

SYMPOSIUM

Epistemological Issues of Research on Medieval Britain and Brittany in History, Language and Literature

Brest, University of Western Brittany, 12th to 14th December 2017

CALL FOR PAPERS – Submission by 30th June 2017

For around the past fifty years, the field of study concerned with Medieval Britain and Brittany has given rise to both new and divergent approaches and questions. These changes have resulted in a very mixed picture today. Certain fields of knowledge appear to be under construction or reform, while others are coming under fire, a situation that bears witness to the difficulties in reconciling the apparently opposing results obtained by the different approaches. To what extent and in what way have popular culture and orality, for example, been dealt with and integrated into this field of study? What questions have been asked, what questions still need asking, with what presuppositions and in what perspective, concerning the origins of the Arthurian legend or the lives of saints? Can sociolinguistics contribute to renewing the approach taken with respect to medieval languages? How have the results of archaeological excavations been analysed and interpreted, and what use is made of them today?

These are some of the questions that encourage us to bring together all of the disciplines concerned with Medieval Britain and Brittany – the British Isles and Armorica – with a view to questioning their foundations. Indeed, whether these disciplines are devoted solely to the intermediate period between Antiquity and the Renaissance, or whether they extend the scope of their reflection to the representation of spaces, the languages and the literatures of these regions up to the present day, they currently seem to be divided in their very approaches, giving rise to seemingly irreconcilable results.

The medieval period lends itself particularly well to an epistemological investigation of this type, the rare remaining testimonies and accounts leaving room for numerous ambiguities. This is what makes the period so subject to passionate and ideological representations indicative of the tensions and stakes related to the eras that question the Middle Ages. Indeed, their distance and their otherness encourage fantastical and far-fetched projections that must be confronted with the scientific approach of the various disciplines. We thus wish to examine the relationships between reality and fiction, both in literature and in history, as well as the question of the construction and dissemination of representations of the Middle Ages between specialists and the general public.

To this end, we wish to initiate epistemological research based on the critical analysis of knowledge on Brittany and Great Britain during the Middle Ages, as well as on the principles and methods variously developed and applied in this field in the past and up to the present day. The specific fields of investigation concerned are history, literature, archaeology, history of art, languages, linguistics and sociolinguistics. Interdisciplinary in nature, the aim of the project is not to produce a catalogue of approaches and evolutions by discipline. On the contrary, our purpose is to draw up a cross-referenced history of the disciplines applied to Medieval Britain and Brittany. To what extent do these disciplines draw on the same sources and examine the same questions? To what extent are their subjects of study similar or comparable? To what extent is it possible to work at the confluence of the different disciplines? Would epistemological divergences not be stronger within the disciplines rather than between them? Does the epistemological approach allow for pushing back or, on the contrary, better defining the potential limits of interdisciplinarity? Does the critical analysis of the various fields of scientific knowledge in the history of the Middle Ages make it possible to approach the field of study in a totally transdisciplinary way?

We are thus looking for papers presented by representatives of different disciplines, in the perspective of a comparison with work carried out in the British Isles in the field of studies on British and Breton areas in the broad sense (geographical areas, spaces represented in texts and fictions, production spaces). We suggest that the speakers base their papers on the following three key topics structured around a main theme defined by questions on the confusion or the convergence of the disciplines.

1) The “omniscient founding fathers”

What are the methods, principles and knowledge that have been bequeathed to us by those we could refer to as the omniscient founding fathers of this field of study, whose work is still recognized, used or simply cited in the various disciplines today. Léon Fleuriot, Celtologist, considered a specialist in the medieval history of Brittany and editor of *Histoire littéraire et culturelle de la Bretagne*¹; Hersart de La Villemarqué, made famous in the nineteenth century by his collection of Breton folk songs in the *Barzaz Breiz*, but who also devoted several books to Arthurian literature and medieval texts composed in different Celtic languages; and Ferdinand Lot, known in the literary world as a pioneer into studies on the *Lancelot-Grail*,² and among historians for his work on the Frankish Early Middle Ages and his admiration of German methods. These and other works by Canon Falc’hun, Emile Ernault, Joseph Loth or Edmond Faral, for example, could be discussed along with their implications.

To date, monographs or scientific symposia have already allowed for furthering the history of the discipline by measuring the contributions of such leading historians of the Middle Ages as Gaston Paris,³ Joseph Bédier⁴ and Paul Zumthor.⁵ In the field of Celtic studies, the work carried out on the “Collecteurs”⁶ has allowed for better understanding the relationship between the Middle Ages and Romantic nationalism. This first perspective will involve examining the relationship between the disciplines concerned in early medieval studies, and which have depicted the closed and secret world of Romantic origins. This will also involve proposing a cartography of this world and evaluating its posterity. What are the connections between the different schools and the first generations of scholars and researchers, and what knowledge has been passed on? In what context did the first theories and research on Medieval Britain and Brittany emerge? Do they continue to structure the different disciplinary approaches today?

2) New subjects, new approaches?

By comparison, since the middle of the twentieth century, what new subjects of research have appeared and what approaches have been applied to them? We have notably observed the emergence of new specialized disciplinary branches, for example the history of manuscripts, which is distinct from the history of texts. There have also been new approaches to well-established disciplines such as medieval Breton, with sociolinguistics reinforcing the study of the language, or archaeology, where genetics proposes new foundations for the anthropological analysis of kinship structures. In the field of Arthurian literature, what are the contributions of new literary criticism to the narratives of the Matter of Britain? How, for example, have they placed the ancient question of the origins of the Arthurian cycle on the backburner? The reception theories of Umberto Eco⁷ or Hans-Robert Jauss,⁸ along with Thomas Pavel’s

¹ Léon Fleuriot (ed.), *Histoire littéraire et culturelle de la Bretagne*, Paris, Champion / Slatkine, 1987.

² Ferdinand Lot, *Etude sur le Lancelot en prose*, Paris, Champion, 1918.

³ Ursula Bähler, *Gaston Paris et la philologie romane*, Geneva, Droz, 2004.

⁴ Alain Corbellari, *Joseph Bédier, écrivain et philologue*, Geneva, Droz, 1997.

⁵ A symposium devoted to Zumthor was organized in October 2015 at Paris Nanterre University by Jean-René Valette and Idelette Muzart-Fonseca dos Santos: “Poétiques de Paul Zumthor, 1915-2015”.

⁶ Several volumes appeared in the collection “Collecteurs” published by the CRBC, Brest, UBO, variously dedicated to Paul Sébillot (2011), François Cadic (2011), Jacques Cambry (2008), Jean-Marie de Penguern (2008) and Emile Souvestre (2006); Nelly Blanchard, *Barzaz-Breiz, une fiction pour s’inventer*, Rennes, PUR, 2006; *Au-delà du Barzaz-Breiz, Théodore Hersart de La Villemarqué*, ed. Nelly Blanchard and Fânch Postic, Brest, CRBC, UBO, 2016.

⁷ Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula*, Milan, Bompiani, 1979, translation Paris, Grasset, “Le Livre de Poche”, 1985.

theory of possible and fictional worlds,⁹ thus allow us to adopt a renewed perspective in our approach to the vast Arthurian cycles and their “influence” inherent to the status of manuscript tradition. To what extent can the barely initiated study of the fragments of the Arthurian literary cycle transform our understanding of texts that are still often considered as closed and limited to a canonical form that has been forged more by editorial choices?

What, then, can we learn from studies on the transmission of texts and manuscripts, both during and since the Middle Ages, on the literary, cultural and historical contexts, the social role of languages, linguistic skills, structures of thought, etc.?

3) Scholarly and popular representations

Finally, the project aims to clarify the relationships between scholarly and popular representations of Medieval Britain and Brittany since the early modern period. How were the former representations created, transformed and disseminated? What are their general implications in popular and cultural practices and conceptions? In connection with the figure of the “omniscient founding fathers”, we can discuss the constitution and influence of learned societies at the end of the eighteenth century. How did the disciplines such as we understand and practice them today become separated? In other words, how did we move from omniscient confusion to inter- and transdisciplinary convergence? To answer these questions, it will be useful to trace the history of certain chairs, in particular the “Celtic” chair, and the history of the field of Celtic studies. How has medieval heritage (historical, archaeological, literary, linguistic, etc.) been perceived and appropriated depending on these different disciplinary fields? By whom? What uses have been made of these disciplines in the construction of, for example, a national Breton or Welsh myth based on a fantastical notion of the Middle Ages? Are the situations on both sides of the English Channel comparable?

In this perspective, it seems fundamental to us that the papers present opposing points of view in order to better analyse their foundations and their ideological implications to this day. Our aim, therefore, is not only to discuss the *doxa* in the research devoted to Medieval Britain and Brittany in history, language and literature, but also to explain the stumbling blocks and the disagreements present by linking them to the different schools and different scientific theories.

The misuse of certain practices and methods of analysis explains how certain erroneous interpretations of the history of Britain and Brittany and the body of medieval literature known as the Matter of Britain came about. What is the role of ideological and political representations specific to these approaches? In history, the interest on the part of the general public continues, for example, to support a production as excessive as it is regionalist, despite epistemological undertakings to deconstruct “national novels”. In the field of the Celtic languages and Middle Breton, the vision of peasant languages transmitted in a fixed way since the heroic times continues to dominate certain works. It remains dominant among the general public, barely undermined by the publishing of Breton literature, which always seems so unexpected.¹⁰ Is it possible today to take a critical approach to the field of study through a more conscious and distanced relationship with ideologies? On this point, there seem to exist both regional and national differences: how is work being undertaken here and there, in France and abroad, on the Brittany and the British Isles of the Middle Ages?

The languages of the symposium will be French and English. The proceedings will be published and the expenses incurred by the speakers (transport, accommodation, catering) will be covered. Proposals for papers should be submitted in the form of a title and an abstract of approximately 300 words and sent to

⁸ Hans-Robert Jauss, *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, translation C. Maillard, Paris, Gallimard, 1978; “Littérature médiévale et théorie des genres”, in *Théorie des genres*, Gérard Genette *et al.*, Paris, Seuil, Points Essais, 1986.

⁹ Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, London, Harvard University Press, 1986, translation *Les Univers de la fiction*, Paris, Seuil, 1988.

¹⁰ Yves le Berre and Ronan Calvez, *Entre le riche et le pauvre. La littérature du breton entre 1450 et 1650*, Brest Emgleo Breiz, 2012. Yves le Berre, *La Passion et la Résurrection bretonnes de 1530 suivies de trois poèmes*, Brest, CRBC, 2011.

Hélène Bouget (helene.bouget@univ-brest.fr) and/or Magali Coumert (magali.coumert@univ-brest.fr) by **30th June 2017** at the latest.

Organization:

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