

## The Astrology of Arthur

“ ‘O ye stars that shudder over me,  
O earth that soundest hollow under me,  
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,  
And power on this dead world to make it live.’  
Idylls of the King—Tennyson

As a practicing druid, the Arthurian tradition of the British Isles has been one source of my training and study since 1990, when I joined the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. The ideas in this article come from a variety of sources. Most important are the stories *told to me* before I could read. Arthur is intertwined with the stars because he is immortal, fixed, like the patterns of the constellations, and yet always human. He moves through seasonal changes of the sky much like the planets.

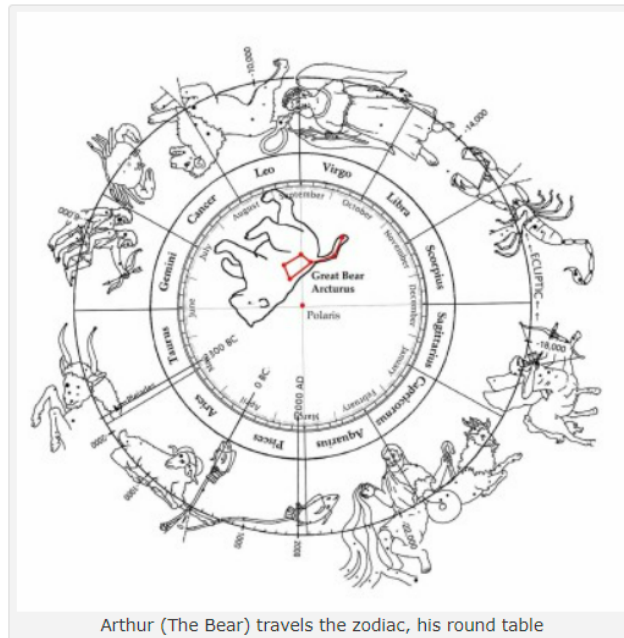


This is an illustration from Doré of Arthur and Merlin under the night sky. Merlin as Druid and astrologer is teaching Arthur the tales of the stars.

Poetry and song store knowledge for cultures all over the world, while the night sky holds ancestral memory in a visual rather than a verbal form. The sky with its starry maps remains a predictable place even as it constantly changes during the night and over the seasons. Stories, which tell of the tribe's origin and history, are associated with the stellar wheel overhead. The journey of the Sun, Moon and the planets along the starry road of the ecliptic become a reenactment of the adventures and love affairs of the ancestors. Constellations beyond the belt of the ecliptic are a rich source of cultural history, a memory guide to the story teller-historian. The sky is a library filled with epic tales of the men and women who tangled with the gods.

As astrologers with a 5,000-year old tradition of psychology and divination based upon the movement of the stars and planets, these stories of the cosmos enrich our understanding of our art and knowledge, and connect us with the poetic wealth of the people and cultures who have gone before us.

We could look at the story of Arthur's Round Table as an earthly reflection of the Zodiac. Arthur's name means The Bear. We could say that the constellation we call the Big Dipper or the Great Bear is Arthur as he journeys through the yearly cycle of the constellations around the ecliptic. The Round Table takes on a whole new meaning when projected on the night sky!



Arthur (The Bear) travels the zodiac, his round table

In Britain these stories were remembered in the songs and poetry of the Bardic tradition. Bards were the poets of Celtic culture, trained to learn the history and genealogy of the tribe from memory, and forbidden to write down their songs. The power of their words was so deeply respected and sometimes feared that as poets, Bards were known as magicians and healers. Most were Druids or trained by Druids. The tradition of the Bards included knowledge of the cosmos. As Taliesin, the great Welsh bard says about himself:

“...my original country  
is the region of the summer stars;  
I was with my Lord in the highest sphere,  
I know the Names of the Stars  
from the North to the South.  
I have been teacher to all intelligences, I am able to instruct the  
whole universe.’

The Mabinogi, trans. Patrick Ford

In this light I have tried to find the stories of Arthur in the stars and planets, the Sun and Moon.



## The Observatory at Cadair Idris



The Giant's armchair, Cadair Idris in Wales. An observatory of the stars and place of poetic inspiration.



*'I have been instructed  
In the whole system of the universe;  
I have been in an uneasy chair  
Above Caer Sidhe,  
And the whirling round with out motion  
Between three elements.'*

Taliesin from Robert Graves the White Goddess

In a highly literate society we have little faith in memory, and our way of life dims the stars, yet they remain to communicate with us whenever we take the time and find the place where we can attune to them. It's not surprising that observatories and temples are located on mountain peaks; they have a similar purpose, a conversation with the sky. At the top of Cadair Idris, a mountain in Wales is a seat, a great stone couch where the giant, Idris, the first astronomer/astrologer watched the night sky. Idris was skilled in poetry and philosophy as well as star lore, and it is said that whoever spends the night in Cadair Idris, the giant's chair, will meet death, madness or poetic inspiration by morning.



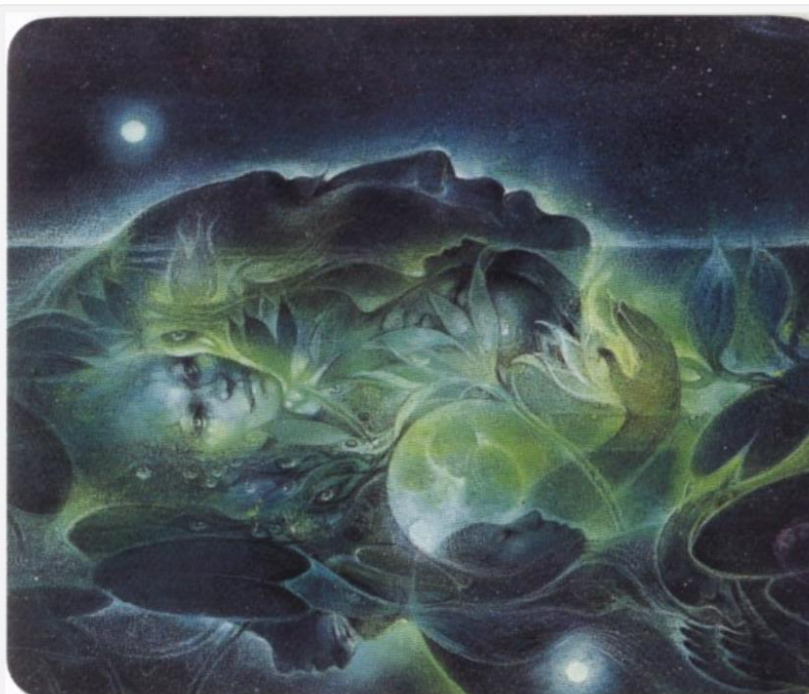
The Wild Hunt

It's not surprising that a mountain observatory filled with poetry and magic is the site of an Arthurian adventure. Arthur's presence is interwoven into many of the sacred sites of the British Isles. On the slopes of this sacred mountain Arthur went on a hunt with the king of the fair folk, *Gwyn ap Nudd* and his pack of hounds the *Cwn Annwn* (dogs of the underworld). The hunt continues and if you are swept up in it, you might find yourself in *Annwn*, the underworld, or perhaps taken up to *Caer Arianrhod* (Corona Borealis).



Corona Borealis the constellation of Arianrhod, the Crown and the Cauldron

As in many cultures, Annwn, 'the underworld,' refers to a place of otherness. It may be simultaneously deep in the earth, an alternate visionary dimension to a familiar landscape such as Arthur's hunt with Gwyn ap Nudd and his hounds, or a location in the sky. The celestial site for Annwn was an important constellation to the British people, *Caer Arianrhod*. This is the Welsh name for Corona Borealis. The literal meaning for *Caer Arianrhod* is 'the castle, or fortress, or hill of Arianrhod.' This constellation, which looks like a coronet or a cauldron is where the Moon goddess, *Arianrhod-The Silver Wheel* instructs the soul as it rests between lives in her cauldron, her heavenly abode, *Caer Arianrhod*.



Arianrhod She of The Silver Wheel the Moon Goddess  
<https://inanna.virtualave.net/bouletgoddess.jpg>



When Arthur hunted on the mountainside of Cadair Idris with Gwyn ap Nudd, he was paying homage to Arianrhod, the Moon lady, something a hero must do in order to move into wider territory. Their quarry was *Twrch Trwyth*, the wild boar, sacred to the Moon goddess because of his crescent shaped tusks. Arthur's battle with the boar gave him the status of an initiated warrior. From this story of Arthur's hunt for the boar with Gwyn ap Nudd, we understand that the young king could enter and leave the underworld Annwn, at will. He, like Orpheus and Persephone entered the dimension of the dead while still alive and returned to bring its treasures back to the living. The treasures of *Twrch Trwyth*, the boar, were a comb, a razor and scissors! In an ancient rock carving found in Scotland, the boar's tusk and a mirror are carved in rock, a clue to the very old connection between the warrior initiation, which the boar represents, and the Moon's cycle. The crescent Moon is represented by the boar's tusk and the full Moon signified by the mirror. Venus may also play a role here since her glyph is a mirror!



Arthur and the hunt for *Twrch Trwyth*. Illustration by Margaret Jones

Like the hero, Orion, who hunts the night sky with his dog, Sirius, Arthur also had a faithful canine companion, Cabal. The dog is often a companion into the otherworld or, like Cerberus, the three-headed dog of the Greeks, he is a guardian of that world. Cabal's footprint is found in Wales at Buelt where Arthur built a cairn for him, known as *Carn Cabal*. One of the stones has the imprint of the dog's paw. It is one of the '*Marvels of Britain*' that when a stone is removed from the pile, it returns within a day or two. When you look up at the familiar figure of Orion with his blue star dog, Sirius in the winter sky, you can imagine the young warrior Arthur with his beloved hound, Cabal.

#### Arthur, a Bear in the Sky

*'Onward the kindred Bears, with footsteps rude,*

*Dance round the pole, pursuing and pursued. [i] —Erasmus Darwin*

Where else shall we look for Arthur in the night sky? When he is on the hunt with Gwyn ap Nydd, we can find him in the winter sky with his sword Excalibur, but there are other constellations, which traditionally hold his memory, and connect him to an important transition from dragon, to bear in the sky.

If Arthur is much older than the medieval tales written about him, we may find clues in the stars about his early existence and genealogy. Because he is '*Arth*' the Bear, we will look for him among the celestial bears. Polaris, the North Star, our pole star at the present time is part of Ursa Minor (the small bear), the still point around which the Northern heavens turn. Like Arthur this guiding star never sets and does not disappear with the change in season.

One of the many names for Ursa Major, Large Bear, is *Arthur's Wain*, his chariot, which he rides round the still point of the pole star in the sky.

*'Arthur's slow wain his course doth roll,*

*In utter darkness, round the pole*

Water Scott

Due to the tilt of the earth, the role of the pole star passes from one star to another. Since the precession of the equinoxes takes about 25,770 years to complete a cycle, a single star typically holds that place for many centuries. It is estimated that Polaris became the pole star about 3400 BCE. Before this, the still point of the Northern sky was Thuban, a serpent star found in the constellation, Draco, the Dragon. Arthur's father was Uther Pendragon, the 'head' or 'chief dragon' At one time the constellation Draco appeared much larger and the Bears were held within his wings.

*'With vast convolutions Draco holds*

*Th' ecliptic axis in his scaly folds.*

*O'er half the skies his neck enormous rears,*

*And with immense meanders parts the Bears'*

Erasmus Darwin

Was this switch of polestars a reason for the theme of 'vanquishing' the dragon in so many Arthurian stories? As the star in the tail of the Bear become central to the Northern skies, was this reflected in stories of a royal Bear (*Arthur*) who had replaced a Dragon (*Uther Pendragon*)? Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon abdicated his central place as the star around which the heavens revolve, but, just as in the Arthurian story, this did not happen all at once. Arthur, who had been raised by a foster family, had to prove his right to kingship.

Both bear and dragon represent earth energy, but, like Thuban, the dragon, has become more difficult to access. Arthur was the heir of an ancient tribe, the Dragon clan, and the founder of another tribe, the Bear clan now living under a new pole star. Merlin foretells all this to Uther, Arthur's father, from a cosmic event:

*'Thou shalt be king of the whole of Britain! For yon star doth betoken thee, and the fiery dragon that is under the star! The ray, moreover that stretcheth forth towards the region of Gaul, doth portend that a son shall be born unto thee that shall be of surpassing mighty dominion, whose power shall extend over all that realms that lie beneath the ray.'*[i]

Geoffrey of Monmouth

To make this mythology more complex and intriguing, King Arthur, the mythological ancestor, has no legitimate descendant, no heir, unless it is all of the British people. Instead he returns, like the Sun at the winter solstice, sometimes called *Alban Arthuan* (the light of Arthur).

Another heavenly bear we might associate with Arthur is *Arcturus*, the brightest star in the constellation Boötes, the Herdsman. Arthur is connected in two ways. Arcturus was a Medieval spelling of Arthur, and it means 'Bear Guardian.' In a medieval variation on the story of his final journey to Avalon, Arthur is transported to Boötes where he lives forever in a crystal palace of Arcturus.

*'Up to the riche sterri briht dongoun-*

*Astronomeers weel reherse kunne*

*Callid Arthuris constellacioun...*

*Wher he sit crowned in the heunly mansioun*

*Amyd the paleis of stonis cristallyne nyne.*—John Lydgate

Arcturus is a transitional figure who symbolizes the passage between the nomadic hunter's way of life to the settled farmer. Nomadic people look to the stars for direction and guidance on their journey, while farmers note the stars for seasonal changes in the growing cycle. According to Ptolemy, Arcturus has the nature of Jupiter and Mars, a combination of which defines the spiritual warrior. This is the star of a powerful leader. Because Arcturus spans the border between the circumpolar and equatorial stars he is seen as indication of a leader who protects his people as they move toward new ways of life.[iii] Arthur's story may begin at the transition between a Paleolithic hunter to the Neolithic farmer and herdsman and then reemerge at the time of change from tribal leaders to a more unified model of a kingdom under a single monarch. Arthur's place among the bears in the sky is an indication of how old this story may be and how deep an imprint it has upon our imagination. He is the Bear of Paleolithic hunters amidst the most Northern stars, and the warrior king of Arcturus, who leads his people to a new concept of national identity.

## Arthur's Court in the Sky

*'Ye intelligent Druids,*

*Declare to Arthur,*

*What is there more early*

*Than I that they sing of.'*[i]—Taliesin

In every generation, poetry and song keep the story of Arthur alive. In light of that, it's not surprising that *Talyn Arthur* (Harp of Arthur) was the name used by the Britons for the constellation, Lyra. If we are going to look for the Arthur's court in the sky we might find Taliesin, the Bard and harpist of Arthur's Court here in Talyn Arthur. He has his own epic stories, but occasionally is added to Arthur's retinue as a mark of respect for both of them. The constellation Lyra is associated with Venus and Mercury by Ptolemy[ii] for they are the planets of beauty and communication, love and magic. This constellation is associated with a harmonious, poetic nature, skills in science and art, mixed with a bit of thievery, all part of the nature of Taliesin as well as Venus and Mercury.

The most visible star in Talyn Arthur is Vega, one of the brightest stars in the summer sky. Vega was the pole star between 12,000 and 10,000 BCE. The Greeks connected Vega with their musician-magician Orpheus who shared many of the same magical, as well as musical talents of Taliesin. Like its constellation Lyra, it is associated with Venus and Mercury by Ptolemy, good planets for an artist or musician.

Vega is one of three bright stars from three different constellations which form an asterism, the Summer Triangle. The other two stars are *Deneb* from Cygnus the Swan, and *Altair* from Aquila the Eagle. On summer nights when these three stars stand out so brightly, I imagine them as Arthur, Guenevere, and Lancelot. Arthur might be Vega in Talyn Arthur; Deneb shines for Guenevere in Cygnus the Swan; and Lancelot with Altair the bright star of Aquila the Eagle. Their love and friendship creates an evolving equilibrium, a triangle so powerful and eternal that it is reflected in the brightest stars of the summer sky.

Deneb, Guenevere's star in the Summer Triangle is part of the constellation, Cygnus the Swan, a bird associated with Venus. Deneb, the bright star in the swan's tail, like Vega is associated with Venus and Mercury. Guenevere, so often abducted and returned unharmed, is much like the planet Venus who appears, then disappears as evening star to reappear at dawn. Guen as a prefix also means white or light and Venus is often called 'the shining one.' The older Celtic name for Venus was Windo-seibari, a white phantom, ghost, goddess, who binds through words, verbal magic,[iii] an association with Mercury. The constellation Cygnus, where Vega dwells can also be connected to shamanic practices for it was common for the Druid shaman to wear a cloak made of swan feathers.

If we link Lancelot with Altair, the brightest star in the constellation, Aquila, the eagle, we get a flavor of Jupiter and Mars. Jupiter and Mars contact in a chart often marks a spiritual warrior. Those who have this combination will take action (Mars) to protect and serve their spiritual ideals (Jupiter). Lancelot is a spiritual warrior with a blend of Jupiter and Mars characteristics. Associated with courtesy and honor, Lancelot is gentle and complex. Altair is associated with daring, but also with relationship and deep caring for others. There is the watery side of Lancelot as well. He is the foster child of the Lady of the Lake, and must battle not only physical danger, but enchantment. As a link between the worlds of fairy and human he moves between the two realities, each with a desire for dominance. Lancelot was asked to choose between these two worlds, choose between the woman he loved and his love and loyalty to Arthur. As the bright star in the constellation Eagle, he flies above these demands.

The Summer Triangle is a symbol of how three bright stars from three adjoining star patterns have come quite recently to be seen as a new star pattern. In the same way, the triangle created by Arthur, Guenevere and Lancelot marks an evolutionary way of looking at men and women, at relationship and the mystery that lies behind these stories reflected in the earth and in the sky.

## Arthur's Round Table

*'The Round Table was constructed, not without great significance, upon the advice of Merlin. By its name the Round Table is meant to signify the round world and the round canopy of the planets and the elements in the firmament, where are to be seen the stars and many other things.'* –La Quest del Saint Graal

King Arthur's Round Table, created by Merlin was a gift from Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father to Guenevere's father King Leodegrance, who in turn gave it as a wedding present to Arthur. As an example of how astrology has been integrated into the Arthurian mythology, there is a legend which suggests the Round Table was designed as a circle of the zodiac with twelve of his knights, a representative of one of the twelve signs of the zodiac. This becomes tricky because there are so many variations and names of the Round Table fellowship. One of the names associated with the Zodiac is *Caer Sidhe*. Since Sidhe refers to the Faerie realm, this adds another dimension to the stories, and we could look at the faerie women of the Arthurian stories as members of a Round Table which operates on another plane.

The circle of the Zodiac is reflected on the land in several areas in Britain. The most famous is the Glastonbury Zodiac, described by Katherine Maltwood in 1935. She called this the *Temple of the Stars*. Laid out on the landscape which surrounds Glastonbury are the figures of the zodiac, which she traces to Sumerian colonists. Reflected upon the land in this way, the cosmos gives great legitimacy to twelve landed families who might claim to be at the root of history and mythological origins of Britain. She makes a thorough correspondence between the zodiacal signs and characters in the Arthurian legends, which vary, for the most part from my connections. The Round Table symbolizes the equality of each of Arthur's knights, just as the Zodiac contains twelve archetypes of equal power. Arthur is the still center, the pole star around which Caer Sidhe—The Zodiac rotates.

Gawain, Arthur's nephew is the first to be knighted for the Round Table, and so might stand in for Aries, the first sign of the Zodiac. When the sun is rising, Gawain gains in power. After the Sun reaches its height at noon, Gawain's strength diminishes. This would suggest his role as a solar hero. The Sun is in exaltation in this sign which Mars rules.



King Pellinore's illegitimate son, Tor is my choice for the second seat at the table. Tor (Taurus) has been raised by his step-father *Aries*, who is a cowherd. He was raised in a family of earthy peasants who lived with cows, very Taurean, yet, perhaps with the help of Venus, the ruler of Taurus, he immediately feels at home in Arthur's court. Despite his noble blood, he is an illustration of the equality of the Round Table.

Gemini is the constellation of twins, and Balin and Balan, seem like good candidates for this position. They are the tragic brothers destined to kill each other in error. Balin takes a sword from a damsel and becomes known as The Knight with Two Swords. He is warned that if he keeps both swords, he will kill the man he loves most in the world and bring about his own destruction. Ignoring this prophecy, he battles his brother who is in disguise and both die. The polarity of Gemini seems fatal in their case.

The Lady of the Lake must be honored, perhaps in the position of Cancer, as her role is as important as Arthur's. She and the other Faerie women are a parallel to the Knights of the Round Table. The Moon rules Cancer, a watery cardinal sign. Like the Moon, the Lady appears and disappears, but is central to the story of Arthur. She gives Arthur his magical sword, Excalibur and the scabbard, which prevents fatal injury. When Arthur is mortally wounded she and other magical women take him to the Island of Avalon, reflected in the sky as Caer Arianrhod. She rules an alternative kingdom with its own strategies and priorities which is intertwined with Camelot.

Leo seems most likely to belong to Lancelot. Leo is fiery and fixed, ruled by the Sun and connected to the heart, to courage, and to love affairs, all very synonymous with this very important character in the later tales of Arthur. His courage and faithful heart seem to be the embodiment of Leo. Like Leo, Lancelot struggles with the transformation of ego into heart. His love of Guenevere, his loyalty to Arthur create the theater for this process.

Shall we try Galahad as the embodiment of Virgo? Virgo is a mutable earth sign ruled by Mercury and known for the ability to discern and analyze to a point of perfection. Galahad is the pure and perfect knight who successfully obtains the Grail. He is the son of Lancelot and Elaine, conceived through the trickery of Elaine's father the Fisher King. In his birth to the virgin Elaine, his purity and solitary wanderings, he personifies the Virgo archetype. Galahad (or in other stories, Percival) is given the seat at the Round Table called the 'Siege Perilous,' which has been awaiting his arrival as prophesied by Merlin.

The story of Sir Geraint and Enid is a tale of marriage reflective of Libra, the sign of partnership. The scales represents the equality necessary for a successful partnership. Geraint misunderstands his wife and believes her love has moved away from him. He takes her on a long journey in silent rage and battles innumerable enemies. Finally after many tests of his valor and her fidelity and love, he drops his fury and understands her faithfulness as an expression of her character, not his physical superiority. She meanwhile has found her own strength and voice through this ordeal.

Scorpio belongs to Mordred who brought death and destruction to the fellowship of the Round Table. A fixed water sign ruled by Mars, Scorpio has connection to death and sexuality, the underworld and transformation, and the necessity for truth to surface. Mordred's hatred for Arthur is not without reason. Because of a prophecy that a May baby will destroy Arthur, the king orders all babies born that month to be put into an old ship which sinks. Only Mordred is rescued and returned to Arthur's sister Morgause and her husband Lot. Mordred is a Scorpionic survivor of infanticide, a vengeful shadow of Arthur and a reminder of the Slaughter of the Innocents in the Christ story. He is both Arthur's incestuous son and his nephew, an unavoidable nemesis.

Merlin takes his place in Sagittarius, for this is the sign of the priest and the shaman. Merlin is also the repository of ancient wisdom and knowledge. Like the centaur who represents the sign, Merlin is half and half, with a human mother and a spirit father. Sagittarius a mutable fire sign ruled by Jupiter, is known to have heavenly knowledge for divination and healing powers. Merlin is the prime mover behind much of the Arthurian action. He arranges Arthur's conception, gives him over to his foster family, and his prophetic wisdom indicates his connection to the divine pattern behind the unfolding of the stories.

Capricorn is an earthy, cardinal, sign, ruled by Saturn. King Pellinore fits that description. He is most famous for his endless search for the Questing Beast, an earth dragon creature, but he is pivotal from the very first in Arthur's rise to power. First he breaks Arthur's sword, drawn from the stone, and opposes his reign. But soon he comes to be a most faithful knight and supporter of the young king. Saturn, the rule of Capricorn is associated with ancestors. Pellinore has an important blood line, tracing his family to Joseph of Arimathea, the uncle of Jesus who brought the holy grail from the last supper to Britain. Dindraine, his daughter is the Grail maiden. His son Percival is the first to see the Grail, and Galahad, his grand nephew is finally successful as Grail Knight. He is the father of at least five of the Round Table knights.

Aquarius, also ruled by Saturn, is a fixed air sign with a very different expression of Saturn. This sign embodies new forms and expressions, like Perceval who is the first to set off on the grail quest. Raised by his mother without any contact with other men or weapons, his manhood and knighthood are very original as might be expected of the Aquarian knight. His father is usually said to be Pellinore, the very traditional version of Saturn, while Perceval is the unique and novel expression of new forms and societal impulses associated with Aquarius, the water bearer. Since the Water Bearer is often shown with a vessel for water, it seems only appropriate that he who is successful in the search for the Grail represents Aquarius.

Lord Pelles, the Fisher King resides in the Grail Castle in the role of Pisces. He has an incurable wound in his thigh, and his kingdom has become a wasteland because of this injury. He is called the Fisher King because, despite his injury, he can fish, a fitting connection to the sign of Pisces. Pisces is the dissolution of all form, in preparation for the beginning of the new cycle in Aries. It is a watery and mutable sign ruled by Jupiter and with a connection to spirituality, to illusion and to permeability. He is a keeper of the Grail because he too is a relative of Joseph of Arimathea. Despite his invalid status, he arranges for the birth of Galahad, by tricking Lancelot into the illusion that his daughter, Elaine is Guenevere. She conceives the child who will be the Grail Knight. The power of water and illusion are central to this story and to the sign of Pisces.

The stories of Arthur, of Guenevere and Lancelot and the knights and ladies of the Round Table exist on many levels of consciousness, and like the stars, they are there to be pondered. Their fascination is eternal. They come out of the land, but they belong to no one time or place or nation. Like the stars, who accompany us through the seasons, we must not lose sight of them or permit them to be forgotten, or buried by too much light, or we shall impoverish our children

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