



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree in European,
American and Postcolonial Language
and Literature

Joint Master's Programme in English and
American Studies

Final Thesis

**“But There
Might None
Prevail:”**

The Sword in the Stone
and its Narrative Forebears

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Marina Buzzoni

Second Reader

Ch. Prof. Gabriele Knappe
Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg

Graduand

Lisa Dal Monte
867807

Academic Year

2022 / 2023

Abstract

The sword in the stone is nowadays a fundamental part of the tale of King Arthur, and as a narreme it has enjoyed tremendous popularity in retellings of the Arthurian matter, both on page and on screen. This fortunate 13th-century addition to the matter of the Once and Future King has sparked scholarly curiosity, and drastically differing hypotheses have been formulated as to its origin, even very recently. This thesis will compare and contrast Francesco Marzella's 2022 study, which suggests a Scandinavian origin for the sword trial narreme, and Alexandre Micha's earlier theory connecting it to French chivalric literature and heroic narratives of Ancient Rome. The Arthurian sword trial, along with the analogues proposed by both authors, will then be analysed in an effort to establish the importance of the trial's setting as a liminal space facilitating contact with the dead, the supernatural, or the hero's passage into their destiny. This will allow a revision of the sword trial definition, and the exclusion of the least likely analogues. Finally, a third chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of Beowulf's giant-sword episode. The definitions and criteria brought to light in the previous chapters will be used to establish whether the Anglo-Saxon poem may be argued to contain a sword trial, possibly testifying to the circulation of this narreme in Britain well before it entered the Arthurian canon.

Acknowledgements

If Rome was not built in a day, neither was it built by a single construction worker. So, after nine months of continuous work on this, my own personal Rome, some gratitude is most definitely in order. First and foremost my thanks must go to my primary supervisor, Prof. Marina Buzzoni, whose enthusiastic support gave me the confidence to pursue this project and whose guidance was invaluable in steering me in the right direction. I would also like to thank my friends and family for their patience and willingness to love the absolute nuisance I become whenever I'm frustrated and losing confidence. A particularly fond thanks goes to my sisters Martina, Chiara, Anna, who can always be counted on to make me smile, and to my best friends, Aster, whose affectionate support was unwavering, and Lea, who single-handedly kickstarted my interest in *Beowulf* through the power of podcast recommendations. Last but not least, I must express my gratitude to my friends in the Third Order Regular, for letting me stay at the convent when I needed a quiet place to work, for the encouragement, and for the candy. A special thanks to Father Riccardo, who let me ramble about David and Augustine and never tired of asking questions. The vast majority of you will never be able to read this thesis, which only makes me feel more grateful for your help and friendship. Thank you for helping me build Rome.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Sword in the Stone.....	4
1.1 Arthur and Wulfstan: A Trial of Virtue	4
1.1.1 Arthur's Sword.....	5
1.1.2 Wulfstan's Staff.....	14
1.1.3 Connecting Sword and Staff	17
1.2 Possible Origins: The Greco-Roman Connection.....	19
1.2.1 Lancelot and the Future Cemetery	20
1.2.2 Theseus and his Father's Sword.....	24
1.2.3 Æneas and the Golden Bough	28
1.3 Possible Origins: The Scandinavian Connection.....	33
1.3.1 Sacred Trees and Bear Warriors.....	33
1.3.2 Revenants and Warrior Maidens	42
1.3.3 The King and the Dead Knight	50
Chapter 2: Liminal Aspects of the Sword Trial	53
2.1 Between the Worlds of Life and Death.....	53
2.1.1 A Liminal Space.....	54
2.1.2 An Encounter with the Dead	60
2.2 In Contact with the Supernatural	66
2.2.1 Monsters and Men.....	66
2.2.2 Facing the Divine	69
2.3 Stepping into Destiny.....	77
2.3.1 From Child to Man.....	78
2.3.2 From Man to Legend.....	86
Chapter 3: In Search of a New Analogue	91

3.1 A Possible Missing Link.....	91
3.1.1 Beowulf and the Sagas	92
3.1.2 Beowulf as an Arthurian Hero	95
3.2 The Giant-Sword.....	99
3.2.1 A Liminal Trial.....	99
3.2.2 A Possible Sword Trial	104
3.3 A Counter-Argument	110
3.3.1 An Uncertain Connection.....	111
3.3.2 An Imperfect Trial.....	113
Conclusions	118
Bibliography.....	131

Introduction

A block of stone stands incongruously in the middle of a square. From the top of it juts the hilt of a sword, firmly embedded in the block, heedless of the many attempts to tear it free. Suddenly, a truly unremarkable person steps out of the crowd. He is young, issued from the lower aristocracy, neither the strongest nor the richest. His hand lifts the sword out of the stone with ease, among the general consternation. This iconic image seems, to a modern-day reader or cinephile, to sit at the very core of the Arthurian legend. Its popularity has proven enormous and enduring, making it a recurring motif and a foundational element in reworkings, regardless of medium. Therefore, it may come as something of a surprise that what Sherman (2015) terms a “stock element” (as cited in Stock, 2015, 1) only entered the legend of king Arthur in a 12th century romance, Robert de Boron’s *Merlin*. The apparently abrupt apparition of the episode, together with its subsequent fortune and long-lasting importance, have prompted scholars to seek out the origin of the narreme among the epics and heroic works that had shaped the culture of Europe up to this point.¹

Alexandre Micha’s (1948; 2000b) authoritative works on the subject propose a classical, Southern-European origin for the sword trial, seeking its analogues in works such as chivalric romances and the *Æneid*. This view requires a certain amount of trust in Robert de Boron’s classical education, which thus far has been broadly, though not universally, shared. More recently, however, a new perspective has emerged through Francesco Marzella’s book *Excalibur: La Spada nella Roccia tra Mito e Storia* (2022). This work counters Micha’s assertion that the sword in the stone must find its origin in the classical world, and seeks the trial narreme not among errant knights and errant Trojans, but rather further north, in some of the Scandinavian sagas. This Germanic strain of Arthurian analogues sees heroes and heroines retrieving swords from tree trunks, stone walls, and burial mounds, and their plausibility is founded upon trust in

¹ A *narreme* is defined in narratology as the basic unit of narrative structure. The term was coined by Dorfman (1969, ix) as a parallel to *phoneme* and *morpheme*. This base definition was expanded upon by Wittmann (1975) and was still considered valid by Bonheim (2000), who applied it to drama as well as to prose. Therefore, *narreme* was considered the most appropriate term to refer to the sword trial and will be used throughout the present thesis.

Robert de Boron's awareness of heroic literary tropes and oral narratives circulating in Britain. Such radically different hypotheses lend themselves to re-examination, considering they do not seem likely to coexist, at least in the scholars' view. A punctual comparison of the two theories to each other and to the touchstone provided by *Merlin* will be useful in order to establish which of them is ultimately more convincing, but this is not the only point of interest.

Indeed, an analysis of the two hypotheses opens two likely possibilities. On the one hand, if the narreme is found to descend from Roman epic it stands to reason that it would remain part of European heroic literature, especially considering the wide circulation and enduring popularity of the *Aeneid*. On the other hand, however, considering the sword trial as part of a Germanic cultural and literary stock opens new avenues for research, both into the possible origins of the narreme and into other literary analogues. Of these two research avenues, the former will not be braved by the present thesis, as it seems to deviate slightly into anthropology, but the latter leaves ample scope for discussion. A review of both Micha's and Marzella's aforementioned works also reveals liminality as the one common trait between the two theories and, *ipso facto*, as a significant aspect of the sword trial narreme. As the plurality of liminal facets which can be identified in the Arthurian trial, as well as in many of the proposed analogues, have not yet been fully and systematically investigated, this aspect of the narreme provides scope for a more focussed analysis. This analysis will provide a further criterion to assess possible analogues, leading to a revision of the sword trial definition. In turn, the existence of a new definition will create scope for a practical test of the same, as it may be used as a guide to examine a heroic episode and determine whether it qualifies as an analogue.

Taking this into consideration, the present thesis will field three main research questions, by dedicating a chapter to each. The first chapter will be dedicated to reviewing Micha's (1948, 2000b) and Marzella's (2022) hypotheses, examining the analogues each scholar brings to bear in comparison to the Arthurian touchstone, and attempting to determine which set of analogues is more convincing. Each episode will be considered as a narrative unit, in what may be called an absolute way, but also as a

part of the scholar's argumentation; thus, the characteristics of the narreme will be explored, but the author's argument will also have its place in the assessment of each hypothesis' persuasiveness. Other scholarly sources will be brought to bear in order to achieve a wider, more informed understanding of the matter at hand. The second chapter will focus on the aforementioned liminal facets of the sword trial, drawing upon both sets of analogues and studying them in a systematic way, with the twofold goal of understanding the importance of liminal space and time to the narreme and of reworking its definition accordingly. This will allow the present work to narrow down the possible analogues, as well as developing a more selective set of criteria which will be employed in the third and final chapter. The third chapter will test Marzella's hypothesis and the definition established in Chapter 2 by seeking another Germanic analogue in the Anglo-Saxon heroic poem *Beowulf*. The presence of a sword trial episode in the poem would strengthen Marzella's argument by attesting the circulation of the narreme in Britain, as well as possibly augmenting the likelihood of a Scandinavian connection.

The conclusions drawn by the present thesis will, of course, be tentative and temporary at best. Whether or not *Beowulf* is found to contain an Arthurian analogue, it will hardly be possible to make definitive statements regarding the circulation of sword trial narremes based on only one text. The main goal of the present thesis is to explore a previously obscure avenue of research opened by recent scholarship, to compare said scholarship to the earlier *status quo*, and to delve into the stimulating new possibility of the sword trial narreme having Germanic origins. Regardless of the final result, however, the analysis and comparison of two foundational works in the British heroic canon, namely, *Beowulf* and *Merlin*, will have shed light on the matter and proven worthwhile. Therefore, the aforementioned analysis will be pursued to its logical conclusion and the textual evidence will be collated into a final argumentation. Nevertheless, the last word on the matter will ultimately be left to future, more authoritative scholarship.

Chapter 1: The Sword in the Stone

The popularity of the sword in the stone as part of the Arthurian matter is undeniable. In 1938 T. H. White titled what would become the first volume of his seminal work *The Once and Future King* after this iconic episode, and the 1963 Disney animated film, also titled *The Sword in the Stone*, has an epic depiction of the trial of the sword as the culminating point of young Arthur's adventures. More recently, even the 2014 western dieselpunk retelling *High Noon Over Camelot* introduced the nostalgically named Sheriff Stone, whom Arthur must defeat to become ruler of Camelot, and whose challenge to the hero echoes the words written on the blade in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. This beloved narreme, a fortunate 13th century addition to the existing matter of King Arthur and his knights, has garnered the attention of scholars who have tried to find its origin, seeking it in different directions. This chapter presents the Arthurian episode and its closest analogues, together with two radically different theories as to the origin of this narrative scheme. The first section covers the trial of the sword undergone by Arthur and a miracle accomplished posthumously by Edward the Confessor, which constitutes the closest analogous episode. The second section focuses on the Greco-Roman connection hypothesised by Alexandre Micha, positing classical epic and myth as a possible origin for the narreme. Finally, the third section explores Francesco Marzella's hypothesis of a Germanic narrative form giving rise to the sword trial as well as other similar narremes.

1.1 Arthur and Wulfstan: A Trial of Virtue

The iconic image of the sword in the stone being retrieved by an unlikely but worthy hero finds its closest analogue, both temporally and thematically, in the life of an Anglo-Saxon saint. In both cases, their virtue lies beyond riches, appearance, and culture, and they are chosen by a divine power capable of seeing into their souls. They are treated together here in order to highlight their similarities, and will then be used as a touchstone for a comparison with possible analogues in 1.2 and 1.3. Therefore, the focus of this section is placed first on the Arthurian episode, then on the miracle narrated in two mediaeval *Lives* of Edward the Confessor, and finally on the connections established by scholars between the two narrations.

1.1.1 Arthur's Sword

The introduction of the sword in the stone into the Arthurian matter is attributed to the 13th century romance *Merlin*, by Robert de Boron.² Of the original text, written in verse, only the first 504 lines remain. However, an anonymous prose version has been transmitted fully, and a comparison of this with the remaining lines of the verse version proves it a substantially faithful, if somewhat shortened, transposition (Micha 1994, 8). The episode of the sword in the stone occupies the last eleven sections of the prose *Merlin*, §80 to §91, from the apparition of the sword sunk into a stone and anvil outside the cathedral of Logres to Arthur's coronation, and is entirely absent from Wace's *Roman de Brut*,³ which is considered by Micha (1994) to be Robert's main source. Indeed, in Wace's text Arthur ascends the throne as his father's legitimate heir, and the author simply states, "Artur, le fiz Uther, manderent, / A Cilcestre le corunerent"⁴ (Weiss, 2002, 226, ll. 9011-12). Paris (1886) considers it likely that a translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*⁵ may have also been used as a source for *Merlin*, and here, too, the trial is absent. After Utherpendragon's death, an archbishop named as Dubricius "Arturum diademate regni insignivit" (Wright, 1985, 101).⁶ Once again, Arthur is simply the dead king's son, "filium eius", and there is no need to prove his birthright (Wright, 1985, 101).

The miraculous event proving the boy Arthur is the chosen king is described by Micha (1994) as part of the extensive christianisation of the original matter operated by Robert, who is also credited with tying the Grail and the Round Table to the New Testament and making Merlin a prophetic figure in the Christian sense rather than the

² For the purposes of this thesis, two editions of *Merlin* have been used, namely, a critical edition and a translation into modern French. The translated edition, curated by Alexandre Micha in 1994, is based on a 1979 critical edition curated by the same author, taking as chief source Bibl. Nat. Fr. 747 for the prose, and Bibl. Nat. Fr. 20047 for the verse fragment. This critical edition was consulted as well, in the revised version published in 2000 by Droz, indicated as Micha (2000a).

³ All references to Wace are based on the bilingual edition curated by Weiss in 2002, which in turn is a revision of Arnold (1938), restoring the original line order and generally presenting a text closer to mss BL. Add. 45103 and Durham Cathedral C iv. 27(1) (Weiss, 2002, xxv-xxvii).

⁴ Weiss (2002, 227) translates this passage as "they summoned Arthur, Uther's son, and crowned him at Silchester."

⁵ The edition used here is Wright's single-manuscript edition from Bern, Burgerbibliothek, ms. 568, published in 1985.

⁶ "Bestowed upon Arthur the royal crown" (translation mine).

pagan. In this new context, Arthur becomes an analogue of the biblical king David, chosen by God to rule the land, and Merlin assumes the role of Samuel as prophet of the king's greatness.⁷ The trial episode is also closely tied to the fostering at Antor's,⁸ which is another addition by Robert. Indeed, in *Merlin*, Egerne only marries the king "au trantieme jor" (Micha 2000a, 234) on the thirtieth day after Arthur has been conceived. Therefore, by order of the king and acting on Merlin's advice, the queen's pregnancy is kept secret and the baby is carried away to be raised by Antor.⁹ This causes an apparent break in the royal lineage, as Uitiers dies "sanz oir", without an heir (Micha, 2000a, 245) and an assembly composed of the aristocracy and high clergy is incapable of agreeing on a worthy successor.¹⁰ The theme of bloodline interruption will be treated in more detail in Chapter 2; for the present purposes it is sufficient to note that in this climate of uncertainty, although Arthur is indeed Uitier's son, he must be marked as the new ruler by a heavenly sign, proving his worth rather than his dynastic legitimacy.

The great importance of this election is highlighted not only by the lengthy narration of it, but also by the repetition of the trial itself; Arthur first retrieves the sword from the stone on the day of the Circumcision of Christ ("Le jor de la Circoncision", Micha, 2000a, 253),¹¹ then he is made to do so again on the same day

⁷ The biblical episode where David is chosen by God and consecrated by the prophet Samuel (I Book of Samuel, 16: 1-13 in the Catholic Bible) bears several interesting resemblances with the tale of king Arthur. Both kings are unlikely choices, starting from a position of disadvantage as youngest sons, and both are tried last, receiving God's blessing regardless and being legitimated as rulers. It does not seem unlikely that David was one of the figures Robert had in mind when undertaking his *Merlin*.

⁸ For the sake of uniformity, the choice has been made to maintain toponyms and proper names as written in *Merlin* (Micha, 2000a). The more common English equivalents are as follows: Uther for Uitier (or Uitierpandragon), Ector for Antor, Kay for Qex, Igraine for Egerne.

⁹ Merlin has the king swear to give him the child on the very morning after his conception, saying, "[...] you have begotten a male heir upon Egerne, you have promised him to me, you shall not have him" (Micha, 2000a, 226, translation mine). Later, Uitiers orders the queen to hide her pregnancy, which would otherwise be perceived as dishonorable, and that the child be "handed over to whom I will command" (Micha, 2000a, 236, translation mine). Merlin selects the family who is best suited to raise Arthur, describing Antor as "one of the most honest and loyal men in [the] kingdom" and his wife as a paragon of virtue (Micha, 2000a, 237, translation mine).

¹⁰ "[...] s'assemblerent li baron et tuit li ministre de Sainte Eglise [...]: si ne se porent acorder a nelui" (Micha, 2000a, 245).

¹¹ This is a Christian holy day celebrated on 1st January. The sword itself miraculously appears on Christmas day, and all Arthur's subsequent triumphs take place on days of religious

(Micha, 2000a, 256), then on Candlemas (“la Chandelor”, Micha, 2000a, 257), at Easter (“la Pasques”, Micha, 2000a, 259-60), and finally on Pentecost (“la Pentecoste”, Micha, 2000a, 262-63), so that by the time he is finally crowned king several months have passed. Throughout this time, others are allowed to attempt the trial and invariably fail, which is interpreted by the archbishop of Logres as clear evidence that none may prevail except the king chosen by God. Indeed, this is written in golden letters on the sword itself, and it is once again the archbishop who reads aloud what may be called the rules of trial, namely, that the man who would be able to retrieve the sword was the ruler chosen by Jesus Christ (Micha, 2000a, 250).¹² Thereafter, it is often repeated to the argumentative barons that “nus ne l’ostera se cil non que Nostre Sires viaut qui soit sires et garde de cest peuple” (Micha, 2000a, 253)¹³, making it very clear to the reader as well.

The trial episode is narrated in a very similar, though significantly more synthetic way in Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*,¹⁴ where the setting is changed from Logres to London and the writing on the sword is given verbatim as “Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil is rightwise king born of all England” (Cooper, 1998, 8). Here, too, Arthur is made to repeat the trial several times, at Candlemas, Easter, and Pentecost, and always triumphs. The emphasis here is placed on the ease with which he pulls the sword out, “lightly” and “without any pain” (Cooper,

celebration, marking the passage of time while also strengthening the link between success in the trial and divine blessing.

¹² “Cil qui estoit celle espee ne qui seroit tel qui la pouïst d’iqui traire seroit rois de la terre par l’election Jhesu Crist” (Micha, 2000a, 250). This passage is translated by Micha (1994, §83) as “Celui a qui était destinée cette épée et qui aurait la force de la retirer serait le roi du pays par le choix de Jésus-Christ”. The mention of “force” in the translation may be misleading, however, and it is not supported by the text as given in Micha (2000a) or by the variant readings present in the apparatus of the same. A more faithful rendering would be “he who will be able to retrieve it”.

¹³ This passage is translated in Micha (1994, 164) as “seul l’ôtera celui que Notre-Seigneur désignera pour être le seigneur et le protecteur de ce peuple”. This can be rendered in English as “only he whom Our Lord will choose as ruler and protector of this people will retrieve [the sword]” (translation mine).

¹⁴ Helen Cooper’s edition, referenced here, is based on British Library MS Additional 59678, also known as the Winchester Manuscript, and emended when necessary from the Caxton print. This is an abridged edition but, as no omissions or changes are indicated by the editor in the section of the text relevant to the present purpose, it was deemed preferable to the older Vinaver edition based on Caxton, whose emendations are described as freer and more frequent (Cooper, 1998, xxiii).

1998, 9), then twice “easily” (Cooper, 1998, 10-11), whereas his rivals cannot “stir the sword nor move it” (Cooper, 1998, 8). Finally, the assembled populace cries for him to be crowned as “all they [kneel] at once, both rich and poor, and [cry] Arthur mercy because they [have] delayed him so long” (Cooper, 1998, 11), highlighting the hero’s twofold status as God’s and the people’s chosen ruler, already present in Robert’s work.¹⁵ After such a complete triumph, as noted in Micha’s 2000 monograph on *Merlin*,¹⁶ Arthur comes to be beloved of the very barons who first opposed him, by proving he possesses the qualities of a great king, namely, generosity, wisdom, and religious faith.

Arthur’s generosity toward Antor and Qex is visible not only in his determination to find a sword for his foster-brother, but also in his immediate acceptance of Antor’s request of naming him seneschal despite his poor character, and in his declaration that “vos ne me savroiz ja chose demander que ne face” (Micha, 2000a, 256).¹⁷ While liberal, however, the future king also proves to be wise when questioned by the barons, who must finally admit that “il sera molt saiges et molt raisnables et molt nos a bien respondu” (Micha, 2000a, 260),¹⁸ and by allotting gifts tailored to the receivers (Micha, 2000a, 260-61). Micha (2000b, 195), therefore, soundly concludes that generosity, courtesy and measure, together with a strong faith in God and willingness to accept kingship as a religious mission, make the child Arthur a great king *in nuce*, even before he is crowned. Thus, the key elements of the narreme can be summarised for practical purposes as follows: an apparently unlikely hero approaches the trial from a position of disadvantage, but easily retrieves the sword of supernatural origin from the stone, because he has been chosen by God, and is thereby legitimated as ruler. This narrative element has enjoyed tremendous success as part of the Arthurian

¹⁵ Indeed, the final repentance of the barons is present in *Merlin* as well, where it is stated, “Et lor s’agenoillent et crient merci tuit ensamble” (Micha, 2000a, 262).

¹⁶ *Étude Sur Le "Merlin" De Robert De Boron, Roman Du 13. Siècle*, henceforth Micha (2000b).

¹⁷ “Je n’aurai rien à vous refuser” in Micha (1994, 167), in English “I will refuse you nothing you may ask” (translation mine).

¹⁸ “He will be very wise and reasonable, and has answered us very well” (translation mine). The second part of this sentence is omitted in Micha (1994, 171), so that the barons’ speech is cut to “[...] il sera fort sage et raisonnable.” As the critical edition makes no mention of the omission occurring in any of the witnesses, it is assumed here to have been a translation choice made when adapting the text into modern French.

legend and garnered attention from philologists, who have analysed it and interpreted it in different ways, some of which will now be explored.

Firstly, the importance of the sword as a symbol in mediaeval literature is widely agreed upon. According to Donà (2014), during this time the sword was the weapon *par excellence*, a symbol of status and power, particularly as part of a king's attire. To the owner, the sword was not only an instrument of war, but also a mark of skill and quality, a symbol that was earned by passing a test. Because of this double symbology, the sword came to be associated with justice as well as power, and indeed the archbishop of Logres admonishes the people, gathered for the Christmas mass, that "Notre Sires, quant il comenda justice terrienne, si la mist en glaive d'espee" (Micha, 2000a, 252).¹⁹ Donà argues that several narremes developed around this all-important weapon, including the sword in the stone, the sword that cannot be taken from the hand of a dead warrior, and the buried sword that must be retrieved by the hero, as well as several more that will not be explored here, and that all of these are related. The Arthurian sword in particular is seen by this scholar as both bearer and sign of an extraordinary personality and a preordained destiny for the one hero who is fated to own it (Donà, 2014, 70). The role of the sword as a symbol of royal power is unmistakable in the Arthurian trial, as it is the vessel through which the choice of England's new ruler is made, as well as the king's weapon to be used in ruling and defending the realm. This symbolic layer of the narrative is vital to Marzella's (2022) interpretation, which will be delved into shortly.

It is possible, however, to interpret the Arthurian sword trial quite apart from its miraculous nature. Littleton and Malcor (1995) see Robert's version of Merlin as a reflection of the same prototype as the Dame du Lac, functioning in Arthur's story as she does in Lancelot's. They argue that the prophetic overlay could have been introduced by clerics of Alano-Sarmatian descent, together with the sword in the stone which would have been inspired by a ritual of the ancient Alans'. This came to form yet another parallel to the Dame du Lac, who became closely associated with the sword in the lake just as Merlin was associated with the sword in the stone. Carlo Donà (2014,

¹⁹ "When Our Lord established justice on Earth, he placed it on the edge of the sword" (translation mine).

72) holds a different view, considering this episode as part of a mediaeval tradition of sword-centric narremes whose core idea is that power, signified by the sword, is granted to a worthy hero by some chthonian power. As the chthonian power in question cannot be identified with the Christian God, the nature of the trial in this interpretation is supernatural without being miraculous, a manifestation of destiny rather than an act of divine providence.²⁰

It has also been proposed that Merlin may have, in fact, organised and stage-managed the trial, making him the supernatural entity at the origin of the entire episode. Cawsey (2001, 95) describes him as a powerful manipulator, albeit a wise one, capable of crossing the gap between the human and the divine. In this analysis, he is still an agent of the Christian God, ensuring Arthur is conceived, born, raised, and crowned, and shadowing his every step thereafter. Indeed, Merlin is the mastermind behind Uitier's seduction of Egerne in all major versions of the tale, whether through the use of a mysterious herb, "une erbe" in *Merlin* (Micha, 2000a, 223), or with "medicamenta" in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (Wright, 1985, 98), but not with outright spells. Littleton and Malcor (1995) describe Geoffrey's Merlin in particular as a scholar and prophet rather than a magical being, a reading which is compounded by his use of the aforementioned *medicamenta*. The word *medicamentum* may indicate medicine, poison, cosmetics and other concoctions (Castiglioni and Mariotti, 2007), but it is obviously connected to pharmacy and science more than to sorcery. As for Robert's Merlin, the authors note the importance of religion to the character, but do seem to consider him the author of the tale's miraculous events. As he also advises the archbishop to gather the aristocracy for Christmas and guarantees the manifestation of a sign with no uncertainty,²¹ Littleton and Malcor argue that "one cannot help but get the impression that he somehow stage-managed the whole business" (1995, 89). Malory's

²⁰ Donà agrees with Littleton and Malcor's formulation of the so-called Alano-Sarmatian connection, a theory which, however fascinating, is rather too anthropological for the scope of this thesis. As it is either rejected or ignored by the two main theorists under examination, Alexandre Micha and Francesco Marzella, this connection will not be pursued further here.

²¹ Merlin's declarations, "je vos sui pleges" and "je vos creant" (Micha, 2000a, 246) show his confidence in the sign to come as well as his awareness of his own sway over the archbishop. Indeed, he has been called upon by the assembly, as mentioned previously, because of his reputation as a wise advisor: "de bon conseil n'onques n'avoient oï parler d'ome qu'il eust forsconseillé" (Micha, 2000a, 245-46). In this context, he is readily accepted as guarantor for the election.

Merlin has been described in very similar terms by Greene (1987, 59), stating once again that he “has stage-managed events”.²²

Of the outlooks just described, Cawsey’s (2001, 92) appears to be the most nuanced, acknowledging the possible assumption on the reader’s part that Merlin may be directly involved in the miracle of the sword on Christmas day, but also noting that such an assumption has no real grounding in the text. The author seems to connect Merlin’s almost omnipotent appearance with the framing device adopted by Robert, who places himself in the comfortable role of editor while casting Merlin, through Blaise, as the source of the writing and therefore of the veracity of the tale (Cawsey, 2001, 93). This is connected by Cawsey to the absolute truth value given by the text to the written word, particularly evident in the case of the words appearing on the sword itself. Indeed, the truth of the golden script is never questioned and, once the sword has been blessed and proven miraculous rather than demonic (Micha 1994, note 31), the un-authored writing is attributed to God and therefore “it paradoxically contains ultimate authority” (Cawsey, 2001, 90). In this case, and according to Cawsey in other loci of the text as well, language has a performative status, as the statement that whoever retrieves the sword shall reign makes it so. This is possible precisely because the whole event, including the writing, are attributed to a benevolent deity and received as the sign that has been promised by God’s prophet, Merlin. Finally, it should be noted that Merlin is not present at all during the trials, as he warned the archbishop he would not be (Micha, 2000a, 248).²³ Marzella (2022, 137) argues that this self-imposed exile has the goal of allowing the miracle to be believed, avoiding precisely the assumption that he is the mastermind behind Arthur’s triumph.

²² This does not seem fully convincing. Littleton and Malcor are quite right in using the word “impression”, whose strong subjectivity gives the lie to Greene’s more peremptory claim. It seems redundant to reiterate that the miraculous events surrounding the sword in the stone are described in no uncertain terms as the work of God and a manifestation of divine will, in *Le Morte Darthur* as in *Merlin*. Moreover, if Merlin is to be accepted as a prophet in the Christian sense, then knowledge of the coming sign fits rather seamlessly in his role and does not need to imply his direct intervention.

²³ Merlin’s answer to the archbishop’s invite to the Christmas celebrations is, “Je n’i serai pas ne ne me verroiz jusques après l’election”, in English, “I will not be there, nor will you see me until after the election” (Micha, 2000a, 248, translation mine.)

Regardless of what the reader may be led to assume or infer, the text clearly underlines the importance of the trial as a means of discovering the ruler chosen by God. The institutional church also has a pivotal role in the person of the archbishop, leading public worship and later championing Arthur's right to the throne (Micha, 2000b, 98; 127). As per Robert's providential narrative, Micha (2000b, 89) notes that Arthur first comes to retrieve the sword in a manner which is only apparently accidental but is actually preordained by God.²⁴ Divine choice is represented as clear and irrevocable, as plenty of others attempt the trial but inevitably fail. In his article "L'Épreuve de l'Épée", Micha (1948, 42) declares that the Arthurian trial does not imply a divinely ordained mission for the hero to accomplish, as the sword is only a symbol of and means to achieve secular power. However, this claim is revised and given nuance in his subsequent works, namely, the introduction to the 1994 edition of Merlin and his 2000 monograph on the same text, as shown. It is probably more accurate to consider the sword as both a symbol of royal power and a sign of divine blessing, especially considering the importance of religion to European monarchies of the Middle Ages and the enduring belief in the divine right of monarchs.²⁵ Marzella (2022) highlights both symbolic meanings, noting how Arthur could have become king simply by bloodright, as indeed he does in Geoffrey's *Historia* and in Wace's *Brut*. The fostering at Antor's, together with the trial, are seen by the author as reinforcing the providential design and proving that Arthur has been chosen by God, which leads to the conclusion that, with or without Merlin's direction, what happens is not a prodigy but a true miracle.²⁶

²⁴ Indeed, Arthur seems to see the sword by chance, while he is returning to the jousting grounds by passing "in front of the church, through the square where the stone was" (Micha, 2000a, 254, translation mine). Once he sees the sword, it is simply stated, "He then thought that, if he may, he would bring it to his brother, so he rode by, gripped it by the hilt, and took it away hidden under his garments" (Micha, 2000a, 254, translation mine). The hero's first triumph is in fact framed as something of a coincidence, although of course it cannot truly be the case, as the writing on the sword makes clear that divine will is orchestrating the trial (see note 11).

²⁵ In particular, Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God* posits a close relationship between paganism, corruption, and the decline of the Roman Empire, highlighting on the other hand the salvific power of faith in the Christian God, and the greatness of the Christian emperors. This work is likely to have been known to Robert de Boron, not only due to its foundational role in mediaeval theology, but also because the verse fragment of *Merlin* refers to "saint Augustin" (Micha, 2000a, 95, l. 397) when explaining the consequences of a sinful life.

²⁶ The difference between prodigies and true miracles, together with its importance to the Arthurian trial, will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2, turning once again to Augustine of Hippo for a theological outlook.

Lastly, the fundamental trait of this episode is that it is a trial of election and not of strength (Marzella, 2022, 35; Donà, 2014). Donà considers this one of the core elements shared by the stories of “liberation of the sword”, defining the election as based on identity rather than exceptional qualities. In other words, only the chosen hero succeeds because he is the chosen hero, as the true arbiter and mastermind behind the trial is destiny itself. In his view, even when the hero does demonstrate peculiar virtues, these are secondary to the predestination narrative. Marzella dedicates more attention to Arthur’s virtues marking him as worthy of God’s blessing, especially his humility (2022, 52), and the specific connection of the sword to a set of values is made explicit by Jaeger (2012, 171), who argues that Arthur’s triumph in the trial puts the question of succession to rest because “legitimacy is hardwired in the elect knight, planted ineffaceably in the genes of the true king” and that the sword “reacts to chivalric/aristocratic/royal identity [sensing] the nature of the man who puts his hand on it [...], as if aristocratic social values and the political order had become laws of nature” (Jaeger, 2012, 170).²⁷

To sum up, the trial of the sword in the stone is a 13th-century addition to the Arthurian matter, part of a process of christianisation of the story aiming to make Arthur a ruler chosen by God. Accordingly, a miraculous sign of election is given to him on a holy day in front of the gathered aristocracy, marking him without possibility of doubt. A definition of the sword trial as a narrative form is formulated by Micha (1948, 37) as a hero retrieving a sword or broken lance from the body of a fallen warrior, or successfully pulling a sword out of a block of stone to which it is affixed. This episode may have been inserted in and adapted to the Arthurian matter by Robert de Boron, but it belongs to a group of sword-centric narremes dating back to more ancient times, and it has several analogues in mediaeval literature all over Europe. The analogue

²⁷ While there is undoubtedly value in the observation that a prodigy worked on the basis of identity is a powerful narrative legitimization of real aristocratic values, Jaeger attributes the judgement and election to “magic” (2012, 170) and “Nature” (2012, 171), seeming to undervalue the importance of religion to the Arthurian trial. It seems worthwhile to note that, in the context of *Merlin*, the laws of nature are rather the laws of God, so that the political order is legitimated by the creator deity rather than by the created world.

temporally closest to the Arthurian trial, narrated only a few decades before *Merlin*, is the next topic of analysis.

1.1.2 Wulfstan's Staff

It may be surprising to find a narrative trial of heroic fame in a hagiographic context, but it is precisely the case of two different *Lives* dedicated to Edward the Confessor, king of the Anglo-Saxons from 1042 to 1066. These works, written by Osbert of Clare in 1138²⁸ and by Ælred of Rievaulx between 1161 and 1163,²⁹ had the same objective of making known the miracles accomplished by the saintly king both in life and death, respectively before and after his canonisation in 1161. In his introduction to the 1923 edition of Osbert's *Vita beati Ædwardi regis Anglorum*, Marc Bloch rightly points out that, in seeking Edward's canonisation, Osbert and his commissioners were attempting to gain not only a national saint but also to strengthen the Norman monarchy (Bloch, 1923, 13). This first attempt failed, possibly due to the instability of Stephen of Blois' reign, which may have reflected poorly on his envoy and encouraged Pope Innocent II to delay the canonisation and wait for more decisive information. Edward the Confessor was finally canonised in 1161, by a new Pope, at the behest of a new king. Bloch (1923, 15) argues for the perceived impropriety of having Henry II Plantagenet promote the diffusion of Osbert's *Life*, which had been commissioned by his old rival Stephen of Blois. Whatever the causes, a new hagiography was completed by Ælred, titled *Vita Sancti Ædwardi Regis et Confessoris*. This would go on to be translated several times, to replace previous *Lives* and to become the official source for subsequent hagiographic works and iconography (Marzella, 2022, 48; Dutton, 2007, 7).

Osbert's *Vita beati Ædwardi regis Anglorum* is the most ancient known source narrating one particular miracle, which involved the dead king Edward and the bishop

²⁸ All references to Osbert's work in this thesis are based on Bloch, Marc, ed. 1923. "La Vie de S. Édouard le Confesseur par Osbert de Clare" in *Analecta Bollandiana* 41: 5-131. This edition is based on British Library Add MS 36737 with occasional emendations from Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS 161. The episode treated here is the object of caput XXIX.

²⁹ The edition referenced here is "Vita Sancti Ædwardi Regis", curated by Marzella in 2017 and published as part of *Aelredi Rievalliensis Vita Sancti Ædwardi Regis; Anonymi Vita Sancti Ædwardi Versifice*. The relevant episode is treated in caput XXXVI.

of Worcester, Wulfstan, during the reign of William the Conqueror.³⁰ After the Norman conquest, Lanfranc of Bec was appointed archbishop of Canterbury and immediately set about reforming the clergy with a spirit of discipline not unlike the developing reformist sensibilities of the time (Marzella, 2022, 44). Wulfstan was the only Anglo-Saxon bishop not to lose his position during this time. He went on to cooperate with Lanfranc, notably in the struggle against the slave trade in Bristol, and was canonised in 1203 by Pope Innocent III (Marzella, 2022, 44). However, Osbert narrates a failed deposition of Wulfstan, attempted by Lanfranc during his first synod in Westminster,³¹ and the miraculous intervention of the deceased Edward to avert it. Like Arthur, Wulfstan is considered unworthy of his role as he is not sufficiently cultured or eloquent, despite being described with a quote from the Bible as “blameless and upright, God-fearing and shunning evil” (Bloch, 1923, 117, l. 12).³² The main departure from the narrative form found in *Merlin* is the fact that here the hero plunges his pastoral staff into the stone himself, “velut in ceram liquantem” (Bloch, 1923, 118, l. 28),³³ symbolically returning it to the king who lies buried under the slab. However, as is the case with Arthur, Wulfstan then proves the only man capable of retrieving the staff, which he does “tam leviter [...] ut nulla sequeretur difficultas in opere” (Bloch, 1923, 120, ll. 17-18).³⁴ Once again, therefore, the true mark of election is not only success but the ease with which success is accomplished.

Ælred narrates the events surrounding Wulfstan’s attempted deposition maintaining Osbert’s narrative structure, but he is more careful in handling the political

³⁰ The older, anonymous *Vita Ædwardi Regis qui apud Westmonasterium requiescit* mentions miraculous events happening at the king’s tomb, where “for the faith of those who call upon Him, God, the King of kings, works the tokens of his goodness” (Barlow, 1992, 127). However, no mention is made here of this specific event. The edition referenced here is based on Harley ms 526, dated around 1100. The editor considers this work as a likely source of Osbert’s *Vita*, although by no means the only source (Barlow, 1992, xxxiv-xxxv).

³¹ An account of the failed deposition, without mention of miraculous events, can be found in William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, finished in 1125 (Winterbottom, 2007, xii). Here, according to Winterbottom’s translation based on the autograph, Lanfranc accuses Wulfstan of illiteracy but, thanks to his honesty and to the intercession of saints, Wulfstan answers the charge to general satisfaction and earns the Archbishop’s support (Winterbottom, 2007, 433).

³² My own translation from the original Latin, “Simplex et rectus ac timens Deum et recedens a malo”. The Biblical reference is given by Bloch (1923, 117, note 1) as Job 1;1.

³³ “As though [it plunged] through molten wax”, translation mine.

³⁴ “As lightly [...] as though there were no difficulty in doing so”, translation mine.

message implicit in the opposition of the virtuous Anglo-Saxon bishop and the representatives of the new Anglo-Norman regime. The emphasis is thus placed on Lanfranc's reform mission, to which he is called by God, and his attempt to remove Wulfstan from his position is framed as an honest mistake which he comes to sincerely regret. The main differences between the two episodes are in the description of details and in the dramatisation of the characters' feelings and words. In particular, Dutton (2007, 8) notes how Osbert dramatises the interactions between Lanfranc and Wulfstan more, while Ælred focuses on the relationship between Wulfstan and Edward, highlighting the humility of the bishop and God's protection of the simple and faithful. As far as textual details are concerned, in Ælred's *Vita*, the staff is described as standing upright, plunged into the stone, "as though it had grown roots" (Marzella, 2017, 166, l. 59),³⁵ and when it cannot be removed, the fact is blamed explicitly on a miraculous force holding onto it from underneath (Marzella, 2017, 167, ll. 72-73).³⁶ Indeed, when Lanfranc himself attempts the trial, the king himself opposes him and causes his failure, as "obsistente sancti regis virtute conatus eius desiderato caret effectu" (Marzella, 2017, 167, ll. 88-89).³⁷

There are clear differences between this episode, in either narration, and the Arhturian trial as it is described by Robert de Boron several decades later. The most obvious discrepancy is that the object to be retrieved here is not a sword but a bishop's pastoral staff, the origins of which are not supernatural or mysterious. Moreover, as mentioned above, it is Wulfstan himself who plunges the staff into the stone covering the king's tomb, and he only has to pull it out once for the miracle to be believed and understood. Finally, Wulfstan's triumph does not mark his first accession to a role of power and simultaneously to a grown man's responsibilities and duties, as he is already a mature man who held the position of bishop before Lanfranc came to power. However, there are also visible similarities between the two events, which have been

³⁵ My own translation from the original Latin, "quasi radicibus niteretur" (Marzella, 2017, 166, l. 59).

³⁶ The exact expression is "[...] quasi a parte inferiori vi quadam mirabili teneretur", in English "as though it was held from underneath by some extraordinary force" (Marzella, 2017, 167, ll. 72-73, translation mine).

³⁷ "His attempt does not have the desired effect, because the saintly king's virtue resists it" (Marzella, 2017, 167, ll. 78-79, translation mine).

analysed as evidence of a common narrative form underlying both. These will now be brought forth and examined, as Marzella (2022) uses them to argue in favour of a common narrative form having originated both episodes.

1.1.3 Connecting Sword and Staff

Wulfstan's trial has been termed an Arthurian analogue, in section 1.1.1, due not only to the temporal closeness of the episodes' redaction, but also and most importantly due to their narrative and thematic similarities. Dutton (2007, 5) acknowledges the differences between the Arthurian trial and the miracle narrated by Ælred, mentioned in 1.1.2, but also notes that both episodes satisfy the main criteria listed by Micha, namely, the object being pulled free from a block of stone and some sort of resistance to be won in order to do so. Moreover, she points out that both protagonists appear at first unworthy of honour and authority, and both Arthur and Wulfstan are also the only ones to triumph in the trial, although others attempt it. Lastly, she highlights how both narrations contain "an explicit statement of their meaning", a miraculous event charged with public significance, repetition reinforcing belief in the miracle, and a clear emphasis on divine agency (Dutton, 2007, 10). The importance of the king to come and Robert's desire to imbue his narrative with religious significance is particularly highlighted by Dutton (2007) through an analysis of the context in which the sword in the stone appears. She notes the significance of the Christmas morning mass as a celebration of "the coming of light into darkness and the beginning of Christ's eternal reign as prince of peace", together with the reading of Luke's gospel describing the shepherds called to worship the newborn king, and the appearance of the sword after the offertory, making the miracle a sign that God has "not only answered the people's prayers but also accepted their gifts" (Dutton, 2007, 15).³⁸

Having established the similarities between the two narratives, Dutton then argues that Ælred's *Vita* was likely to appeal to Robert de Boron, who was invested in the christianisation of his source matter and had already taken inspiration from several

³⁸ This reading of the sacred temporal context is supported by the text, as Merlin himself insists on the significance of Christmas day as "the holy day on which the king of kings [...] was born" (Micha, 2000a, 247, translation mine), connecting the birth of Christ to the coming of "tel roi qui le peuple puisse gouverner a son plaisir et sa volenté faire", a blessed king that will rule according to divine will (Micha, 2000a, 247).

texts. In particular, the fact that Edward is presented throughout as God's chosen ruler is argued to make Ælred a congenial source for the tale of another divinely appointed monarch (Dutton, 2007, 13). Considering the likelihood of Robert having been Anglo-Norman, or at least having lived in England for a time, the author concludes that Ælred's *Vita*, as a widely available and probably appealing source containing the closest known antecedent of the Arthurian trial, is the most likely source of inspiration for this episode (Dutton, 2007, 18). Indeed, manuscript copies dating from Robert's time exist, mainly in England but also in France (Marzella, 2017, 13-24). Moreover, Dutton (2007, note 33) notes the existence of an Anglo-Norman versification which has been dated prior to 1170 by Östen Södegård.³⁹ Marzella (2022), however, takes a more cautious approach, mentioning the possibility of Ælred's being one of Robert's sources but preferring to postulate the existence of a narrative scheme circulating in England already in the 12th century, having influenced Osbert, and with which Robert may have come into contact as well (Marzella, 2022, 135-136). The identification of Robert de Boron with Robertus de Burun, to whom Henry II donated lands in 1186,⁴⁰ while by no means certain, is considered likely by the author as it fits with the poet's interest in the Arthurian matter (Marzella, 2022, 30).

Marzella (2022) also provides his own detailed description of the similarities between the two episodes, noting that they are more numerous than the differences even though they do not form one clear motif, involving what he calls a series of narrative elements. These elements are the trial itself, the election, the manifestation of divine will, the apparent weakness of the hero, the presence of a judge or arbiter of the trial along with several witnesses and antagonists, and the sacred time and space during

³⁹ This is of particular interest, as Paris (1886, XII) argues that Robert may not have known Latin. His rather cursory argument is based chiefly on the similarity in the spelling of proper names and toponyms between Robert's work and Wace's, and the issue of language seems to have been dropped by scholars since, as neither Micha nor Marzella draw attention to it. Regardless, it seems only fair to address the possibility of Robert's having come into contact with a translation of Ælred's *Vita*, if not with a copy in Latin.

⁴⁰ The name appears on pages 3 and 5 of *Rotuli de Dominabus et Pueris et Puellis de Donatione Regis in XII Comitatus*, in the edition curated by Stacey Grimaldi in 1830. Robertus de Burun, together with his wife Beatrix and his son Roger, is also mentioned on page 151 of the *Monasticon Anglicanum*, in the 1846 edition curated by William Dugdale, as having donated 80 acres of land to a monastery. The source for this part of the text is the Cartulary of Walden Monastery as transmitted by Harley MS 3697.

which the event takes place. In other words, both heroes prove themselves chosen by God by easily extracting an object which is prodigiously fixed within a solid block, in the presence of a religious authority and in a setting of public significance. Success proves the heroes' worth in spite of their apparent weakness, rewarding their virtue and humility while their antagonists inevitably fail. This happens in a sacred space and time, in or near a place of worship, on a holy day or during an important religious event such as a synod. Marzella (2022, 57) ties these elements into the following "minimal plot":

In a sacred time and place, the protagonist, starting from a position of disadvantage and despite not being the only one to attempt the trial, is the only person capable of extracting an object symbolising a position of authority from a stone (or, more generally, from a hard material) and in so doing proves to the judge of the trial and to the assembly of onlookers that it is God's will that he should be the one to hold that position of authority.⁴¹

This definition is more detailed than Micha's (1948) description of the trial, given in section 1.1.1. In his exploration of possible sword trials and analogues for the Arthurian episode, Micha makes no mention of Ælred or Osbert, so that the connection between the miraculous pastoral staff and the sword in the stone is entirely absent from his work. He instead focuses on chivalric literature and epic, looking to a remote past for the possible source of the narreme. The results of this research will now be explored, together with the varying responses they have elicited.

1.2 Possible Origins: The Greco-Roman Connection

This section focuses on Micha's hypotheses, formulated in the 1948 article "L'Épreuve de l'Épée" and reiterated in his monograph *Étude Sur Le "Merlin" De Robert De Boron, Roman Du 13. Siècle*, regarding the possible origin of the sword trial narreme. Other sources will be explored in relation to Micha's theory, whether corroborating it or disagreeing with it, with the goal of seeking the closest analogues of the Arthurian episode. Among the possible analogues brought to bear by Micha, the three examined here have been chosen for their importance to the author's argument, overall notoriety, and because they all contain liminal elements which will be the object of Chapter 2. They will be treated in reverse chronological order, starting with the narrative temporally closest to Robert's *Merlin* and ending with the most remote.

⁴¹ Translation mine.

1.2.1 *Lancelot and the Future Cemetery*

The first possible analogue for the Arthurian trial is an episode narrated by Chrétien de Troyes in his *Lancelot, or The Knight of the Cart*, a romance in verse composed between 1159 and 1181, under the patronage of the Countess Marie of Champagne.⁴² The narrative begins with Queen Guinevere being kidnapped by Meleagant and taken to the land of Gorre, from which it is said no-one may return, and it is on a quest to rescue her that Lancelot happens upon a peculiar cemetery. Having stopped by the adjacent church to pray, the knight is then guided by a helpful monk among the strange tombs, each of which bears the name of a living knight who is destined to lie there upon his death. Lancelot then approaches the most ornate and grandiose of the tombs, closed by a slab of stone which, according to the monk, would require “seven very large and strong men” to lift it (Kibler, 1981, p. 81, l. 1894).⁴³ An inscription on the same stone declares that

He who will lift
This slab by his unaided strength
Will free all the man and women
Who are imprisoned in the land. (Kibler, 1981, p. 81, ll. 1900-1903).⁴⁴

The knight then proceeds to take hold of the slab of stone and lifts it “Without the least difficulty” (Kibler, 1981, p. 81, l. 1912),⁴⁵ eliciting the admiration of the monk and discouraging his hostile pursuers from further opposing a man chosen by destiny.

This episode is described by Micha (1948, 37) as the first instance of a romance containing a sword trial, although in a different form. In this article, the author puts particular emphasis on the journey through the land of the dead represented by Lancelot’s quest through the land of Gorre, which imprisons all newcomers and never allows them to leave. The knight then delivers his queen and countrymen, an exploit

⁴²All references in this thesis are to the 1981 bilingual edition curated by William W. Kibler, based on Bibliothèque Nationale MS 794. The episode of the future cemetery occupies ll. 1836-1996.

⁴³ “Set homes / plus forz que moi et vos ne somes” (Kibler, 1981, 81, ll. 1897-98).

⁴⁴ “Cil qui levera / cele lame seus par son cors / gitera ces et celes fors / qui sont an la terre en prison” (Kibler, 1981, 80, ll. 1900-1903).

⁴⁵ “Si que de neant ne s’i grieve” (Kibler, 1981, 80, l. 1912).

described in terms very close to how the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus⁴⁶ dramatises the harrowing of Hell, as noted by Micha (1948, 40) and Le Rider (1991, 87). Indeed, both narratives centre on a deliverer rescuing captives from a land of torment, and often use similar lexicon. The captives of Gorre recognise Lancelot as “he / who will lead us out of exile / and free us from the great misery” (Kibler, 1981, p. 83, ll. 1413-14), a cry that may echo John the Baptists’s, “Ecce Agnus Dei [...] veniens sedentibus nobis in tenebris et umbra mortis” (Kim, 1973, XVIII, 3, ll. 7-8; 15-16).⁴⁷ More convincing, however, is the use of terms such as prison and imprisonment in both texts. The Gospel of Nicodemus states that Christ, in coming to Hell, destroys the hardest prison and frees the prisoners (Kim, 1973, XXIII, 1, ll. 7-9),⁴⁸ just as the captives of Gorre are described as “cil qu’il avoit delivrez / et de prison desprisonez” (Kibler, 19981, p. 170, ll. 4087-88). More generally, it stands to reason that a tale of deliverance written in a Christian context would have similarities to scripture, be it apocryphal or otherwise.

Micha’s reading of the material also establishes an analogy between the stone slab covering Lancelot’s tomb and the sword taken by Arthur from within the stone and anvil, both of whom descend, according to him, from the episode of the golden bough in Book VI of the *Æneid*,⁴⁹ with what he calls “a slight transposition” (Micha, 1948, 41). In his 2000 monograph on *Merlin*, Micha briefly returns to the subject of *Lancelot*, adding that the golden writing on Arthur’s sword, which describes the trial and the prize awaiting the triumphant hero (see section 1.1.1), may have been inspired by the writing on the stone slab covering Lancelot’s future tomb. This inscription, too, is both a description of the trial itself – the lifting of the stone – and of the destiny promised as recompense for success – the freeing of the captives. It could, therefore, be argued to have the same performative value as the writing on the sword, although in Lancelot’s case it is not as immediately obvious. Micha (1948, 57) goes as far as to argue that the

⁴⁶ In the edition of the Gospel of Nicodemus referenced here, curated by H. C. Kim and based on *codex Einsidlensis*, the descent of Christ into the underworld occupies chapters 16 through 27.

⁴⁷ “Here is God’s Lamb [...] who comes to us as we sit in darkness and in the shadow of death” (Kim, 1973, XVIII, 3, ll. 7-8; 15-16, translation mine).

⁴⁸ “Iesu [...] firmum carcerem confregit, et eiecit captivos” (Kim, 1973, XXIII, 1, ll. 7-9).

⁴⁹ This episode will be treated in detail in section 1.2.3.

motif of writing as part of the trial originates in Chrétien's *Lancelot* and subsequently finds great popularity and spreads to different contexts and works.⁵⁰

Several analyses of the episode of the future cemetery are possible, but it is generally agreed that it constitutes both a trial of election and a moment of crossing into the liminal space between life and death. Le Rider (1991), whose analysis will be treated in Chapter 2, focuses on the importance of death imagery to the entire romance, analysing the parallels between it and the Gospel of Nicodemus and coming to the conclusion that *Lancelot* could be, "for the XII century, the only *katabasis* of Christian inspiration" (98, translation mine). Noreiko (1973), on the other hand, offers a different outlook, focusing less on the land of Gorre as an underworld and more on the elective value of the Future Cemetery trial. According to him, the thesis of the romance is "to push courtly love to the point where it clashes with the needs of chivalry, to show that courtly love must go beyond these needs to become an end of its own" (Noreiko, 1973, 465).⁵¹ Therefore, although Lancelot does prove himself "chosen by destiny" through completion of this trial (Noreiko, 1973, 480), election alone does not guarantee his ultimate success. Indeed, the trial itself is described as first and foremost an act of prowess, having little to do with proving the knight worthy of loving the queen, which is the second and most important goal of the narrative. Lancelot's prowess makes him victorious, his election confirms his worth untarnished by the shame of riding in the cart, but only through absolute, conscious obedience in love can he finally earn both victory in combat and the privilege of serving Guinevere.⁵² Nevertheless, Noreiko (1973, 465) does confirm the existence of a correlation between the quest through the land of Gorre and other mythical *katabases*, acknowledging the value of the argument even as he focuses on other aspects of the romance.

⁵⁰ The latter part of the argument, pertaining to the writing on the tombstone, seems more plausible than the former. The hypothesis of the golden bough being transformed into a stone to be lifted, and then again into a sword to be extracted from a stone, delineates a rather complicated narrative evolution that Micha himself does not support in a satisfactory manner, stating it as fact rather than striving to prove it.

⁵¹ All direct quotes from Noreiko are my own translations from the original French.

⁵² Lancelot's trial, although unmistakably elective, does not therefore lead to the hero's complete victory, as in Arthur's case and Wulfstan's. The renown gained back by the victorious knight is here only a means to an end, and must be sacrificed again. This, together with the differences in imagery and execution, contributes to making this episode a relatively unconvincing analogue for the Arthurian trial.

Jaeger (2012) agrees with Micha in linking Lancelot's exploit to the Arthurian trial by highlighting their elective natures, the predetermined destiny they indicate, and the messianic promise implicit in both.⁵³ He does, however, note that the funereal character of Lancelot's trial is absent in the Arthurian episode. The fact that the trials are both manifestations of the Christian God's will may go some way towards explaining their similarities, as Chrétien, too, has his heroes act within a markedly Christian context. This is also evident in the fact that when a young, promising knight inevitably falls from grace at the beginning of his story, what follows is not tragedy but rather rebirth (Jaeger, 2012, 168). The hero overcomes his flaws and expiates his failings, coming to earn glory and love, in a process that echoes the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. However, Jaeger's analysis sees Lancelot's association to the messiah as meant to generate identification and emulation, which is considered more important than any doctrinal meaning which could be conveyed by associating Christ with a courtly adulterer. In other words, Chretien's *Lancelot* makes use of the Christian faith as

a means of heightening and exalting the hero and his otherwise questionable story of shame, humiliation, and heroism in the service of the queen. The graveyard episode and the messianic allusions are accretions on Lancelot's skin-ego, not Christianising metaphysics. The pseudo-religious element injects large doses of religiously/mythically charged charisma into the hero (Jaeger, 2012, 184).⁵⁴

The main counterargument to considering Lancelot's trial as an analogue for the sword in the stone comes from Marzella (2022). Indeed, the author mentions the episode of the future cemetery, describes it briefly, and concludes that it is "evidently very distant" from the Arthurian trial (Marzella, 2022, 69, translation mine) thereby

⁵³ The messianic value attributed to the quest through Gorre by the imagery of death and rebirth could be argued to be present in *Merlin* in a more direct fashion, as the prophet explicitly promises a sign from God and a chosen ruler to come (Micha, 2000a, 246). Moreover, the messianic role attributed to Arthur is also functional to his destiny, tightly linked to the search for the Grail.

⁵⁴ Whether or not Robert de Boron belongs to Jaeger's "educated *romanciers* of the twelfth and early thirteenth century" (2012, 183), in other words, whether *Merlin* conveys a real metaphysical message or merely seems to do so, is an intriguing question but one that cannot be satisfactorily answered within the bounds of this thesis. It is therefore left to future exploration.

dismissing the connection.⁵⁵ It is undeniable that the visual imagery is very different, as Lancelot lifts a stone rather than an object embedded in a stone. Moreover, the emphasis placed on physical strength distinguishes him rather sharply from Arthur and Wulfstan, who were unlikely heroes precisely because of their apparent weakness and meekness (see section 1.1.3). However, even keeping to Marzella's own framework of definition, similarities do exist between the episodes, which are all clearly trials of election meant to mark one man above all others as destined for greatness. For instance, the figure of the arbiter is present in the person of the monk, and the lady Lancelot is escorting, together with the two pursuing knights, may be considered an audience, although they only hear of the trial and do not witness it directly. Moreover, the cemetery is unmistakably a sacred space, located near a place of worship. Lastly, Lancelot could be argued to start from a position of relative disadvantage due to the shame and dishonour he carries since the fateful encounter with the cart,⁵⁶ although there is no evidence of the monk's being aware of it, or of the fact's having any bearing on the trial. It should also be noted that there are no antagonists, although the monk's statement that only seven men together could move the stone may be argued to imply the possibility of such antagonists existing. Nevertheless, Lancelot's trial fits the definition loosely at best, and is much closer to the type of test faced by another, much earlier hero: Theseus.

1.2.2 Theseus and his Father's Sword

This episode, not mentioned in Micha (1948) but inserted in his 2000 monograph and considered part of the legendary substratum⁵⁷ of Robert's Merlin, is narrated in

⁵⁵ This hurried dismissal of the episode presents the same unfortunate lack of argumentation as Micha's previous statement of its relevance. The trial undergone by Lancelot does not require the hero to extract an object from within a solid mass, which should disqualify it according to either author's definition of the narreme, yet it does not lack relevant similarities. Although it is ultimately an unlikely candidate, it nonetheless warrants an analysis, which the present thesis attempts to provide.

⁵⁶ See Kibler, 1981, ll. 320-444.

⁵⁷ While it is impossible to precisely identify this substratum, which doubtlessly includes written and oral material now lost, it should be noted that Plutarch's *Lives* is extremely unlikely to have been a direct source of inspiration for Robert's *Merlin*. Indeed, according to Pade (2014, 536), Plutarch's works probably did not circulate at all, during the Middle Ages, in the area which the author dubs "the Latin West". Although some evidence exists of English libraries containing the "philosophical writings" of Plutarch (Pade, 2014, 537), these most likely only comprised the *Moralia* and the probably spurious *Institutio Traiani*.

Plutarch's *Vitae Parallælae*.⁵⁸ Here, Plutarch draws a parallel between Theseus and Romulus, two great kings beloved by their people, who founded cities destined to have great power, and whose existence was situated in the nebulous space between history and myth. The comparison with Arthur, the once and future king of British legend, is therefore understandably tempting. Theseus, like Arthur, grows up ignoring the identity of his father,⁵⁹ until “in his young manhood” he displays both physical prowess and “a firm spirit” (Perrin, 1914, 13). At this point he is taken by his mother to face his trial. To prove himself worthy of being recognised by his father and becoming heir to the Athenian throne, the hero must lift “a great rock” under which his father has hidden “a sword and a pair of sandals” (Perrin, 1914, 9). Like Arthur and Lancelot, he accomplishes this with no difficulty and lifts the stone “easily” (Perrin, 1914, 13).⁶⁰ If on the one hand this trial involves the retrieval of a sword, however, on the other hand the weapon is reached by removing the stone rather than by lifting it out of the stone. This seems to prove the hero's “vigour of body” (Perrin, 1914, 13)⁶¹ rather than his predestination to rule, and indeed there seems to be no place for destiny or divine intervention in this episode.

Micha (2000b) argues in favour of this episode being an analogue of the Arthurian trial chiefly on the basis of its elective value, which the author considers comparable to the episodes found in the *Aeneid* and in the *Saga of the Völsungs*.⁶² It is true that Theseus' success in the trial leads to an election, as he earns the right and the means to be recognised as his father's heir; upon coming to Athens, he simply shows Ægeus the sword and the king immediately “embrace[s] him, and formally recognize[s] him before an assembly of the citizens” (Perrin, 1914, 25). Moreover, the future ruler is warmly welcomed by his subjects due to his “ἀνδραγαθία” (Perrin, 1914, 24; Ziegler,

⁵⁸ All quotations in this thesis come from Perrin's 1914 bilingual edition, although the critical edition of the Greek text curated by Ziegler in 1960 has also been consulted. The episode under examination is in chapter 6, although chapter 12 is also relevant, as it narrates the hero's true triumph and reward.

⁵⁹ “Æthra kept his true birth concealed from Theseus” (Perrin, 1914, 13), just as Arthur “firmly believed” he was Antor's son (Micha, 2000a, 248, translation mine).

⁶⁰ The text as presented in both Perrin (1914, 12) and Ziegler (1960, 5) expresses the ease of success through the adverb “ῥαδίως”.

⁶¹ Perrin (1914, 12) and Ziegler (1960, 5) both carry the reading “ἄμα τῆ τοῦ σώματος ῥώμῃ”.

⁶² These two sources are cited by Micha (2000b) as more potential analogues, and accordingly they will be treated respectively in sections 1.2.3 and 1.3.1 of the present thesis.

1960, 10), a word that Perrin translates as “manly valour” (1914, 25) but which could also mean “manly virtue” (LSJ,⁶³ n.d.). While election is only one element of the Arthurian trial, and is not sufficient in itself to classify an analogue, Anderson (2004) also argues in favour of a connection existing between Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* and Robert’s *Merlin*. He firmly states that the difference between pulling the sword out of the stone and lifting the stone to reach the sword “is of course neither here nor there”, as what truly matters in both cases is the test of strength, proving the hero’s paternity,⁶⁴ and the acquisition of a weapon (Anderson, 2004, 142).⁶⁵ The author concludes that Theseus represents a similar archetype to Arthur, denying the possibility of the sword in the stone being either an isolated incident or a heroic trope (Anderson, 2004, 144).

As previously mentioned, Theseus plays the role of the good king *par excellence* in Athenian tradition, however contradictory that may seem. Agard (1928) and Shapiro (1991) argue that his figure evolves both as a man and as a symbol, providing a realistic life story while always representing the core values of the time, and therefore remaining a hero the people could rally behind. Agard in particular describes his progress, beginning as a hero among heroes, then coming to be worshipped more and more as defender of the weak, “a Pericles among heroes” (Agard, 1928, 89), to the point where Plutarch records his tomb acting as a place of respite and sanctuary for escaped slaves and “all poor people who fear those in power” (Agard, 1928, 90).⁶⁶ Moreover, Den Boer (1969) argues that Plutarch’s account of Theseus’ life has him struggle initially,

⁶³ The *Liddell, Scott, Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon*, cited here and henceforth as LSJ, was consulted in the electronic version available online.

⁶⁴ Indeed, as Anderson (2004, 142) rightly points out, both heroes are conceived by trickery. Ægeus is “persuaded [...] or beguiled” into lying with Æthra, and only discovers her identity afterwards (Perrin, 1914, 9); Perrin (1914, 8) and Ziegler (1960, 3) both employ here the verb “διᾶπτάω”, meaning “to deceive utterly” (LSJ, n.d.). As for Arthur, his conception is made possible by Merlin, who temporarily gives Utiens the appearance of Egerne’s husband (Micha, 2000a, 223-25), as noted in section 1.1.1. This unlawful conception subsequently leads to both heroes being kept in the dark as to their true parentage, as noted at the beginning of this section.

⁶⁵ This view of the Arthurian trial is diametrically opposite to that adopted in the present thesis. As established in section 1.1, and indeed as stated in Robert’s text, Arthur triumphs despite not being the strongest man, because he is chosen by God. This difference between him and Theseus, who shows by his own strength of body and mind that he is worthy of the throne, seems too large to be dismissed as Anderson does.

⁶⁶ The translation of this passage provided by Perrin (1914, 85) is very close to Agard’s quotation and will, therefore, not be included here. Either rendition is supported by the Greek text (Perrin, 1914, 84; Ziegler, 1960, 35). Interestingly, this description is almost chivalric, *ante litteram* of course, in its focus on the figure of a good king protecting the weak and helpless.

somewhat like Arthur, to gain the approval and support of the aristocracy.⁶⁷ However, Theseus' eventual success as a statesman is complete, to the point where his enemies can only act against him while he is absent.⁶⁸ Upon returning to Athens, his human flaws and weaknesses are portrayed in his attempt to regain power by force, but his greatness lies in the final decision to not pursue this avenue, but rather to give up power.⁶⁹ His willingness to bend to the will of the people is, however, a necessary trait for monarchy to exist as a positive entity in the Athenian tradition, where the Persian kingdom was not only an ever-present enemy but also carried with it the threat of slavery and oppression (Den Boer, 1969, 4). This quality, while undeniably positive, should not be confused with the Christian humility displayed by Arthur and Wulfstan.

Although Theseus and Arthur may share common traits as archetypes of royal excellence, the connection between their two trials of election remains debatable. Donà (2014, 77) considers Theseus' myth a certain source for the Arthurian episode, highlighting the fact that in both cases the sword allows the hero to be recognised as the king's son and prove his right to the throne. However, it should be noted that in Arthur's case his paternity is of secondary importance and it is revealed not by his success in the trial but by Merlin's subsequent intervention.⁷⁰ Moreover, Theseus undergoes a trial of strength, lifting a heavy boulder, while Arthur proves his election by succeeding without being the strongest contestant. This is the argument proposed by Marzella (2022, 74),

⁶⁷ This is not fully supported by the text. If on the one hand it is true that Theseus has to make promises to gain the aristocracy's support, it is also true that the noblemen of Attica are either "readily persuaded" or "[choose] to be persuaded" (Perrin, 1914, 53) and no explicit mention is made of opposition or struggle. On the other hand, the country nobles are later stated to have "long been hostile to Theseus" (Perrin, 1914, 75), so that Den Boer's argumentation still maintains its overall validity.

⁶⁸ Theseus is, at this point, employed in a quest to find wives for himself and his friend Peirithoüs. Taking advantage of his absence, a powerful enemy foments the noblemen against Theseus, going as far as to offer up the city to the invading Tyndaridae. This is narrated in chapters 31 and 32 (Perrin, 1914; Ziegler, 1960).

⁶⁹ This is an interesting reading of a passage that does not reveal Theseus' motivations and thoughts; Plutarch simply narrates of his desire "to rule again as before" and of his attempt to "force his wishes upon [his opponents]" (Perrin, 1914, 81). This attempt ends with Theseus "overpowered [...], despairing of his cause" and finally leaving the region (Perrin, 1914, 81). Den Boer's interpretation of the text is not the only possible reading, although it is of interest to the present thesis.

⁷⁰ This is the case in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (Cooper, 1998, 13) and, according to some, in the original ending of *Merlin*. Micha (1994, 175-79) and Micha (2000a, 293-98) include this part as a separate section, titled "Fin Possible du *Merlin* (d'après le manuscrit de Modène)". The manuscript in question is ms Modena, Biblioteca Estense Universitaria E 39.

highlighting the extreme difficulty in justifying a hypothetical direct relationship between the two stories, belonging as they do to cultures and times very far from each other. The author acknowledges the similarities between the two heroes, starting with their conception happening through deception. However, he also points out that Theseus' trial has no public component and no others may attempt it, as the stone and tokens have been kept secret by his mother by order of Ægeus. Furthermore, Theseus is not tested or legitimated by a supernatural force, as his trial has been organised by his father. To summarise, although Theseus and Arthur are in many respects similar, their respective sword trials remain divisive. There is, however, a classical hero whose mission is more markedly divine. His story will be explored in the next section.

1.2.3 Æneas and the Golden Bough

In the sixth book of the *Æneid*,⁷¹ Æneas undertakes the distinctly epic task of accomplishing a katabasis, a journey into the underworld. The trial which will prove him worthy of attempting such a journey occupies a section of the book extending from line 124 to line 211, including the explanation given to the hero by the Cumaean Sibyl. According to the prophetess, the trial has been predisposed by the queen of the underworld herself,⁷² and it is accomplished by finding within the forest a golden bough, described as “aureus et foliis et lento vimine ramus” (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 137-38). This bough may only be plucked by the hand of one who is called by fate, and will resist an unfated attempt by proving impossible to detach, even with tools made of hard iron (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 145-48), so that the hero's triumph has elective value. According to Micha (1948, 39) this episode is the “true origin” of the Arthurian trial, the original archetype from which Chrétien departed by having Lancelot lift a slab of stone rather than pluck a branch off a tree.⁷³ The author

⁷¹ All mentions of the *Æneid* refer to the bilingual edition curated by Ramous and Baldo in 1998, whose Latin text follows the authoritative critical edition curated by Geymonat in 1973.

⁷² “Proserpina [...] / instituit” (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 142-43).

⁷³ The circulation of Virgilian texts and related material throughout Mediaeval Europe is well attested, notably by the wealth of manuscripts recovered containing Servius' and Servius Auctus' commentaries (for a detailed list see Murgia, 1975). As Servius is considered at least partly responsible for the popularity of the so-called Augustan interpretation of the *Æneid* (Thomas, 2001, ch. 3), it stands to reason that the poem would hold some appeal for an author like Robert, aiming to write the story of a great king. It would be interesting, however, to know how the bough-stone-sword transposition took place, or how Micha thinks it did, but

therefore argues that at its origin the narrative form of the trial carried with it a journey into the afterlife, which was lost in later reworkings including the Arthurian episode (Micha 1948, 41). This connection, too, has been debated, as will be shown in this section.

Micha (1948) highlights the elective dimension of the trial as a possible link between Arthur and Æneas. The latter's trial is made explicitly elective by the Sibyl's own caveat, "*si te fata vocant*", meaning "if you are called by fate" (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, l. 146, translation mine). Moreover, in both narratives the hero's election is made manifest by the ease with which he accomplishes the task of retrieving the object, be it bough or blade.⁷⁴ The author maintains that Arthur gains a worldly throne rather than accomplish a divinely ordained mission, as the narrative elements of the trial are reworked in a more secular way and lose their higher meaning (Micha, 1948, 42). He concludes that if this theme does indeed come from Virgil, it is yet another piece of evidence of the influence he had over the mediaeval imagination and on the "*métier poétique*" of the time (Micha, 1948, 50). The argument is maintained in Micha (2000b, 57), although here the conclusion is that the motif belongs to the world of legend, and it is impossible to say for certain if Robert came in contact with it through oral tales or by other means.

Indeed, the trial undergone by Æneas has elective value, as acknowledged by Marzella (2022, 77), even though the election is not exclusive. Æneas is, in fact, one of the privileged few who can retrieve the bough, which Charon later describes as "*longo post tempore visum*" (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 409) implying that others have succeeded in bringing it to him before. Once again, there are no antagonists attempting the trial with Æneas, but it is implied that others have tried and failed in the

unfortunately the topic is not delved into in the text, and the reader must be left wondering. As a result, the connection appears neither obvious nor entirely persuasive.

⁷⁴ Indeed, as noted in section 1.1.1, Arthur simply rides by the stone, grips the sword by the hilt, and carries it away; the text reads, "*si vint par iqui a cheval, si la prant par le poignal, si l'emporte*" (Micha, 2000a, 254). The passage's syntax contributes, through the use of parataxis, to paint in the reader's mind the picture of an action done quickly and unthinkingly, with no particular effort. In Æneas' case, the ease of his success is established in the Sybil's instructions, "*ipse volens facilisque sequetur*" (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 146, italics mine), and subsequently realised as the hero seizes the bough "*extemplo*", meaning "immediately, with no hesitation" (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 210).

past, or may try and fail in the future.⁷⁵ Regardless, the episode qualifies as a trial of election and not of strength, as strength alone cannot win the bough (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, ll. 147-48), although the ease with which the hero finally plucks the golden bough has been much debated, as will be shown shortly. A similar analysis is found in Segal (1968, 75), where Æneas is said to be “singled out for extraordinary success” and the Sibyl’s words are described as “implicitly contrast[ing] his easy possession of the bough with the others (if any there were) who tried unsuccessfully to possess it.” Finally, Parvulescu (2005) highlights the role of the bough as a passport meant to reassure the chthonian deities of the respectful conduct of visitors, a sort of guarantee of the bearer’s piety. This, too, could be a point of contact with the Arthurian trial, as both heroes are chosen for success thanks to a particular virtue.

Another significant similarity between the two episodes is the presence of an arbiter or judge. Rather like Lanfranc in the episode of Wulfstan’s staff (see section 1.1.2), the Cumaean Sibyl does not directly witness the trial, but she does explain the rules and acknowledge the hero’s success, thereby assuming both the role of the archbishop and of the golden writing in *Merlin*. Parvulescu (2005, 882) notes how the Sibyl establishes the two conditions for Æneas’ *katabasis*, namely, the celebration of Misenus’ funeral and the plucking of the golden bough. Brooks (1953, 262) describes her as an external agent, a figure of history and authenticity who also marks the difference between Æneas’ journey to the underworld and Ulysses’. Indeed, the Trojan hero knows what awaits him before he undertakes the journey, thanks to the Sibyl’s help and guidance. Brooks (1953, 258) also highlights the Sibyl’s role as the arbiter of the trial, demanding a sign before she allows a journey that, to her pragmatic and folk-wise eye, is a perversion of nature. He therefore argues that the golden bough itself is not supernatural but merely unnatural, a dead part growing from a living whole, a mirror image of the living man breaking the laws of nature to reach the land of the dead (Brooks 1953, 278), giving it a symbolic reading but not connecting it to divinity or virtue.

⁷⁵ This implication may be found in the Sibyl’s speech, as she specifies that an unfated person may well attempt the trial, and precisely describes the inevitable failure such an attempt would be met with; the text reads, “aliter non viribus ulli / vincere nec duro poteris convellere ferro” (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, ll. 147-48).

The symbolism of the golden bough has been much debated and there is no definitive reading, especially as it has no known literary antecedents, so that both ancient and modern theories regarding it are speculative (Parvulescu, 2005, 883). Marzella (2022, 77) argues that the bough, besides growing off the tree rather than having to be pulled from within a solid block, does not symbolise a position of power or authority. Indeed, the mysterious golden bough has been read variously as an embodiment of the antinomy of life and death (Brooks, 1953), as a symbol of the hero's piety (Parvulescu, 2005), and even an allegory of Æneas' own soul (Weber, 1995), but it is clear that its possession does not lead Æneas directly to his glorious destiny. On the other hand, Parvulescu (2005, 907) also notes that gold is generally a symbol of the divine, and in this episode is meant to suggest the "presence of the divine will in the realm of mankind", a reading which neatly fits with the symbolism of the bough as a token of the hero's willingness to obey divine direction and once again potentially brings the episode closer to the Arthurian trial.⁷⁶

Marzella's (2022, 77) final argument, stating that in this case the election leads not to a confirmation of identity or destiny, but merely to the possibility of undertaking the journey, is contradicted first and foremost by the explicit mention of destiny, "fata", by the Sibyl (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 147). Weber (1995), Avery (1966), and Brooks (1953) all agree that Æneas' success in the trial is instrumental to the final consummation of his destiny and that the central book of the poem is the apex of his transformation from Trojan to Roman hero, a metamorphosis which would not be possible without the *katabasis*. It could be argued that in this case identity is not confirmed as much as erased and re-created, and that the true confirmation of Æneas' destiny is in the prophecy he receives from his father Anchises in the underworld. Nonetheless, the fact that the hero who succeeds in plucking the golden bough must be

⁷⁶ It may be useful to add here that Æneas' piety, which undoubtedly includes readiness to forgo his own wishes in the name of obedience to the gods, as highlighted in his leaving Dido in Book IV, cannot be directly equated to Arthur's humility. The latter is framed and conceptualised as a Christian virtue, and finds a place in a value system that is obviously very different from Virgil's. The two trials are brought closer by the fact that they both seem to base divine election on one particular virtue of the hero's, but the virtue valued by Proserpina is not the virtue valued by the Christian God.

called by fate is still a strong argument in favour of this election being an important stepping stone to a great destiny. However, even Æneas' success in the trial and his nature of chosen hero have been the object of debate.

Indeed, the Sybil's words are clear; the bough will "follow [the hero's hand] easily, as if willingly" (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 146, translation mine), while any man not fated to take the journey will be unable to rip or cut it away from the tree. However, when Æneas plucks the bough, it resists and is described as "cunctantem", meaning "hesitant" (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 211, translation mine). Although Avery (1966, 270) attempts to blame the apparent inconsistency on the fact that the *Æneid* was never finished, and Virgil did not have a chance to smooth out all problematic *loci*, this line of reasoning has found little popularity. Avery (1966, 271) also maintains that the Sybil's declaration that "ipse volens facilisque sequetur / si te fata vocant" (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 146-47) is not a guarantee of ease but merely of success, which seems rather doubtful, considering the presence of the word *facilis*, an adjective which can mean both "easy" and "willing". Segal (1968) argues that the Sibyl's order to "carpe manu" (Ramous et Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 146) does not necessarily mean "seize with the naked hand", as in many instances *manu* after a verb of action has a meaning close to "forcefully". He adds that the Sibyl's instructions never suggest Æneas should be gentle, and he does as he was told by plucking the bough forcefully, displaying at the same time his "heroic temper" (Segal, 1968, 77). According to his reading, Virgil chose to surprise the reader by having the bough cease to be passive and overturn the expectation of "smooth, divinely prepared success" (Segal, 1968, 77). Segal connects this choice to the other *loci* in the poem which show ambivalence toward the destiny of Rome, viewing the beautiful but hidden bough as a symbolic anticipation of the loss of innocence awaiting Italy and its inhabitants (Segal, 1968, 77) as they step onto the Roman path of glory and war.

To summarise, the episode of the golden bough is a very interesting possibility as an analogue for the Arthurian sword trial. The two narremes share an elective nature based on a specific virtue, they are both manifestations of divine will and blessing, and they are both overseen by an arbiter testifying their validity. Moreover, the tree from

which the golden bough grows is said to be sacred to Juno Inferna, and the episode coincides with Misenus' funeral, so that arguably the sacred time and place are also present. However, the visual image of an object being pulled from within a block is absent in the *Aeneid*, the antagonists are only implied as a possibility, and the hero is not represented as weak or starting from a position of disadvantage. The role of the trial as an immediate access to power is another difference between the two, as is the symbolic role of the object to be retrieved. Marzella (2022, 77) finally deems it unlikely that this episode should be at the origin of the Arthurian sword trial, despite Virgil's great popularity and influence throughout the Middle Ages, but the textual evidence still leaves ample room for debate. Thus far, Marzella's work has provided the chief counterargument to Micha's theories, but the next section explores his own proposal as to the origin of the sword trial as a narrative form.

1.3 Possible Origins: The Scandinavian Connection

This section will cover a different line of thought, expressed by Francesco Marzella in his 2022 book *Excalibur: La Spada nella Roccia tra Mito e Storia*. Indeed, in addition to arguing against the Greco-Roman connection delineated in section 1.2, Marzella (2022) provides his own hypothesis of an original narrative scheme from which the Arthurian episode may have descended, and claims that this ancestor-narrative also originated a series of narratives found in Scandinavian sagas. The analogues he suggests are examined here in pairs, as they share relevant themes and structures, and other sources are brought to bear to broaden the scope of the reflection. Although Marzella's (2022) declared goal is not to find the closest analogue but only to establish links between the works, each episode will still be compared to the touchstones established in section 1.1 of the present thesis.

1.3.1 Sacred Trees and Bear Warriors

The first analogue proposed by Marzella (2022) is to be found in the *Saga of the Volsungs*,⁷⁷ first compiled anonymously in the 13th century. The text is classified by

⁷⁷ The edition used in this thesis is *The Saga of the Volsungs : The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, curated by Byock in 2012, and based on Ny kgl. Saml. 1824b 4^{to} and Olsen's diplomatic edition of the same. A bilingual edition, edited and translated by Finch (1965) and based on the same manuscript and diplomatic edition, has also been consulted.

Meli (1993) as belonging to the *Fornaldarsögur*, or “legendary sagas” (Meli, 1993, 18),⁷⁸ and more specifically to the subgroup of the heroic sagas, which tend to contain archaic ethics and values, such as the importance of vengeance and the binding nature of oaths. Indeed, the plot of the saga is built on a series of acts of vengeance, “a sort of universal feud” (Meli, 1993, 22), reflecting the importance of vengeance as a juridical instrument within Germanic society and the relationship between it and honour. What causes the failure of the system of vengeance and leads to tragic conclusions, in Meli’s view, is the nature of the heroes themselves, who are similar to berserkers and therefore characterised by terrible violence and a lack of moderation. The narrative archetype of the knight has no place in this saga, and the hero is still a potential element of chaos and disturbance to the social order, by virtue of their very exceptionality. Although the story of the Völsung is very family-focused, as remarked by Mancinelli (1993), the monarchic symbolism is present both in the royal lineage and in the fact that the first part of the saga, especially Sigurðr’s youth,⁷⁹ is probably a celebration of King Hakon IV of Norway (Meli, 1993, 11). The episode of interest is situated toward the beginning of the saga, in Chapter 3.

This trial, like Arthur’s and Æneas’, is masterminded by a deity,⁸⁰ who strides into the central hall of king Völsungr’s abode during the celebration of his daughter’s betrothal and plunges a sword into the trunk of the Barnstokkr, a tree which grows at the centre of the building. He then declares the sword “a gift” (Byock, 2012, 37) from himself to whoever may pull it out of the tree. As was the case with Arthur, the rich and powerful are the first to attempt the trial but fail, until Sigmundr, king Völsungr’s son, finally draws the sword from the tree easily, “as if [it] lay loose for him” (Byock, 2012, 37).⁸¹ This marks the beginning of a feud between Völsung’s family and the vengeful

⁷⁸ All direct quotes from Meli (1993) are my own translations from the original Italian.

⁷⁹ As was the case for *Merlin*, the choice has been made to prefer a faithful spelling for Norse words and names, and to avoid confusion, this will be used throughout, regardless of the choices made by the quoted scholars and editors. The only exceptions are the titles of published works, where the anglicised orthography is maintained.

⁸⁰ The text describes a man whose looks are unfamiliar to the assembly (Byock, 2012, 37; Finch, 1965, 4), but whose mottled cape and missing eye reveal him as the god Óðinn, who is often described in such a manner (Byock, 2012, note 18; Finch, 1965, 4, note 4).

⁸¹ This passage, which reads “ok var sem laust lægi fyrir honum” (Finch, 1965, 5 verso), is translated by Finch as “as if he found it quite loose” (1965, 5 recto), maintaining the core element of sudden ease.

Siggeir, but the sword remains Sigmundr's until his death, when Oðinn himself breaks it in Chapter 11.⁸² In Chapter 15, the two pieces of the blade are reforged into Gramr, the sword with which Sigmundr's son Sigurðr will slay the dragon Fafnir.⁸³ The temporary loss and eventual return of the supernatural weapon may encourage a comparison with the Arthurian matter; Malory narrates that the sword taken by Arthur from the stone is broken "in two pieces" in a duel with king Pellinore (Cooper, 1998, 28), and later substituted with Excalibur through the intervention of the Lady of the Lake (Cooper, 1998, 29).⁸⁴ The correspondence is not exact, and may be no more than a plot device to justify the existence of two legendary swords belonging to Arthur, but as there is no trace of the episode in *Merlin*, this line of enquiry will not be pursued further.

Marzella (2022, 85) argues that it is unlikely for this episode to have been modelled after the Arthurian trial, as there is no evidence of the prose *Merlin* being circulated in the Scandinavian area, even in translation. Moreover, although the Saga was first written after *Merlin*, the source matter is much older, referring to the time of the great Germanic migrations. The interpolation of an entire narrative episode from a Romance source or from a non-Germanic oral tradition in matter otherwise strongly tied to the northern tradition, carrying with it the necessity to paganise the narration of a miracle, is not quite plausible in this situation (Marzella, 2022, 86). There are also significant differences between the two episodes, so that it is finally possible to exclude the hypothesis of direct derivation of one story from the other. However, the possibility of a common narrative scheme from which both episodes have evolved independently remains. This theory is based upon the significant points of similarity between the two narremes, which have frequently been noticed and will now be explored in more detail.

⁸² Once again, the deity is not named but merely described as a one-eyed man in a hooded cloak, carrying a spear (Byock, 2012, 49-50; Finch, 1965, 20). Sigmundr strikes at him, and his sword "[breaks] in two" (Byock, 2012, 50), in other words, "brast í sundr í tvá hluti" (Finch, 1965, 20 verso).

⁸³ Interestingly, Gramr shares with Malory's version of the sword in the stone the ability to cut through an anvil. The former is tested in such a way to determine its quality, and splits the anvil in two (Byock, 2012, 57; Finch, 1950, 27), while the latter is found embedded in an "anvil of steel" placed on top of a "great stone" (Cooper, 1998, 8), as noted in section 1.1.1.

⁸⁴ Excalibur is eventually returned to the Lady as Arthur lies dying (Cooper, 1998, 515), but as Malory reminds the reader, "men say that he shall come again" (Cooper, 1998, 517). However, no mention is made in the text of his reclaiming Excalibur in case he should return, and therefore this last comparison seems far-fetched and will be abandoned.

Firstly, there is little doubt of the elective nature of the trial. A god poses the challenge, based on a criterion of his own choosing, and implicitly calls the hero to glory and adventure (Marzella, 2022, 86) by offering a peerless weapon as a gift. Marzella (2022), Meli (1993) and Koch (1994) all agree that Sigmundr's triumph constitutes a manifestation of Oðinn's blessing bestowed upon his descendant,⁸⁵ just as the god's apparition on the battlefield and his breaking of the blade mark the end of Sigmundr's triumphs and of his life. Byock (2012, note 1) also highlights the close relationship between Oðinn and the hero's family, reflected in the recurring element *sig*, meaning victory, in proper names of the Völsung line, as the deity was also sometimes called Sigtýr, victory god. Finally, Donà (2014) remarks that from Sigmundr's triumph, proving him to be Oðinn's chosen champion, derive both great sorrow and great fame, as Sigmundr becomes the target of Siggeir's vengeance but, in time, also comes to be a king and marry a princess whose name, Hjördís, means "Goddess of the sword" (Donà, 2014, 72). Likewise, the hero can only be killed when Oðinn revokes his blessing by breaking the hero's sword against his own lance, annulling the election.

The space in which the trial is set may not be sacred *strictu sensu*, but Marzella argues that it has an element of holiness by virtue of being built around the Barnstokkr. The tree, whose name translates as "child-trunk" (Finch, 1965, 4, note 1) is described variously as *eik* (oak) and *apaldr* (apple tree), both terms which were also used generically to mean "tree" (Byock, 2012, note 17). The image of the apple tree, however, is particularly evocative as it may be connected to Iðunn's apple tree, adding a symbolic meaning to the image (Byock, 2012, note 17). Marzella (2022, 88) does not mention this reading, but connects the Barnstokkr to the apple given by Oðinn to Rerir and his queen to ensure the continuation of their dynasty,⁸⁶ adding also that the apple tree was particularly favoured by Germanic populations for the ease with which it bore fruit. Marzella (2022, 88), Byock (2012, note 17), and Finch (1965, 4, note 1) are also

⁸⁵ Indeed, in Chapter 2 of the saga, the very existence of the Völsung line is ensured by Oðinn, who sends a wish-maiden – or a valkyrie, according to Finch's translation – with a magic apple to king Rerir so that he may have a son. This child, delivered after an overlong pregnancy, is Völsungr himself. For a detailed account of this part of the saga, see Byock (2012, 35-36; Finch, 1965, 3-4).

⁸⁶ See note 83.

unanimous in acknowledging a possible connection between the Barnstokkr and the sacred world tree Yggdrasill; just as the universe is constructed around the great ash (Finch, 1965, 4, note 1), Völsungr's abode is built around the central tree whose branches stretch through the roof (Byock, 2012, 36; Finch, 1965, 4). Therefore, the Barnstokkr "can be read as a symbol of fertility, regality and sacrality at the same time" (Marzella, 2022, 88, translation mine). Moreover, the time during which the trial happens is unmistakably sacred, being dedicated to the ritual celebration of marriage.

The importance of Signý's marriage as context for the trial has been highlighted by Ellis Davidson (1960). She firstly notes the well-documented presence of symbolic swords at Germanic area weddings, whether the blade acted as a reminder to the wife of the penalty for unfaithfulness or as a phallic symbol meant to grant fertility to the marriage, adding that a tree was also often present at Swedish weddings, and in Norway the custom was for the groom to plunge his sword into the roof beam as deep as it would go. The author acknowledges that the sword that only one man can pull out, like Arthur's, is an unmistakable sign of divine blessing and the right to rule, but prefers to focus on the Barnstokkr as a "guardian tree" associated with the luck of the family (Ellis Davidson, 1960, 4). Since the luck of family in this context depends on the bearing and rearing of sons, she deems it reasonable to suppose that Siggeir, the bridegroom, should have been the one to retrieve the sword from the tree as a token of an auspicious marriage. Indeed, Meli (1993, note 31) also notes that Siggeir seems to forgo the trial altogether, expecting a special treatment as guest and bridegroom.⁸⁷ Ellis Davidson corroborates her thesis by remarking that Signý's only son to survive to adulthood is Sinfjötli, whose father is Sigmundr, not Siggeir. As the sword is then passed on to Sigmundr's other son, Sigurðr, who reforges it and uses it to slay the dragon, the author argues that luck and valour are passed from one generation to the next through the

⁸⁷ The text does not quite support this claim, as it is stated that "The noblest men went up to it first, and then each of the others" (Byock, 2012, 37), implying that every man in the hall attempts the trial, including Siggeir. The latter's offer to buy the sword, moreover, is rebuffed by Sigmundr with the words, "You could have taken this sword from where it stood, no less than I did, if it were meant for you to carry it" (Byock, 2012, 37). Finch's (1960, 5) translation is very similar to Byock's. Therefore, the expectation of special treatment, however logical as a hypothesis, is not apparent in the text. However, the implication of social superiority of Siggeir over Sigmundr remains solid, as the former is not only the bridegroom and a guest of honour, but also a king in his own right.

family treasures, making the weapon a token of the “continuing power of the family” (Ellis Davidson, 1960, 18).⁸⁸

Considering the marriage context and its significance, it is apparent that Sigmundr, although not in a position of explicit disadvantage, is both socially inferior to his rival Siggeir and symbolically not meant to succeed. He is also the last to undergo the trial, like king David and, in a sense, Arthur. Marzella (2022, 87) also notes that Sigmundr, too, does not triumph thanks to his strength but simply because of destiny, as highlighted by the ease with which the sword seems to follow his hand. The high number of antagonists failing is another point of contact with the Arthurian trial, confirming that only one hero is destined to free the sword. The author also acknowledges the differences between the two episodes (Marzella, 2022, 86-88). Firstly, the core image is slightly different in the saga, as the sword is fixed into the tree and not a stone, and secondly there is no real arbiter to witness Sigmundr’s success, as Oðinn leaves before the attempts begin (Byock, 2012, 37; Finch, 1965, 5). Although Arthur and Wulfstan both accomplish their first prodigy in solitude, the two archbishops – the unnamed archbishop of Logres and Lanfranc – have no equivalent here. Nevertheless, the author concludes that Sigmundr’s sword has the same symbolic value as Arthur’s, being a godly gift and representing a regal investiture from the deity (Marzella, 2022, 88).

However, Donà (2014) considers the sword in the stone, destined for a hero to whom it brings power and victory, as a paradigmatic episode in the Norse sagas and not an isolated incident. Accordingly, Marzella brings to bear a second example of an Arthurian analogue, which he finds in the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*.⁸⁹ This saga tells the story of Hrólfr Kraki, a warrior chieftain who was widely considered to be one of the greatest kings of the ancient north. The anonymous XIV-century author drew on an

⁸⁸ The concept of a family heirloom, usually a weapon, embodying familial values and power is by no means an isolated incident, and will return in some of the other episodes treated in this thesis. Arguably, Arthur’s sword and Wulfstan’s staff are also symbolic of a specific set of values and virtues, which the hero must possess in order to triumph in the trial, although the family link is rather weakened in these cases. This reading will be further explored in Chapter 2.

⁸⁹ The edition referenced here is *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, curated by Byock in 1998 and translated from Desmond Slay’s edition of ms AM 285 4¹⁰. This translation was used alongside the critical edition curated by Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson (1943-44 b), in the electronic version.

extensive body of heroic lore, for which reason the similarities between this text and *Beowulf* suggest the existence of a common oral tradition in the mediaeval north (Byock, 1998, xxiv). The present thesis will focus on chapters 20 through 23 (Byock, 1998, 37-52),⁹⁰ which narrate the tale of the man-bear Björn and his sons. Like the *Saga of the Volsungs*, this text contains folktale motifs, elements of older heroic poetry, and traces of mythology, especially where Oðinn is concerned. They also share the social theme of strife among kindred, although the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* has a narrower scope and focuses on tensions and quarrels within the Danish royal family. The episode examined here is one of the few coming of age narratives in a saga which is otherwise more interested in mature characters (Byock, 1998, xi), and its protagonist is named Böðvarr Bjarki.

Böðvarr is the youngest of Björn's three sons, raised by their mother Bera after their father's death. Having foreseen his upcoming demise, the man-bear had instructed his beloved to send their children to a cave in the forest, to receive their inheritance according to their merits. In the cave they will find "a chest with three bottoms", with runes on it marking each son's inheritance, as well as three different weapons "embedded in the rock", so that each son "shall have the one intended for him" (Byock, 1998, 38).⁹¹ When the firstborn, Elfróði, is ready to leave his mother's house, he is taken to the cave and tries to take the sword left by his father, but the weapon remains "fast in the stone" and he cannot remove it (Byock, 1998, 40).⁹² He finally leaves with the smallest share of his father's treasure and a shortsword. The second son, Þorir, also tries to take the sword, but it holds fast⁹³ and he must settle for an axe (Byock, 1998, 41). The third, Böðvarr, is described as having "no blemish" (Byock, 1998, 40)⁹⁴ and is his mother's favourite. He avenges his father and ensures his mother remarries before leaving, taking with him the sword which "loosened as soon as he gripped the hilt"

⁹⁰ The division of chapters is different in Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson (1943-44 b), where the same events take place in chapters XXVI through XXXI.

⁹¹ See Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. XXVI).

⁹² See Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. XXVIII).

⁹³ The text as presented by Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. XXIX) repeats here the same phrase used to describe Elfróði's failure in chapter XXVIII, "ok er sverðit fast".

⁹⁴ Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. XXVII) reads "[...] ok var honum ekki neitt til lýta."

(Byock, 1998, 44).⁹⁵ This weapon has supernatural abilities of its own, as it cannot be drawn “without causing the death of a man” (Byock, 1998), and it may be used only three times in a man’s life, after which it may never be drawn by the same person again.⁹⁶

In his introduction to the saga, Byock (1998, xxv-xxviii) links the figure of Böðvarr Bjarki to the folktale archetype of the Bear’s Son and explains the similarities between the hero and Beowulf with their descent from this same scheme. In this tale, the hero is often the offspring of a human and a bear, and grows to display uncommon strength.⁹⁷ He sometimes receives an extraordinary weapon as an heirloom. He journeys with companions to an empty house, whose monstrous owner returns and mistreats one of the men, prompting the hero to wound it, chase it to the underworld, and finally kill it. Byock (1998, xxvii-xxviii) argues that Böðvarr does share plot points and characteristics with the folktale hero, but he is also developed as an epic character, and his dragon-slaying adventures are further away from the Bear’s Son archetype than Beowulf’s killing of Grendel. However, it is possible that the affinities between the two texts may originate from an older Scandinavian tale following a Bear’s Son type of hero. Interestingly, Arthur has also been argued to be a Bear’s Son hero, together with the aforementioned Theseus (Anderson, 2004).⁹⁸

The connection to the animal world also appears to be important to Böðvarr’s character. Indeed, not only is he the son of the man-bear Björn, but his mother is named

⁹⁵ Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. XXXI) reads “Verðr sverðit laust, þá hann tekr til hjaltanna.”

⁹⁶ See Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. XXXI).

⁹⁷ Böðvarr, unlike his brothers, is not born with superhuman strength. As both Elfróði and Þorir are only partly human, having respectively an elk’s and a dog’s hindquarters (Byock, 1998, 40; Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. XXVII), it is implied that this manifestation of their father’s ferine nature is responsible for their strength. However, later in the saga, Böðvarr will drink blood drawn from Elfróði’s leg and thereafter be “ahead of most men in strength and prowess” (Byock, 1998, 46), so that the description of the Bear’s Son still applies to him.

⁹⁸ The problem with Anderson’s argument lies, as noted in 1.2.2, in his easy dismissal of the differences between Arthur and Theseus, as well as those existing between both heroes and the Bear’s Son archetype. Moreover, Anderson’s sources do not include *Merlin*, which further limits the relevance of his argument to the present thesis. Nonetheless, the Bear’s Son archetype will be explored further in Chapter 3, where Beowulf is analysed as a possible Arthurian analogue.

Bera, which means “she-bear” (Byock, 1998, xviii).⁹⁹ The name Bjarki means “bearcub” or “little bear”, and may have been his original name, with the later addition of the moniker Böðvarr, meaning “warlike” from the Old Norse *böð*, “battle” (Byock, 1998, xviii). Arthur’s name, too, has several possible etymologies connected to ancient lexical roots for “bear”, be they Celtic, Latin, or Greek (Anderson, 2004). According to Byock (1998, xxix), Böðvarr has also been linked to the figure of the berserker warrior (*berserkr*),¹⁰⁰ who was thought of as a “were-bear”, part man and part beast. Although not explicitly a berserker, he does take the form of a bear and become invulnerable to weapons, notably in chapter 33 (Byock, 1998, 73-77).¹⁰¹ These supernatural abilities are similar to those of Odinic champions, and Oðinn is present in this saga as god of victory, or Sigtýr, like in the *Saga of the Völsungs*.

Marzella (2022) makes no mention of the Bear’s Son archetype and limits his analysis to the similarities between Böðvarr’s sword trial and Arthur’s. He notes that in both cases the trial consists in the extraction of an object from stone, and Böðvarr is in a position of relative disadvantage not only because he is the youngest, but also because his lack of animal characteristics also deprives him of the supernatural strength displayed by his brothers (Marzella, 2022, 100). Once again, however, physical strength is not necessary to succeed in the trial, as Böðvarr’s success is preordained by destiny. He is chosen, not only as his parents’ favourite, but also as the one among his brothers who will accomplish the greatest exploits, making this another trial of election (Marzella, 2022, 100). Moreover, although in this case the sword is not a symbol of royal power *per se*, the inheritance predisposed by prince Björn for his sons still suggests that the retrieval of the objects embodies the continuation of the royal bloodline. The trial and its results are also a manifestation of a superior will, which belongs neither to God or to a god, as was the case with Arthur and Wulfstan or with Sigmundur, but rather to Björn, whose supernatural nature is highlighted by his ability to foretell the future and to gift his children magic weapons (Marzella, 2022, 100). The judge or arbiter of the trial is completely absent from this episode, however, as are the

⁹⁹ The dictionary consulted for all Norse words is the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, curated by the University of Copenhagen, available online, and henceforth referred to as ONP. For the meaning of Böðvarr’s mother’s name, see ONP, s.v. “bera.”

¹⁰⁰ ONP, s.v. “berserkr.”

¹⁰¹ See Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. L).

sacred space and time. The cave is described as a liminal space (Marzella, 2022, 101), and it is significant that each of Björn's sons passes through it before leaving their mother's home and entering an independent adult life, but this liminal aspect does not equate holiness, and will be explored in Chapter 2.

From the analysis of Sigmundr and Böðvarr's trials, Marzella (2022, 101) derives a confirmation that the narrative form of the sword trial originates in heroic literature rather than in hagiography. He points out that *Merlin* and the sagas share two key aspects which are absent in Wulfstan's story, namely, the extraordinary weapon won by the hero, which will then allow him to accomplish great exploits, and the initiatic value of the trial. Indeed, as noted in section 1.1, Wulfstan's pastoral staff is not of supernatural origins, its value is purely symbolic, and the miracle does not mark a coming of age for the mature bishop. This is sufficient evidence, according to the scholar, to deduce that hagiography adapted a heroic narrative scheme, rather than the other way around (Marzella, 2022, 101). As for the origin of this antecedent, Marzella (2022, 102) argues that it may be Scandinavian, due to the closeness of the sagas to ancient traditional material and their uniform adoption of a narrative scheme where the hero proves his worth and identity by earning a special sword. His argument continues with an exploration of a slightly different trial often present in the Norse matter, as will be shown.

1.3.2 Revenants and Warrior Maidens

The second part of Marzella's argument is tied to the first by means of a short episode contained in the *Landnámabók* or *Book of Settlements*¹⁰², a text dating from the 12th and 13th centuries and containing information about the settling of Iceland. According to both Marzella (2022) and Byock (1998), the text contains the tale of a settler called Skeggi, who enters the burial mound of king Hrólfr and his warriors. There, he steals several weapons, but when he tries to take Böðvarr's sword he is unable to bend the

¹⁰² Two editions of *Landnámabók* have been consulted, namely, the 1898 English translation by Rev. T. Ellwood, and the 1774 Copenhagen edition curated by Hannes Finsson. The two texts differ significantly with regards to the episode examined here, as will be shown.

dead warrior's arms.¹⁰³ Böðvarr subsequently attacks the intruder, who can only be saved by king Hrólfr himself.¹⁰⁴ The same story is told in the *Saga of Þórðr Hreða*,¹⁰⁵ an Icelandic saga composed in the 14th century according to Marzella (2022, 103). Here, too, the reason for Skeggi's failure to retrieve Laufi is that "he could in no way bend [Böðvarr's] arms" (Coles, 1882, 176), although there is no combat with revenants. However, several narremes wherein a hero must earn or win an extraordinary sword are linked in the sagas to the opening of a tomb and combat with a revenant or a ghost. These trials often have an initiatic value for the hero, as the tomb they must enter belongs to an ancestor whose sword becomes symbolic of family values and fortune passing through generations. The first episode, chosen by Marzella for its notoriety, is narrated in chapter 18 of the *Saga of Grettir the Strong*, also known as the *Saga of Grettir Asmundarson*, or simply *Grettir's Saga*.¹⁰⁶

In Chapter 18 of the saga, the titular Grettir enters the burial mound of a man called Kárr, who is said to wander the land and to have driven away farmers to favour his son's dominion over the island (Byock, 2009, 51). This revenant is described as a *haugbúi* (Jónsson, 1936, 58), or mound-dweller (Byock, 2009, 52),¹⁰⁷ and it is within his dwelling that the encounter takes place. Grettir attempts to retrieve the treasure

¹⁰³ The impossibility of taking a sword from the hands of its deceased owner is not isolated in the Norse sagas, as will be shown in 1.3.3. This narreme is quite similar to the sword trial as Micha (1948) defines it, as it involves a fallen warrior and the necessity to overcome resistance and pry a weapon loose.

¹⁰⁴ This is compounded by the Copenhagen edition (Finsson, 1774, 181-82), while in the translation compiled by Rev. T. Ellwood in 1898, this part of the tale is abridged to "he made a raid on the land and broke into the Howe or Burial Mound of King Hrolf Kraki, [...] but he could not possess himself of Laufi (the sword of Bodvar Biarki)" (Ellwood, 1898, 111). This may be due to the two editions referring to different versions of *Landnámabók*, as Ellwood refers mainly to *Melabók*, while the Copenhagen edition is based on a plurality of manuscripts identified in the frontispice as *Manuscripti Legati Magnæani*.

¹⁰⁵ The saga is translated into English as part of the appendix to John M. Coles' *Summer Traveling in Iceland* (1882, 173-204), as "The Story of Thorðr Hreða (The Terror)". Coles dates the saga to the beginning of the 11th century, but it seems reasonable to follow the later dating given by more recent scholarship, bringing it closer to the other sagas examined here.

¹⁰⁶ The translation used for this thesis is *Grettir's Saga*, curated by Jesse L. Byock in 2009 and based on two critical editions, curated by Guðni Jónsson in 1936 and by Örnólfur Thorsson in 1994. Guðni Jónsson's edition was also consulted.

¹⁰⁷ Later on, Kárr will also be called a *draugr* (Jónsson, 1936, 60), another word used to indicate a revenant (see ONP, s.v. "draugr"). The present thesis will focus more on Scandinavian revenants in section 2.2.1.

buried in the mound, which at first seems to contain mainly gold and silver,¹⁰⁸ but he is confronted by the revenant and a fierce struggle ensues. When the hero finally gains the upper hand, he “[cuts] off the head” (Byock, 2009, 52) of the revenant, placing it between the corpse’s legs (Marzella, 2022, 105) or “against [his] buttocks” (Byock, 2009, 52).¹⁰⁹ Grettir then brings the treasure, which is now said to include a sax of great quality, “so fine that he had never seen a better one,” (Byock 2009, 52) to the house of Þorfinnr, Kárr’s son. The word *sax* here indicates a single-edged shortsword or knife, as noted by Jónsson (1936, 59, note 2), although in a more general sense it could also mean “sword” or “sword blade.”¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, the difference between shortsword and sword does not have here the same weight as in the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (see section 1.3.2) and the sax is simply treated as an extraordinary weapon for the hero to win.

Indeed, Grettir wishes to keep the shortsword, telling Þorfinnr, “If I were this short-sword’s owner, / Never would it slip from my hands” (Byock, 2009, 53),¹¹¹ but is rebuffed as unworthy. Þorfinnr will only grant it to him after he has proven himself “by accomplishing something worthy of fame” (Byock, 2009, 53). The sword will then be named Kársnautr, meaning Kárr’s-Gift (Jónsson, 1936, 260; Byock, 2009, 213), and will be the tool of Grettir’s greatest exploits, including the slaying of the revenant Glámr, whose head is also cut off and placed “against his buttocks” (Byock, 2009, 102).¹¹² Finally, in chapter 82, Grettir himself will be killed and his murderers will try and fail to pry open his fingers, grasping Kársnautr (Jónsson, 1936, 261; Byock, 2009, 214). It may seem surprising that Marzella (2022) makes no mention of this episode, which is yet another example of the popularity of the narreme wherein a dead warrior

¹⁰⁸ “Mikit í gulli ok silfri” (Jónsson, 1936, 58).

¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the Norse text seems to support either translation. Jónsson (1936, 58) carries the reading, “setti hann þat við þjó honum”, where the word *þjó* can mean both “buttocks” and “thighs” (ONP, s.v. “þjó”). As this detail is not vital to the present thesis, no attempt will be made to choose one translation over the other.

¹¹⁰ ONP, s.v. “sax.”

¹¹¹ See Jónsson (1936, 60).

¹¹² The Norse wording here is the same as in Kárr’s case, “setti þat við þjó honum,” (Jónsson, 1936, 122) which suggests a ritual gesture finalised to avoiding the dead person’s return as a revenant, as noted by Jónsson (1936, 122, note 1).

refuses to give up his sword.¹¹³ However, it should be considered that there is no worthy successor to inherit Kársnautr, and the problem is speedily solved by amputating the hand, so that ultimately this is unlikely to be a trial narreme at all. Once the corpse's hand is cut off, the same shortsword is used to decapitate the body,¹¹⁴ even breaking “a piece [...] from the middle of the sax's cutting edge” (Byock, 2009, 214).¹¹⁵ The fact that Kársnautr is eventually broken seems noteworthy, as the same happens to Sigmundr's sword and, in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, to Arthur's first sword as well (see section 1.3.1). More swords which break or are broken will be treated in section 1.3.3 and in Chapter 3.

Overall, it is difficult to argue in favour of this episode as an analogue of the Arthurian sword trial, and indeed Marzella does not. However, it seems worthwhile to mention that some similarities do exist. Kársnautr, the sax retrieved from the tomb and later earned by the hero, is overall more important than Grettir's first sword Jökulsnautr, even though the latter is described as lucky. This sword, also known as Ættartangi (Tang-of-Generations) is a family heirloom which the hero's mother gives him when it is time for him to leave home (Ellis Davidson, 1960, 7), not unlike the aforementioned Bera and the as yet unmentioned Hervör do for their own sons. The sax, on the other hand, while not explicitly magic in nature, is a weapon “suitable only for a hero capable of wielding it” (Byock, 1998, xviii). This is reinforced when Þorfinnr declares that Kárr never even let him, his own son, wield the weapon while he was alive (Byock, 2009, 53), so that in a way he comes to play the part of the unworthy antagonists in the trial. The sacred, or at any rate liminal, space is of course present, as the trial is set within a burial mound. Naturally the episode does not fit either Marzella's definition of the sword trial or Micha's, but it does provide evidence that the motif of a young hero undergoing an initiatic or legitimising test within a haunted tomb, usually but not

¹¹³ The present section has already mentioned the revenant Böðvarr Bjarki in *Landnámabók* and in the *Saga of Þórðr Hreða*. Another, very similar trial will be treated in section 1.3.3.

¹¹⁴ The idea that a hero, monster, or other supernatural being may only be slain with their own weapon is connected by Puhvel (1972, 210) to a Celtic motif which also appears ‘more dimly’ in the Germanic area. Arthur's sword Excalibur is also argued to fit the mould of this deicidal ‘lightning-weapon’ (Puhvel 1972, 213), especially as it is described as blazing with light whenever unsheathed and Morgan le Fey plots to have Arthur killed with it, a plan which only narrowly fails. However, as Excalibur is not the sword that young Arthur retrieves from the stone on Christmas day, this line of inquiry lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

¹¹⁵ “Brotnaði skarð í miðri egginni” (Jónsson, 1936, 261).

always belonging to an ancestor, and which also involves a weapon of superior quality, is deeply rooted in the substratum of heroic sagas. However, according to Marzella (2022) the most relevant example of this episode is to be found in the *Saga of Hervör and Heiðrekr*.

The *Saga of Hervör and Heiðrekr*¹¹⁶ is another 13th century saga, set during the 4th century wars between Goths and Huns. The plot revolves around the sword Tyrfingr and its owners, as it is passed down through the generations. The sword is forged by the dwarves Dvalinn and Dulinn, at king Svafrlami's request, and it is cursed by its makers so that that it may not be drawn without causing a man's death, it will cause three great evils, and the king's own son will die by its blade.¹¹⁷ Despite the curse, Tyrfingr brings great triumphs to Svafrlami and comes to be owned by one of his sons, the berserker Angantýr, who is buried with it upon his death. The episode covered by Marzella occupies the fourth chapter of Crawford (2021),¹¹⁸ the fourth and fifth sections of Chadwick (1921),¹¹⁹ and interestingly centres on a heroine rather than a hero. The titular Hervör, Angantýr's daughter, retrieves the sword from her father's burial mound after a long discussion with his reluctant ghost. The two texts insist on the courage shown by the heroine in braving the burial grounds at night and in claiming the family heirloom as is her birthright, in spite of the "evil doom" prophesied by Angantýr (Crawford, 2021, 14). However, a heavy curse comes to the owner of the sword, and the dead warrior repeatedly warns his daughter that it "will / destroy all / of [her] family" (Crawford,

¹¹⁶ Two translations are used for this thesis, due to differences in the text. Nora K. Chadwick's 1921 translation, in *Stories and Ballads of the Far Past*, is based on an earlier edition by Valdimar Ásmundarson, following the "H"-text from *Hausbók* (ms A. M. 544) and the paper mss closest to it. The second and more recent translation is Jackson Crawford's (2021), and it appears in the volume *Two Sagas of Mythical Heroes*. Crawford's text is translated from the edition by Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a), based on the "R"-text, found in ms GKS 2845 4to. Both Old Norse editions – Ásmundarson (1891) and Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a) – were also consulted for the present thesis. Where the two translations agree, Crawford is cited, as his language is clearer and less archaic.

¹¹⁷ This episode is narrated in detail in Chadwick (1921, 88-89), while it is abridged to "This king had acquired a sword named Tyrfing from some dwarves" in Crawford (2021, 1). The threefold curse, too, appears only in Chadwick (1921, 89), while Crawford (2021, 1) only retains the impossibility of drawing it without killing. The same difference is present in the Old Norse text (Ásmundarson, 1891, 310-11; Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 a, ch. I). The name of the king is also different in the two texts, as Crawford (2021, 1) follows Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. I) in calling him Sigrlami.

¹¹⁸ See Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. IV).

¹¹⁹ See Ásmundarson (1891, §IV-V).

2021, 15, 17). Hervör eventually passes the sword onto her youngest son, Heiðrekr, who uses it to “[deal] his brother his death-blow” (Chadwick, 1912, 103)¹²⁰ before leaving his parents’ house and accomplishing his own deeds of prowess.

Marzella (2022), like Donà (2014) before him, notes that Tyrfingr is, however briefly and in an atypical way, a sword in the stone. Indeed, once king Svafrlami has forced the dwarves to forge the magical sword for him and learned of the curse they have placed upon it, in his rage he throws the sword at them. The dwarves, however, quickly disappear within their stone dwelling and the blade sinks into the rock “so deep that both the ridges of the blade were hidden”, which proves its exceptionality to the king and convinces him to keep it (Chadwick, 1912, 89).¹²¹ Later, it is buried with Angantýr and must be retrieved from the burial mound by a worthy heir, his daughter, who needs to prove her valour by “wad[ing] forward into [the] fires” of the burial ground (Crawford, 2021, 12) and verbally sparring with the spirit of her father.¹²² Finally, along with the sword, the triumphant Hervör receives confirmation of her noble descent,¹²³ along with her father’s blessing and what may be considered the family values. Indeed, Angantýr’s parting words are, “Farewell, yet fain would I give to thee / [...] / The strength and vigour and hardihood, / All that we had that was great and good” (Chadwick, 1912, 100),¹²⁴ so that the virtues of the twelve berserkers are not lost in death, but kept alive in Hervör and her descendants.

¹²⁰ In Crawford (2021, 20), Heiðrekr kills his brother by hurling “a large stone” blindly into a crowded hall, and only subsequently receives his sentence of exile from his father, and Tyrfingr from his mother. Therefore, in this version it is not possible for the cursed blade to be responsible for the fratricide. In Chadwick’s narration, on the other hand, it is clearly stated that, as the two brothers were alone and the sword must kill whenever drawn, the outcome was inevitable (1912, 103).

¹²¹ See Ásmundarson (1891, 310-11). This episode, as previously noted, is absent in Crawford (2021) as in Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a).

¹²² The conversation between the two takes the form of a debate in verse, and it is nearly identical in both versions of the text (see Ásmundarson, 1891, 316-18; Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 a, ch. IV).

¹²³ This is all the more evident in Crawford’s (2021, 9) translation of the saga, where the heroine has previously had her lineage questioned, to the point of being called the daughter of a slave (see Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 a, ch. IV).

¹²⁴ The passage of virtues and values through the generations is less obvious in Crawford’s translation, where Angantýr seems rather to regret his inability to accomplish such a passage as he says, “I’d rather have given you / [...] / power and strength” (2021, 18).

Donà (2014) adds that Tyrfingr is an emblematic example of the recurrent Celtic and Germanic motif of the cursed sword, or the magic sword with an evil will of its own, which often appears in similar contexts to the Arthurian episode. Puhvel (1972) argues for the same hypothesis, although in his view it is impossible to determine whether this similarity is due to direct influence or parallel development of a similar narrative in different contexts.¹²⁵ Indeed, Tyrfingr is of supernatural or otherworldly origins by virtue of its having been made by dwarves. Although it brings to its bearer a dark destiny, it also grants victory in battle and royalty, as it is said that “many families of kings” descend from the last Angantýr, Hervör’s grandson (Crawford, 2021, 54).¹²⁶ The necessity of killing whenever the sword is drawn may hint at an autonomous will of the magical weapon, or be simply part of the curse cast upon it by its makers. Finally, Puhvel (1972) notes that the sword seems to have deicidal properties. Indeed, when Heiðrekr draws Tyrfingr in anger, the god Óðinn takes the shape of a falcon to fly away. However, the blade manages to “cut off his tail feathers” (Crawford, 2021, 41),¹²⁷ causing the deity’s anger and Heiðrekr’s demise.

Although the supernatural sword guarantees a royal destiny and a violent death chiefly to Hervör’s descendants, the heroine herself also shares some characteristics with the other heroes who triumph in the sword trials. Marzella (2022, 109-110) notes that like Arthur and Böðvarr she is an orphan, and like the former she ignores her true identity until she comes of age, when she is recognised by her dead father.¹²⁸ She also

¹²⁵ Puhvel’s more prudent line of thought seems preferable, considering the abundance of cursed or otherwise magical weapons in all cultures. Examples include the Russian hidden sword and self-swinging sword, and the Japanese muramasa, of which the first often appears in contexts similar to the Arthurian trial, the second is clearly magical, and the third are considered cursed and evil (Vernardsky, 1959, 137; Cespedez Gonzales, 2021, 29:24-30:20; 42:55-47:07).

¹²⁶ See Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. XV). Chadwick’s translation also states that “lines of kings are sprung from him” (1912, 138), following Ásmundarson (1891, 356). In this point, the two Old Norse texts are identical, reading, “Angantýr var lengi konungr í Reiðgotalandi. Hann var ríkr ok hermaðr mikill, ok eru frá honum komnar konunga ættir” (Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 a, ch. XV; Ásmundarson, 1891, 356).

¹²⁷ See Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. X), Ásmundarson (1891, 345).

¹²⁸ This is not quite accurate, as Hervör is told her father’s name by her guardian before she leaves to fetch the sword (Crawford, 2021, 9-10; Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 a, ch. IV). Although this conversation is absent in Chadwick’s version of the saga, the heroine still introduces herself to Angantýr as his “only daughter” from the very beginning (1912, 96; Ásmundarson, 1891, 316), so that Marzella’s (2022, 109) argument is somewhat weakened on this point.

does begin her tale in a position of disadvantage by virtue of being a young woman on whose shoulders alone rests the weight of her bloodline, as her father and uncles all die before her birth (Crawford, 2021, ch. 3; Chadwick, 1921, §III). Finally, it is through the sword Tyrfingr that she is legitimated as her father's heir, suggesting the symbolic value of the weapon, especially considering that along with it she receives the blessing and the strength of her male relatives, as previously noted. After this recognition, she continues her military exploits under a male pseudonym, until, having received confirmation of her valour and worth, she can return to her grandfather's house, where she starts behaving "like other young women" (Crawford, 2021, 19) and eventually marries. At this point, Marzella (2022, 111) argues, she no longer needs a male alias to legitimate her as an heir.

Marzella (2022) connects the episodes of Hervör, Böðvarr, and the other Scandinavian heroes who retrieve extraordinary swords from a burial mound to the same original narrative scheme that gave rise to the Arthurian sword trial. The structure of this hypothetical original scheme is described by him as follows:

A hero of royal descent, starting from a position of disadvantage [...], proves that he is destined to accomplish great deeds and legitimates himself as part of the royal bloodline by being the only person capable of retrieving the sword plunged into the burial mound of his dead father (or of an ancestor) (Marzella, 2022, 116, translation mine).

He furthermore argues that the removal of the burial mound from the narreme in Robert de Boron's *Merlin* can be explained by the jarring quality of an episode of tomb profanation within an otherwise very Christian work, as well as by the necessity of having Arthur be legitimated by God first and foremost (Marzella, 2022, 117-118). Wulfstan, on the other hand, can be said to return his pastoral staff to the dead king and then take it back from him, especially considering the mention in Ælred's text of a supernatural force holding onto it from within the tomb, as noted in 1.1.2. This element ties into the episode involving Skeggi and the dead Böðvarr Bjarki holding onto his sword, as well as into one last mediaeval source, which is the main point of contact between Marzella's hypothesis and Micha's earlier theories, and which will now be treated on its own.

1.3.3 *The King and the Dead Knight*

It was mentioned in 1.1.1 that, according to Micha (1948), the retrieval of a sword or broken lance from the body of a fallen warrior can constitute a sword trial analogous to the Arthurian episode. The main example the author brings to bear to sustain this argument is an episode found in the *Saga of Charlemagne and His Knights*,¹²⁹ compiled in Norway in the 13th century. This work follows the same characters as the French *Chanson de Roland* but also presents interesting differences, such as a miraculous event following Rollant's death in the battle of Roncevaux Pass. As he lies dying, the knight addresses his sword Dyrumdali, names the holy relics contained within the hilt, and wishes the weapon may not fall into heathen hands, but remain "among good men, Christians, and wise" (Hieatt, 1975, 277). When Charlemagne goes to the battlefield, he finds Rollant lying atop Dyrumdali, gripping it tightly in his right hand. After a brief swoon, the king orders "the stronger of his knights" (Hieatt, 1975, 282) to fetch him back the sword, which proves to be impossible as the dead man's grip cannot be loosened. After a second attempt fails, he sends "five knights, so that each one could grasp one of Rollant's fingers" (Hieatt, 1975, 282), with no result. Only after a long time of devoted prayer can the king take the sword from the now "loosened" hand of the knight (Hieatt, 1975, 283).¹³⁰

Micha (1948) considers this episode an unmistakable analogue for the Arthurian sword trial, and goes as far as to hypothesise a French translation of the saga, having since been lost, as a possible source of inspiration for later romance writers.¹³¹ Indeed, divine election is present in this episode, and there are antagonists who try and fail to pry the sword from Rollant's hands. Marzella (2022) highlights the importance of the

¹²⁹ The translation used in this thesis is *Karlamagnus Saga: the Saga of Charlemagne and His Heroes; Translated by Constance B. Hieatt*, published in three volumes in 1975. The relevant episode is to be found in the third volume. Paul Aebischer's (1954) critical reconstruction of the French manuscript employed by the Norse translator for the eighth branch was also consulted. As was the case for Merlin, proper names are maintained here as they are in the saga, with the exception of Charlemagne, who will not be referred to as Karlamagnus to avoid confusion. The corresponding names in the more widely known spelling are as follows: Roland for Rollant, Durendal or Durandal for Dyrumdali, Naimon or Namus for Nemes.

¹³⁰ See also Aebischer (1954, 218-21; 231-32).

¹³¹ Marzella (2022, 119) makes no such connection, but uses this episode as evidence that the motif of a dead person allowing a worthy heir to take a symbolic object from their hands, visibly very close to the episode of the pastoral staff, was present in Norse literature.

miraculous sword belonging to the most valorous of the knights, and the fact that only a man of equal valour may take it from the dead warrior.¹³² He also notes the strong bond between him and Charlemagne, both in terms of feudal obedience and of blood relation, although in this case the older and more powerful relative receives the sword from a younger subordinate. This episode appears closer to Wulfstan's trial than to Arthur's, as the supernatural intervention is manifested through the will of a deceased person who chooses who is worthy of receiving the staff or sword. Moreover, as noted by Marzella (2022), Charlemagne keeps only the pommel of Rollant's sword, with the relics encased therein, and throws the blade "into water far from land" (Heatt, 1975, 283), considering no other man worthy of wielding it. This is quite close to an episode present in Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, wherein king Arthur, mortally wounded, orders Bedivere to go to the water's side and throw Excalibur in. In this case, a mysterious hand emerges from the water to seize the sword, brandishes it three times, and then submerges once more, so that here, too, a supernatural element is present (Cooper, 1998, 515).

To conclude, although it is impossible to determine exactly the origin of the sword trial narreme, Marzella's hypothesis of its having developed in heroic literature first and only subsequently adapted by hagiography seems sound. The two theories explored in this chapter have argued for very different perspectives, having the Arthurian episode originate from Greco-Roman myth and epos and from Scandinavian sagas respectively. However, while Micha makes firm claims and presents the *Aeneid* as the true origin of the trial narreme, Marzella posits the existence of a narrative form which inspired the sagas, Osbert's *Vita*, and Robert's *Merlin*. Of course, the latter theory is much more difficult to either support or contradict, by virtue of its somewhat nebulous nature, while Micha's peremptoriness exposes him to the possibility of criticism where the differences between episodes are more stark. Finally, whether classical or Norse, the episodes most likely to belong to a sword trial narreme share a strong liminal quality, whether by being set in a liminal space, by facilitating contact

¹³² This is supported by the text, as Nemes wisely tells Charlemagne, "Rollant's sword shall never be loosened unless as good a warrior as he was takes hold of it" (Heatt, 1975, 283). The implication seems to be that even Charlemagne can only succeed through divine intervention, and indeed he does not consider himself a worthy successor and refuses to keep Dyrumdali for himself.

with the supernatural or the underworld, or by bridging the gap between two chapters of the hero's life. This trait is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Liminal Aspects of the Sword Trial

The previous chapter has explored the Arthurian sword trial and its analogues in a wide spatial and temporal panorama, measuring each against the touchstone provided by Robert de Boron's *Merlin* and testing their compliance to the definitions of sword trials provided by Micha (1948, 2000b) and Marzella (2022). These episodes will now be looked at in a different light. One unifying trait among these heroic or saintly trials is that they constitute a moment of intense liminality in the life of the hero who triumphs in them. This trait will now be delved into, focusing first on liminality between life and death, then between natural and supernatural,¹³³ and finally between two distinct stages of the protagonist's life, be they childhood and adulthood or normality and fabled destiny. Hopefully, this analysis will allow a slight revision of the working definition of sword trial and the subsequent discardment of the least likely analogues.

2.1 Between the Worlds of Life and Death

The first liminal trait noted by scholars as a common thread among sword trial narremes is that the trial often constitutes a moment of contact between the living and the dead. Indeed, many of the heroes treated here either journey through the Underworld or find themselves encountering the dead and even the undead. If among Micha's (1948) analogues Theseus, in addition to Arthur himself, seems not to fit within this description, the Scandinavian episodes proposed by Marzella (2022) all feature a strong sense of liminality between life and death, so that the overall importance of it to the narreme seems worth investigating. This section will focus first on the liminality of the space wherein the trial is set and its function in facilitating the encounter between the hero and the world of the deceased, and secondly on the encounter itself and on the importance of the figure whom the hero meets.

¹³³ The word supernatural is used in this thesis to indicate all that belongs to "a realm or system that transcends nature, as that of divine, magical, or ghostly beings" (OED, s.v. "supernatural"). In particular, the focus will be on monstrous and ghostly creatures in section 2.2.1, and on the hero's encounter with the divine in section 2.2.2.

2.1.1 A Liminal Space

The journey into the land of death was argued by Micha to be part and parcel of the original sword trial narreme, as seen in 1.2, and it is indeed a key aspect of two Arthurian analogues from Southern Europe, namely, the pagan *Æneid* and the Christian *Lancelot*.¹³⁴ Although clearly very different in many respects, not least the action performed by the hero to overcome his trial, the motivations pushing him to action, and the cultural context to which each text belongs, the similarities are interesting. Both episodes take place in a setting rife with death and rebirth imagery, as will be explored in the present section, and the space of the trial is liminal, as *Æneas* finds the golden bough near the gates of Hades and Lancelot lifts a stone covering a tomb in a cemetery.¹³⁵ Other heroes whose trials take place in or near tombs are Hervör, Grettir, and Wulfstan,¹³⁶ while a burial mound is relevant in a more tangential way to Sigmundur's story.¹³⁷ It is true, however, that Arthur's trial does not involve burial mounds or tombs of any sort, and, although Malory does describe the stone and sword appearing "in the churchyard" (Cooper, 1998, 8), this may simply be an addition of his.¹³⁸ This discrepancy will be explored later in this section.

Æneas undertakes the trial of the golden bough with the precise goal of being allowed into the Underworld. The journey of a living man through the land of the dead is not only a heroic *topos*, but also a violation of the laws of nature, hence the need for a

¹³⁴ See sections 1.2.3 and 1.2.1, respectively.

¹³⁵ The Sybil, *Æneas*' guide and arbiter of his trial, is addressed by the hero as the one whom the goddess Hecate put in charge of the gates of Avernus (Ramous et Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 117-118; see also section 1.2.3). Lancelot's trial in the future cemetery is treated in section 1.2.1.

¹³⁶ See sections 1.3.2 for an introduction to Hervör's and Grettir's trials, section 1.2.2 for Wulfstan's.

¹³⁷ As noted in section 1.3.1, Rerir is given an apple by a messenger of the god Oðinn and subsequently is able to conceive an heir. The apple is brought to him while he sits on a *haugr*, a burial mound (ONP, s.v. "haugr"), possibly an ancestor's (Byock, 2012, 35; Finch, 1965, 3), and the implications of this setting will be explored in more detail shortly.

¹³⁸ Marzella (2022, 114) deems this "a deduction" from *Merlin*, as the sword appears "outside the church, and therefore may be in the cemetery area" (translation mine). Micha's edition of Robert's text reads "devant la maistre porte de l'eglise, en mi la place" (Micha, 2000a, 250), which may be translated as "in front of the church's main door, in the middle of the square" (translation mine) and effectively excludes the possibility of the stone and sword being in the churchyard. However, the apparatus of the same edition also contains the reading "devant le mostier", which means simply "outside the church" (translation mine). It is therefore possible that Malory may have had access to a text carrying the latter reading, as proposed by Marzella (2022, 114).

sign that the passage into death is indeed part of the hero's destiny.¹³⁹ Brooks (1953, 270) argues that the golden bough itself, being the instrument to resolve the antinomy between life and death, is the incarnation of it. In his view the golden bough, not alive yet part of the living tree, found in the last living grove on the edge of the kingdom of death and retrieved thence, allows the living hero to depart from the Underworld unharmed (Brooks, 1953, 270). In other words, they are reciprocal symbols, death in and from life allowing life in and from death (Brooks, 1953, 271). Moreover, he considers the burial of Misenus (Ramous et Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 212-235) parallel to, and intertwined with, the task of the bough, as the funeral rites cleanse Æneas and his companions from the curse of the dead city of Troy, so that they can all participate in the journey of rebirth to a new land (Brooks, 1953, 276).¹⁴⁰ Æneas' entire quest through the Underworld, therefore, recalls images of life and death allowing him to fully realise the meaning of what Brooks calls the Tree of Life, to which he is compared in the fourth book of the epic.¹⁴¹ Moreover, it is the upward movement of the doves that shows him the way, reaching to heaven and escaping from hell (Brooks, 1953, 277)¹⁴² as he is reborn as a Roman hero.

The Tree of Life, sinking its roots into the land of death and reaching its boughs into the heavens, may evoke images of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, whose connection to

¹³⁹ This elective dimension of the trial is made explicit in the text, as the Sybil cautions Æneas that he will only succeed if he is called by destiny, “si te fata vocant” (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book 6, l. 147).

¹⁴⁰ The cleansing nature of the burial rites is made explicit by the Sybil's own words, as she commands the hero to bury his deceased friend whose corpse “contaminates the whole fleet” (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, l. 150, translation mine) and calls the ritual sacrifice accompanying the burial “the first expiation” (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, l. 153, translation mine).

¹⁴¹ Announcing to Dido his determination to leave Carthage at the bidding of the gods, the hero is compared to an oak which stretches its branches toward the heavens and its roots into Tartarus at the same time, “quantum vertice ad auras / aetherias, tantum radicem in Tartara tendit” (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book IV, ll. 445-46). The reference to the heavens, encoded in the adjective *aetherius*, and to the deepest profundities of Tartarus, explains the description of this image as the Tree of Life.

¹⁴² Here, Ramous and Baldo's (2020, Book VI, ll. 201-202) text reads, “Inde ubi venere ad fauces grave olentis Averni, / tollunt se celeres liquidumque per aëra lapsae”, highlighting precisely the upward motion from “the maw of foetid Avernus” to “the clear air” (translation mine). The adjective “liquidus” can also mean “pure” or “clean” (IL, s.v. “liquidus”), in stark contrast to the foul-smelling air of the Underworld.

the Barnstokkr in the *Saga of the Völsungs* was explained in section 1.3.1.¹⁴³ The thematic centrality of king Völsung's ancestral hall to such a family-focused saga, together with the already mentioned emphasis placed on descendance, makes the identification of the Barnstokkr with an apple tree interesting. Indeed, as mentioned above, the birth of Völsungr himself is brought about thanks to a magic apple which Rerir receives from a wish-maiden while sitting on a mound, presumably the family burial mound.¹⁴⁴ Ellis Davidson (1960, 3) reads this passage as establishing a connection between “tree, fruit, mound and the birth of children” (Ellis Davidson, 1960, 3), a position shared by Finch (1965, 3, note 1) as well. Moreover, she notes that apple trees growing in or near halls and providing a connection to another world are also found in the Celtic tradition (Ellis Davidson, 1960, note 9). However, although the space surrounding the Barnstokkr could be liminal, this has little bearing on the trial itself, which mainly concerns the blessing bestowed by Oðinn on a hero and the fortune of his lineage (see section 1.3.1). Other sagas have their heroes face trials in spaces more obviously liminal, namely, burial grounds.

Grettir, whose trial was introduced in section 1.3.2, proves his courage and valour by entering a burial mound at night and emerges victorious after defeating its inhabitant, who was most definitely not resting in peace.¹⁴⁵ The revenant himself will be treated in more detail shortly, but for the purposes of this section it is sufficient to establish that the burial mound is represented as a space where the living may go seeking the dead, and which the dead may cross to haunt the living (Marzella, 2022, 104), as Kárr himself does when he goes “walking” (Byock, 2009, 51). Hervör, too, braves the burial ground, where she sees “the fires of the barrows and the ghosts

¹⁴³ Yggdrasil is, of course, far from being the only similar image. For instance, a Tree of Life is mentioned in the Bible, where it is placed by God in the centre of the Garden of Eden (Genesis, 2: 9). This tree, however, has a function more alike that of Iðunn's apple tree, whose fruit keeps the Norse gods from ageing (Finch, 1965, 2, note 1); indeed, during the biblical Fall of Man, God exiles Adam and Eve and stations heavenly guards outside Eden, lest humans eat the fruit of the Tree of Life and become immortal (Genesis, 3: 22-24).

¹⁴⁴ See Byock, 2012, 37; Finch, 1965, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Although Grettir first goes to the mound in the morning, he spends a long time breaking into the tomb and can only get inside when “the day [is] almost over” (Byock, 2009, 51). The struggle with Kárr and the subsequent work of hoisting the treasure out of the mound only allow him to return “late in the evening” to Þorfinnr's hall (Byock, 2009, 52). Jónsson's text reads, “var þa mjök áliðinn dagrinn” (1936, 57) and, “á síðkveldum” (1936, 59) respectively.

standing outside” (Chadwick, 1921, 96).¹⁴⁶ After taking leave of her father, moreover, she confesses, “Surely in terror I drew my breath / *Between the worlds of life and death* / When the grave fires girt me round” (Chadwick, 1921, 100, italics mine).¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, in both sagas the hero is warned of the danger by a local; the farmer Auðunn tells Grettir that “there is no profit in being curious” and “he should not concern himself” with Kárr’s tomb (Byock, 2009, 51),¹⁴⁸ while Hervör is cautioned by an unnamed shepherd against “going alone / into such grim darkness” (Crawford, 2021, 12).¹⁴⁹ This similarity, together with the description of strange flames accompanying the apparition of ghosts and revenants, suggests the existence of a narrative formula, as noted by Chadwick (1946 b).

The cultural importance of Scandinavian burial mounds as a point of contact with a family’s past is well documented in history, as well as in literature, considering barrows could be used to strengthen property rights (Andrén, 2013, 272) and in some cases were even built on top of older dwellings (Andrén, 2013, 274). Even after the christianisation of Scandinavia, the mounds remained part of the landscape and therefore of the communal memory, retaining such importance that churches were sometimes built on burial grounds (Andrén, 2013, 274). As noted by Bennett (2014), moreover, descriptions of burials in the sagas written after christianisation often have extratextual referentiality. Angantýr and his brothers, for instance, are said to be buried on the island of Samsø, with a toponym referencing a real place where burial mounds were part of the landscape. These descriptions work as “sites of memory” both by pointing out physical vestiges of the past and by being fictionalised relics of the same (Bennett, 2014, 47). Therefore, it could be argued that the barrows actually served as a

¹⁴⁶ The description of the ghosts is omitted by Crawford (2021, 14), but as Angantýr is already speaking before the mound is said to open (Crawford, 2021, 14), it is assumed here that the spirit of the berserker is appearing outside the grave in both versions of the saga. See also Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. IV).

¹⁴⁷ In this case, too, Crawford’s text differs slightly from Chadwick’s, reading “I seem more than anything / to be between worlds” (2021, 19). This difference, however, derives from translation choices, as the Norse text is identical and reads, “helzt þóttumst nú / heima í millim” (Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 a, ch. IV; Ásmundarson, 1891, 318). In either case, the liminal nature of the episode is not lost.

¹⁴⁸ See also Jónsson (1936, 57).

¹⁴⁹ See also Ásmundarson (1891, 315), Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. IV), Chadwick (1921, 95).

liminal space where the living may encounter and remember their dead ancestors, and that this function is reflected in the sagas.¹⁵⁰

Although written after the christianisation of Scandinavia, the sagas treated in this thesis all follow heroes of the pagan times; the liminal imagery of the burial ground, however, is not an exclusive prerogative of pre-Christian religion. The trial undergone by Lancelot in the land of Gorre is a prime example, as the kingdom of no return bears “a name that may associate it with the Celtic underworld” (Jaeger, 2012, 163), and the cemetery awaiting the living knights reinforces the implication. Le Rider (1991) focuses on the importance of death imagery to this romance, starting with the eponymous cart itself, which is both a travelling pillory and a gibbet carrying with it the phantom of a shameful, agonising demise.¹⁵¹ The significance of humiliation and death being the instrument and necessary condition of the hero’s final glory is to be found, according to the author, in the Christian backdrop against which the action is situated. Lancelot is not represented as Christ himself, but he is a man whose life journey is modelled on Christ’s, and therefore must be figuratively crucified before he can be resurrected (Le Rider, 1991, 86). The episode of the future cemetery, apparently extraneous to the world of chivalry, provides an image strongly hinting at resurrection when Lancelot opens his own tomb and stands by the opening, holding up the stone.¹⁵² Le Rider (1991), like Jaeger (2012), connects this to the previously mentioned Harrowing of Hell in the Gospel of Nicodemus, an episode wherein Christ descends into Hell after his

¹⁵⁰ Burial mounds are by no means exclusive to Scandinavia, and are indeed found all over the world, perhaps hinting at a universal desire to keep the memory of the deceased alive and visible in the landscape. For instance, in the British Isles barrows were constructed in the Neolithic to house entire family groups, while in the Bronze Age this sort of burial was reserved for important individuals (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “barrow”). Emperors and aristocrats were buried in mounds in ancient China and Japan, as well (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “burial mound”). What does seem to be peculiar to Scandinavia is the ritual removal of grave goods, particularly weapons, sometimes accompanied by a symbolic second killing of the owner (Klevnäs, 2016), which is yet more evidence of the real-world significance of the mound as a place of encounter between the living and the dead.

¹⁵¹ Indeed, onlookers ask the cart driver whether his knightly passenger is “convicted of theft” or “a murderer” (Kibler, 1981, 21, ll. 416-17), wondering what manner of death awaits him, flaying, hanging, drowning, or burning (Kibler, 1981, 19, ll. 410-14).

¹⁵² In this case the imagery of rebirth contains biblical elements, as in the Gospels Jesus’ tomb is closed with a large stone, which is rolled away by an angel upon his resurrection (Matthew 27: 60; 28: 2; Mark 15: 46; 16:4; Luke 24:2; John 20: 1). In Mark’s narration, particular emphasis is placed on the weight of the stone, as the women going to finish the burial rights worry they will not be able to move it (16:3).

resurrection and delivers the souls of the righteous patriarchs (see section 1.2.1),¹⁵³ noting that the other similarities present in the romance make the apocryphal Gospel a likely inspiration. Lastly, Jaeger (2012, 98) argues that Chrétien seems to treat the mythic elements of his romance with particular fervour, leading to the conclusion that this work could be, “for the XII century, the only *katabasis* of Christian inspiration.”

The liminality of space is maintained in Wulfstan’s trial, introduced in section 1.1.2, although the hero does not undertake a journey through the Underworld. Instead, the proximity of Edward’s tomb makes possible the encounter between the living bishop and the dead Saint, through whom divine will is manifested.¹⁵⁴ Although churches are not always seen as liminal spaces between the realms of life and death, a position usually fulfilled more easily by the churchyard which is within the bounds of sacred ground but outside the building itself (Lindow, 2018, 42), in this case the importance of the tomb is unmistakable. Marzella (2022, 114) draws attention to the movement necessary to reach the trial space, which indeed is situated some distance away from where the synod is being held, establishing a physical separation between Wulfstan and the rest of the bishops.¹⁵⁵ This could be argued to be further evidence of the liminal character of the trial and its space, as separation from, and re-integration within, the normal living world are both necessary phases.¹⁵⁶ The same cannot be said for Arthur, however, as mentioned above. The space within which his trial takes place has a sacred

¹⁵³ Although never canonical, the Gospel of Nicodemus had a wide circulation throughout the Middle Ages, both in Latin and in vernacular versions (Kim, 1973).

¹⁵⁴ As noted in section 1.1.2, Wulfstan returns his pastoral staff to Edward, symbolically surrendering his power to the monarch who had given it to him. This is accomplished by plunging the staff into the stone covering the saintly king’s tomb (Bloch, 1923, 118, ll. 22-30; Marzella, 2017, 166, ll.54-60).

¹⁵⁵ In Osbert’s text, Wulfstan “ad sepulchrum regis abiit”, or “left for the king’s tomb” (Bloch, 1923, 118, l. 4, translation mine), while Ælred reports that he “accessit ad lapidem”, or “drew close to the stone” (Marzella, 2017, 165, l. 38, translation mine). It is interesting to note that the verb *ābēo*, chosen by Osbert, can be used to express departure or exit from a place, while the verb *accēdo*, employed by Ælred, can indicate arrival or entrance (IL, s.v. “ābēo”; “accēdo”). Although the two verbs encode movement, so to speak, in opposite directions, they both express the crossing of a threshold, making the very lexical choices in this case appropriately liminal.

¹⁵⁶ According to Van Gennep’s (1960, 11) original definition of rites of passage, they include preliminary, liminal, and postliminal rites, which concern respectively the separation of the individual from the community, the transition, and the reintegration within the community. Wulfstan, too, separates himself from the other bishops and only rejoins them after the miracle has been accomplished. For a more detailed analysis of this episode as a rite of passage, see section 2.3.1.

dimension but does not function as a gateway between the worlds of the living and the dead. However, Marzella (2022, 117-18) argues that contact with the dead, and specifically a dead ancestor, is part of the original narrative scheme and was only removed by Robert de Boron in order to establish Arthur as God's chosen ruler first, and Utiens's rightful heir second.¹⁵⁷ The importance of direct contact between the hero and their dead ancestors is the focus of the next section.

2.1.2 An Encounter with the Dead

The main purpose of a liminal space separating the worlds of life and death within these heroic narratives is to facilitate a meeting between the hero and a dead person, a meeting which is often part and parcel of the trial narrative. Once again, the *Aeneid* and sagas dramatise this contact between the worlds in a setting which is still essentially pagan, while the stories of Charlemagne, Arthur and Wulfstan have a markedly Christian character.¹⁵⁸ In both sets of narratives, however, the importance of the dead man is apparent, whether he is moved by his own will or acts as a conduit for the divine, as will be explored shortly. As noted above, the Arthurian episode narrated by Robert de Boron lacks any mention of the hero coming in contact with, or being legitimated by a dead ancestor; this follows rather logically from the absence of a clearly liminal space between the worlds of the living and the dead in the setting of the trial (see section 2.1.1). Nonetheless, as noted above, Marzella (2022) argues in favour of the dead ancestor figuring in the original narrative scheme of the sword trial, an argument which will be explored in more detail at the end of this section.

Grettir and Hervör both encounter the dead as part of their trial, and it is from them that they take an exceptional weapon. These two tales have similarities and differences, both in narrative and descriptive terms. For instance, they feature different

¹⁵⁷ The argument is sound, as indeed many of the analogues he considers entail some form of contact with the realm of death. This is most obvious in Grettir's and Hervör's cases, but present in a less overt fashion in Sigmundur's story, as mentioned above, and in Böðvarr's, as will be shown in 2.1.2. Moreover, Robert's interest in representing Arthur as a messiah is clear in the text, and Utiens could not very well be represented as a saintly king handing power into the hands of a worthy heir, considering the deception and adultery that allowed that very heir's conception, as noted in section 1.1.1.

¹⁵⁸ See Chapter 1.

kinds of revenants, or *draugar*,¹⁵⁹ as they reflect two distinct traditions; as noted by Chadwick (1946 a, 50), the Norwegian undead usually haunt their own burial mounds and never stray far from them, while their Icelandic counterparts roam the land as they please. Hence, the marked difference between Angantýr, who meets his daughter on the threshold of his barrow,¹⁶⁰ and Kárr, who is said to walk and to have driven away “all those farmers who owned lands” on the island (Byock, 2009, 51),¹⁶¹ although he faces the hero within the tomb. Chadwick (1946a, 55) also delineates a narrative scheme involving a hero and a *draugr*, as the revenant can often be stopped if he is vanquished in a fight and beheaded, and the triumphant hero frequently retrieves treasures or weapons from the barrow. Grettir’s encounter with Kárr perhaps fits this definition better than that of the sword trial, especially considering that, although Grettir finally does earn the right to carry Kársnautr, this requires a different trial and symbolises recognition of the hero’s value by Þorfinnr rather than by his dead father (see section 1.3.2). However, the episode testifies to the importance of legendary weapons to the story of the hero who earns them, and to the elective function of the relevant episodes.¹⁶²

Hervör’s contact with the world of the dead has a more markedly dynastic undertone. Indeed, it is her father who must be persuaded to give up the family sword, handing it to her as is her birthright, despite the curse it bears.¹⁶³ In this context, Tyrfingr is an actual weapon, as well as a plot device, but also and most importantly a representation of the patrimony, both physical and metaphorical, that each generation receives from the previous one and passes down along the bloodline. As noted by Clover (1986), in the case of Hervör’s family there is a break in the chain of warriors inheriting the sword from father to son. As she is the only heir, and the only possible

¹⁵⁹ ONP, s.v. “draugr.”

¹⁶⁰ The difference between Chadwick’s and Crawford’s versions of the text, reflecting the different Old Norse texts edited by Ásmundarson (1891) and Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a), has already been addressed in 2.1.1.

¹⁶¹ See also Jónsson (1936, 57).

¹⁶² Indeed, Marzella (2022, 106) does not seem to consider Grettir’s trial a true Arthurian analogue. The episode is, however, analysed here along with all the others, as it is part of the author’s argument and it may prove of interest.

¹⁶³ Hence the argument in verse between the two, during which each tries to persuade the other (see Chadwick, 1921, 96-100; Crawford, 2021, 13-19; Ásmundarson, 1981, 316-18; Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 a, ch. IV).

link between Angantýr's generation and Heiðrekr's, she must become "a functional son" (Clover, 1986, 39). Indeed, the qualities that are bestowed upon her by her father and uncles as the family legacy, "All that we had that was great and good" (Chadwick, 1921, 100), are typically male, strength and valour, and although they are intended for Hervör's male heirs, they must pass through her and be carried by her.¹⁶⁴ According to Clover, (1986, 39, 40) when she describes herself as "between worlds", Hervör is correct in more ways than one, as her position is liminal both between life and death and between man and woman, as well as bridging the past incarnated by her father and the future that will belong to her sons.

This dimension of dynastic legitimation is fundamental to Marzella's (2022) argument. He highlights how Hervör's declared goal is to go raiding and return with treasure, but when facing her father's spirit she focuses exclusively on Tyrfingr and shows no interest in the other barrows (Marzella, 2022, 110).¹⁶⁵ Unlike Grettir, who takes gold and silver from Kárr's mound despite struggling with the load (Byock, 2009, 52), and in spite of her role as a viking leader, she seems to be seeking only the recognition of her role as heir. Indeed, leaving the barrows after her verbal duel with her father, Hervör's triumph is complete and "The daughter of princes is glad indeed, / O glad at heart today!" (Chadwick 1921, 100). Marzella (2022, 112) connects the heroine's position of initial disadvantage and her need to be recognised to the potential interruption of the family line, a trait that is shared by many of the sources explored

¹⁶⁴ This reading may lead to the argument that Hervör does not truly earn the sword due to her valour, as she receives them both together from her father and uncles. However, her bravery and military prowess are firmly established in the saga, when she leaves home and becomes the leader of a raiding party (Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 a, ch. IV; Ásmundarson, 1891, 314), and later, as already mentioned, when she confronts the revenants and argues with the spirit of her father. Therefore, although Angantýr does bestow upon her the family values to be treasured and transmitted, it is obvious that she earns his blessing with courage and rhetoric of her own.

¹⁶⁵ This is not fully supported by the text. In Crawford's version of the saga, following Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. IV), Hervör's intention is always to "inherit" the riches buried with her "departed / famous kinsmen" (Crawford, 2021, 10), and she may tell her fellow raiders that "there [is] hope of treasure" in order to preserve her false identity as Hervarþr (Crawford, 2021, 11). It is true, however, that once she is facing her father her interest shifts fully to Tyrfingr and she seems to leave with no other treasure. Chadwick's text, however, makes no mention of the heroine's intention in sailing to Samsø, preserving only her assurance to the vikings of the presence of treasure in the barrows (1921, 93-94; see also Ásmundarson, 1891, 314), so that Marzella's argument finds more support here.

here. Böðvarr is the only son of prince Björn's who comes in contact with the royal court, avenging his father and reigning as is his birthright, although only for a short time.¹⁶⁶ Sigmundr receives his sword from a divine ancestor (see section 1.3.1) and later finds himself in the position of sole male heir of the Völsung line, conspiring with his sister to avenge his father and brothers.¹⁶⁷ Theseus, too, fulfils the role of hero restoring the continuity of his family, as his father's sword allows him to be recognised as heir (see section 1.2.2).¹⁶⁸ It should be noted, however, that Ægeus is not dead and that the space of Theseus' trial has no liminal quality in this sense, and therefore it will not be treated in depth here.

If Theseus' father is living and Lancelot only confronts the spectre of his own eventual death, the chief analogue proposed by Micha (1948) offers more scope for analysis. Æneas, like Hervör, has a last conversation with his dead father, who discloses information about the hero's future and destiny (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 756-899). This meeting, however, is the reward for success in the trial of the golden bough and not part of the trial itself. Nevertheless, the last contact between the two is significant to Æneas' journey, as Anchises has been an oppressive figure throughout his life and even after his death, and the hero's filial piety has led him to obey meekly, without blame and without love (Brooks, 1953). However, Brooks notes that in the Underworld Anchises appears helpless and old, and for the first time purely human.¹⁶⁹ For him, Æneas can feel love and anxiety as a "natural unfated man" (Brooks, 1953, 266) and by this act of personal will he proves himself worthy of his destiny, which is accordingly revealed to him. The contact with a dead ancestor is therefore relevant to the hero's legitimation, even though the elective dimension of the trial should perhaps

¹⁶⁶ See Byock (1998, ch. 22), as well as Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. XXX).

¹⁶⁷ See Byock, (2012, ch. 6-8), as well as Finch (1965, ch. 6-8).

¹⁶⁸ Indeed, Ægeus makes manifest his dynastic worries when he orders Æthra to send his son to him, provided he can retrieve the tokens from under the rock, in all secrecy, "for he was mightily in in fear of the sons of Pallas, who were plotting against him [...] on account of his childlessness" (Perrin, 1914, 9).

¹⁶⁹ Indeed, Anchises is first introduced contemplating the unborn souls of his descendants, which are called "caros nepotes" to show his affection for them (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, l. 682). Moreover, upon seeing his son, Anchises displays strong emotion, reaching out with both hands and even weeping: "alacris palmas utrasque tetendit, / effusaeque genis lacrimae et vox excidit ore" (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, l. 682). It is likely that this image, together with the embrace between father and son, thrice attempted and thrice proven impossible (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 700-702), informs Brooks' (1953) reading.

be extended from the single episode of the golden bough to encompass all of the *katabasis*.¹⁷⁰ If the pagan analogues of the sword trial seem to involve revenants and spirits of the dead, the narreme is somewhat different for the Christian works explored here, where the dead do not truly exhibit a will or personality of their own. This limits the directness of the contact with their successors, as will now be considered.

The episode narrated in the *Saga of Charlemagne*, introduced in section 1.3.3, is perhaps closer to the miracle accomplished by Edward the Confessor than any of the examples given thus far. The concept of a dead man holding onto a symbolic, sacred object and only yielding it to the one man deemed worthy is at the core of both narrations. In Rollant's case, the corpse can be clearly seen grasping the hilt of his sword, while Wulfstan's staff is held in place by a mysterious force, "vi quadam mirabili" (Marzella, 2017, 167, l. 73) which Lanfranc will later suspect to have indeed been Edward's right hand, "sancta eius dextera" (Marzella, 2017, 168, l. 100), but in both cases the dead man could be argued to be a conduit for the will of the Christian God responding to a prayer.¹⁷¹ The sword held by the dead knight is an incomparable weapon, both due to the quality of its blade and to the presence of several relics in the hilt, making it an effectual Christian equivalent for the magic swords of the pagan sagas. Unlike Týrfingr and Böðvarr's sword Laufi, however, Dyrumdali may not be passed along to a worthy successor, it is "not fitting for anyone to bear it" (Hieatt, 1975, 283). This is a discrepancy with Wulfstan's tale, too, as he retrieves his own pastoral staff and keeps it. In this case, the object is both sacred and symbolic of its owner's authority and virtue, like Dyrumdali, but the virtue in question is humility, hence the more subdued

¹⁷⁰ Arguably, the final separation between father and son is as important as their meeting, as indeed Æneas incarnates the end of the Trojan royal line and the beginning of the Roman people. In fact, Æneas tearfully attempts to embrace his father's spirit upon first seeing him (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 699-702), but after receiving the prophecy he takes leave of him without effusions and, according to Mario Ramous' translation, "hastens to the ships" (my own translation from the original italian "s'affretta alle navi", Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, l. 899). The journey through the underworld could be argued to mark the death of Troy and its rebirth as Rome, so that dynastic continuity does not have the same importance here as in the sagas.

¹⁷¹ Charlemagne "pray[s] for a long time" before the sword is "loosened before him" (Hieatt, 1975, 283; see also Abischer, 1954, 232), and Wulfstan's speech addressed to the saintly king takes the form of prayer, both before leaving the staff and before retrieving it (Marzella, 2017, 165-66; 168). In Osbert's *Vita*, the importance of prayer is even greater, as Wulfstan prays both to God and to Edward (Bloch, 1923, 118, ll. 3-22; 120, ll. 3-15).

tone. Moreover, the relationship between the two heroes and the respective deceased figures is fundamentally different, as Charlemagne is Rollant's feudal overlord, while Edward fulfils a role of symbolic fatherhood for Wulfstan by choosing and protecting him, which brings the saintly king closer to the dead ancestors mentioned above (Marzella, 2022).

From this analysis, Marzella (2022, 116) comes to the conclusion that Arthur is the only hero who does not receive a legitimating sword from a dead ancestor within a liminal space facilitating contact between the two. As Micha's analogues have been considered as well, it could be argued that Theseus and Lancelot each have only half of Marzella's requirement, as the former receives a sword from his father who is not dead, and the latter enters a liminal space between the realms of life and death without receiving a symbolic object. However, it seems worth noting that these two trials are the least compelling analogues in terms of narrative similarities, as shown in Chapter 1. The Arthurian episode, on the other hand, is one of the touchstones of our analysis and therefore may make the definition problematic. As mentioned above, Marzella (2022, 118) argues that Robert de Boron may have wanted to remove the dynastic legitimation from the centre of attention, so to speak, in order to establish Arthur as a messianic figure. A potential interruption of the bloodline is still present in *Merlin*, as Arthur is an unknown and unrecognised son of the dead king, but in this case the conflict is solved through divine intervention, a solution that better aligns with Robert's reworking of the matter than an episode of tomb profanation. Arthur is eventually recognised as Uitier's son, healing the break in the dynasty in a final and definitive way, but only after he has become king, as noted in Chapter 1.

To conclude, Micha's 1948 hypothesis that the trial narreme may have been created as part of a *katabasis* narrative is reworked, rather than refuted, by Marzella (2022). Indeed, there is compelling evidence of the sword trial involving a moment of contact between the living and the dead regardless of which derivation is accepted, as on the one hand Æneas journeys to the afterlife to meet his father, while on the other hand Grettir and Hervör meet revenants in their burial mounds. Moreover, the trial's function as the solution to a dynastic problem is present on both sides of Europe, too, as

Theseus retrieves his father's sword to be recognised as heir just as Hervör does, while Sigmundr receives his weapon from a divine ancestor. Finally, Charlemagne takes a peerless sword from the hand of a dead knight only after securing divine approval, not unlike Wulfstan who can take his pastoral staff back from the hand of Edward the Confessor because he is deemed worthy of carrying it by his God. Indeed, the only major outlier seems to be Arthur himself, although this discrepancy, too, can be explained by considering the context and objectives of the author reworking the sword trial narreme to fit his ideological and religious views.

2.2 In Contact with the Supernatural¹⁷²

The second liminal trait visible in the sword trial narremes explored thus far is the contact between the natural and supernatural world. As the hero retrieves an object which is often an extraordinary weapon of supernatural origins, they may be faced with a monster, a reminder of their own potential monstrosity, or a manifestation of divine blessing. It seems interesting to note that the importance of divine intervention is greater in the texts of Christian inspiration, but also in the *Aeneid*, the only pagan work featuring a priest or priestess as part of the trial narreme (see section 1.2.3). This section will focus first on the exploration of monsters present in the sagas, trying to establish the importance of this second liminal trait to the Scandinavian iterations of the sword trial. Subsequently, the role of deities and divine will will be explored, both in the pagan and Christian works, once again seeking to highlight the importance of this element to the narreme.

2.2.1 Monsters and Men

For the pagan heroes mentioned here, the trial often involves contact with the supernatural world, quite separate from the divine. It is the case of Grettir and Hervör, who come face to face with mound-dwelling revenants known as *draugar* or *haugbúar*.¹⁷³ Chadwick (1946 a, b) notes that these creatures are frequent antagonists for Norse heroes, as they walk or ride about at night slaughtering cattle or killing people,

¹⁷² As previously anticipated, the word supernatural is used here to indicate “a realm or system that transcends nature, as that of divine, magical, or ghostly beings” (OED, s.v. “supernatural”), as well as creatures and objects belonging to such a realm.

¹⁷³ See sections 1.3.2; 2.1.2.

and generally making themselves disagreeable to the living. Kárr is a good example of this sort of *draugr*, and he constitutes a sort of trial run for Grettir in preparation for his encounter with the more dangerous Glámr.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, although the saga does not describe Kárr as particularly violent or bloodthirsty, he is credited with single-handedly driving away all other farmers from the island, so that it belongs entirely to Þorfinnr (see section 1.3.2), and he fights Grettir within the mound attacking “with fury” (Byock, 2009, 52).¹⁷⁵ Angantýr, on the other hand, belongs to the friendlier category of *draugar*, described by Chadwick (1946 a, b) as capable of having poetic dialogues with the living and of bestowing gifts upon them.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, as noted in section 1.3.2, the dead berserker warrior sustains a lengthy bout of verbal sparring with his daughter, in verse, and finally gives her the family sword along with the good qualities of her forefathers.

The function of the *draugr* as a monster has been explored by Hume (1980), who notes the generally more realistic character of the Icelandic sagas, but also the fact that witchcraft, rune magic, and second sight would be considered realistic in a time when people claimed to possess such powers fairly frequently (Hume, 1980, 2). According to the scholar, creatures such as dragons and *draugar* are truly fantastical, as opposed to the aforementioned supernatural gifts. In her opinion, these beings usually serve one of four purposes, namely, they can be a test of the hero’s might, a chance for the hero to serve the common good, an ironic device to humanise a heroic character, or a commentary on the nature of heroism (Hume, 1980, 3). The first sort of monster is the one most relevant to the texts being examined here, and Hume notes that these combats often end with the triumphant hero taking the monster’s hoard or part of it. In particular,

¹⁷⁴ For Grettir’s fight with Glámr, see Byock (2009, ch. 35; Jónsson, 1936, ch. 35). Both revenants are finally beheaded by the victorious hero, which Chadwick (1946a) and Jónsson (1936, 122, note 1) both note is one of the two strategies employed in sagas to stop a wandering revenant. Of the other method listed by Chadwick (1946a), suttee, there is no trace in the sagas treated here and so it will not be delved into.

¹⁷⁵ Jónsson (1936, 58) reads, “sótti haugbúinn með kappi.” The word *kapp* can indicate fervour and zeal, but also aggressiveness, rage, and even war (ONP, s.v. “kapp”).

¹⁷⁶ Chadwick’s articles contain a deeper analysis of the relationship between revenants and poetry, connecting the ghosts’ ability to bestow poetic inspiration with the other supernatural gifts, including “the power to beget children” (Chadwick, 1946a, 64). While the use of verse is of no great consequence to this thesis, Chadwick’s hypothesis that king Rerir, in the *Saga of the Volsungs*, may have gone to the family burial mound in hopes of receiving an ancestor’s blessing and aid in his efforts to have children (Chadwick, 1946a, 64) is interesting, and brought forth by Finch (1965, 3, note 1) as well.

a hero may gain a unique sword that will allow him to distinguish himself and accomplish greater deeds in the future (Hume, 1980, 4), as is the case in both *Grettir's Saga* and in *The Saga of Hervör and Heiðrekr*. Hume (1980, 9-10) argues that *draugar* are often artistically more interesting than other monsters, because they have a known personality in life and get to keep it in death. In her view, by turning dishonest, wrathful, or otherwise problematic people into monsters for the hero to vanquish, a society seeks to dramatise and overcome its own flaws and weaknesses (Hume, 1980, 13-14). This is done through two chief figures, namely, the *draugr* and its living counterpart, the berserker.

The bear warrior, overtaken by animal fury in combat to the point of transformation, is another representative of what Hume calls “imperfectly socialised” heroism (1980, 11) as his strength can be dangerous if it is not properly directed. These figures who possess a twofold nature, animal and human, carry with them a potential threat to the society of humans. Böðvarr Bjarki is, so to speak, a good were-bear, as he only uses his supernatural abilities to serve his king and therefore, implicitly, society at large.¹⁷⁷ However, his brothers Elgfróði and Þorir, who inherit more of their father’s ferine nature, lack not only the possibility to appear fully human or fully animal but also the capability to properly harness their strength. Indeed, in their youth they are both banned from participating in communal games, as they continually injure and maim the other players, being “fierce and unyielding” (Byock, 1998, 40).¹⁷⁸ Their trials all take place in a space that was long inhabited by Björn in his bear form, and was also the setting of his last prophetic dialogue with Bera (see section 1.3.1), so that it evokes the supernatural even before the three prodigious weapons come into play. Indeed, it could be argued that this moment of symbolic contact with their dead parent also acts as a confirmation of their otherness, of the non-human traits they inherit from Björn together with the weapons.

¹⁷⁷ Indeed, toward the end of the saga (Byock, 1998, ch. 33; Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. L), “a great bear” is seen fighting by king Hrolf’s side (Byock, 1998, 74) and only disappears when Böðvarr is roused from a trancelike state, to which he responds by stating that he “can now offer the king far less support than before” (Byock, 1998, 75). Therefore, although the warrior does not physically transform into a bear, there is a very strong implication that the beast is a supernatural manifestation under his control. The expression “were-bear” is therefore used here, although not exactly fitting, for lack of a better alternative.

¹⁷⁸ See also Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. XXVII-XXVIII).

If these pagan heroes face monsters or reminders of their own potential monstrosity as part of their trial, the later Christian authors seem to lay aside the supernatural and especially the monstrous. It can hardly be argued that Wulfstan and Charlemagne are facing the undead, while Lancelot's stone reveals an empty tomb and even Æneas' journey through the grove carries the mark of the divine rather than of the monstrous, as will be seen shortly. From this analysis, it seems likely that the *draugar* and Björn's cave have the function proposed by Marzella, namely, to facilitate a connection between the living and the dead in order to avert a potential interruption in the bloodline, rather than to act as monsters or as representations of the supernatural *per se*. However, the next section will show that the Christian authors leave much more space to the divine and miraculous, dimensions which are already present in the *Æneid* and in the *Saga of the Volsungs*, although in a pagan sense.

2.2.2 Facing the Divine

All the narremes explored thus far are election trials, proving the triumphing hero's worth and readiness for a grand destiny and often setting their victory against the backdrop of others' failure. The entity responsible for choosing the protagonist is sometimes a god, both in the pagan and Christian works, suggesting the importance of a supernatural entity calling heroes to their fate and designating them above all others as champions. Of the sagas mentioned here, only the *Saga of the Volsungs* contains direct involvement of a deity in the election trial.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, as noted in section 1.3.1, the mysterious old man who enters the hall of king Völsungr and issues the challenge is easily recognised as the one-eyed god Oðinn.¹⁸⁰ In this situation, as mentioned above, the deity is at the same time an ancestor of Sigmundr's, as Völsungr was conceived through his intervention. Byock (2012) describes Sigrudr, Sigmundr's son, as "an Odinic hero", and explains the god's involvement in the continuation of the bloodline with the necessity to ensure the dragonslayer's birth. This interpretation is corroborated by Koch (1994), who also argues that the reason for Oðinn's decision to revoke his blessing and break Sigmundr's sword is the death of Sinfjötli. Indeed, her view is that

¹⁷⁹ Oðinn also appears in the *Saga of Hervör and Heiðrekr*, as mentioned in section 1.3.2 with reference to the deicidal properties of Tyrfingr, but he is not involved in the heroine's trial.

¹⁸⁰ See Byock (2012, 37), Finch (1965, 4).

Simundr and Signý's incestuously conceived son is the purest incarnation of the Völsung line, and by letting him die his father has committed a grievous sin in the god's eyes.¹⁸¹ Oðinn's blessing and protection will then return to Sigurðr along with the pieces of his father's sword,¹⁸² so that the god remains involved in the fortunes of the Völsung line throughout the generations.

Æneas, too, is a hero of divine descent who can count on his mother Venus' assistance and protection when facing a trial which, as noted in section 1.2.3, is imposed by other deities. His search for the golden bough, together with the entire subsequent journey, is also guided and mediated by the Sibyl, a priestess and prophetess who, when divinely inspired, speaks in the voice of the gods and foretells the hero's future in a chilling scene of possession (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 77-101). However, it could be argued that the same statement made for prophecies and second sight as realistic narrative elements in the Norse sagas (see section 2.2.1) is valid here, as well. Indeed, as mentioned in section 1.2.3, the Sibyl has been described as a figure of history and authenticity, lending credibility to a tale set in a past so remote it starts blurring into myth. More mythical in nature is the intervention of Venus who, in response to her son's prayers, sends two doves to guide him to the golden bough (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 186-204). The flight of the sacred birds ending among the branches of the tree which allows entrance to the Underworld has been interpreted as a parallelism to the Tree of Life, and therefore, to the hero himself (see sections 1.2.3; 2.1.1). Æneas, like the tree that holds both the dead golden bough and the living doves,

¹⁸¹ This is an interesting theory, although the text does not seem to fully support it. It is true that Sigmundr's last battle takes place very soon after Sinfjötli's death, indeed in the very next chapter, but no explicit link is established between the two events. Sigmundr's parting words to his wife are "Odin does not want me to wield the sword since it is now broken. I have fought battles while it pleased him" (Byock, 2012, 51), which shows only his awareness of having lost the god's favour. Moreover, the dying king also foretells the birth of Sigurðr describing him as "the foremost of [his] line" (Byock, 2012, 51). Finch's (1965, 21) text is nearly identical to Byock's in both passages. However, it stands to reason that, in such a family-focused saga, the death of a son may cast a strong pall of blame over the father and cause a divine ancestor to rescind his blessing.

¹⁸² Several times, during Sigurðr's adventures, he is accompanied or advised by the deity, disguised as an old man. See for instance Byock (2012, ch. 13), Finch (1965, ch. 14), where the hero receives from Oðinn a horse "sired by Sleipnir," (Finch, 1965, 24) a clear mark of divine blessing and approval.

reunites in himself his mother and his father, representing the topical union of love and death and straining the nature of mortality (Brooks, 1953, 278).¹⁸³

If then Æneas' very existence bends the rules of human nature, it follows that it should be him to cross into the realm of the dead and return unharmed. His trial, proving his piety as well as his divinely ordained right to undertake the journey, is set by the queen of the underworld, variously named in the poem as Proserpina or Juno Inferna (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, l. 138; 143), as her husband is named Stygian Jove (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book IV, l. 638). The rulers of the underworld are therefore represented as mirror images of the king and queen of the heavens, reinforcing the correspondence between sky and underground, light and darkness, life and death, an antinomy becoming a union in the figure of the golden bough and of the hero who bears it as a gift to the goddess. Proserpina will have no further bearing on Æneas' destiny, but the bough acts as a token of her benevolence and persuades Charon to let him cross the river Acheron.¹⁸⁴ By completing the trial set by the goddess, the hero obtains safe passage through her realm and back to life, an experience reminiscent of resurrection which will be examined momentarily in its initiatic connotation. For the time being, it is sufficient to confirm the relevance of divine will and benevolence both as origin and consequence of the trial in the tales of Sigmundr and Æneas, a trait they share with their Christian counterparts.

In Lancelot's case, introduced in section 1.2.1, the origin of the trial is ambiguous. Indeed, there is no clear statement in the text describing the prophecy inscribed on the tombstone as divine or otherwise. However, it is possible to apply here the framework delineated by Cawsey (2001, 90) in relation to the writing on Arthur's sword, already mentioned in 1.1.1. In this episode, as in *Merlin*, there is no mention of where the writing may have come from and its truth-value is undisputed, so that it may

¹⁸³ On the one hand, Venus is the goddess of love, represented by the two doves that Æneas recognises as “maternas [...] avis” (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, l. 193). On the other hand Anchises is not only a mortal man, but indeed a dead one, and it is in order to meet him that his son undertakes the *katabasis*.

¹⁸⁴ Charon at first refuses to let the hero and the priestess onto his boat, which “may not carry the living” (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, l. 391, translation mine), but upon seeing the golden bough he immediately recognises it and relents, making room for them among the souls of the dead (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 408-413).

be assumed that the author of the prophecy is God.¹⁸⁵ The performative status of language is another trait that the two narratives could be argued to share, as Lancelot fulfils the prediction written on the stone, but in this case there is more narrative and temporal distance between the cemetery episode and the knight's eventual triumph.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, the episode has a strong religious undertone by virtue of being set within a sacred space, near a place of worship. Lancelot stops at the church to pray before attempting the trial,¹⁸⁷ and the role of arbiter is assumed by a friar so that here, too, the institutional Church is directly involved and in a position of relative power. Arguably, therefore, this episode also constitutes a manifestation of divine election, even though the test itself is based on strength more than on virtue.

The episode narrated in the *Saga of Charlemagne*, on the contrary, is a trial of pure election. Indeed, five knights together attempt to pry open Rollant's fingers but fail (Hieatt, 1975, 282; Abischer, 1954, 232), highlighting the supernatural nature of this divinely enhanced *rigor mortis*. The knight's last words and thoughts are for his sword and the wish that it may never again be wielded by a man "to terrify another" (Hieatt, 1975, 282), but especially to avert the dreadful possibility that it may fall into enemy hands, as it is "both good and holy" (Hieatt, 1975, 277).¹⁸⁸ His wish is granted in full, to the point where even the king of Christianity can only accomplish the miraculous task after a moment of devoted prayer, presumably obtaining God's blessing and promising a suitable end for the sacred weapon, making clear his intention never to wield it in battle. Moreover, the close relationship existing between Charlemagne and Rollant, both as king and knight and as blood relations, makes the result of the trial a likely reflection of the dead man's own wishes, not unlike Edward the Confessor surrenders the pastoral

¹⁸⁵ Indeed, Lancelot's guide only states that "On it are carved letters" (Kibler, 1981, p. 81, l. 1899) delineating the prophecy, and deems himself sure of its coming true (Kibler, 1981, ll. 1972-77). Such unquestioning faith from a monk strongly suggests the writing is of divine origin.

¹⁸⁶ Arthur is designated as the king chosen by God from the moment he first retrieves the sword, and recognised as such by Antor and the archbishop, although his coronation is delayed (see Micha, 2000a, 254-58). Lancelot's success, on the other hand, only foretells his eventual triumph in rescuing his queen and countrymen, without directly causing it. For this reason, although the words of the monk communicate absolute certainty, whether this is sufficient proof of performative language is admittedly debatable.

¹⁸⁷ "Le chevalier [...] el mostier / entra a pié pour Deu proier" (Kibler, 1981, p. 78, ll. 1841-42).

¹⁸⁸ See also Abischer (1954, 220).

staff only to the man he himself has chosen to carry it. Nonetheless, it seems that the main difference between the other sagas explored here and the *Saga of Charlemagne* is that the relationship between the living and the dead is no longer direct and personal, but necessarily mediated by God. In other words, the dead are sought by the living as a source of wisdom and election *per se*, but also and perhaps preponderantly as an instrument through which divine will can be manifested.

The clearest example of this shift in meaning is the miracle accomplished by Edward the Confessor, but a brief detour into the matter of Christian miracles and of what phenomena were understood as miraculous during the Middle Ages may be useful here. A widely available work on the topic, certainly known to Osbert and Ælred, is Augustine of Hippo's *City of God*.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, as one of the Fathers of the Church, Augustine had his works copied and preserved throughout the Middle Ages in monasteries and churches on both sides of the Channel, as proven by library records (Westwell, n.d.). The interpretation of miracles in *City of God* hinges on the fact that lack of a rational explanation does not equal impossibility, as the human mind is limited and may not always comprehend the rationality of divine action. In other words, “a portent [...] does not occur contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known of nature” (Bettenson, 1984, 980). Therefore, as God's creative will is by definition the nature of all things, it may not be said that miracles subvert the natural order, but merely the order which is generally followed by nature and understood by man, and this they do in order to transmit a divine message to humanity and increase the number of the faithful. These true miracles are always worked by God directly, although sometimes “with the cooperation of the martyrs or in response to [...] prayers” (Bettenson, 1984, 1048), and indeed Augustine cites many examples of miracles obtained by the faithful by touching relics or visiting Saints' tombs.

However, Augustine also finds himself grappling with reports of prodigies and marvels accomplished, or said to be accomplished, through the power of pagan deities or human magicians. These phenomena, which he calls *mêchanêmata* or contrivances (Bettenson, 1984, 975), are considered by the author to be either performed by men

¹⁸⁹ All subsequent references to *City of God* are based on the 1984 translation by Henry Bettenson.

through “the demon’s black arts” (Bettenson, 1984, 974) or by demons themselves. Augustine argues that, as demons desire to be worshipped as gods and to influence humans for the worst, they will often make “a few of them disciples of their own, and teachers of very many others” (Bettenson, 1984, 975), and so are magicians trained. However, Augustine turns even these apparent counterarguments into evidence supporting his religious views, claiming that if demons and angels, who are created beings, can accomplish marvels, the power of the God who created them and bestowed such might upon them must be all the greater (Bettenson, 1984, 976). *Mêchanêmata* are not miracles, but may appear as such and therein lies their potential danger. If, as shown here, mediaeval theology admitted the existence of wonders of demonic origin meant to deceive the faithful, it follows naturally that the mysterious sword and stone in *Merlin* must be prayed over and blessed with relics to ensure their divine origin.¹⁹⁰ In contrast, a prodigy accomplished within a place of worship through the action of a Saint, as is the case in Osbert’s and Ælred’s *Lives*, or through relics of Saints, as in the *Saga of Charlemagne*, needs not be doubted and indeed is not.

Within this context, the importance of prayer to the three Christian trials is easily explained. If, however, Charlemagne witnesses a divine marvel and requires God’s blessing to be allowed possession of sacred relics, as covered in the present section, Wulfstan asks directly for a miracle and has his wish granted. Indeed, this seems a textbook example of a miracle worked by divine power through the body of a Saint, which arguably constitutes a relic,¹⁹¹ in the latter’s resting place, and therefore is to be considered valid by Augustine’s criteria.¹⁹² As already established, the source of the

¹⁹⁰ As pointed out in section 1.1.1, upon hearing of the mysterious sword and stone, the archbishop has all the relics of the church brought out and holy water sprinkled on the newly appeared objects (Micha, 2000a, 250). The function of prayer and blessings in ensuring no demonic manoeuvre is at work is established by Micha (1994, 162, note 31), and the present thesis has already pointed out the extreme likelihood of Robert de Boron being at least somewhat familiar with Augustine’s theology in Chapter 1.

¹⁹¹ A relic, in a Christian context, is defined as “the physical remains (as the body or a part of it) of a saint, martyr, or other deceased holy person, or a thing believed to be sanctified by contact with him or her” (OED, s.v. “relic”). Edward’s body can be argued to fulfil the necessary criteria in either *Life*, as the very existence of Osbert’s work proves that the king was considered a holy person even before he was officially canonised (see section 1.1.2).

¹⁹² It may be worthwhile to mention here a difference between the two *Lives*. In Osbert’s text Wulfstan prays first to God and then to Edward (Bloch, 1923, 120, ll. 6-15), making clear that it is God who accomplished the miracle, in Augustine’s words, “with the cooperation” of the dead

election is purely divine in Wulfstan's case, as in the Arthurian episode. In Osbert's text, Lanfranc declares that "God has shown" Wulfstan's virtue and worth (Bloch, 1923, 119, l. 32, translation mine), while Ælred has the archbishop say that "the Lord rekindled the holy king's spirit," in order that he may reveal the same virtue (Marzella, 2017, 167, ll. 89-90, translation mine). In both texts the quality that God values in Wulfstan is his *simplicitas*, a virtue that encompasses simplicity, honesty, candour, and frugality,¹⁹³ and which has previously been the reason for his deposition. This is particularly evident in Ælred's *Vita*, where the text reads, "Wlstanus simplicitatis [...] accusatur" (Marzella, 2017, 165, ll. 20-21). Moreover, as previously noted, in this trial the role of the dead ancestor as legitimator is performed by Edward, the symbolic, spiritual father who first chose Wulfstan to hold a position of power.¹⁹⁴

Furthermore, Marzella (2022, 128) notes that, whereas the pagan heroes have female relatives such as Signý and Bera as helpers and supporters, in the Christian trials this role is performed by the institutional church. Lanfranc does, indeed, recognise and support Wulfstan's claim to the role of bishop once it has been clearly established as God's will. Osbert and Ælred are in agreement on this point, as they both describe king and archbishop kneeling before Wulfstan, asking for forgiveness (Bloch, 1923, 120, ll. 18-21; Marzella, 2017, 168, ll. 111-113).¹⁹⁵ Moreover, in both texts it is Lanfranc himself who officially asks Wulfstan to take back his staff and his role, reinstating him fully with the same authority he had first used to demote him (Bloch, 1923, 119-120; Marzella, 2017, 168, ll. 99-101). Even the time between the deposition and

king. Ælred, on the other hand, has Wulfstan pray exclusively to the Saint, highlighting the latter's agency in performing the miracle (Marzella, 2017, 168, ll. 103-109). The decision to give greater autonomy to Edward may be due to the fact that, by the time Ælred's *Life* is written, the king's canonisation has been completed, as noted in section 1.1.2.

¹⁹³ See IL, s.v. "simplicitas."

¹⁹⁴ See Bloch (1923, 117, ll. 30-35; 120, ll. 13-15), Marzella (2017, 165, ll. 29-54; 168, ll. 103-109).

¹⁹⁵ Both authors dramatise this scene in a dynamic way, augmenting the emotional impact through their lexical choices. In Osbert's version of the tale, Lanfranc and William "fall at Wulfstan's feet" (Bloch, 1923, 120, ll. 18-19, translation mine) and the verb employed is *procido*, meaning "to fall down" or "to collapse" and therefore encoding a fast, violent downward motion (IL, s.v. "procido"). Ælred's text, on the other hand, describes the king and archbishop "hurry", presumably toward Wulfstan, and ask forgiveness "prostrated on the ground" (Marzella, 2017, 168, ll. 111-112). Once again, the verb *prosterno* can mean "to throw to the ground", so that the implication of fast, violent movement is very similar (IL, s.v. "prosterno").

reinstatement is spent by Wulfstan among monks, “inter plebeios monachos” in Bloch (1923, 119, ll. 8-9) and simply “inter monachos” in Marzella (2017, 166, l. 57). This highlights both the hero’s humility and the familiar embrace of the church for its members. Although the figure of an arbiter is absent from the Norse sagas, therefore, it stands to reason that family ties and dynamics be substituted with religious hierarchies and institutions when the legitimator is no longer an ancestor but a deity. What is more, when Osbert undertook the writing of his work, it was known that Lanfranc had attempted to depose Wulfstan and failed, which made him an ideal candidate for the role of arbiter (Marzella, 2022, 134).¹⁹⁶

The same can be said for the Arthurian trial, where once again the archbishop takes the young hero under his protection and guides him wisely until he is crowned king (Micha, 2000a, 258-59).¹⁹⁷ Although Merlin could be expected to act as protector and advisor, he is temporarily absent at the time of the trial, as noted in section 1.1.1, which Marzella (2022, 137) argues is a strategic decision on his part to avoid being accused of masterminding the prodigy himself.¹⁹⁸ Considering the theological views of the time, explored in this section, there is reason to believe that it may indeed be the case. In Robert de Boron’s work, Merlin is not only a prophet but also the spawn of a demon,¹⁹⁹ which would make his direct intervention possible but suspicious. Regardless, as previously noted, the archbishop himself is quick to confirm the divine nature of the recently appeared sword, anvil, and stone, and the truth of the writing on the blade is never doubted again within the narrative.²⁰⁰ Therefore, Arthur’s reign is

¹⁹⁶ See also section 1.1.2.

¹⁹⁷ In chapter 88, the barons meet on Candlemas and request “que [...] tu teignes l’enfant en garde” until Easter, which the archbishop accordingly does (Micha, 2000a, 258).

¹⁹⁸ Indeed, despite his efforts to retreat to the sidelines of the miraculous happenings, the magician-cum-prophet has been suspected of pulling the strings of the action by several scholars (see section 1.1.1).

¹⁹⁹ Merlin’s conception, along with his mother’s efforts to save her soul and her child’s, are narrated in the verse fragment (Micha, 2000a, 77-99) and in the first 8 chapters of the prose (Micha, 2000a, 102-118; Micha, 1994, 23-38).

²⁰⁰ In Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* (Cooper, 1998, 8), the archbishop orders the assembled crowd to pray and “that no man touch the sword till the High Mass be all done”, but there is no particular blessing of the sword itself, so that the reason for this prolonged prayer remains ambiguous. The fact that the assembly is forbidden from touching the sword could, however, be taken as evidence that the archbishop is operating the same verification as his counterpart in *Merlin*, especially considering that in this narration the writing on the sword does not directly mention divine will and therefore remains yet more mysterious.

willed and legitimated by God, because the Holy Grail awaits him. Marzella (2022, 136) argues that a sovereign destined for such a holy accomplishment must be chosen by God first, and only secondly legitimated by blood as Uitier's heir. This fundamental role of faith and religion to the trial is shared by Robert, Malory, Osbert and Ælred, because their heroes move within the same value system, and their humility leaves space in the tale for the miraculous event that proves their true greatness.

To conclude, the presence of supernatural beings or forces at work seems to be a significant part of the sword trial narreme, but it takes different shapes depending on context. If the heroes of the Norse sagas face undead creatures and receive the blessing of the gods or of their dead ancestors, their Christian counterparts are chosen by divine intervention exclusively, when they seem inadequate to human eyes. The importance of institutional, organised religion is evident in the *Aeneid*, as in *Merlin* and in the *Vita Sancti Edwardi*, whereas the monsters for the hero to overcome virtually disappear and are substituted by a purely symbolic test. In all cases examined, however, the hero is chosen for a grand destiny due to their ability to enter the liminal space and triumph in the supernatural trial. It should be noted that Theseus seems, thus far, to still be the furthest from the touchstones, as his trial does not involve supernatural intervention or election by a non-human entity (see section 1.2.2). However, the Athenian prince will be more relevant in the next section, where the initiatic value of the trial is explored and the liminal space becomes liminal time.

2.3 Stepping into Destiny

The third and final liminal trait shared by the narremes considered here derives from the peculiar situation of the episode within the frame of the hero's life. By facing their trial when on the cusp of adulthood, or by undergoing a significant change of status as a result of their triumphs, many of the heroes mentioned in this thesis could be argued to have passed an initiation of sorts. Whether the passage from childhood to adulthood is made explicit by the narrative or the trial leads the hero out of a relatively ordinary life toward their personal legend, the change is significant enough that its importance can hardly be doubted. What is more, the lynchpin on which the change hinges is the trial episode and the hero's triumph in it, giving it clear initiatic value. Therefore, this

section will explore the episodes marking the hero's passage into adulthood and then the passages into legend, in order to better understand the role of this third type of liminality within the narreme.

2.3.1 From Child to Man

The sword trial as depicted in *Merlin* has a strong initiatic value, evident not only from context but also through a lexical analysis of the pass. Indeed, the moment of triumph marks Arthur's passage from a relatively common childhood spent in Antor's household as a cadet brother to an adulthood marked by glory and adventure. Robert de Boron specifies Arthur's age at this point as "ou sezieme an", in the sixteenth year (Micha, 2000a, 248), and he is clearly not considered an adult by the other characters.²⁰¹ Indeed, he is referred to as "uns garçons", meaning "a boy" (Micha, 2000a, 257), and several times as "l'enfant", "the child", (Micha, 2000a, 258; 260), and the barons are especially opposed to being ruled by such a young person without knowing "quel hom il voura estre", *id est*, "what sort of man he will be" (Micha, 2000a, 260).²⁰² However, when they are finally persuaded and the coronation is allowed to proceed, the archbishop knights Arthur and announces to the assembled crowd, "Veez ci un home que Nostre Sires nos a eslit" (Micha, 2000a, 262),²⁰³ calling him a man for the first time. Furthermore, the importance of sword-centric rituals in the initiation of knights has been noted by Donà (2014), while Dutton (2007, 9) describes the episode in *Merlin* as "insistently sacramental", so that the ritual dimension of the trial is unmistakable. Finally, Arthur's separation from Antor is dramatised by Robert with great emphasis on the young man's distress (Micha, 2000a, 255-56).²⁰⁴ It could be argued that this episode

²⁰¹ The age of majority for men, in England, was raised from fifteen to twenty-one during the feudal period, between the 9th and 13th centuries, according to James (1960, 26). Moreover, twenty-one was also the age at which a squire may be knighted, as per the Norman custom (James, 1960, 28). Therefore, Arthur being knighted so young may constitute either a strategy employed by Robert to set his tale in the past before the law was changed, or an exception due to "particular merit" (James, 1960, 28). As Arthur faces much antagonism because of his youth, and as it was not uncommon for sovereigns to reach majority earlier due to their perceived "superior genius" (James, 1960, 28), the latter hypothesis seems more likely.

²⁰² All translations are my own.

²⁰³ "Behold a man who Our Lord has elected for us" (translation mine).

²⁰⁴ At first, Arthur is convinced that "the man he thought of as his father [is] disowning him as a son", therefore he "crie[s] and suffer[s] greatly" (Micha, 2000a, 255, translation mine). And even after Antor has told him what he knows, namely, that he was ordered to christen and raise Arthur without knowing who his real parents were, it is all the future king can do to repeat, "je

sees Arthur separated from his family, facing the trial of the sword alone, and finally reintegrated into society in a new role, reflecting the structure of initiation rituals.²⁰⁵

Theseus' success in the trial imposed by his father also marks his separation from the maternal side of his family, followed by a solitary journey through Greece which gives the young man a chance to prove his valour, and finally culminating in his recognition and reintegration into society as his father's heir.²⁰⁶ Ægeus himself establishes the trial as an initiation moment when he tells Æthra to wait until their son "came to man's estate" (Perrin, 1914, 9), and indeed Theseus is led by his mother to the stone "in his young manhood" (Perrin, 1914, 13), when he shows promise as a future ruler. Van Gennep (1960, 64-65) notes the importance of symbolic separation from the mother in initiation rites, and that in some cases the contact with her may be prolonged after the separation from the rest of society, although the moment of severance is inevitable; in this case, Æthra is the arbiter of the trial and guides her son to the cusp of adulthood before letting him go on his own journey. After his solitary adventures, during which he accomplishes many great deeds, the young hero finally comes to his father's house where he is "formally recognised [...] before an assembly of the citizens, who [receive] him gladly" (Perrin, 1914, 25). Therefore, the initiatic and dynastic value of the trial is unmistakable, although the elective trait is missing and the hero's success proves only that his strength equals his father's.²⁰⁷

Æneas' quest for the golden bough does not have such an obvious initiatic value as Theseus' trial, and once again it is the whole *katabasis* that appears significant rather than the trial episode in itself. Although the hero faces the trial as a grown man, it is worth noting that his mother guides him to success, albeit in an indirect way befitting a

vos pri que vos ne me desavouoiz de fil" (Micha, 2000a, 255). This highlights how Arthur perceives current events as a traumatic and potentially ruinous separation from his family.

²⁰⁵ This is compounded by the archbishop's habit of addressing Arthur as "filz", son (Micha, 2000a, 256-58), substituting himself and his guidance for Antor. For a detailed study of initiation rituals, see Chapter 6 of *The Rites of Passage* (Ven Gennep, 1960, 65-115).

²⁰⁶ See Perrin (1914, §VII-XII), Ziegler (1960, §VII-XII).

²⁰⁷ This in spite of Donà (2014) and Anderson (2004), who seem convinced of the irrelevance of this difference between Theseus' trial and Arthur's. Indeed, as argued in Chapter 1, the fact that Arthur is by no means the strongest contender is of paramount importance and this, together with the other differences highlighted thus far, significantly reduces the likelihood of the episodes being related.

deity, by sending her sacred birds to him.²⁰⁸ Arguably, therefore, she accompanies him to the cusp of a journey he must continue alone, not unlike Æthra and, as will be seen shortly, Bera. After his trial has been accomplished, a priestess guides Æneas to the underworld, where he can meet his father for the last time and finally separate fully from him by returning, alone, to the land of the living. The hero thus crosses the threshold of death and is reborn, figuratively, with a new identity; from the last of the doomed Trojans, he becomes the first of the glorious Romans. What Van Gennep calls “the dramatisation of the novice’s death and rebirth” is part of the initiation rites practised, among others, by the followers of the Orphic mysteries (1960, 91), and indeed it has been argued that Vergil may have been referring precisely to the mysteries when writing this passage (Parvulescu, 2005). However, as mentioned, it is rather the whole journey which reflects the structure of initiation, even following Parvulescu’s argument that the golden bough reflects the ritual branch carried by supplicants. Therefore, for the purposes of the present thesis, the initiatic value of the trial of the golden bough remains partial at best.

Böðvarr Bjarki and his brothers, on the other hand, are presented with a trial that has a strong initiatic value. Each of them is guided to the cave by their mother when they have decided to leave the family home (Byock, 1998, ch. 40, 41, 44; Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch.XXVIII, XXIX, XXXI),²⁰⁹ enters the liminal space alone, and emerges with his inheritance which includes a weapon, ready to face a hostile world independently. In fact, Elgfróði and Þorir take their leave of their mother in rather final terms after accomplishing their trials (Byock, 1998, 41), while Böðvarr takes part in her wedding feast before riding away alone (Byock, 1998, 44).²¹⁰ The act of marrying Bera

²⁰⁸ The doves first appear “forte”, by chance (Ramous and Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 90), but, after the hero has recognised the “maternas [...] avis” (Ramous and Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 193) and prayed to his divine mother for guidance, they alternate brief flights and rests allowing the hero to follow them to the tree (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book VI, ll. 199-204).

²⁰⁹ Elgfróði “told his mother that he wanted to leave [...]. His mother took him to the cave” (Byock, 1998, 40), Þorir “asked permission to leave. His mother showed him the way to the cave” (Byock, 1998, 41), and Böðvarr “rode away alone. [...] Following his mother’s instructions, he first headed to the cave” (Byock, 1998, 44). See also Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch.XXVIII, XXIX, XXXI).

²¹⁰ This is especially true for Þorir, who “bað móður sína vel lifa” (Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson, 1943.44 b, ch. XXIX), while Elgfróði “kvaddi [...] móður sína at skilnaði” (Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson, 1943.44 b, ch. XXVIII). The latter passage is translated by Byock (1998, 41) as

to a Jarl, *de facto* inserting her in a new family context, lends yet more radicality and poignancy to Böðvarr's separation from her, as he is not only removing himself from her physically, but also removing her from him terms of family relations. Bera fulfils a similar role to that described previously with reference to Æthra, both as guide and, *ipso facto*, as her sons' last contact with the familiar world of their childhood, from which they must depart in a bold and final way. Moreover, as noted in 2.2, the cave as a liminal space also facilitates a symbolic contact with Björn, who "had long before determined what each son should have" (Byock, 1998, 40).²¹¹ This contact with the deceased father, too, is broken almost immediately as the three brothers receive his last gifts and depart, further confirming the initiatic value of the episode.

Marzella (2022, 127) considers the trial the concluding moment of the hero's initiation, and this may indeed be true of Elfróði and perhaps Þorir, but seems less accurate in Böðvarr's case. Indeed, Elfróði leaves the cave and immediately establishes himself as a robber and killer, "buil[ds] himself a hut and settle[s] in" (Byock, 1998, 41),²¹² seemingly having chosen his way of life. Þorir pays a visit to his older brother after receiving his inheritance, but only a brief exchange of threats occurs before the agnition and reconciliation, so that this moment may not qualify as a second test, although it is true that Elfróði finally gives his brother a reward, in the form of excellent advice (Byock, 1998, 41-42).²¹³ The youngest of the brothers, on the other hand, has a veritable second test to face before he can begin his own adventures,

"parting without even bidding his mother farewell", but this does not seem entirely accurate to the Norse text, which lacks a negative construction and rather seems to mean "he bade his mother farewell" or "he took leave of his mother." Crawford's (2021, 97) translation supports this, reading, "After this he said farewell to his mother." Of Böðvarr, meanwhile, it is simply said that "sittr Böðvarr í veizlunni, áðr en hann ríðr" (Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. XXX).

²¹¹ "Björn hafði þat allt á kveðit, hvat hvern skyldi hafa" (Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. XXVIII).

²¹² See also Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson (1943-44 b, ch. XXVIII).

²¹³ To be precise, Elfróði offers Þorir half of his fortune, "bauð honum allt at helmingi við sik, þat sem þá hafði hann saman dregit" (Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. XXIX), as soon as he recognises his younger brother. However, this material reward is refused by Þorir and substituted, so to speak, with advice to go to Gautland and take advantage of a power vacuum there to become king. This marks the beginning of Þorir's own legend, as he becomes king "and there are great sagas about him" (Byock, 1998, 42), so that the episode may be argued to mark the completion of the initiatic passage.

separate from his family.²¹⁴ After passing through the cave and retrieving his share of treasure and weaponry, Böðvarr, too, visits Elgfróði (Byock, 1998, ch. 23; Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. XXXI). A fierce struggle follows, until Böðvarr’s hood falls back, allowing his brother to recognize him. After this, Elgfróði draws blood from his ferine leg and has Böðvarr drink it, which makes him “exceedingly strong” (Byock, 1998, 46).²¹⁵ This encounter, containing as it does a fight, an agnition, and a reward, seems to qualify as a secondary heroic trial and another step in the protagonist’s initiation, making the sword trial only the beginning.²¹⁶

Hervör’s trial, too, could be considered an initiation. While it does not coincide with her first attempt to leave her grandfather’s home, it is the first time she leaves, so to speak, officially and with permission. Indeed, Crawford’s (2021, 9) version of the text narrates that “When she came of age [...], she went into the forests and killed men for their money”, then was caught and brought back and “stayed at home for a while”.²¹⁷ In this case, however, she openly declares to her grandfather her determination “to visit [her] departed / famous kinsmen” and asks her mother to provide her with raiding apparel “as [she] would for a son” (Crawford, 2021, 10).²¹⁸ Like

²¹⁴ This specification is necessary as the hero has already accomplished glorious deeds in order to avenge his father and to defend his family’s honour (see Byock, 1998, ch. 22; Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. XXX), and the trial only marks the beginning of his independent adventuring.

²¹⁵ Once again, Elgfróði first offers his brother half of his fortune, and is refused on moral grounds, as Böðvarr disapproves of murder for the sake of money. Instead of treasure, therefore, Elgfróði gives him advice to “go to king Hrolf” (Byock, 1998, 46), as well as sharing his own prodigious strength. This repeating pattern is yet more evidence that the previous encounter with Þorir, too, may be part of the initiation process.

²¹⁶ It is possible to take the argument further, adding that Böðvarr then attempts to visit Þorir, is mistaken for his brother, and faced with a third test of honour by being put to bed with his sister-in-law (Byock, 1998, ch. 23; Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. XXXII). It may then be argued that Þorir and Böðvarr, as younger brothers, complete their initiation by establishing contact with the older brother(s), passing a test, and then breaking the contact and leaving. This delineates a more complex structure but does not invalidate the importance of the sword trial as the first and more solemn moment of passage.

²¹⁷ See Vilhjálms­son and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. IV).

²¹⁸ It should be remembered here that Chadwick (1921, 93) translates Ásmundarson’s (1981) version of the text, wherein the dialogue between Hervör and her mother does not appear, and the heroine merely tells the jarl that she is unhappy and wishes to leave. Here, the journey undertaken by Hervör does not have the declared goal of seeking her father’s grave, although she lands on Samsø knowing what she will find there. This difference will not be explored in detail here, as it has a limited impact on the initiatic value of the heroine’s encounter with her father and therefore seems to fall outside the scope of this thesis.

Böðvarr and his brothers, Hervör leaves her mother's home to seek a first and last moment of contact with her dead father, from whom she demands her inheritance, as seen in section 1.3.2. As noted by both Clover (1986) and Marzella (2022), this episode constitutes a recognition of Hervör's place in the family and in her father's bloodline, and after receiving it she no longer does "oftener harm than good" (Chadwick, 1921, 93), but rather "[has] great success" in raiding and piracy (Chadwick, 1921, 101).²¹⁹ This reframing of her behaviour highlights her role of "functional son" (Clover, 1986, 39), as she acts as a male heir should, before returning to her grandfather's house and settling down "like other young women" (Crawford, 2021, 19).²²⁰ By assuming the role of the female heir, she concludes her initiation and begins her adult life, becoming a mother and, in time, passing Tyrfingr on to her son, which guarantees the continuation of the bloodline.²²¹

In Sigmundr's and Grettir's cases, the initiatic dimension of the sword trial is perhaps not as readily apparent as in the previous two sagas. In the *Saga of the Volsungs* no mention is made of the hero's age, although the trial takes place on "the appointed day", when "the banquet and [Signý's] marriage [...] take place" (Byock, 2012, 37).²²² This moment marks the beginning of Signý's adult life and the separation from her family, as indeed the wedding festivities conclude with Siggeir "travel[ling] home with his wife" (Byock, 2012, 37). Therefore, considering Signý and Sigmundr are twins (Byock, 2012, 36; Finch, 1965, 3), this moment could be argued to mark the end of his childhood, too, by proxy, so to speak. It is interesting to note that Signý's distress at leaving her family and marrying Siggeir is reiterated dramatically when she warns Völsungr of his imminent demise, asking to stay and risk death with her brothers and father, but is rebuffed and returns, "[crying] bitterly," to her husband (Byock, 2012,

²¹⁹ In these points, Ásmundarson's text reads respectively, "gerði hun oftar ilt enn gott" and "Hervör langa stund í hernaði, ok varð mjök sigrsæl" (1981, 314; 319). Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson's (1943-44 a, ch. IV; ch. V) text is virtually identical, slightly changing the syntax and spelling but maintaining the concept and even the lexical choices.

²²⁰ The Old Norse text reads, "fram sem aðrar meyjjar" in both Ásmundarson (1891, 319) and Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. V).

²²¹ See Ásmundarson (1891, ch. VI), Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson (1943-44 a, ch. V).

²²² See also Finch (1965, 4).

39).²²³ Soon after this second, painful separation, Sigmundr is also faced with a final detachment from familial ties as the rest of the Völsungar are slaughtered (Byock, 2012, ch. 5; Finch, 1965, ch. 5), highlighting the parallels between the twins' narrative arcs all the more clearly. The retrieval of the god-given sword, in addition to causing Siggeir's ire and revenge, does also mark the beginning of the hero's glory and misfortune, but this dimension will be explored in the next section as it is only loosely related to the idea of a ritualised passage from childhood to adulthood.

Grettir, too, does not seem to step out of childhood when facing Kárr. Indeed, seems to be considered a man, albeit an unpredictable one, ever since he is sent by his father to the *Alþing* in Chapter 16 (Byock, 2009, 39-44; Jónsson, 1936, 44-48).²²⁴ Moreover, he has already been declared an outlaw by the time he reaches Þorfinnr's lands, also in chapter 16, and has proven his strength several times by lifting a heavy boulder (Byock, 2009, 44; Jónsson, 1936, 48) and bailing water out of the ship quickly enough that eight men could hardly keep up with him (Byock, 2009, 49-50; Jónsson, 1936, 50). Therefore, Grettir is already a strong man willing to fight and kill by the time he enters Kárr's mound, he has been separated from his family for a long time due to outlawry, and his success in defeating the revenant and taking his treasure causes no change in the hero's social status. In the light of this, his encounter with Kárr seems more than anything a sort of trial run for the subsequent struggle with Glámr in Chapter 35 (Byock, 2009, 99-103; Jónsson, 1936, 118-123). It may be added that Grettir's trial does not win him an excellent weapon, as is the case in all other sagas. As mentioned in section 1.3.2, he still has to prove his worth to Þorfinnr by saving his household from dishonour in chapter 19, before being given "the good sax" (Byock, 2009, 64)²²⁵ in chapter 20. Among the episodes cited thus far, this seems to have the weakest initiatic value.

²²³ See also Finch (1965, 7). Völsungr's insistence that Signý "must go back to [her] husband [...] and stay with him" (Finch, 1965, 7), regardless of her brothers' and father's fate, could be yet more evidence of a drastic separation caused by marriage between a woman and her birth family. A similar implication was already noted in the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, where Böðvarr marries his mother to a jarl before leaving on his adventures.

²²⁴ "Althing" is the term used by Byock (2009, 40), whereas Jónsson (1936, 45) carries the word "þing." In either case, the word indicates the parliament, or people's assembly (OED, s.v. "althing"; ONP, s.v. "þing").

²²⁵ "Þá gaf hann Gretti saxit góða;" (Jónsson, 1936, 73).

Finally, the episodes pertaining to Wulfstan and Charlemagne, presented in sections 1.1.2 and 1.3.3 respectively, do not seem to share the marked initiatic dimension of the sword trial in *Merlin*. Both protagonists are adults when facing their trials, and their success does not involve a significant change in status or the access to a new social role. This is especially true of Charlemagne, who seems to receive the sword Dyrumdali as a legacy from a beloved friend and relative rather than as a symbol of power, particularly considering the hierarchical positions held by the two men.²²⁶ In Wulfstan's case, an argument could be made in favour of this episode qualifying as a second initiation, as the hero is readmitted to his previous position. Indeed, every stage of the episode is marked by physical movement, as Wulfstan leaves the Synod to approach the grave of the saintly king, retires among monks, is called back and finally reunited with Lanfranc and therefore, symbolically, with the higher levels of the institutional church.²²⁷ The removal from one place to the next, along with the scheme of separation and reunion, is not sufficient to make this episode a convincing rite of passage. Nonetheless, it could be interpreted as a trace of initiatic value in the narrative form which inspired the episode. In this respect, it seems reasonable to agree with Marzella's (2022, 126) conclusion, namely, that hagiography appropriated a heroic narrative scheme and modified it as needed, removing the original initiatic dimension, which, as noted, is shared by most antecedents. However, the heroic narratives do not always entail the dramatisation of a passage from childhood to adulthood, and sometimes appear to be more concerned with an apparently ordinary man becoming a legendary warrior. This is the topic of the next section.

²²⁶ See Hieatt (1975, 282-83), Abischer (1954, 231-32).

²²⁷ The importance of motion verbs was noted in section 2.2.2, as well as in the present section. In Osbert's text, Wulfstan "ad sepulchrum regis abiit" (Bloch, 1923, 118, l. 4) using the motion verb *ābēo*, and later Lanfranc and the king "procedunt" (Bloch, 1923, 119, l. 11) to the same place and there meet again with the hero, who "residebat [...] inter plebeios monachos" (Bloch, 1923, l. 8-9). Ælred uses the verb *accēdo*, "to draw close" (IL, s.v. "accēdo"), for Wulfstan's first movement toward the tomb (Marzella, 2017, 165, l. 38), then *advěniō* and *assurgo*, with an implication of upward movement, for Lanfranc and the king (Marzella, 2017, 167, l. 76). He then adds Lanfranc's movement toward Wulfstan, once again with *accēdo* (Marzella, 2017, 167, l. 83), and finally the same verb is used to indicate Wulfstan's motion toward the tomb to retrieve his pastoral staff (Marzella, 2017, 168, l. 102).

2.3.2 *From Man to Legend*

The Arthurian sword trial combines initiation and divine blessing, marking the hero's passage from an ordinary childhood to an adulthood which is not only glorious, but supernaturally marked by a grand destiny, as noted in section 2.2.2. Although *Merlin* concludes with the coronation, or soon after, even considering some manuscripts carry a longer text,²²⁸ Robert's *Perceval* continues the story of the legendary king and his knights on the quest for the Holy Grail. The importance of this relic and its retrieval have already been argued to justify the dramatisation of a passage from ordinary life into an existence blessed by God. The second touchstone employed in this analysis, Wulfstan's trial, also shows divine favour, and any man whose life is touched by a miracle exists in the realm of legend quite independently of religious belief on the part of the reader. Moreover, it seems worth mentioning here that Wulfstan was canonised in his own right in 1203 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Saint Wulfstan") and was considered a Saint locally before then, as proven by a hagiography being written about him soon after his death, first in English and then in Latin (Williams, 1995, 170). Osbert and Ælred may have come in contact with this material,²²⁹ or with William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, which records miracles occurring at Wulfstan's tomb and goes as far as to claim that, were it not for the scepticism of current times, "Wulfstan would long ago have been raised on high and proclaimed a saint" (Winterbottom, 2007, Book IV, 439).

In the analogues proposed by Micha, presented in section 1.2, the beginning of legend may be argued to be a facet of the initiatic dimension of the trial narreme. After

²²⁸ As previously mentioned, Micha's edition of the text closes the narrative with the disappearance of the stone and anvil and only a generic statement that Arthur "was made king of the realm of Logres and kept the land and the kingdom in peace" (Micha, 2000a, 263, translation mine). The endings provided by the Modena manuscript and the Didot manuscript are inserted as an appendix. The former includes the revelation of Arthur's paternity and the foundation of the Round Table, while the latter adds to these Merlin's prophecy regarding the Grail and its retrieval, and his departure for Northumberland (Micha, 2000a, Appendice, 469-477).

²²⁹ It is not certain whether Osbert may have had access to the Latin *Vita Wulfstani*, translated by William of Malmesbury at some point between 1124 and the early 1140s (Williams, 1995), considering the *Vita beati Ædwardi regis Anglorum* was completed in 1138, but the English original must have circulated before then and may have been available. Ælred, writing in the early 1160s, may have come in contact with either version, and was familiar with William of Malmesbury's other work, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, which he references (Marzella, 2017, Complementary Notes, 338).

retrieving the tokens of his royal descent, Theseus departs on a long journey aiming to emulate the valour of Heracles, to whom he is related by blood (Perrin, 1914, 17; Ziegler, 1960, 6-7). Indeed, after vanquishing his first foe, the young prince carries away the dead man's club "just as Heracles did with the lion's skin" (Perrin, 1914, 17; Ziegler, 1960, 7), making the parallel between him and the hero of myth unmistakable.²³⁰ Lancelot receives a prophecy of success for his quest through the land of no return, which is constructed as a *katabasis* and therefore has supernatural undertones.²³¹ However, as noted in section 1.2.1, the entire narrative is one process of initiation moulding the hero, through action and sacrifice, into the prototype of the courtly lover, so that the legendary dimension of Lancelot's exploits is of secondary importance. Lastly, Æneas' journey often brings him in contact with the supernatural, and the gods are frequently involved in his adventures and misadventures.²³² Within this context, the trial of the golden bough does not mark a significant change in the hero's relationship to the supernatural or the divine. As the present thesis has argued, these events belong to larger initiatic narratives. These involve the hero coming in contact with a non-human reality and becoming legendary in their own right, but ultimately the passage from ordinary life to mythic life does not seem to have particular relevance within the trial narrative itself.

The northern warriors of the sagas, on the other hand, often experience their first contact with the supernatural during their trials, and subsequently lead legendary lives of glory and adventure. Therefore, it could be argued that they do not only pass from childhood into adulthood, but also from a merely human life into an existence that may be qualified as super-human. Grettir, for instance, faces his first supernatural encounter

²³⁰ It should be noted here that Theseus' exploits see him vanquishing men rather than monsters, and that the legendary quality of his life is, at this stage, implied by the comparison with Heracles and not made explicit by the narrative.

²³¹ See section 1.2.1 for an introduction to the episode and its role as a metaphorical journey through the land of the dead.

²³² From the very beginning the hero's tale is set in motion by warring deities, as Juno has Æolus raise a storm against him (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book I, ll. 50-91) and Neptune intervenes to save the Trojan fleet (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book I, ll. 124-156). Later, in Book IV, the god Mercurius is sent as a messenger by Jove himself to order Æneas to leave Carthage (Ramous and Baldo, 2020, Book IV, ll.219-278). These are only a few instances of divine intervention in Æneas' life, and the specific functions of Proserpina and Venus in the trial of the golden bough have been explored in section 2.2.2.

when entering Kárr's tomb, as before this moment his life has been relatively ordinary. He was previously outlawed for murder (Byock, 2009, 44) and was not believed when he tried to blame "a singular troll creature" (Byock, 2009, 43),²³³ highlighting both the presence of the supernatural within the world of the saga and the fact that Grettir's life has not been touched by it yet.²³⁴ After the encounter with Kárr, however, the hero is involved in many more adventures before he next encounters a revenant, the dreaded Glámr, in chapter 32. The deeds accomplished by Grettir between these two encounters, including the exploit that finally earns him Kárr's sword, involve berserkers and other warriors, men rather than monsters. Therefore, it does not seem that the episode analysed here marks a clear passage from ordinary life into an existence touched by the supernatural. Hervör, on the other hand, arguably enters a new phase of her life which is marked by the curse of the magical sword Tyrfingr,²³⁵ while Böðvarr begins his heroic deeds with the acquisition of his weapon from Björn's cave. However, in the latter case the supernatural is present in the hero's life since birth, and even before then in the lives of his parents.

Not unlike Böðvarr, Sigmundur is described as "the foremost and the finest-looking" of Völsungr's children (Byock, 2012, 36).²³⁶ It is also stated clearly that he and his twin sister Signý "surpassed most men named *in old sagas* in both knowledge and accomplishments and in the desire to win" (Byock, 2012, 36, italics mine), so that arguably, like Böðvarr, they are established as belonging to the realm of legend from the start. This may be due to their divine descent, as their father was born of the magic apple sent by Óðinn, and their mother is the daughter of a giant as well as the wish-

²³³ Jónsson (1936, 47) calls this creature "hamartroll."

²³⁴ Indeed, the reason for which his tale is not believed is not lack of faith in the existence of trolls *per se*, but rather knowledge that "no troll would have taken the man in full daylight" (Byock, 2009, 43). This also establishes the nocturnal habits of such dangerous creatures, which will be relevant to the hero's encounters with revenants as well.

²³⁵ Angantýr's repeated warnings come to mind, along with the "evil doom" he foretells in an effort to dissuade his daughter from retrieving the weapon. Moreover, in Ásmundarson's (1891) version of the saga, followed by Chadwick (1921) Tyrfingr does indeed cause the death of Hervör's son Angantýr, when his brother Heiðrekr unsheathes it for the first time and "deal[s] his brother his death-blow" (Chadwick, 1921, 103). Later in the saga, the cursed sword will once again cause strife between brothers Angantýr and Hloð (Crawford, 2021, ch. 11; Chadwick, 1921, §XXII) and lead to outright war, so that the curse it bears continues to affect all owners in turn.

²³⁶ See Finch (1965, ch. 2).

maiden who brought the apple (Byock, 2012, 36). Therefore, their family line bears the blessing of a god and carries the blood of supernatural beings, making each member a potential legendary hero. In this case, it cannot be argued that the sword trial marks the beginning of Sigmundr's legend, as it is firmly encased within the family legend, but it is true that Oðinn extends to him special benevolence and protection by gifting him the sword, elevating him above his kinsmen (see section 2.2.2). Moreover, the sword trial marks the beginning of Sigmundr's exploits and adventures, as none of his deeds are mentioned before this.²³⁷ Arguably, therefore, the conquest of an extraordinary sword is a catalyst allowing the hero to fully realise his legendary potential. Still, this aspect rather appears to be a declination of the initiatic motif than a narrative thread of its own, and will be pursued no further.

In conclusion, this analysis has attempted to delve into the liminality of the sword trial and to determine the importance of this trait to the narreme, hoping to revise its working definition. The Arthurian sword trial has emerged as an intensely liminal moment allowing for divine intervention and avoiding a break in dynastic continuity. Moreover, it also represents a moment of passage from childhood to adulthood, and as such contains aspects typical of initiation rituals. In the light of this analysis, the analogues proposed by Micha overall seem to be the least compelling, with Theseus and Lancelot appearing furthest from the Arthurian touchstone. Among Marzella's proposed analogues, on the other hand, only Grettir appears quite removed from the trial narreme as formulated here, so that what has been termed the Scandinavian connection in the present thesis is overall the more compelling hypothesis. What Marzella (2022) remains vague about is the means by which a Scandinavian narrative form may have reached the British Isles. Although a delicate approach is necessary when dealing with what is most likely a cultural exchange happening over a period of time chiefly through oral narratives, the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, if proven to contain a sword trial, could be a link between the sagas and the hagiographies. The analysis of this work is the focus of the next chapter, and the definition it will be tested against is the one provided by

²³⁷ This is a significant difference between Sigmundr and Böðvarr, who defeats queen Hvit, described as “a great troll” (Byock, 1998, 38; Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. XXVI), and even rules a kingdom before taking his father's sword from the cave, although he is “content with this position for only a short while” (Byock, 1998, 44; see also Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 b, ch. XXX).

Marzella (2022, 57), substituting, however, his “sacred time and place” with the liminal time and place delineated in the present chapter.

Chapter 3: In Search of a New Analogue

Searching for a possible Arthurian analogue in an Anglo-Saxon poem that may not have been read at all between the 12th and 18th centuries (Niles, 1997, 1) may require some sort of justification. Firstly, it seems needful to note that it is not the purpose of the present thesis to demonstrate that Robert de Boron was inspired by, or even knew, *Beowulf*. This is especially relevant if one follows Kiernan (1996) in dating the *Beowulf* manuscript at the beginning of the 11th century and considering it the archetype. Indeed, the goal of this chapter is rather to analyse *Beowulf* and determine, if possible, whether it contains any evidence of the sword trial narreme circulating in Britain before *Merlin* was written.²³⁸ This may indicate not only that the narreme was part of the literary tradition, written or oral, but also that it was part of a Germanic cultural background, considering the scholarly consensus on a probable relation between *Beowulf* and some of the Scandinavian sagas cited in the present work. A positive outcome would reinforce Marzella's (2002) argument and further invalidate Micha's (1948). This chapter will therefore cover first the possibility of *Beowulf* qualifying as a missing link of sorts between the matter of sagas and *Merlin*. Then, Beowulf's journey into Grendel's mere is analysed, with arguments being brought to bear both in favour and against its value as a possible Arthurian analogue. Finally, a temporary conclusion will be provided, with, of course, no intention of claiming the final word on the matter.

3.1 A Possible Missing Link

It is certainly impossible to determine how much, in what context, and in what way *Beowulf* was read before the aforementioned "great hiatus" (Niles, 1997, 1), especially if one espouses Kiernan's (1996) belief that ms Cotton Vitellius A. XV contains the archetype of the poem. Nonetheless, the work's very existence qualifies it for analysis, as no literary work exists in a vacuum. Moreover, much academic attention has been devoted to the connection between *Beowulf* and the sagas, especially considering it is, after all, "an English poem about the fortunes of Scandinavians in Scandinavia" (Andersson, 1997, 129). It is not unreasonable to hypothesise that other works like

²³⁸ All references in this thesis are to Kiernan's manuscript-based fourth edition and translation of *The Electronic Beowulf*, available online. This edition also contains a facsimile of ms Cotton Vitellius A. XV, as well as backlit and ultraviolet images.

Beowulf may have existed at the same time, and that similar narremes as the ones found in the poem may have circulated, both orally and in writing, and been part of the literary background from which Robert draws his Arthurian romance.²³⁹ This line of thought is especially encouraged by the considerable scholarly devotion to the indebtedness of the *Beowulf* poet to a Germanic wealth of knowledge, including folk-tales, as will be shown shortly. Therefore, this section will cover first the possibility of *Beowulf* existing in relation to the Scandinavian sagas that have already been examined, to then attempt to determine whether the titular hero may qualify as an analogue for Arthur.

3.1.1 Beowulf and the Sagas

The possibility of a connection between *Beowulf* and Scandinavian knowledge and literature has been explored since the early 19th century, when Thorkelin (1815, cited in Andersson, 1997, 4) hypothesised that the *Beowulf* poet may in truth be no more than a translator, and his work an Anglo-Saxon rendition of a Scandinavian original. Although this hypothesis has since been abandoned, the possibility of a Scandinavian source cannot yet be rejected (Andersson, 1997). Indeed, much scholarly attention has been devoted to the topic, although with much disagreement. Among the sagas considered in the present thesis, *Grettir's Saga* (Jónsson, 1936; Byock, 2009) and the *Saga of the Volsungs* (Finch, 1965; Byock, 2012) have been considered the closest to *Beowulf*.²⁴⁰ For this reason, the similarities between these texts, along with the possibility of shared narremes, are explored in this section.

In their introduction to the 2009 edition of *Grettir's Saga*, Byock and Zori highlight the similarities between the two tales of land cleansing, namely, Grettir's slaying of Glámr and, later, his victorious struggle against two trolls in the Bardardal

²³⁹ The argument brought forth by Marzella (2022) in favour of Robert having come into contact with the sword trial narreme in Britain, covered in Chapter 1 of the present thesis, provides a springboard for the present research. Once again the issue of language will be momentarily ignored, due to the lack of meaningful evidence on the topic of Robert's instruction.

²⁴⁰ It seems worthwhile to add here that these sagas, in the redactions known to us, are both dated later than *Beowulf*. However, as stated in the previous chapters, it is widely thought that the tales circulated orally significantly earlier, so that the possibility of the *Beowulf* poet drawing from them, or similar narrations, cannot be immediately excluded.

valley on the one hand,²⁴¹ and Beowulf's killing of Grendel and his mother on the other. However, the scholars also remark upon the striking difference between the monsters' natures and narrative functions, as well as between the two heroes' roles in society. They conclude that "the *Beowulf* story [...] is originally a Scandinavian tale" (Byock and Zori, in Byock 2009, xxiv) and that the elements it shares with the saga are likely to be the result of a common oral heritage rather than the product of a direct connection between the texts.²⁴² Turville-Petre (1974) also argues against the likelihood of direct influence of *Beowulf* on the saga, but highlights the centrality of a deliverer figure to both works (Turville-Petre, 1974, 348) and ultimately proposes the existence of common motifs used in different ways by the two artists (Turville-Petre, 1974, 350). As far as the particular episodes are concerned, Grettir's descent into Kárr's tomb and Beowulf's dive to the underwater hall inhabited by Grendel's mother do share enough similarities to make a deeper investigation worthwhile. For instance, both journeys require a downward motion into a liminal space beneath the surface of earth and water respectively, they both lead to a challenging confrontation with a monstrous creature, which the hero wins, and finally to the acquisition of some form of reward, both in terms of riches and prestige. A more detailed exploration of the Beowulf episode will be undertaken in 1.2, but for the time being this seems sufficient to justify the present effort.

The second saga to have been explored in relation to *Beowulf*, as mentioned, is the *Saga of the Volsungs*. The main, and indeed the strongest argument in favour of such a connection is the digression inserted in *Beowulf* (149r, ll. 873-899) covering the deeds of Sigemund, identified with Sigmundr (Griffith, 1995, 24), and particularly his slaying of a dragon. Although it has been noted that in the saga it is Sigurðr who kills Fáfnir, the mutable nature of legendary tales may account for this difference (Griffith,

²⁴¹ The latter episode is covered in chapters 65 and 66 of *Grettir's Saga* (Byock, 2009, 176-180), and sees the titular hero fighting and injuring a female troll before diving under a waterfall to access a hidden cave and slay the giant residing within. The connection between this episode and *Beowulf* seems to have been vastly agreed upon in the last few decades (Byock and Zari, 2009; Abram, 2017; Andersson, 1997; Ellis Davidson, 1960; Fisher, 1958; Osborn, 2007; Parks, 1993).

²⁴² Marzella (2022) also evokes a common background shared by *Merlin* and the sagas, from which the sword trial narreme derives. Whether or not *Beowulf* draws a similar narrative scheme from this hypothetical substratum is the main focus of the present chapter.

1995, 24), or the poet may have chosen to rework the matter (Abram, 2010, 208). Abram (2017) goes as far as to suggest that the reason for the elision of the two characters, Sigmundr and Sigurðr, into one may be onomastic. Indeed, the interpretation of “Sigemund” as “Victory-Hand”²⁴³ gives rise to the possibility of Beowulf sharing the epithet by virtue of his recent triumph against Grendel, furthering the identification of the two heroes into what Abram terms “the transcendent, multifaceted type of the traditional hero” (2017, 401).²⁴⁴ Moreover, by taking into account the fact that the saga is later than *Beowulf*, the scholar seeks and finds traces of the latter in the former, namely, connecting Beowulf and Sigurðr to a dragon-slaying archetype of which they represent different iterations (Abram, 2017, 409).²⁴⁵

Furthermore, and in a way more closely relating to the episodes treated in this thesis, Abram argues in favour of a link between Beowulf and what he terms “the Scandinavian reflexes of the Völsung-Niflung cycle” (2010, 216) based on the use of gold imagery reminiscent of kennings in the description of Grendel’s mere. While not excluding the reading of the mere as hellish, he argues that the expression “fyr on flode” at line 1366 of the poem is likely to evoke hellfire to the readers but not to the characters’ minds (Abram, 2010, 200), and proposes instead a reading of it as a periphrasis for “gold” (Abram, 2010, 201).²⁴⁶ By considering the expression a cognate of Old Norse kennings, Abram also establishes a link between *Beowulf* and the Völsung-Niflung cycle through the imagery of gold in water, specifically, the treasure in the underwater mere inhabited by the Grendelkin and the cursed hoard of the Niflungar sunk in the river Rhine (Abram, 2010, 205). Although refusing to fully exclude either

²⁴³ The reading of “Sigemund” as a two-word epithet arises from the fact that the name is spelled twice as two words, “sige munde,” on folio 149r of the manuscript, as visible in Kiernan (2015).

²⁴⁴ This is in accordance with Lee’s previous argument that “as hero, Beowulf is not analogous to or like Sigmund: he is Sigmund, because he shares Sigmund’s being” (1998, cited in Abram, 2017, 399).

²⁴⁵ The second, vaguer trace pointed out by Abram is in the episode wherein Sigmundr avoids being slain by a she-wolf thanks to his sister’s shrewd advice (Byock, 2012, 40). This hypothesis will be treated in more detail in 1.1.2, as it relates to the identification of Beowulf with the Bear’s Son folktale.

²⁴⁶ *Fyr on flode* is translated as “fire on flood” in the *Electronic Beowulf* (Kiernan, 2015, l. 1366, see also ms 160r). The connection of this image to hellfire is established through the *Visio Pauli*, describing a fiery river as part of the landscape of hell (Abram, 2010, 201), a connotation which will be explored in more detail in 1.2.

reading, Abram describes the phrase *fyr on flode* as seeming “to reach out beyond the confines of Old English verse into a Germanic-traditional hinterland” (Abram, 2010, 213), once again evoking the idea of a common cultural and oral substratum. Therefore, the indebtedness of Beowulf to Germanic narremes seems significant enough to warrant the present argument. The next section will focus on the titular hero and attempt to ascertain whether he is, so to speak, an Arthurian hero.

3.1.2 Beowulf as an Arthurian Hero

Considering for the moment the possibility of a common cultural hinterland giving rise to the aforementioned sagas, *Beowulf*, and the narreme from which the Arthurian sword trial developed, it seems logical to explore the likelihood of Beowulf himself as an Arthurian analogue. The similarities between the two heroes reside in their military prowess and glorious reign, and it has been proposed that they may in fact be iterations of the same archetype, namely, the Bear’s Son, or AT 301. The argument in favour of Beowulf belonging to this folktale motif is as old as the description of the motif itself, formulated by Friedrich Panzer in 1910 and met with wide acceptance (Abram 2017, 391), due to the narrative similarities as well as to the interpretation of Beowulf’s name as meaning “bee-wolf” and, therefore, “bear”. This section will briefly cover a few critical reworkings of this outlook, as well as the proposal that Arthur, too, may be a Bear’s Son.

Anderson (2004, 43-44) describes the folktale motif of the Bear’s Son by highlighting its salient traits, pointing out that it concerns a hero of “unusual conception”, usually a youngest son characterised by uncommon strength, who is made to guard a royal orchard, then fights off a supernatural or strange creature which he follows to another world, only to be abandoned by his companions and finally return triumphant, often rescuing and subsequently marrying a princess in the process. Although he does not focus on the similarities between this scheme and the *Beowulf* narrative, these are readily apparent. The hero is initially considered “slack, / an indolent aristocrat” and not worthy of power and honour in his homeland (Kiernan,

2015, ll. 2187-88),²⁴⁷ then proves himself through feats of strength and prowess abroad before returning in triumph. Although no royal orchard is described, Beowulf performs the duty of a “hall-guard” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 667) for Hroðgar, and his fight with Grendel can certainly be described as the hero “beat[ing] off a strange predator” (Anderson, 2004, 43), considering the creature’s man-eating habits.²⁴⁸ The hero then travels to the mere by following the tracks left by Grendel’s mother, a second monster whose addition does not depart significantly from AT 301. His companions prove more loyal than their folktale counterparts, as they do not abandon the hero, but Hroðgar and his do leave, assuming Beowulf dead upon seeing “that the writhing water was all worked up, / a sea by blood sullied” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1593-94). During both combats, Beowulf displays uncommon strength, first by gripping Grendel so hard the monster’s “sinews sprang apart” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 817), and then by wielding the giant-sword which is described as “larger than any other man / [...] might bear” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1560-61).

Despite the numerous similarities, however, *Beowulf* also departs quite significantly from the Bear’s Son tale, notably in the conspicuous absence of any distressed princess for the hero to rescue and marry. This is all the more significant when considering that AT 301 has also been termed The Three Princesses’ tale (Andersson, 1997, 130), highlighting the importance of this plot element. Moreover, there is nothing uncommon about the titular hero’s conception, and his only connection to bears is to be found in the interpretation of his name as “bee-wolf”, meaning “bear”. This reading is rather firmly established as solid, although not fully immune to criticism, as will be seen shortly, and allows another possible link to king Arthur, whose name has also been argued to descend from an ursine root. Anderson (2004, 62) seems confident in Arthur’s being a Bear’s Son, invoking the relationship between Arthurian

²⁴⁷ In the light of Marzella (2022), it seems logical to see Beowulf’s perceived incapacity as serving the same role as the archetypal hero being a youngest son, *id est*, to establish his starting position as disadvantaged and put an obstacle on his way to the throne. Although not a literal younger son, Beowulf must still prove his valour before he can be recognised by Hygelac and, in time, inherit the kingdom. In this respect, therefore, *Beowulf* seems to follow the spirit if not the letter of AT 301.

²⁴⁸ The predatory behaviour of Grendel will be mentioned again in 1.2, with reference to the character’s liminality, as per Parks’ (1993) exploration of the topic.

material and the Greek legends of “Arkas/Arktouros”²⁴⁹ as well as the corpus of lore and narratives involving Theseus, mentioned in Chapter 1, whom he also considers an iteration of AT 301. This highlights the universal character of the Bear’s Son tale as an archetype, which can become a weakness when seeking analogues, as noted by Andersson (1997). However, *Merlin* does share some elements of AT 301, chiefly the unusual conception of the hero, which happens through deceit and magical means, and his initial unlikeliness as an heir to the throne. In fact, Arthur believes himself Antor’s younger son and is perceived as such until after his coronation, which arguably fits the criteria of the Bear’s Son tale more accurately than Beowulf’s youthful incompetence.

As mentioned, one argument in favour of Beowulf as a Bear’s Son is the reading of his name as “bee-wolf” or “ravager of the bees”, formulated by Sweet in the *Anglo-Saxon Reader* (1876, 213), which has met with substantial approval after the dismissal of the alternative “woodpecker” (Abram, 2017, 391) in consideration of the hero’s ursine strength.²⁵⁰ This allows the character to match almost seamlessly with the Bear’s Son tale, forming what Abram (2017, 391) calls a “hermeneutic circle” and facilitating wide acceptance of the theory. In the scholar’s words, “if the hero is a bear, then a ‘Bear’s Son’ tale is his natural habitat; if he is a ‘Bear’s Son’ hero, his name should mean ‘bear’” (Abram, 2017, 391). Turville-Petre (1974, 356) and Fisher (1958, 176, note 18) appear fully confident in the accuracy of this reading, which also lends strength to the connection between the Anglo-Saxon poem and the matter of sagas by reinforcing the similarities between Beowulf and Böðvarr Bjarki, another hero who shares Bear’s

²⁴⁹ Arkas is the son of Zeus and the nymph Callisto, who is turned into a she-bear by a vengeful Artemis and eventually becomes the constellation Ursa Major, according to the myth reported by Pseudo-Erathostenes (Condos, 1997). Arktouros is explained by Anderson (2004, 28) as meaning “bear-keeper” and indicating one of the stars in the constellation Bootes, or the constellation itself, in Antiquity. This star was believed to be Arkas himself, reunited with his mother in the sky (Anderson, 2004, 29), hence the naming of the character as Arkas/Arktouros.

²⁵⁰ “Beowulf’s bear-like habit of hugging his adversaries to death” (Chambers, cited in Abram, 2017, 392) is cited in favour of this comparison, and indeed Beowulf does defeat Grendel through the strength of his “handgrip” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 753) and later breaks Dayraven’s “bone-casing” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 2508) with his “war-grip” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 2507). The fact, noted by Abram (Kiernan, 2015), that this behaviour is not truly ursine seems to have little bearing, considering it is “frequently reported in anecdotes” and may have been part of popular belief for a long time.

Son traits and whose name means “bear”.²⁵¹ Finally, it has been mentioned in 1.1.1 that a link has been made between Sigmundr and the “bee-wolf” hero through an episode located in the fifth chapter of the *Saga of the Volsungs* (Byock, 2012, 40). The hero and his brothers have been put in stocks by the vengeful Siggeir, and a she-wolf devours one prisoner every night. Signý sends a trusted servant to smear Sigmundr’s face and mouth in honey, which the she-wolf proceeds to lick, allowing the hero to bite her tongue off and kill her. According to Abram (2017, 411), “there is no other episode in all of Germanic literature that collocates so closely the bee with the wolf”, making it as a possible trace of an older archetype of hero, connected to both wolves and bees, from which both Beowulf and Sigmundr may descend. Vowell (2022) considers this connection meaningful and further argues in favour of the two heroes being in some way related.

To conclude, although it is not certain whether Arthur and Beowulf originate from the same archetype, the hypothesis is interesting as it opens the possibility of new comparisons, including the present discussion. Although the Bear’s Son is a potentially universal type of tale, which limits its usefulness as a tool here, the two heroes examined here do share some similarities, as pointed out in this section. They both begin their story as brave youths who are roundly considered unsuitable to reign, until they demonstrate honour, prowess, and divine support, and become just kings. Finally, they are both defeated by a powerful foe in their last combat and die, mourned by their faithful companions and subjects. More to the point, both heroes face an arduous trial in a liminal space, emerging victorious thanks to an uncommon and possibly supernatural sword, and receiving recognition and honour from a figure of authority. The next sections will analyse Beowulf’s struggle with Grendel’s mother in the mere with the goal of determining whether it may qualify as an Arthurian analogue.

²⁵¹ See the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson, 1943-44 b; Byock, 1998). Of all the heroes mentioned thus far, Böðvarr is perhaps the most literal Bear’s Son, considering his parents are a bear and a woman named Bera, he is the youngest of three sons, and he acquires superhuman strength by drinking his elder brother’s blood. Moreover, the first enemy he defeats is Queen Hvit, who is described as an “ogress” (Byock, 1998, 43) and a “monster” (Byock, 1998, 44), although this episode has little in common with the analogues in *Grettir’s Saga* and *Beowulf* and appears much further from the archetype, if it is related at all.

3.2 The Giant-Sword

After bravely diving into the mere, Beowulf is seized by Grendel's mother and bodily dragged to her underwater dwelling, a firelit hall where a frightful combat takes place. Both combatants try and, at first, fail to inflict damage upon each other, due to the giantess' thick hide and to the hero's armour. A barehanded struggle follows, during which Beowulf is in far greater difficulty than in the previous combat against Grendel, until divine intervention grants him the instrument of victory. Thus, the hero finds a giant-sword, larger and heavier than any other man may swing, and uses it to slay Grendel's mother and to decapitate Grendel's corpse, whose head he brings back as evidence that the land has been cleared of evil. He is then welcomed back as a hero and presented with symbolic gifts.²⁵² The present section focuses on this episode, testing it first for the liminality whose importance was proven in Chapter 2, and then comparing it more directly to the definition of sword trial. This section argues chiefly in favour of *Beowulf* as an Arthurian analogue, while the following section will bring to bear a counter-argument.

3.2.1 A Liminal Trial

The liminal nature of the giant-sword episode can be considered triune, *id est*, relative to setting, to the monster, and to the hero. This section focuses on an analysis of the liminal elements in each sphere, as the working definition of sword trial was amended in Chapter 2 specifically to include liminality. The mere and submerged hall are liminal spaces between the natural and supernatural world, but have also been argued to function as a representation of hell, a space inhabited by the dead who is nevertheless conquered by the living hero. Grendel and his mother are monstrous creatures, walking the line between human and animal, but also between human and demonic, further reinforcing the identification of their dwelling as hellish. Finally, Beowulf himself has been argued to be a liminal, ambiguous figure, a wild card who has not quite found his place in the world. In this context, his triumph against the Grendelkin assumes an initiatic connotation, as it allows him to be recognised as a hero both in Heorot and, later, in his own homeland.

²⁵² This episode is covered by lines 1492-1650 of the poem (Kiernan, 2015; ms 163r-166r).

The place Grendel and his mother flee to after raiding Heorot is described in detail by the *Beowulf* poet, through the lips of Hroðgar, highlighting its importance both in terms of atmosphere and symbolism (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1357-76). It is a mere, apparently originating from an underground body of water of unknown depth and overshadowed by a dark forest. The most prodigious characteristic of this landscape is the nightly appearance of “fire on flood” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 1366), an obvious omen of supernatural happenings which immediately calls to mind the “flame that comes from treasure” visible near or above Kárr’s barrow in *Grettir’s Saga* (Byock, 2009, 51) and the “grave-fire” signalling to Hervör the position of her buried kinsmen in the *Saga of Hervör and Heiðrekr* (Crawford, 2021, 12).²⁵³ Finally, the mere is described as a place where a hunted hart would not go, preferring to be killed by hounds rather than seek a possible escape through the water. This does not only complete the picture of the mere and its inhabitants as extremely dangerous, but also establishes it as a place of death, characterised by little light and no wildlife. This reading was taken further by scholars who posited that the mere could be a representation of the Christian hell.

The hellish connotations of Grendel’s mere, considered as certain by Klaeber (1950), are linked to the apocryphal *Visio Pauli*,²⁵⁴ or *The Apocalypse of Paul*, either directly or through the mediation of Anglo-Saxon homilies which circulated at the time.²⁵⁵ Here, hell is described as a place where there is “no light [...], but darkness and sorrow” (Elliott, 1993, 633), whose main feature is “a river boiling with fire” (Elliott, 1993, 633), mentioned several times. The souls of the dead are either immersed into this river to varying depth or “pushed [...] into the fire” (Elliott, 1993, 634). Analogues for

²⁵³ It should be noted here that the latter two instances of mysterious flame at night appear on land, near burial grounds, and seem to signal the presence of grave-goods and/or unrestful spirits of the dead. The flame burning on the water’s surface, described by Hroðgar, has been interpreted as a signal for the presence of treasure in the grendelkin’s hall (Abram, 2010), losing its link to the barrow and the *draugr*. *Beowulf* is more markedly Christian than the sagas, which may explain this difference, as was the case for other Christian works in Chapter 2.

²⁵⁴ All references to the *Visio Pauli* in the present work are based on Elliott’s 1993 translated edition of *The Apocryphal New Testament*, which takes Paris MS 1631 as a base manuscript.

²⁵⁵ The choice has been made here to bypass the Blickling Homilies and cover the scripture directly, as this was the method applied by Klaeber (1950) and Anderson (2010). For a compelling analysis of the Blickling manuscript and its probable influence on Grendel’s mere, see Kiernan (1996, xix-xxii), who goes as far as to argue the two manuscripts may have been produced in the same scriptorium.

the darkness and fire of hell have been found in the description of the mere, where fire burns on the water at night, and Klaeber (1950, 183) goes as far as to state that “manifestly conceptions of the Christian hell have entered into the picture”. This makes Beowulf’s journey a *katabasis*, bringing the hero yet closer to the Bear’s Son archetype and to the saga analogues treated above, and the episode closer to the working definition of sword trial. Moreover, Klaeber seems to read the episode as an echo of the vergilian underworld experienced by Æneas, which also features a dark forest and a mysterious river (Ramous and Baldo, 1998, Book VI, ll. 131-32) as well as a deep cavern whose entrance is “protected by a black lake and by the darkness of the woods” (Ramous and Baldo, 1998, Book VI, l. 238),²⁵⁶ over which birds cannot fly safely – a potentially interesting parallel to Hroðgar’s hart. However, the hypothesis of vergilian influence of Beowulf has lost support after Niles (1983, 78-79) argued extensively against it, as is also noted by Andersson (1997, 141), hence, this line of comparison will be pursued no further.

Another strong argument in favour of Grendel’s mere having hellish connotations is the ambiguously diabolic nature of its inhabitants. Indeed, the man-eating giants, as well as elves and other evil creatures, are described as “Cain’s kin” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 107), banished and separated from mankind as punishment for their ancestor’s murder of Abel. Grendel, in particular, is described by Klaeber (1950, l) both as a “man-monster” and as an “incarnation of the Christian devil.” Indeed, the creature is referred to as “a demon out of hell” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 101) and “the fiend of mankind” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 164).²⁵⁷ The fact that Cain himself was, in the past, sometimes interpreted as the progeny of a fallen angel, or even of the devil himself (Byron, 2011, 17), strengthens the possible genealogical link between the Grendel kin and the fallen angel *par excellence*, Satan.²⁵⁸ What is more, this inhabitant of the mere is

²⁵⁶ My own translation from the original Latin, “tuta lacu nigro nemorumque tenebris”.

²⁵⁷ The manuscript reads, respectively, “feond on helle” (132r) and “feond mancyn(ne)s,” (133v) although of the final three letters only the high s is visible in Kiernan’s facsimile.

²⁵⁸ It should, however, be noted that Byron’s sources are for the most part Jewish, rather than Christian. The Christian interpretations he brings to bear in favour of Cain’s demonic nature are based chiefly on 1 John 3:10-12 and Tertullian’s *De Patientia* 5:15. These ancient exegeses appear weaker today. The canonical Catholic Bible reads 1 John 3:12, stating that Cain was “of the evil one” (translation mine), as meaning that he was under the influence of the devil and therefore committed evil deeds, as is the case in other passages of the text (*La Bibbia di*

marked by the same prodigious flame, glinting in his eyes as he stalks his prey in the darkness (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 726-27). Therefore, Grendel seems to inhabit a sort of littoral zone between the Scandinavian troll and the Christian demon, and indeed Klaeber (1950, 188) notes that he is finally beheaded both to bring back evidence of his death and, possibly, to avoid him haunting Heorot as a ghost. The *draugar* fought by Grettir were also beheaded to ensure they would not rise again, and this may be one more hint of the Germanic hinterland from which the *Beowulf* poet takes inspiration. In this way, Grendel acts as “a fearful reminder of damnation to a people who see themselves existing on the edges of the supernatural” (Higley, 1986, 347) and highlights the peculiar nature of *Beowulf* as a hybrid, almost syncretic work, caught between paganism and Christianity.

However, there is another layer of liminality to Grendel and his kin. Indeed, as mentioned above, Grendel is a *man-monster*, poised at the intersection of civilization and savagery, humankind and beastkind. Parks (1993) analyses the behavioural patterns of Grendel and Beowulf, describing the former as predatory and the latter as agonistic. Grendel and his mother are in fact predators, eating the men they slay (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 740-45, 1331-33), while the titular hero willingly renounces weapons to fight the monster on an equal footing (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 677-87). In other words, as argued by Parks (1993, 12), Grendel behaves as a hunting predator and flees when wounded, while Beowulf seeks a heroic confrontation, treating the monster as a conspecific. Moreover, Grendel’s raids on Heorot are called “war-craft” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 127), “feud and felony” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 137)²⁵⁹ and it is stated that he refuses to accept peace terms and the payment of a fee (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 154-56), both of which are solutions to human conflict, rather than to the ravages of an animal. More specifically, when

Gerusalemme, 1971, 2498, note 3,8). As for Tertullian, his phrasing “Nam statim illa semine diaboli concepta, malitiae fecunditate irae filium procreavit” (*De Patientia*, 5:15) lends itself to a reading where the subject of the sentence is the sin of impatience, which is the agent of the previous sentence (5:14) and the subject of the sentence preceding this (5:13). In this reading, which seems justified by the syntactic context, impatience is “conceived through the seed of the devil” and metaphorically begets “a child of anger” (translation mine). This is the interpretation chosen by Fredouille’s 1984 translation into French. Nevertheless, the fact that an exegesis has lost traction in the modern times does not erase its influence in the past, and the reading documented by Byron opens an interesting possibility for the interpretation of *Beowulf*.

²⁵⁹ The Old English reads respectively “guðcræft” (see ms 132v) and “fæhðe 7 fyrene” (see ms 133r).

Grendel's mother first raids Heorot, Hroðgar describes her behaviour as revenge in the context of feud (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1333-45), showing awareness that her actions may be predatory, but her motives are not (Parks, 1993, 13). This distinction between mother and son brings Vowell (2022) to re-evaluate Grendel's mother, focusing on her humanity to reconnect her to the Germanic figure of the vengeful woman, another example of which is Sygný.²⁶⁰ Therefore, it seems clear that the inhabitants of the mere have an intensely liminal nature, human yet monstrous. This has interesting implications for the hero who rids the land of them.

Indeed, by placing himself in a position of equality to a monster, Beowulf is in a way stepping into the same liminal zone inhabited by the Grendel kin. Higley (1986) sees Grendel and Beowulf as two sides of the same coin, sharing the ability to easily cross thresholds. Indeed, the hero meets Grendel's mother in her own abode, a supernatural space that is "most emphatically not for man" (Higley, 1986, 348) and where no other warrior dares go. In this space, the struggle between them is a veritable duel on an equal footing (Parks, 1993, 13), with each combatant symmetrically trying and failing to wound the other. Higley (1986, 347) also notes that Beowulf is later called *āglæca*, terrible one (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1512, 2592), a term elsewhere used to describe Grendel (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 159, 732, 739 etc.).²⁶¹ The hero is therefore represented as potentially monstrous, and Higley (1986) argues that Hroðgar and his companions perceive his liminal nature as discomfiting. According to the scholar, Beowulf is adopted as a foster son and thane precisely to incorporate him, in an attempt to resolve his wavering nature that makes him appear in turn human, monstrous, and

²⁶⁰ Vowell's argument that Grendel's mother is presented as a vengeful woman and not merely a monster seems solid, and was brought forth in less specific terms by Kiernan (1984, revised 2010) as well. However, Vowell's theory that "the scop's celebratory song of Sigemund and Fitela [...] alerts the audience that Grendel is not alone in the marshes" (Vowell, 2022, 245) and leads them to expect the appearance of a Sygný-like avenger is perhaps less convincing because nigh impossible to prove. Further exploration of the relationship existing between Grendel's mother, traditional female trolls, and female heroic characters in Germanic culture certainly seems promising, but it is beyond the scope of the present thesis.

²⁶¹ According to the *Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, available online, the word *āglæca* can be translated both as "fierce combatant" and as "monster," further highlighting the presence of a littoral zone between the heroic and the monstrous into which a character may, and indeed in this case does, step (Bosworth, 2014, s.v. "āglæca"). This is particularly relevant in the second instance of the word being used to refer to Beowulf, where the term "āglæcean" is used to indicate both the hero and the dragon and is translated by Kiernan as "the great adversaries" (2015, l. 2592, see also ms 187v).

godlike. As previously mentioned, the importance of the hero's triumph against the Grendel kin to his achievement of a stable social role arguably gives the twofold battle an initiatic connotation, providing a satisfying conclusion to the hero's youthful adventuring and opening the next phase of his life, what Fisher (1958, 179) terms "the stage of kingship."²⁶² Despite all this, however, liminality is not sufficient to mark this episode as an Arthurian analogue. A more precise analysis follows.

3.2.2 *A Possible Sword Trial*

Having established the liminality surrounding the episode, this section analyses Beowulf's triumph over Grendel's mother in comparison to the working definition of sword trial, established in Chapter 2 on the basis of Marzella's (2022) "minimal plot". The definition is as follows: in a liminal time and place, and despite the presence of rivals, a hero starting from a position of disadvantage retrieves a symbolic object from within a block of solid material, proving himself as the person chosen by God to assume a role of power, in the presence of an audience and an arbiter. This section of the thesis aims to focus on the similarities between the Beowulf episode and this definition, comparing the poem to the other analogues explored in Chapters 1 and 2 whenever it appears useful or interesting to do so. Possible counter-arguments to the current working hypothesis, namely, that the Beowulf episode qualifies as an Anglo-Saxon analogue for the Arthurian trial, will be explored in section 3.3, which also provides a conclusion.

As previously stated, Beowulf enters the liminal space of the mere in order to face and slay its supernatural inhabitants. The hero's intent is clear, and he moves resolutely to attack, making a journey from Heorot which acts as a parenthesis within his larger journey from his homeland to Hroðgar's lands and back. This may perhaps be compared to Arthur's leaving Antor's estate for Logres in Robert's *Merlin* (Micha,

²⁶² A similar view is held by Turville-Petre (1974, 354), who defines the underwater fight against Grendel's mother as "the culmination of the hero's testing-period" allowing him to obtain "the full status of a hero." The initiatic connotation of the episode seems clear, and will be taken up again in the next section, where a more detailed comparison is made between Beowulf's and Arthur's trials.

2000a, 248) and share the same initiatic value.²⁶³ Section 3.2.1 pointed out the fact that Beowulf's social role is changed by his success, in a similar way to Arthur's, although the former hero is recognised as a prince from birth and the latter is not. Moreover, the necessity to travel to a new location to undergo the trial characterises the structure of initiation rituals, as noted in Chapter 2. Beowulf is separated not only from his family, whom he leaves behind in Geatland, but also from his own retinue and from the surrogate father he finds in Hroðgar, and rejoins them only after the completion of his heroic exploit.²⁶⁴ This is coherent with the definition of initiation ritual given by Van Gennep (1960), and not dissimilar to Arthur's short journey back from the jousting ground to the church and subsequent reunion with his foster family (Micha, 2000a, 254). This, of course, gives the trial a private nature and, in Beowulf's case, removes the audience entirely, although the hero's companions do await his return and celebrate his triumph (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1626-28). This point will be expanded upon in section 3.3.

Unlike Arthur's brief quest for his foster-brother's sword, however, Beowulf's journey to the mere has an explicitly aggressive dimension, as noted above. Despite his being the attacker, the hero's position quickly becomes one of disadvantage. He is physically smaller than Grendel's mother, and arguably weaker, considering she "grasp[s] the warrior / in hideous grips" (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1501-1502) and drags him bodily to her dwelling. Moreover, fighting on her own territory likely contributes to her advantage (Culbert, 1960, note 12), as does the fact that she "has been alerted by her son's misfortune" to the presence of a new, more formidable foe (Parks, 1993, 12-13). Beowulf himself, on the other hand, may be unprepared for the level of antagonism he is to meet, expecting perhaps a repeat of his easy triumph against Grendel, who is almost instantly overcome by the hero's strength and becomes "afraid at heart" and "eager to go" (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 754-55).²⁶⁵ In this second combat, Beowulf's

²⁶³ Of course, the same reasoning is valid for Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, where the only difference is the very slight relocation of the trial from Logres to London, as pointed out in Chapter 1.

²⁶⁴ Indeed, after Grendel has been defeated, Hroðgar declares himself determined to love Beowulf "for [his] own son" (Kiernan, 2015, l. 946). This calls to mind Robert's Antor, but also the archbishop, who consistently calls Arthur "filz", as previously noted.

²⁶⁵ This hypothesis is, however, not fully convincing when considering the preparations made by the hero before his journey. Indeed, the *Beowulf* poet takes the time to list and describe the weapons and armour donned by his protagonist (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1441-65), in striking contrast

disadvantage increases with time, until he “collapse[s], heart-weary” and is “felled” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1543-44). At this point, divine intervention comes to protect the hero and guarantee his triumph over evil. It is, therefore, possible to argue that this episode has elective value, as the Christian God is held responsible for “wield[ing] war-victory” and “decid[ing]” the hero’s final victory (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1554-55).²⁶⁶ This is done by means of the giant-sword, which Beowulf is able to see among other weapons and wield, despite its size and weight, against his enemy.

The manifestation of divine will does not explicitly mark Beowulf as a chosen ruler or warrior, but it does prove he is protected by God, for the time being. In this respect, the hero undergoes a similar arc to Sigmundr, first receiving the blessing of a deity through the possession of an extraordinary weapon, then losing the same blessing and succumbing in battle. If, however, Oðinn openly revokes his protection by breaking Sigmundr’s blade, the Christian God is not involved in Beowulf’s last combat with the dragon (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 2538-2711). Nonetheless, it is true that Beowulf’s last sword, named Nægling, “[falls] apart, / fail[s] in battle” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 2680-81), just as Sigmundr’s blade “[breaks] in two” (Byock, 2012, 50).²⁶⁷ Furthermore, even the giant-sword does not survive the encounter, as the acidic blood of the Grendel kin causes the blade to melt and leaves only the ornate hilt, which is returned to Hroðgar. This calls to mind the fate of Dyrumdali in the *Saga of Charlemagne*, whose blade is also destroyed due to the absence of another warrior worthy of wielding it. Although in the latter case

to his bare-handed fight with Grendel. This alone is compelling evidence that Beowulf does, indeed, expect a more difficult encounter, as noted, among others, by Culbert (1960, 16) and Fisher (1958, 177). Nevertheless, the second fight is described as “unexpectedly difficult” by Bammesberger (1995, 225) and the advantages enjoyed by the older, more experienced creature are notable. In context, whatever the hero’s expectations, he certainly seems to be in a position of relative disadvantage, which, as noted by Culbert (1960, 16), is a *desideratum* due to how closely this combat follows the previous one.

²⁶⁶ Indeed, Kiernan’s (2015) facsimile of ms 164r mentions God three times in as many lines, first as “halig God,” then as “witig drihten,” and finally as “rodera rædend”. These are translated as “holy God,” “the wise Lord,” and “the Reader of the heavens” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1553-55). This repetition reinforces the importance of divine intervention to the hero’s eventual success.

²⁶⁷ In fairness, this is not the first time Beowulf has been failed by a sword in combat, as the poet notes (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 2682-84). Indeed, during the struggle with Grendel’s mother, the sword Hrunting fails to do any damage to the giantess and is said to have “failed / the prince under pressure” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1524-25). In both cases the use of the verb “to fail” puts the blame solely on the weapon, effectively excluding negative divine intervention which is, on the other hand, made very explicit in the positive, as noted above. Therefore, this line of comparison will be pursued no further.

the removal of the blade is voluntary rather than prodigious, the giant-sword is described by the *Beowulf* poet as “larger than any other man / into battle-play might bear” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1560-61),²⁶⁸ arguably implying a similar uniqueness to that present in the *Saga of Charlemagne*. Therefore, while this may be no more than a coincidence, it is also one more encouragement to consider the Germanic hinterland whose importance to the *Beowulf* poet is at this point clear.

Furthermore, the hero receives another manifest divine blessing, beside the means to triumph over his foe. Once Grendel’s mother has been slain, the underwater hall is filled with light, “brightness [shining] forth [...] / just as from heaven shines brightly / the sky’s candle” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1570-72). This heavenly sunlight contrasts sharply with the fiery gleam of Grendel’s eyes, with the flames seen by peasants on the water’s surface near the mere, and with the “fire-light” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 1516) which has allowed him to see his surroundings until this moment. As the mere and its inhabitants are repeatedly qualified as hellish and demonic, it may be argued that this second, radically different source of light is a sign of the triumph of good over evil, and a manifestation of God’s blessing being bestowed on the conquering hero.²⁶⁹ Interestingly, Osbert reports a similar luminous effect centering on Wulfstan’s staff once it has been plunged into the stone, stating that “the brightness of its radiance shone forth clearly in coruscating rays” (Bloch, 1923, 118, ll. 27-30, translation mine).²⁷⁰ This detail is foregone by *Ælred* and does not appear in *Merlin* or in any of the Scandinavian analogues, so that it may well not belong to the trial narreme at all. However, the fact that a manifestation of God’s will through light is attested in hagiography corroborates the reading of the mere’s illumination as divine and reinforces the elective value of *Beowulf*’s trial.

²⁶⁸ Here, the Old English text reads “mare ðonne ænig mon oðer / to beadulace ætberan meahte” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1560-61; see also ms 164r).

²⁶⁹ Somewhat surprisingly, there is no mention of this in Wright’s 1957 article on light and darkness in *Beowulf*. He does cover the initial illumination of the mere and cave, noting that this fiery light “bodes ill” (Wright, 1957, 6), and notes the return of sunlight to Heorot after *Beowulf*’s victory. Indeed, the dawn of a new day is described as “hastening” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 1802) and as a sign of “heaven’s joy” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 1801), which reinforces the positive and divine connotation of sunlight formulated above.

²⁷⁰ The original Latin reads, “fulgor claritatis ipsius choruscantibus radiis serenus illuxit.”

The aforementioned description of the giant-sword as impossible for an ordinary warrior to wield is relevant to the present discussion in other ways, too. Firstly, there are no antagonists vying for the weapon in the *Beowulf* episode, which may weaken the argument in favour of this episode as an Arthurian analogue, as the presence of rivals is included in the working definition as given above. However, thanks to lines 1560 and 1561, the argument may be made that the failure of all others is implied rather than actual. This, joined to the manifestation of divine will in deciding the result of the encounter, possibly aligns Beowulf's trial with Æneas' where, as noted by Marzella (2022, 77), it is implicit that other attempts are both possible and possibly doomed to failure.²⁷¹ Moreover, supernatural implications are inherent in the fact that the sword does not only belong to the Grendel kin but is also “giganta geweorc”, “the work of giants” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 1562).²⁷² Schrader's (1993) interpretation of the inscription on the hilt as being written in the language spoken by mankind before the Flood, with letters taught to them by a fallen angel, could be taken as supportive of this. Köberl (1987) argues that the sword is in fact Heremod's, lost by him in his last combat, but still admits it could have been made by giants. He, too, links it to the fall of Lucifer, which was believed to have led both to the birth of giants, begotten by fallen angels upon women descended from Cain, and to humankind learning metalworking. Whether it was bladesmithing or the alphabet that Cain's kin learned from the fallen angels, therefore, the supernatural aura surrounding the giant-sword seems satisfactory for the present purposes.²⁷³

If the trial is, indeed, to be considered elective, the sword retrieved by the hero should also have a symbolic value linked to power and virtue. Throughout the poem, the symbology of swords and weapons appears to be coherent with this, as the warriors' equipment is often described as “shining” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1448, 1895), “splendid”

²⁷¹ The matter of possible Vergilian influence over the *Beowulf* poet has been treated in 3.1 and will not be taken up again here. Nonetheless, it seems appropriate to mention similarities to all the episodes treated in the present thesis, for the sake of thoroughness and clarity.

²⁷² See also Kiernan (2015, ms 164r).

²⁷³ It may be of interest to note here that Grendel's mother is finally killed by the hero with her own sword, after Beowulf's own blade failed to do any damage. This can be easily read as an echo of the deicidal sword, which was mentioned in Chapter 2 of the present thesis with reference to Sigmundr and Grettir, confirming both the supernatural capabilities of the weapon and, yet again, the presence of common narremes in the sagas and in the Anglo-Saxon poem.

(Kiernan, 2015, l. 1451), “battle-bright” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 1523), evoking a luminous image which the poet associates with goodness and divinity, as shown above. The giant-sword itself is “win-blessed” as “the choicest of weapons” (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1557, 1559), highlighting its excellence which, as mentioned above, can be considered supernatural. Moreover, the symbolic value of giving and receiving swords is present and relevant to the narrative. Beowulf receives a sword from Hroðgar as a reward and brings it to his lord and kinsman Hygelac, as per the custom. In return, Hygelac gives the hero another sword which is a family heirloom, named as “Hreðel’s heirloom” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 2191). This “seems to have meant his recognition as a grown man and a ruler” (Ellis-Davidson, 1960, 6). Van Meter (1996) corroborates this reading, drawing attention to weapons as the mark of nobility and to the symbolic connection between inherited war-gear and a noble heritage to be propagated. The scholar also highlights the statement of loyalty and kinship which lies in Beowulf’s handing over of received treasure (Van Meter, 1996, 181). Finally, he notes the use of weapons in ancestor worship and cults of the dead, serving as “a source of the social empowerment of the heirs in ways that are perhaps alien to a Christian viewpoint” (Van Meter, 1996, 178). This is strikingly close to the hypothesis formulated by Marzella (2022) and therefore contributes to making the giant-sword a candidate for the sword trial narreme.

Lastly, it may be argued that Hroðgar himself takes on the role of arbiter in Beowulf’s trial. Fisher (1958, 174) notes how, as part of his initiation, the hero journeys through a foreign space to find the root of a chthonian power, which, once defeated, grants a boon and recognition from the initiator of the quest.²⁷⁴ The boon in question is the hilt of the giant-sword, the only object Beowulf takes from the giants’ treasure as evidence of his success, leading to recognition of his worth. Hroðgar is the quest-giver, a role which in *Merlin* is played directly by God, but there are many similarities between him and the archbishop, as briefly mentioned above. They both present themselves as guides and putative fathers for their respective hero, whom they refer to

²⁷⁴ This calls to mind the possible folktale roots of the sword trial narreme, but also, and more specifically, Donà’s (2014) reading of Arthur’s trial, mentioned in Chapter 1 of the present thesis. He, too, linked success in the trial to legitimation of the hero’s rule by a chthonian power, or through a boon taken from the chthonian power. Although the christianisation of the narreme operated by Robert makes this reading less persuasive, it seems to fit better in the case of *Beowulf*, whose overall atmosphere retains pagan elements.

as “son” (Micha, 2000a, 256-57; Kiernan, 2015, l. 946). Moreover, they are both figures of authority and power, represented as good and godly in the face of their inferiors’ scepticism.²⁷⁵ Finally, they receive from the hero’s hands the boon prodigiously retrieved, the whole sword in Arthur’s case and the hilt in Beowulf’s, and give wise advice in return. The archbishop takes charge of Arthur’s education for a time and advises him on how to be a virtuous king, telling him to choose his courtiers and advisors carefully (Micha, 2000a, 258), while Hroðgar gives a speech on mortality and the dangers of power (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1723-84).

To conclude, the episode under examination sees the hero enter a liminal space, which can be read as purely supernatural or even infernal, to face a trial prepared for him by supernatural intervention. He triumphs, thanks to his own abilities and divine blessing, and thereby passes into a different phase of his life, characterised by a higher social status and greater responsibility. At the heart of the trial is a sword, symbol of military might and of regal power, which can only be wielded by the hero and which is instrumental in his subsequent social ascent. An older man acts as quest-giver, putative father, and arbiter of the trial, granting boons and praise to the triumphant protagonist, in contrast to the scepticism and hostility of others. The similarities between this summary and the minimal plot of the sword trial are visibly significant, although the correspondence is not perfect. Therefore, whatever the outcome of the present discussion, *Beowulf* has arguably already proven the existence of sword-centric narremes in Anglo-Saxon literary culture, which somewhat reinforces Marzella’s (2022) hypothesis. Nevertheless, a possible counter-argument is proposed and addressed in the next section, with the hopes that it may grant an objective view of the matter and lead to a plausible, however temporary, conclusion.

3.3 A Counter-Argument

It was mentioned in section 3.1 that there is significant scholarly consensus regarding *Beowulf*’s link to some Scandinavian sagas, and specifically *Grettir’s Saga*. Significant

²⁷⁵ In *Beowulf*, the greatest doubt is voiced by Unferð, who antagonises Beowulf (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 506-528) and thus allows the fight with Grendel to be reframed as a heroic combat complete with a formal boast (Parks, 1993). In *Merlin*, the barons are responsible for delaying the new king’s coronation, as Arthur’s age and humble origins cast doubt on his ability to rule (Micha, 2000a, 256-60).

consensus is not, however, universal consensus. Indeed, there have been attempts to re-examine the assumed connection and put it into question, leading to renewed debate. The present section will first examine one such attempt, Fjalldal's *The Long Arm of Coincidence* (1998), chosen because it is the most recent and because it seems to have received no small amount of attention. After a brief overview of Fjalldal's argument and the responses it has elicited among reviewers, a more detailed counter-argument will be brought to bear regarding the *Beowulf* episode itself. In this latter part of the section, the giant-sword episode will be analysed for narrative elements which may disqualify it as a sword trial and Arthurian analogue. Finally, a tentative conclusion will be formulated.

3.3.1 An Uncertain Connection

Although the parallels between *Beowulf* and some of the Scandinavian sagas have been noticed and studied with great interest for a long time, they have not led to universal agreement. Indeed, the possibility of an existing link between the Anglo-Saxon poem and *Grettir's Saga* has been put into question, notably, by Magnus Fjalldal's book *The Long Arm of Coincidence* (1998). According to Fjalldal, the similarities between the texts amount to little more than coincidence, and many scholars have been blinded by their own desire to find a connection. Among the theories he discards is the Bear's Son hypothesis, which is found lacking in persuasiveness as the traits *Beowulf* shares with the archetype are also found in mediaeval texts that have no connection to the Bear's Son (Fjalldal, 1998, 95).²⁷⁶ The possibility of one ancient legend being reworked independently by the two authors, resulting in *Beowulf* and *Grettir's Saga*, is deemed so improbable as to make belief illogical (Fjalldal, 1998, 107), and even the hypothesis of the same ancient legend becoming fragmentary and the fragments being used by the two authors fails to satisfy. Finally, although well aware of the impossibility of formulating a definitive statement on whether the two works are related, Fjalldal remains firm in his scepticism and considers the similarities noticed by scholars as superficial and ultimately coincidental.

This position appears to constitute an extreme and an outlier in the field of *Beowulf* studies, and as such it was not received unanimously. Reviewers in turn praise

²⁷⁶ In this respect, Fjalldal also agrees with the already cited Andersson (1997).

Fjalldal for his clarity and completeness of his analysis (Andersson, 1999), criticise his polemical tendencies and “special pleading” (O’ Donoghue, 2000, 120), and on occasion go as far as claiming his entire argument is built on “a host of questionable assumptions” (Jorgensen, 2000, 92). A common thread shared by most responses to the book seems to be a solid conviction that, although few scholars would nowadays propose a direct genealogic link between *Beowulf* and *Grettir’s Saga*, the parallels cannot be trivial or casual, as pure coincidence is as unlikely an explanation as the existence of an underlying tale type. Among the scholarly works examined thus far, Abram (2017, note 56) paints Fjalldal’s book as somewhat reductionist and refers to Osborn’s (2007) response. Osborn does not argue against Fjalldal’s choice to re-examine previous attempts to prove a genetic relationship between the texts, going as far as to agree that some such attempts were indeed exaggerated, but she takes issue with his adamant scepticism, which she also deems excessive. This moderate position seems the most promising in the context of the present thesis, considering that the existence of a genetic connection between *Beowulf* and *Grettir’s Saga* is not vital to the argument.

Indeed, all that is being sought in *Beowulf* is confirmation that the sword trial narreme circulated in England before Robert, which is vital to Marzella’s theory that the narreme originated in the Germanic cultural substratum from which the sagas examined here and *Beowulf* both take inspiration. For this reason, were there a proven connection between the texts, this would make the present argument easier, but the same argument would not be invalidated or made superfluous by the lack of such evidence. While there is certainly merit in re-assessing scholarly assumptions, therefore, further examination of Fjalldal’s work lies beyond the scope of the present thesis. However, regardless of the elements it shares with some Scandinavian sagas, the *Beowulf* episode being examined here does not perfectly fit the definition of sword trial as formulated here. The potentially disqualifying narrative elements present in the episode are treated in the next section, which also provides a tentative conclusion.

3.3.2 *An Imperfect Trial*

Although significant similarities do exist between Beowulf's exploit in Grendel's mere and Arthur's trial as described by Robert de Boron, an argument can be made against the hypothesis that they reflect the same sword trial narreme. These hinge on the main differences between the two episodes, namely, the elective value of the trial, the triumph of divine will over human scepticism, and the core image of the sword being extracted from a solid block. This section will expand upon these arguments and attempt to establish whether *Beowulf* contains a likely analogue for the Arthurian sword trial and, subsequently, whether the poem can be considered evidence that the narreme circulated in Britain before Robert employed it. Indeed, once the potential disqualifying elements have been brought to bear, it will be possible to weigh them against the similarities covered in section 3.2 and, hopefully, to formulate a temporary conclusion. Nevertheless, it is of course not the goal of the present thesis to have the last word on the matter, but merely to test the solidity of Marzella's (2022) theories and to open the debate in a new direction.

The elective value of the hero's success is diminished, in *Beowulf's* case, by several circumstances and narrative elements. Firstly, as mentioned in 3.2.2, there are no antagonists attempting the trial. The argument brought forth previously, that the sword is described as impossible for another man to wield, can in fact be read as a comment on the titular hero's prodigious strength, which is a recurring motif in the poem. Indeed, the power of his arm is sufficient to defeat Grendel in unarmed combat, and such that the monster "had not met [...] in another man / a greater handgrip" (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 751-53). From the very beginning of the poem Beowulf is described as uncommonly strong, having "thirty / men's main-strength in his hand-grip" (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 379-380),²⁷⁷ a fact which weighs strongly against his being a possible Arthurian analogue. Arthur is never described as possessing uncommon physical power, and the only advantage he has over his foster-brother comes from having been nursed by Antor's wife, a noblewoman, rather than from a wet nurse of lower social class

²⁷⁷ The Old English here reads, "þæt he pri|(tig)es / manna mægen-cræft on his (mund)gripe / heaporoþ hæbbe" (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 379-380; ms 138v). Much of the first line is damaged and difficult to read, but Kiernan's notes and close-up photographs make his reconstructions compelling.

(Micha, 2000a, 248).²⁷⁸ This, however, does not give him any advantage over his noble rivals in the trial, as all he needs to succeed is God's blessing.

Beowulf, however, does not seem to triumph in his trial solely through divine intervention. The text gives rather the impression that God allows the hero to find the giant-sword, while it is his own strength that allows him to wield the weapon and slay the giantess. In this respect, Beowulf's trial seems to have more in common with Lancelot's or Theseus'. Scholarly analysis of the episode further strengthens this argument, as Culbert (1960, 17) seems certain that this episode allows Beowulf to "[demonstrate] his extraordinary prowess and physical strength", displaying superhuman qualities in surmounting an unexpected obstacle. Similarly, Lancelot easily lifts the slab of stone, a feat which would require the strength of seven men (Kibler, 1981, l. 1894) and thereby calls to mind the thirty-men strength of Beowulf's grip.²⁷⁹ Theseus, on the other hand, lifts a heavy boulder to retrieve the tokens left beneath it by his father and therefore, as noted in Chapter 2, only proves that his strength is equal to Ægeus', with no obvious divine intervention to support him. Therefore, if Beowulf is closer to Arthur by virtue of lifting and wielding a sword rather than a stone, and by the clear statement that God decides his triumph, his trial also shares enough of Theseus' and Lancelot's disqualifying elements to warrant a counter-argument.

Another striking difference between Beowulf's trial and Arthur's is the core image conjured by the text in the reader's mind. Firstly, the *Beowulf* poet is remarkably vague and laconically states "He saw then among weapons a win-blessed blade" and "He hoisted then the linked hilt" (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1557, 1563). This provides a strong contrast to the emphasis placed by Robert on the repeated trials undergone by Arthur,

²⁷⁸ This, however, has more to do with moral qualities than physical strength. Indeed, it was a stout belief of the time that a breast-fed child would imbibe, along with the milk, the virtues and flaws of the mother or wet-nurse (Micha, 1994, note 32). This is, in fact, the explanation given by Antor himself for his son's poor character, which he acquired "through the milk of a peasant woman" (Micha, 200a, 256, translation mine).

²⁷⁹ Arguably, Beowulf and Lancelot also share a similar election, as God seems to choose Beowulf to triumph and cleanse Heorot of the monsters which threaten it, while Lancelot is chosen as the rescuer of the queen and captives from the land of Gorre. The cleanser and rescuer, called to their mission by divine intervention in a setting which evokes a *katabasis*, assume a certain sacrificial dimension which is part of their respective authors' Christian cultural background.

although he, too, simply seizes the hilt and draws the sword with ease (Micha, 2000a, 254). Secondly, and more obviously, the text of *Beowulf* does not in any way suggest that the giant-sword is found embedded in a stone or solid material, leading to the loss of the basic image of the trial. Culbert (1960, 16) does state that the hero finds the sword “hanging on the wall”, a detail which is not present in the translation of the text used in the present thesis, but which is still obviously quite different from its Arthurian counterpart. Thirdly, the value of the sword is different, as it is not success in the trial, but success in the monster-slaying mission which leads the hero to power and fame. The writing and decoration on the hilt are described by the poet for the reader’s benefit, but it has been argued that no character within the poem is able to decipher it, and that even Hroðgar improvises his speech on impermanence based on the message of the hilt, rather than the message on it (Schrader, 1993, 142). This, too, is very different from the accurate instructions inscribed by God in golden letters on Arthur’s sword, read aloud by the archbishop.

Finally, an element that Marzella (2022) declares fundamental, and which is absent from the *Beowulf* episode, is the unlikely success of the hero. In his own words, “it is precisely [Arthur and Wulfstan’s] unexpected and yet unmistakable success that reveals they have been chosen by divine will, despite all appearances marking them as unsuitable for their role” (Marzella, 2022, 75, translation mine). This does not seem to be the case for Beowulf, who is recognized as a hero, in Heorot if not at home, and most certainly by the reader as well, considering how the narrator insists on it. Indeed, the epithets used for Beowulf include “the brave one” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 1518), and even after his sword fails to do any damage to the giantess he trusts in his strength and attempts to tackle her bare-handed (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1533-42). Even in the moment of highest difficulty, when he collapses “heart-weary,” he is still “the hardest of warriors” (Kiernan, 2015, l. 1543). There is very little doubt of his worth left at this point, but it should be noted that Hroðgar’s retinue is quick to despair upon seeing blood in the mere’s water, and to declare they “did not expect that [Beowulf], conquering, would come out” (Kiernan, 2015, 1596-97). Even the hero’s companions remain with no little foreboding at the water’s edge, not daring to hope for their leader’s return (Kiernan, 2015, ll. 1604-05). Therefore, although the reader is encouraged to believe Beowulf a

worthy and mighty warrior, and although he is never described as physically weak, his triumph over Grendel's mother is at least partly unexpected.

Before reaching a conclusion, however, it may be useful to take the time to look at *Beowulf* as a hybrid work, existing in the littoral zone between the pagan world it narrates and the Christian world its author belongs to. On the one hand, the episode under examination lacks the liminal element of contact with a dead ancestor, avoiding a possible break in the dynastic continuity, which Marzella saw as a casualty of the Christianisation process. Indeed, it may well have occurred to the *Beowulf* poet, as to Robert de Boron, to remove the suggestion of tomb profanation, and the dynastic legitimation is arguably maintained, in a more diffuse way, through the ritual exchange of swords among Hroðgar, Beowulf, and Ecgþeow. On the other hand, however, the presence and intervention of the Christian God is much more subtle here than in *Merlin*, due to the hero's might and valour being beyond doubt. Divine election falling on a seemingly unworthy candidate has been described as something of a Biblical trend, with one exegete going as far as to note that "the reader is usually induced to look upon the divine election with perplexity" while the would-be chosen hero is often prey of the same doubt and uncertainty (Mercadini, 2023, 29, translation mine). This certainly seems to be the case for Arthur's and Wulfstan's elections, much more than for their pagan counterparts encountered thus far. In the light of this, it may be argued that the discrepancy between the *Beowulf* episode and the definition of sword trial is due to the author's efforts to Christianise a poem set in pagan times, reworking the narreme in an original way in the process.

To conclude, an analysis of *Beowulf* as a possible Arthurian analogue is justified by its being an Anglo-Saxon poem drawing upon Germanic cultural and literary stock and becoming, in turn, part of the literary tradition. However unlikely it may be for Robert de Boron to have come into direct contact with it, a narreme present in *Beowulf* is a narreme present in the context that birthed *Beowulf*, a possible middle ground between the world of the heroic sagas introduced in section 1.3 and *Merlin*. The giant-sword episode presents significant similarities when compared to the Arthurian sword-trial, as they both see a hero triumph from a position of disadvantage, thanks to divine

intervention, thereby gaining recognition and social advancement. In both cases, the trial takes place in a liminal space, as part of the hero's initiation into adult life, and is presided over by an arbiter who is both a figure of authority and a stand-in for the hero's absent father. The main differences between the two trials have to do with the visual image of the sword being lifted from within a block of stone, which has no equivalent in *Beowulf*, with the divine election, which is more preponderant in *Merlin*, and with the importance of dynastic continuity, which is only threatened in *Beowulf* by the prince's own erstwhile incompetence. While the first of these discrepancies cannot be redressed or reasoned away, the second and third may be explained as the fruit of an author's free elaboration of a pagan heroic narreme which is being fitted to a Christian heroic context. *Beowulf* emerges from this analysis as an interesting possible analogue, although not beyond contradiction, and as evidence of the continued presence and importance of sword-centric narremes in the culture that would, in time, produce the iconic sword in the stone.

Conclusions

The present thesis has attempted to investigate the Arthurian sword trial narreme and the episodes proposed by two scholars as analogous narremes, from a philological, comparative perspective focused on liminality. The 12th century romance *Merlin* (Micha, 2000a), being the first work to have Arthur undertake the sword trial, is the formulation taken as the standard. Here, the stone and sword appear on Christmas morning outside the church of Logres, and the archbishop reads the golden writing on the blade declaring that the man who can pull the sword from the stone is God's chosen king. After many failed attempts, young Arthur happens upon the sword in a seemingly casual manner and effortlessly retrieves it, taking it to his foster-brother. He is then made to repeat the trial several times, chiefly due to the scepticism of the aristocracy, but always triumphs and is finally crowned and consecrated. A second touchstone is identified in a posthumous miracle accomplished by Edward the Confessor, narrated in two mediaeval hagiographies, namely, Osbert of Clare's *Vita Beati Eadwardi Regis Anglorum* (Bloch, 1923) and Ælred of Rievaulx's *Vita Sancti Ædwardi Regis et Confessoris* (Marzella, 2017). In this episode, the unjustly deposed bishop Wulfstan plunges his pastoral staff, symbol of his role of authority, into the stone covering the saintly king's tomb, praying to Edward to take back the staff and grant it to someone worthy. Afterwards, others try to remove the staff, including the archbishop who deposed Wulfstan, and cannot take it out of the stone. This prompts the king and archbishop to ask forgiveness and reinstate the holy man to his previous position. This episode presents the most significant similarities to the Arthurian trial, as well as being the closest known analogue both temporally and geographically, hence the decision to follow Marzella (2022) in considering it a second standard.

The other analogues, be they the Romance episodes proposed by Micha, or the Germanic iterations brought forth by Marzella, have been tested against the touchstones described above by means of a working definition. At first, this consisted of the minimal plot formulated by Marzella (2022, 57). This definition dictates that, in order to be qualified as a sword trial, a given episode must see the hero extracting a symbolic object from a solid block, in a sacred time and space, despite their initial disadvantage and the

presence of antagonists attempting the trial; the hero's triumph must, moreover, be qualified as a manifestation of divine election, by which a deity communicates to the audience and arbiter of the trial the contestant chosen to occupy a position of power, symbolically represented by the retrieved object. The choice of this definition is justified by the fact that it contains the main criteria proposed by Micha (1948) and further elaborates them into a more detailed formulation, making the result the more selective definition of the two. Moreover, Micha's definition is proven to work poorly by the very works that employ it, as the analogues proposed in Micha (1948) and Micha (2000b) often do not fully comply with his definition and are presented as factual with minimal argument.

Once the decision was made, the first analogue to be assessed was the second touchstone. This was useful to test both the episode and the definition, before proceeding to employ Wulfstan as a solid Arthurian analogue and Marzella's (2022) minimal plot as the guiding set of criteria to evaluate other analogues. The episode centring around Wulfstan's staff, previously summarised, sees the protagonist retrieving the symbol of his power from a stone block, within a church and during a synod, after others have tried and failed to do the same. His triumph confirms that God, through the person of Edward, has chosen him as a worthy bishop despite Lanfranc's initial scepticism, and Lanfranc himself is cast as the arbiter acknowledging the divine election. Therefore, the choice to consider this episode as a close analogue is justified by compliance with the definition, not only by temporal and geographical nearness. At the same time, the definition itself is proven to be functional in assessing narrative episodes. The Romance analogues were, therefore, put to the same test in the first chapter of the present thesis. Overall, they have proven less convincing than their Germanic or Scandinavian counterparts.

Indeed, as previously mentioned, when tested against the definition given above, Micha's proposed analogues have shown significant weaknesses. The trial undergone by the eponymous knight in Chretien de Troyes' *Lancelot, or The Knight of the Cart* (Kibler, 1981) does not involve the lifting of an object out of a stone but rather the lifting of a stone, and although there is a prophetic dimension to the knight's success, it

is not sufficient to erase the impression that the episode is primarily a trial of strength. An argument can be made in favour of divine election being present in the writing on the stone, and the monk is present as a witness and arbiter of sorts, but there are no true antagonists. Finally, the hero does not ultimately seem to be in a position of difficulty, and there is very little reason for the reader to believe him likely to fail. Theseus, too, undergoes a trial of strength predisposed by his father rather than by a deity, and only proves his physical might is equal to Ægeus' by retrieving his sword from underneath a boulder. Although this second episode is brought closer to the touchstone by the presence of a sword as symbol of royal power, it lacks divine election, the hero's apparent weakness, sacred time and space, and antagonists. What is more, this episode is narrated in Plutarch's *Lives* (Perrin, 1914), a work unlikely to have circulated in western Europe during the Middle Ages. The third Romance analogue, Æneas' golden bough trial, has proven more promising.

The episode that Micha considers the true origin of the Arthurian sword trial is found in Book VI of the *Æneid* (Ramous and Baldo, 2020). Here, the titular hero faces a trial predisposed by the goddess Proserpina as a condition to enter her kingdom, the Underworld. Instructed by the Cumaean Sibyl, who takes on the role of arbiter by clarifying the rules and subsequently ensuring the hero's triumph is recognised by Charon, Æneas enters a grove looking for the golden bough. This object, whose symbolic value is certain, though there is little agreement on what the symbol represents, may be plucked from the tree where it grows by a person called by fate to accomplish a *katabasis*. Therefore, divine election is present not only through the goddess who has established the trial, but also through the three goddesses of fate, the Fates, who are implicitly present. The time and space of this trial are arguably sacred, as the grove is not only on the edge of the Underworld but also near the Sibyl's abode, where the priestess accomplishes rites, is possessed by Apollo, and foretells the future. Moreover, the trial is closely linked to the funeral of Æneas' fallen comrade, Misenus, making the time sacred, as well. However, the episode lacks antagonists, and once again the hero is never in a position of disadvantage or weakness, so that the criteria of the definition are not fully satisfied. Overall, Micha's analogues are not very persuasive *per se*, and the scholar does not sufficiently argue in their favour or formulate any theory as

to how the narreme may have evolved from the golden bough to the lifting of the stone and then, seemingly backwards, to the sword embedded in the stone.

The Germanic analogues proposed by Marzella (2022) were also analysed for compliance to the definition and proved more convincing than their Romance counterparts. The *Saga of the Volsungs* (Finch, 1965; Byock, 2012) seems particularly close to the touchstones, as it sees a young hero retrieving a sword plunged within a tree trunk, after many others have tried and failed. Sigmundr's success is a clear mark of divine election and blessing, as the god Oðinn himself puts the sword in place and declares it a gift to whoever may retrieve it. The trial takes place during a time of ritual celebration, which arguably makes it sacred, and the space has a supernatural aura by virtue of the symbolic tree growing within the hall in reference to Yggdrasil. Although this trial seems to lack the figure of an arbiter, it still happens in the presence of an assembly and thereby has official value. Another Scandinavian analogue that complies with the definition, although not perfectly, is found in the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (Vilhjálmsón and Jónsson, 1943-44 b; Byock, 1998). Here, a youngest son retrieves a sword embedded in stone after his older brothers have both failed to do so, proving himself the worthiest heir of his father, the man-bear Björn. In this case the election is not divine but still explicitly supernatural, and the central image of the object embedded in the stone is very close to the touchstones. However, Böðvarr Bjarki's trial is not set in a sacred time or place, and once again there is no true arbiter, as the trial has been predisposed by Björn before his untimely death.

Marzella (2022) brings forth two more episodes, not as true analogues but rather as evidence of the importance of sword-centric trial narremes in these sagas. The first of these is found in *Grettir's Saga* (Jónsson, 1936; Byock, 2009) and is visibly far from the definition of sword trial. The titular hero enters a burial mound and fights a revenant in order to retrieve the burial goods, including a shortsword or sax of incomparable quality. By his bravery and strength, Grettir proves himself worthy of the weapon, although he will only own it after accomplishing more great deeds. If the space of the trial is sacred, being a burial site, and there is a sort of arbiter in the person of Þorfinnr, the trial lacks the core image of a symbolic object within a solid block, as well as clear

election designating an apparently weak hero, as Grettir is never in a position of explicit disadvantage and has no antagonists. The second sword-centric narreme is similar to Grettir's, as it involves a heroine obtaining the sword that was buried with her father. In the *Saga of Hervör and Heiðprekr* (Vilhjálmsson and Jónsson, 1943-44 b; Ásmundarson, 1891; Crawford, 2021; Chadwick, 1921) the titular Hervör faces the ghost of Angantýr in a veritable verbal duel until he is persuaded to recognise her as his heir and give her what is rightfully hers, the sword Tyrfingr. In this case, the weapon is symbolic and carries with it the family values as well as the family curse, and the triumphing heroine is in a way elected by a supernatural figure, *id est*, the ghost of her father.

Finally, the one analogous episode contemplated by both Micha and Marzella is found in the eighth branch of the *Saga of Charlemagne* (Abischer, 1954; Heatt, 1975). This section of the saga narrates the battle of Roncevaux Pass, mainly in agreement with the *Chanson de Roland*, but inserting the sword trial. After the death of the knight Rollant, Charlemagne sends his knights to fetch back his sword Dyrumdali, exceptional in quality and made holy by the presence of several relics embedded in the hilt. When it proves impossible to take the weapon from the dead knight's hand, even for five knights trying together, the king himself takes a moment to pray before trying himself. At this point, the corpse's hand loosens and gives up the priceless sword. This trial has a public dimension and a possible, though not fully convincing, arbiter in the figure of the wise advisor Nemes, who understands and explains the reason for the dead knight's unwillingness to hand over Dyrumdali to an unworthy owner. Failed attempts are narrated and the elective dimension of the king's success is arguably divine, as it is made possible by prayer. However, there is no actual implication of weakness or disadvantage in the starting position of the hero, king Charlemagne, and the spatial and temporal setting of the trial is not sacred. The sword being taken from a dead body and not a solid block of stone is another difference in terms of image, although it preserves an element of contact with the dead which is important to the narreme in many of its iterations.

This analysis has shown that the "sacred time and space" proposed by Marzella (2022) as part of the trial narreme definition is somewhat reductive, resulting in many

otherwise promising analogues not fitting the criterion. Therefore, the second chapter of this thesis has analysed the setting and narration of the previously introduced episodes in a wider liminal perspective, bringing to light elements of possible interest. Three sorts of *limen* were treated, in an effort to establish whether one or more could be useful in adapting the working definition of the trial narreme. Firstly, the trial space was explored in its function as a conduit for contact between the worlds of the living and the dead, as both Micha (1948) and Marzella (2022) noted the importance of this liminal dimension. Then the often supernatural origin of the trial was investigated, examining how the trial episodes bring the heroes in contact with the monstrous and the divine. Finally, the sword trial was analysed in its role as a rite of passage, using Van Gennep's (1960) formulation as a standard and seeking to identify which episodes can be considered a passage from childhood to adulthood, and which mark the passage from an ordinary life into a legendary existence. This triune examination showed the significance of liminality as a facet of the sword trial and prompted a revision of the narreme definition to include liminal traits.

The two touchstones of the present thesis, Arthur's and Wulfstan's trial, showed liminal characteristics of several kinds. Arthur comes to retrieve the sword in the stone at the cusp of adulthood, and his success in the trial leads to a separation from the family who raised him and his reintroduction into society with a new role, in the process abandoning his identity as a boy and becoming a man. Moreover, his triumph is a mark of divine election, as the miraculous nature of the events is tested and proved by a member of the institutional Church, who plays a role of arbiter and legitimator. All Arthur seems to be missing is the moment of contact with a dead ancestor, which is likely due to the author's wish to establish his hero as a messiah rather than simply as a king. Wulfstan, on the other hand, is legitimated in his role as bishop not only by the will of God but also by his spiritual father, Edward the Confessor, who chooses him for the position over all other candidates, both in life and in death. The trial is once again framed as a miracle, as highlighted by the importance of prayer in all phases. Moreover, it takes place above Edward's tomb, which allows the deceased king's direct involvement but also forces Wulfstan's separation from the synod he symbolically leaves and then rejoins as he is reinstated. In these terms, the episode may be considered

a second passage or initiation, as the hero passes first from his role as bishop to his previous position as monk, and then returns.

The Romance analogues show interesting similarities as well as significant differences. Lancelot's trial is set within a cemetery in a land that evokes the underworld, and it directly involves a tomb, although the hero is made to confront the spectre of his eventual death rather than legitimated by a deceased person of significance. The knight's election, although not very strongly marked, can be argued to be divine as it is once again mediated by a member of the institutional church and preceded by prayer. There is no initiatic element to this trial, however, nor does the episode mark the beginning of the knight's legendary adventures. Theseus' trial, on the other hand, has a very strong initiatic dimension, in both senses examined here; he is brought to the stone by his mother as a young man, and once he accomplishes the trial set by his father he is allowed to separate from the family who has raised him and seek recognition as prince of Athens. *En route* to his father's home, he also accomplishes his first great deeds, whose legendary nature is established through a repeated comparison with the mythic Hercules. However, this episode lacks both a moment of contact with a dead ancestor and a supernatural or divine election. For this reason, it remains, even more than Lancelot's trial, a trial of strength. Æneas, like Lancelot although in a more literal way, accomplishes a katabasis starting with the trial of the golden bough. This object is not only found on the edge of the underworld, but it also represents the antinomy of life and death. Æneas' triumph is due both to destiny and to his virtue, as in Wulfstan's and Arthur's cases, and the divine help the hero receives marks his election yet more clearly as supernatural. Once again, the arbiter is a member of the institutional clergy, a priestess. However, the initiatic value of this episode is vague at best, and even the contact with the hero's dead father is the reward for success rather than part of the trial, which lowers the impact of this analogue.

The Scandinavian episodes have also proven interestingly liminal. Sigmundr comes to face his trial during his twin sister's marriage celebrations, marking her passage into adulthood and, *ipso facto*, his, as well. This initiation by proxy continues as Signý is the first to be separated from the Volsung clan, but Sigmundr is eventually

isolated as the only male heir of the clan, as well as the only male survivor. His trial is set in a space which has supernatural undertones by virtue of the Barnstokkr, which stretches through the king's house simulating the world tree, Yggdrasill. Divine intervention is particularly explicit in this episode, as a deity strides into the hall and issues the challenge; in this case, Oðinn functions both as a source of divine blessing and as an ancestor recognising his heir, so that there is no contact with the dead. Moreover, it may be argued that Sigmundur's life is firmly encased in the family legend since his father's supernatural conception, and the fact that he is already compared to the heroes of sagas before the trial confirms this. Böðvarr's life, too, is marked by the supernatural since before his birth, as his father is turned into a bear and his brothers are born partly ferine. Still, his trial has a strong initiatic dimension, consisting of a separation from family and marking the beginning of the hero's independent life. The inheritance he receives from his father is once again a supernatural legitimation, confirming Böðvarr's worth and superiority, although there is no divine intervention. In both these cases, the focus on the sword as a gift or inheritance from a superhuman ancestor selects the hero and marks him for a great destiny at a time when he is ready to become an adult.

Grettir and Hervör both face trials set in strongly liminal spaces, namely, burial grounds. Unlike Lancelot, though, these heroes come face to face with revenants and have to defeat them, physically or verbally, in order to take away part of the treasure hidden in the burial mound. If Grettir's encounter with a *draugr* devolves into a fight and functions as a trial run for his later struggle with a more dangerous revenant, lacking a clear initiatic dimension as well as an immediate reward legitimating the triumphant hero, Hervör's trial allows a more fruitful comparison. Her journey to a place perceived as between worlds has the precise goal of retrieving her dead father's treasures, which the heroine sees as her due inheritance. The passage of the sword and, symbolically, of the family virtues and values from the dead father to the living daughter avoids a break in the bloodline and legitimates Hervör as Angantýr's heir. This legitimation turns her from an uncontrollable criminal into a successful "functional son", raiding and pillaging with no moral censure from the narrator, until she is ready to settle down and take on her duties as a daughter, wife, and mother. Once again, there is

no divine intervention in these trials, as the hero is legitimated by a supernatural creature which, in Hervör's case, is also an ancestor. Although these two episodes cannot be considered true analogues for the Arthurian sword trial, they confirm both the importance of sword-centric narremes and the presence of liminal traits within these narremes in the Germanic heroic tradition.

Lastly, the analogue shared by Micha and Marzella fittingly shows liminal elements reminiscent of both the Germanic and the Romance strains examined here. On the one hand, a dead knight refusing to let go of his sword calls to mind Grettir's death as well as Böðvarr's appearance as a revenant in *Landnámabók* (Finsson, 1774; Ellwood, 1898) and in the *Saga of Þórðr Hreða* (Coles, 1882). On the other hand, the election is strongly marked as divine and mediated by prayer, an element which is absent in the sagas. This is coherent with the fact that this particular branch of the saga is likely to be an adaptation of the French *Chanson de Roland*, and as such may well contain Scandinavian elements and narremes side by side with more explicitly Christian knightly content. The similarities between this episode and the touchstones, which have already been noted, extend to the liminal traits. The election is framed as purely miraculous, so that the relationship between the living and the dead appears to be mediated by religion, as was the case for Wulfstan and Edward. As was the case for Arthur, the sword becomes a symbol of valour and virtue, and it can only be taken, with God's blessing, by an exceptional individual. Unlike Arthur, though, Charlemagne does not keep the weapon, admitting his own unworthiness to wield it in battle, and only preserves the holy relics embedded in the hilt. Finally, there is no initiatic value to Charlemagne's trial, nor is the space particularly liminal, unless it be by virtue of containing a corpse.

This analysis of the liminal traits present in the analogous episodes seems to support Marzella (2022) in his theory that the narreme may have originated as a rite of passage seeing the hero winning an exceptional and symbolic weapon along with the blessing of his ancestors in order to continue the bloodline and transmit the family values. The frequent intervention of supernatural forces seems tightly linked to this, as legitimation may come from a deity, thereby becoming a call to a destiny of peculiar

greatness. In some cases the deity and the ancestor overlap, although the Christian iterations of the narreme seem to prefer the theme of divine blessing over dynastic closure. In the light of this, the working definition of sword trial is adapted to include liminal space and time instead of sacred space and time, and the Romance analogues proposed by Micha (1948, 2000b) are discarded, as they do not comply with the definition in a satisfactory manner, and the scholar's argument in their favour is not strong enough to compensate. Among the Scandinavian analogues, *Grettir's Saga* seems to be the farthest from the touchstones, which is coherent with Marzella's (2022) own admission that this is not a true analogue. If Marzella's theory is accepted, and the narreme is supposed to have Germanic origins, it seems reasonable to seek other sword trials in the British Isles that may be Arthurian antecedents. The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* (Kiernan, 2015), having often been described as closely related to sagas, may be a good starting point.

The third chapter of this thesis has focused on *Beowulf*, based on Marzella's (2022) proposal that Robert de Boron may have come into contact with the sword trial narreme during a sojourn in the British Isles. As noted, it is extremely unlikely for Robert to have read *Beowulf*, but the purpose of this section was to investigate the presence of sword trial narremes in Britain prior to *Merlin*, and not to identify a direct inspiration behind the romance. The indebtedness of the Anglo-Saxon poem to a Germanic cultural substratum has often been analysed and appears solid regardless of the individual scholars' theories. If, on the one hand, it may be excessive to posit a genetic relationship between *Beowulf* and one or more sagas, on the other hand there are enough similarities both in plot and conception of the heroic character, not to mention the Scandinavian setting, to entertain the possibility of a sword-centric trial narreme existing in *Beowulf*, as well. Moreover, it has been argued in the past that Arthur and Beowulf may originate from the same heroic archetype, the Bear's Son. Although this folktale model is too broad and universal to be relied upon in this context, the similarities between the two heroes' progress are significant. They both begin their story as youths who are considered unworthy of royal power, forcing them to demonstrate their virtue as well as the divine support they enjoy, before they can reign. The respective trials both involve exceptional swords of supernatural origins, and they both

win the hero praise and recognition from figures of authority. This was considered sufficient grounds for a more detailed analysis of Beowulf's trial episode.

The episode in question is the hero's journey through Grendel's mere and his duel with Grendel's mother. Beowulf dives through the water and is seized and dragged by the creature to her underwater abode, where the two engage in a fierce battle. After each has tried and failed to wound the other, Beowulf finds himself grappled and in dire straits, until by divine intervention he is able to find the giant-sword. Armed with this exceptional weapon, which would be impossible for a weaker man to wield, the hero finally slays Grendel's mother, whereupon the previously firelit hall is flooded with heavenly light. Beowulf is finally able to return to Heorot with Grendel's head and the hilt of the giantsword, the blade having been eroded by the creatures' acidic blood. He is welcomed and rewarded by Hroðgar, who is both quest-giver and arbiter. This episode shows both similarities and differences when compared to the sword trial touchstones, warranting a more detailed exploration. This was done at first with the purpose of finding liminal facets, whose relevance was outlined in Chapter 2. The episode was found to possess a triune liminal nature, namely, a liminal setting, a liminal monster, and a liminal hero. Indeed, the mere is both the dwelling of monstrous creatures and a possible representation of hell, while the Grendelkin themselves are in turn animalistic, demonic, and perplexingly human, not unlike Beowulf himself seems to shift between human, godlike, and nearly monstrous. Interestingly, the intense liminality of the hero's figure is seemingly resolved by his triumph in the trial, after which he is allowed to stabilise as a just king.

As noted, the setting of this episode has been interpreted as hellish. Indeed, the main sign of supernatural danger noted in the text is the nightly apparition of flames on the water's surface, which has been interpreted as a variation on the theme of the river of fire described in the apocryphal *Visio Pauli*. The Grendelkin, which inhabit the mere and the underwater hall, are also intensely liminal creatures, described in turn as possessing human, animal, and even demonic traits. Genealogically linked to Cain, the monstrous creatures are at the same time explicitly fiendish, and corporeal in a way more reminiscent of the troll or revenant. Indeed, Grendel himself is beheaded and his

head is brought back by the triumphant hero as evidence of his cleansing mission having been accomplished, and it has been noted that beheading was the preferred method for avoiding the return of *draugar*. Moreover, Grendel's behaviour in haunting Heorot for food and fleeing from an unexpected challenge can be read as predatory, while his mother's behaviour is framed as vengeance in the context of feud, and therefore, is inherently human. Beowulf, too, by willingly engaging with Grendel on an equal footing, steps into the littoral zone between what is human and what is not. His hybrid, discomfiting nature is resolved with his triumph, as he is given a new and more stable social role, which arguably gives this trial an initiatic connotation, as well. From this analysis, the poem emerges as distinctly liminal, or rather littoral, in nature, no less because it exists between paganism and Christianity, not unlike the sagas treated in the present thesis and, in a way, not unlike *Merlin* itself is poised between a heroic narrative and a messianic narrative of salvation.

The episode of the giant-sword shows significant similarities with the definition of sword trial, quite apart from its liminal aspects. The hero is triumphant thanks to divine intervention, accomplishes a quest given to him by a putative father who is also the arbiter of the trial, and proves himself ready to occupy a position of power in his own right. At the centre of the trial is, of course, a sword, which acts as a symbol of power but also as a literal weapon that only the hero can wield. Nonetheless, the sword is never lifted out of a solid block, and there are no antagonists attempting the trial and failing to highlight the hero's election. On the one hand Beowulf is in a position of disadvantage, both by virtue of being considered incapable of ruling and by finding himself unable to slay Grendel's mother, at considerable risk of his life. On the other hand, however, the divine election is not as preponderant to the trial as it was in Arthur's and Wulfstan's cases, and it is difficult to shake the impression that this remains, at its heart, a trial of strength. From this point of view, the disadvantage suffered by the hero is even less significant, as he is described as uncommonly strong in a consistent way throughout the narrative. This seems to be the strongest counter-argument to the possibility of *Beowulf* containing an Arthurian analogue, as the absence of the stone block and the less prominent intervention of God may be chalked up to the author reworking the narreme in a personal way.

In conclusion, this thesis has attempted to establish the more likely theory of origin for the Arthurian sword trial, to analyse the episode and its forebears from a new perspective, and to open the possibility of an analogue that had not been explored by previous scholarship. As a result of the comparative analysis of Chapter 1, the present author chooses to side with Marzella (2022) in considering the sword trial a Germanic heroic narreme reworked independently by hagiography and Christian heroic narrative. Chapter 2, by analysing the analogues in a systematic way and in a new framework, has highlighted the importance of liminal facets to the narreme and led to a revision of Marzella's (2022) definition of the same. This new definition was then applied to *Beowulf*, a work which seemed likely to contain a new Arthurian analogue, mentioned by none of the scholarship consulted by the present author. The presence of a sword trial narreme in the Anglo-Saxon poem was thought to be a possible argument in favour of the narreme's Germanic origin, as well as proof of its existence within the British heroic canon before Robert de Boron's *Merlin* was written.

However, the final result does not allow the present author to consider *Beowulf* an Arthurian analogue in a definitive fashion. Although the similarities between the episodes are undeniable, the differences in terms of core image, plot significance, and symbolic meaning appear too significant for the present thesis to successfully argue against them; *Beowulf*'s trial remains primarily a trial of strength with no antagonists, and the hero's triumph comes as expected, by the reader if not by all characters. Nevertheless, the polyphony of text cannot be ignored, and interpreting this episode as mainly heroic does not *ipso facto* invalidate other readings, including an Arthurian reading. Moreover, the negative conclusion of the present analysis neither supports nor, importantly, invalidates Marzella's (2022) hypothesis. Further judgement regarding the *Beowulf* episode is left to future research, as the present author contents herself with reiterating the likelihood of Robert encountering a sword trial narreme of Germanic origin and reworking it in a grander, more markedly Christian way. The result is a timeless image, loaded with much older symbolism, whose enduring charm and near-universal appeal are born of its very hybrid, liminal nature.

Bibliography

- Abischer, Paul. 1954. *Rolandiana Borealia. La Saga Af Runzisvals Bardaga Et Ses Dérivés Scandinaves Comparés à La Chanson De Roland; Essai De Restauration Du Manuscrit Français Utilisé Par Le Traducteur Norrois.* Lausanne: Rouge.
- Abram, Christopher. 2010. "New Light on the Illumination of Grendel's Mere." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 109, no. 2: 198-216. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jenglgermphil.109.2.0198>.
- Abram, Christopher. 2017. "Bee-Wolf and the Hand of Victory: Identifying the Heroes of Beowulf and Völsunga saga." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 116, no. 4: 387-414. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jenglgermphil.116.4.0387>.
- Agard, Walter R. 1928. "Theseus. A National Hero." *The Classical Journal* 24, no. 2: 84-91. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3289521>.
- Anderson, Graham. 2004. *King Arthur in Antiquity*. London: Routledge. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.
- Andersson, Theodore M. 1997. "Sources and Analogues" in *A Beowulf Handbook*, edited by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, 125-48. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Andersson, Theodore M. 1999. Review of *The Long Arm of Coincidence: The Frustrated Connection between "Beowulf" and "Grettis saga."* by Magnús Fjalldal. *Speculum* 74, no. 3: 739-41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2886795>.
- Andrén, Anders. 2013. "Places, Monuments, and Objects: The Past in Ancient Scandinavia." *Scandinavian Studies* 85, no. 3: 267-81. <https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.85.3.0267>.
- Ásmundarson, Valdimar, ed. 1891. "Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks." *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*. 307-367. Reykjavik: S. Kristjánsson.
- Avery, William T. 1966. "The Reluctant Golden Bough." *The Classical Journal* 61, no. 6: 269-72. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3294104>.

- Bammesberger, Alfred. 1995. "Beowulf's Descent into Grendel's Mere." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 96, no. 3: 225-27. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43346100>.
- Barlow, Frank, trans. 1992. *The life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bennett, Lisa. 2014. "Burial Practices as Sites of Cultural Memory in the *Íslendingasögur*." *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 10: 27–52. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48501879>.
- Bettenson, Henry, trans. 1984. *St. Augustine. City of God*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Bloch, Marc, ed. 1923. "La Vie de S. Édouard le Confesseur par Osbert de Clare" in *Analecta Bollandiana* 41: 5-131. *Internet Archive*. https://archive.org/details/sim_analecta-bollandiana_1923_41/page/n3/mode/2up.
- Bonheim, Helmut. 2000. "Shakespeare's narremes." *Shakespeare Survey* 53: *Shakespeare and narrative*, edited by Peter Holland, 1-11. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bosworth, Joseph. 2014. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller, Christ Sean, and Ondřej Tichy. Prague: Faculty of Arts, Charles University. Available at <https://bosworthtoller.com/1252>. Accessed 21 September 2023.
- Brooks, Robert A. 1953. "Discolor Aura. Reflections on the Golden Bough." *The American Journal of Philology* 74, no. 3: 260–80. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/292310>.
- Byock, Jesse L., ed. 1998. *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*. London: Penguin Books.
- Byock, Jesse L., ed. 2009. *Grettir's Saga*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Byock, Jesse L., ed. 2012. *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. Berkeley: University of California Press. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.
- Byron, John. 2011. *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry*. Boston: BRILL. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

- Castiglioni, Luigi and Scevola Mariotti. 2007. *IL: Vocabolario della Lingua Latina*. 4th ed. Turin: Loescher.
- Cawsey, Kathy. 2001. "Merlin's Magical Writing: Writing and the Written Word in 'Le Morte Darthur' and the English Prose 'Merlin.'" *Arthuriana* 11, no. 3: 89–101. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869653>.
- Cespedes Gonzales, Lilian. Filmed 20th August 2021. "Cursed blades and dark swords in myth and fantasy". Lecture held by the Royal Armouries, 1:40:43. <https://www.medievalists.net/2021/09/cursed-blades-and-dark-swords-in-myth-and-fantasy/>.
- Chadwick, Nora K., trans. 1921. "The saga of Hervor and Heithrek" in *Stories and Ballads of the Far Past*, 79-143. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chadwick, Nora K. 1946a. "Norse Ghosts (A Study in the Draugr and the Haugbúi)." *Folklore* 57, no. 2: 50–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1256952>.
- Chadwick, Nora K. 1946b. "Norse Ghosts II (Continued)." *Folklore* 57, no. 3: 106–27. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1257735>.
- Clover, Carol J. 1986. "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85, no. 1: 35–49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27709600>.
- Coles, J. M.. 1882. *Summer Traveling in Iceland; Being the Narrative of Two Journeys Across the Island by Unfrequented Routes*. London: J. Murray.
- Condos, Theony. 1997. *Star Myths of the Greeks and Romans: a Sourcebook Containing The Constellations of Pseudo-Erathostenes and the Poetic Astronomy of Hyginus*. Grand Rapids (MI): Phanes Press.
- Cooper, Helen, ed. 1998. *Le Morte Darthur. The Winchester Manuscript*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crawford, Jackson, trans. 2021. *Two Sagas of Mythical Heroes. Hervor and Heidrek & Hrólfr Kraki and His Champions*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. Kindle.
- Culbert, Taylor. 1960. "The Narrative Functions of Beowulf's Swords." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 59, no. 1: 13-20. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27707401>.
- Den Boer, W. 1969. "Theseus: The Growth of a Myth in History." *Greece & Rome* 16, no. 1: pp. 1–13. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642890>.

- Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (ONP). n.d. <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?>. Accessed 11 September 2023.
- Donà, Carlo. 2014. “La Spada nella Roccia e Altre Spade del Destino” in *Filologia e Letteratura. Studi Offerti a Carmelo Zilli*, edited by Angelo Chielli and Leonardo Terrusi, 63-80. Bari: Cacucci Editore.
- Dorfman, Eugène. 1969. *The narreme in the medieval romance epic: An introduction to narrative structures*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Dugdale, William, ed. 1846. *Monasticon Anglicanum: a History of the Abbies and Other Monasteries, Hospitals, Frieries, and Cathedral and Collegiate Churches, with Their Dependencies, in England and Wales*. London: James Bohn.
- Dutton, Marsha L. 2007. “The Staff in the Stone: Finding Arthur’s Sword in the ‘Vita Sancti Edwardi’ of Aelred of Rievaulx.” *Arthuriana* 17, no. 3: 3–30. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27870843>.
- Elliott, J. K., ed. 1993. *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis Davidson, H. R. 1960. “The Sword at the Wedding.” *Folklore* 71, no. 1: 1–18. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1258785>.
- Ellwood, Rev. T., trans. 1898. *The Book of the Settlement of Iceland*. Kendal: T. Wilson.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Accessed 15 September 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/>.
- Finch, R. G., ed. and trans. 1965. *Völsunga Saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*. London: Thomas Nelson Ltd.
- Finsson, Hannes, ed. 1774. *Islands Landnamabok: hoc est Liber originum Islandiae*. Copenhagen: A. F. Stein.
- Fisher, Peter F. 1958. “The Trials of the Epic Hero in Beowulf.” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 73, no. 3: 171-183. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/460234>.
- Fjalldal, Magnus. 1998. *The Long Arm of Coincidence : The Frustrated Connection Between 'Beowulf' and 'Grettis Saga.'* Toronto: University of Toronto Press. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.

- Fredouille, Jean-Claude, trans. 1984. *Tertullien: De la Patience*. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf.
- Greene, Wendy Tibbetts. 1987. "Malory's Merlin: An Ambiguous Magician?" *Arthurian Interpretations* 1, no. 2, 56–63. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27868621>.
- Griffith, M. S. 1995. "Some Difficulties in *Beowulf*, Lines 874-902: Sigemund Reconsidered." *Anglo-Saxon England*, 24: 11-42.
- Grimaldi, Stacey, ed. 1830. *Rotuli de Dominabus et Pueris et Puellis de Donatione Regis in XII Comitatus*. London: G. Pickering.
- Hieatt, Constance B. 1975. *Karlamagnus Saga: the Saga of Charlemagne and His Heroes ; Translated by Constance B. Hieatt*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.
- Higley, Sarah Lynn. 1986. "'Aldor on Ofre,' or the Reluctant Hart: A Study of Liminality in *Beowulf*." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 87, no. 3: 342-353. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43343752>.
- Hume, Kathryn. 1980. "From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature." *Studies in Philology* 77, no. 1: 1–25. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174026>.
- Jaeger, C. Stephen. 2012. *Enchantment : On Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- James, T. E. 1960. "The Age of Majority." *The American Journal of Legal History* 4, no. 1: 22–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/844549>.
- Jónsson, Guðni. 1936. *Íslensk Fornrit VII: Grettis Saga*. Reykjavik: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag (1964).
- Jorgensen, Peter A. 2000. Review of *The Long Arm of Coincidence: The Frustrated Connection between "Beowulf" and "Grettis saga."* by Magnús Fjalldal. *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 99, no. 1: 91–95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27711910>.
- Kibler, William W., ed. and trans. 1981. *Chrétien de Troyes' Lancelot or, The Knight of the Cart (Le Chevalier de la Charrete)*. New York: Garland.

- Kiernan, Kevin. 1984 (revised 2010). "Grendel's Heroic Mother."
<https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/kiernan/HeroicMother/>. Accessed 21 July 2023.
- Kiernan, Kevin. 1996. *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. (1999).
- Kiernan, Kevin, ed. 2015. *Electronic Beowulf*. 4th ed.
<https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/ebeo4.0/CD/main.html>. Accessed 27 September 2023.
- Kim, H. C. 1973. *The Gospel of Nicodemus. Gesta Salvatoris*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.
- Klaeber, Friedrich. 1950. Introduction to *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, edited by Friedrich Klaeber, ix-cxxiv. Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company.
- Klevnäs, Alison Margaret. 2016. "Imbued with the Essence of the Owner: Personhood and Possessions in the Reopening and Reworking of Viking-Age Burials."
European Journal of Archaeology, 19 no. 3: 456-476.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14619571.2016.1190202>.
- Köberl, J. 1987. "The Magic Sword in Beowulf." *Neophilologus* 71, no. 1: 120-128.
ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Koch, Ludovica. 1994. Introduction to *La Saga dei Völsunghi*, edited by Ludovica Koch, 26-52. Parma: Pratiche Editrice.
- La Bibbia di Gerusalemme*. 1971. Edited by F. Vattioni et al. Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane.
- Le Rider, Paule. 1991. "Le Dépassement de la Chevalerie dans 'Le Chevalier de la Charrette.'" *Romania* 112, no. 445/446 (1/2): 83-99. *JSTOR*,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45039178>.
- Liddell, Scott, *Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon (LSJ)*. n.d. https://lsj.gr/wiki/Main_Page. Accessed 2 September 2023.
- Lindow, John. 2018. "Nordic Legends of the Churchyard" in *Storied and Supernatural Places : Studies in Spatial and Social Dimensions of Folklore and Sagas*, edited by Ülo Valk and Daniel Sävborg, 42-53. Helsinki : Finnish Literature Society / SKS.
- Littleton, C. Scott, and Linda A. Malcor. 1995. "Some Notes on Merlin." *Arthuriana* 5, no. 3: 87-95. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27869125>.

- Mancinelli, Laura. 1993. Foreword to *La Saga dei Volsunghi*, edited by Marcello Meli, 5-8. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.
- Marzella, Francesco, ed. 2017. "Vita Sancti Ædwardi Regis" in *Aelredi Rievalliensis Vita Sancti Ædwardi Regis; Anonymi Vita Sancti Ædwardi Versifice*, 12-181. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Marzella, Francesco. 2022. *Excalibur. La Spada nella roccia tra mito e storia*, Salerno: Salerno Editrice.
- Meli, Marcello. 1993. Introduction to *La Saga dei Volsunghi*, edited by Marcello Meli, 9-25. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.
- Mercadini, Roberto. 2023. *La Donna che Rise di Dio e Altre Storie della Bibbia*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Micha, Alexandre. 1948. "L'épreuve de l'épée." *Romania* 70, no. 277: 37-50.
<https://doi.org/10.3406/roma.1948.3642>
- Micha, Alexandre, ed. 1994. *Robert de Boron. Merlin*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Micha, Alexandre, ed. 2000a. *Merlin: Roman du XIIIe Siècle*. Geneva: Droz. Kindle (2015).
- Micha, Alexandre. 2000b. *Etude Sur Le "Merlin" De Robert De Boron, Roman Du 13. Siècle*. Genève: Droz.
- Murgia, Charles E. 1975. *Prolegomena to Servius 5: The Manuscripts*. Berkeley : University of California Press.
- Mynors, R.A.B. 1998. *William of Malmesbury. Gesta Regum Anglorum*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Niles, John D. 1983. *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Niles, John D. 1997. "Introduction: Beowulf, Truth, and Meaning" in *A Beowulf Handbook*, edited by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, 1-12. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Noreiko, Stephen F. 1973. "Le Chevalier de la Charrete : Prise de Conscience d'un 'Fin Amant.'" *Romania* 94, no. 376 (4): 463–83. *JSTOR*,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45040353>.

- O'Donoghue, Heather. 2000. Review of *The Long Arm of Coincidence: The Frustrated Connection between "Beowulf" and "Grettis saga."* by Magnús Fjalldal. *Medium Ævum* 69, no. 1: 119–20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/43631502>.
- Osborn, Marijane. 2007. "Manipulating Waterfalls: Mythic Places in *Beowulf* and *Grettissaga*, Lawrence and Purnell" in *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, edited by Stephen O. Glosecki, 197-224. Tempe: ACMRS in collaboration with Brepols.
- Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. <https://www.oed.com/?tl=true>. Accessed 11 September 2023.
- Pade, Marianne. 2014. "The Reception of Plutarch from Antiquity to the Italian Renaissance" in *A Companion to Plutarch*, edited by Mark Beck, 531-543. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.
- Paris, Gaston. 1886. Introduction to *Merlin: Roman en Prose du XIIIe siècle*, edited by Gaston Paris and Jakob Ulrich, I-LXXX. Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français.
- Parks, Ward. 1993. "Pray Tell: How Heroes Perceive Monsters in 'Beowulf.'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 92, no. 1: 1-16. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27710761>.
- Pârvulescu, Adrian. 2005. "The Golden Bough, Aeneas' Piety, and the Suppliant Branch." *Latomus* 64, no. 4: 882–909. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41543919>.
- Perrin, Bernadotte. 1914. *Plutarch's Lives*. London: Heinemann (1967).
- Puhvel, Martin. 1972. "The Deicidal Otherworld Weapon in Celtic and Germanic Mythic Tradition." *Folklore* 83, no. 3: 210–19. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1259546>.
- Ramous, Mario and Gianluigi Baldo. 2020. *Virgilio. Eneide*. 4th ed. Venezia: Marsilio.
- Schrader, Richard J. 1993. "The Language on the Giant's Sword Hilt in *Beowulf*." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 94, no.2: 141-147. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43345937>.
- Segal, Charles. 1968. "The Hesitation of the Golden Bough: A Reexamination." *Hermes* 96, no. 1: 74–79. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4475491>.

- Shapiro, H. A. 1991. "Theseus: Aspects of the Hero in Archaic Greece." *Studies in the History of Art* 32: 122–39. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42620663>.
- Stock, Lorraine K. 2015. "Reinventing an Iconic Arthurian Moment: The Sword in the Stone in Films and Television." *Arthuriana* 25, no. 4 : 66–83. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44697440>.
- Sweet, Henry. 1876. *The Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*. 14th edn, reprint. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (1962).
- Tertullian, n.d. *De Patientia*. https://www.tertullian.org/latin/de_patientia.htm. Accessed 19 July 2023.
- Thomas, Richard F.. 2001. *Virgil and the Augustan Reception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. *ProQuest Ebook Central*.
- Turville-Petre, Joan. 1974. "Beowulf and Grettis Saga: An Excursion." *Saga-Book* 19: 347-57. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48612717>.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizendom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Van Meter, David C. 1996. "The Ritualized Presentation of Weapons and the Ideology of Nobility in Beowulf." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 95, no. 2: 175-189. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27711299>.
- Vernardsky, George. 1959. *The Origins of Russia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Vilhjálmsson, Bjarni and Guðni Jónsson, eds. 1943-44 a. "Hervarar Saga," *Stories for All Time*. <https://fasnl.net/saga/17>. Accessed 4 September 2023.
- Vilhjálmsson, Bjarni and Guðni Jónsson, eds. 1943-44 b. "Hrólf's Saga Kraka." *Stories for All Time*. <https://fasnl.net/saga/20>. Accessed 2 September 2023.
- Vowell, Alison. 2022. "Grendel's Mother and the Women of the Völsung-Nibelung Tradition." *Nephilologus* 107: 239-255. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-022-09738-5>.
- Weber, Clifford. 1995. "The Allegory of the Golden Bough." *Vergilius* 41: 3–34. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41587127>.
- Weiss, Judith, ed. 2002. *Wace's Roman de Brut: A History of the British. Revised edition*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.

- Westwell, Chantry. n.d. "Works of the Church Fathers." Accessed 26 April, 2023.
<https://www.bl.uk/medieval-english-french-manuscripts/articles/works-of-the-church-fathers>.
- Williams, Ann. 1995. *The English and the Norman Conquest*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.
- Winterbottom, Michael. 2007. *William of Malmesbury. Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wittmann, Henri. 1975. "Théorie des narrèmes et algorithmes narratifs". *Poetics*, 4, no. 1: 19-28.
- Wright, Herbert G. 1957. "Good and Evil; Light and Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in *Beowulf*." *The Review of English Studies*, 8, no. 29: 1-11. *JSTOR*,
<http://www.jstor.com/stable/511108>.
- Wright, Neil, ed. *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth I: A Single-Manuscript Edition from Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer Ltd.
- Ziegler, Konrat, ed. 1960. *Plutarchus: Vitae Parallelae*. Vol. 1. Leipzig: Teubner.