arthur's stepsister; the black-skinned pagan Ekuba, queen of Janfuse, in Africa, a woman of immense good sense; as well as young ladies and maidens like the sisters Lyonesse and Lynette; Laudine, the Lady of the Fountain; Elaine the Younger, Gawain's sister and Loth's daughter; and Morfydd, twin sister of Sir Owain. Over time, other women of very different ages also joined them. Among them, the unparalleled

Dindrane, the young Itonje and her mother, Queen Sangive, and the beautiful, sharp and powerful Duchess Orgeluse de Logroys.

With the inclusion of all of these women, the Round Table had perfected its capabilities as the instrument of peace, in line with Merlin's recommendations.

'Women have a quick wit and an innate intelligence to conserve, recover and mend relationships,' Arthur thought as he looked at the women scattered around the circle of the Table. 'Their exquisite care to avoid hurting feelings and their attention to the nuances of relationships, bonds and links between people, make them indispensable in aiming to resolve conflicts and maintain peace and harmony.'

With these women, the Round Table reached its maximum level of splendour. This community of men and women had transformed the social contract of their time, based on independence. Through them it became an affective bond based on interdependence, a true fellowship in which everyone was willing to do their best for everyone else. The equality among its members, including the king, had worked the miracle. This was to the extent that the members of the table said that, although they had hardly had any dealings with a number of their fellows, the affection they felt for each other was so deep that only death could separate them.

The Round Table exerted an enormous gravitational force on all its members, to the point that many knights and ladies from distant lands had chosen to move from their residences and bring their families to Camelot, in order to be able to more often enjoy the company of the noble community.

'Those who sit around this table will no longer want to return to their own lands or leave this place,' old Merlin had told Arthur many years before.

Arthur lost his half smile, head bowed.

'Oh, Merlin, my good Merlin!' he lamented to himself. 'What became of you, my good friend?'

Yes, the king missed his old friend and counsellor very much. Unfortunately, it was a woman who took away his most powerful support in the government of Logres, given that the celebrated magician disappeared following the steps of Nimue, the Lady of the Lake.

‘Love has no age,’ Arthur thought. ‘Who knows if his passion for this woman cost him his life ... And now the good of Merlin is not in this world, but in the world of dreams.’

Yes, Merlin and many other good knights had passed away, and the painful memory of those friends was always with Arthur on those occasions when the community of the Round Table met. But he knew that he could not let himself be carried away by his feelings, nor should he engulf himself too much in grief and the nostalgic memory of those who were no longer there, when he could enjoy, here and now, the presence of so many good friends. And there, before his eyes, they all sat.

The music of violas and flutes continued flooding the hall with their harmonious sounds and knights and ladies continued to talk and laugh while waiting for an adventure. This is because, at the Table, there was the custom of not starting the meal until a memorable event had taken place. And this because the recounting of adventures was one of the main distractions on the Table.

As Merlin had advised Arthur, for the kingdom to work, the knights had to take responsibility for themselves. That was why he established a rule which stated that, whenever a knight left on any quest he had to swear, before departing, that on his return, he would tell with honesty, and in detail, what happened to him. This would have to be truthful, whether it covered him with honour or, on the other hand, with shame. This custom would help Arthur to differentiate the good knights from the bad, the honest, noble and loyal ones from the dishonest and devious, thus purging the Round Table of any corrupting elements. From all those accounts countless stories would eventually emerge telling of the amazing deeds and feats of the Knights of the Round Table. Arthur always made sure that his bard carefully memorised all those adventures.

‘Perhaps all these deeds and events will be related in the future when our existence is no more than a memory, and I hope it is

pleasant,' the king reflected. 'I hope that this esteemed assembly will inspire future generations.'

Arthur never forgot what Merlin had once said to him, while from the battlements of Camelot, they looked out over the green meadows of the surrounding countryside bathed in the evening sun.

'Sir, your Round Table, however large and prestigious it may be,' he had said letting his gaze slide to the horizon, 'is just the prefiguration of another much larger and honourable table that will be established in a distant future. This will be when the noblest and purest people of all the races of the known world, and of another world that is not yet known, will congregate, as here, around another round table to form a great fellowship. Then, war will become a tragic memory of the past, and the human race will reach the status of the gods.'

Arthur had always remembered these words. In fact, he did not want to forget them.

'We must not forget the utopias,' he muttered to himself, 'for utopias mark the horizon towards which we must direct our mounts.'

Suddenly, Arthur abandoned his quiet reflections and thoughts. Something was happening in the vicinity of the main door of Camelot's great hall. The loud conversations and laughter had waned. This might be the first sign that there was going to be an adventure.

Looking beyond Lancelot, Ector and Dinadan, who had also fallen silent and now looking towards the door, Arthur saw that a corridor had opened between the congregation in order to let in a page. This page was holding, by the hand, a handsome young man dressed as a jester.

'God save you, my Lord! God save you, my Lady!' said the newcomer, dropping to the ground on one knee. 'My mother insisted that I should greet you both separately, and she also told me to greet those who, because of their great fame and nobility, are sitting around the Round Table.'

And, without waiting for the King's greeting, he continued:

'At the entrance to this castle I found a knight dressed completely in red who, it seems, wants to fight, claiming strange rights over your



kingdom. He has also asked me to tell you that he is sorry for having spilled the Queen's wine,' he added, looking at Guinevere. 'If you allow me, I am willing to confront him myself. In return, and if I am successful, I beg you to allow me to keep his armour, which is magnificent, and also that you grant me the honours of a knight.'

Arthur marvelled at the young man's boldness. However, he feared for the young man's life, foreseeing his inexperience with weapons. The King was completely unaware that he had just met the beautiful Parzival, the son of Gahmuret d'Anjou and Queen Herzeloide, the knight who would end the Quest for the Holy Grail and win the right to sit in the Siege Perilous, the vacant seat at the Round Table.

But that's another story. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2016).

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## Comments

I understand that this is quite a long and complex version of this story. However, I wished to provide a complete version of the story so that it would be best able to transmit its particular set of values, values that represent an extensive range of the principles of the Earth Charter.

As I hope you have seen, this story illustrates the diverse, transcultural and inclusive character advocated by this point of the Charter, particularly those which point to the joint work in equality of all the components of the Table. This is from the beginning a symbol of the world in the medieval texts themselves. An interesting work in this regard is offered by Bloch (1980).

When I made a content analysis of this story, it met **all** the categories of complex-systems thinking and **all** the categories of the values and principles of the Earth Charter, making it one of the most useful stories in the collection.

The version presented here brings together elements from a number of different stories from the Arthuric Cycle in which the Round

Table and its community are mentioned. It draws on material that dates back to Wace (1155), who was the first to mention the table. I have limited myself to highlighting those details that exist in the medieval texts which I judged to have the greatest resonance with our own historical context. Finally, I have connected this brief episode of Arthur's court with the scene of the Parzival myth in which the hero appears for the first time before Arthur, as in Wolfram von Eschenbach's (1999) adaptation.

It is also Wolfram von Eschenbach's version that specifies women also sat around the Round Table. All the characters named here appear in some version of the Arthurian myths and have the characteristics I have emphasised here.

### Sources

- Bloch, R. H. (1980). Wasteland and Round Table: The historical significance of myths of dearth and plenty in old French romance. *New Literary Story*, 11(2), 255-276.
- Eschenbach, W. von (1999). *Parzival*. Madrid: Ediciones Siruela.
- Malory, T. (1986). *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Vols. 1 and 2. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Classics.

### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

The Way Forward: Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision. We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must

join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.

Principle 13: Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.

Principle 16: Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

Principle 16a: Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

Principle 16f: Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

