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SORICE (Gabriele), « The skull-cup motif in *Gerbert de Metz* between intertextuality and ethnography »

RÉSUMÉ – Cette étude examine l'épisode du crâne de Fromont tel que le présente *Gerbert de Metz* (ca. 1180-1210). Plusieurs textes relatant la coutume de réaliser une coupe avec un crâne humain sont analysés, afin de déterminer s'ils pourraient être considérés comme des sources pour le récit épique. En croisant les données archéologiques et anthropologiques avec des témoignages négligés sur les pratiques culturelles médiévales, l'étude jette un nouvel éclairage sur cet épisode.

ABSTRACT – The present study examines the so-called Fromont's skull episode as contained in *Gerbert de Metz* (c. 1180-1210). The analysis focuses on the literary and historical accounts attesting the practice of making a cup out of a human skull, to determine if they might have acted as sources for the poem. Taking into consideration archaeological data, anthropological finds and neglected Christian cultural practices, the study sheds a new light on the episode.

## THE SKULL-CUP MOTIF IN *GERBERT DE METZ* BETWEEN INTERTEXTUALITY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

*Gerbert de Metz*, a *chanson de geste* belonging to the Lorraine cycle and generally dated to the last quarter of the twelfth century, contains one of the most memorable episodes of Old French epic. Among the violent upheavals of the feudal war opposing the rival clans of Lorraine and Bordeaux, one particularly stands out because of its barbaric cruelty: it is the so-called Fromont's skull episode. After a long and unsuccessful war against his enemies, Fromont, the leader of the Bordeaux clan, is killed by the emir whom he himself, after his conversion to Islam, had summoned to France in order to help him fight the Lorraine clan. His corpse is found on the battlefield by his own son Fromondin, who, having remained loyal to Christian faith, has become a vassal of the Lorraine leader, Gerbert de Metz, the eponymous hero of the poem. Before Fromont's burial in the monastery of Saint Seurin, not far from Bordeaux, his son Fromondin ambiguously conceals his need for vengeance against Gerbert<sup>1</sup>, who in turn, after the death of his archenemy, invites Fromondin to become his cupbearer<sup>2</sup>. Thus, peace is apparently

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1 See *Gerbert de Metz: chanson de geste du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. P. Taylor, Namur-Louvain-Lille, Secrétariat des Publications-Éditions Nauwelaerts-Librairie Giard, 1952, p. 300, v. 11194-11199: "Fromondins dist entre ses denz soé: / 'Ahi, Gerbers! Con voz porroie amer! / Voz li tolistes trestote s'érité; / Par vostre guerre a il renoié Dé. / Je ne vorroie por.i. roiauté / Q'encor.i. jor ne l'aiez comparé.'" ["Fromondin said to himself softly: / 'Alas, Gerbert, how could I love you? / You deprived him of all his feuds; / He repudiated his faith because of the war you waged against him. / Were I given a kingdom, / I would not refrain from making you pay for what happened'"]. If not otherwise stated, all translations into English are mine. In this paper, I will focus on the poetic versions of *Gerbert* and I will not examine the three prose versions of the so-called *Geste des Loberains*. On the Fromont's skull episode as contained in the most ancient prose version attested by the manuscript Arsenal 3346, see *Prose des Loberains (MS. Arsenal 3346)*, ed. J.-Ch. Herbin, Valenciennes, Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 1995, p. 177.

2 *Gerbert de Metz*, v. 11493-11507.

established, and Fromondin's and Gerbert's forces fight together against the Muslims. Afterwards, Fromondin is told that the monastery of Saint Seurin has been set on fire and destroyed; consequently, Gerbert, pretending to honour Fromont, decides to rebuild it and, in doing so, has Fromont's bones removed from the sepulchre and brought to a new and more magnificent one. The narrator specifies that Gerbert uses trickery in order to make Fromondin reveal where his father's bones lie<sup>3</sup>. Seeing Fromont's skull lying aside, Gerbert takes it and tells his friend Mauvoisin to keep it with care, so as to turn it into a cup which his cupbearer Fromondin will use to serve him:

*Li rois Gerbers a pris le banepier  
Du viel Fromont, que il n'avoit point chier.  
A Mauvoisin le va tantost baillier:  
"Tenez, amis, alez ce estouier.  
Por ce qu'il fu toz jorz si bons guerrier,  
Se m'eût Dieus, gel ferai essaucier;  
Car.i. coupe toute ovree a or mier  
En ferai faire, dont Fromondins, li fier,  
Me servira devant moi al mengier<sup>4</sup>."*

King Gerbert took the skull  
Of old Fromont whom he did not love.  
He gave it to Mauvoisin:  
"Take this, my friend, and keep it with care.  
For he has always been such a great warrior,  
May God save me, I will glorify him;  
For I will have a golden cup made  
With which Fromondin, the brave,  
Will serve me at table during the meal."

3 *Gerbert de Mez*, p. 340-341, v. 12694-12704: "Li rois Gerbers fu plainz de grant voisdie; / A Fromondin prist maintenant a dire: / 'Ou gist Fromons? Dites le moi, biax sire!' / Dist Fromondins: 'Nel voz celerai mie; / Devant l'autel Saint Seurin, le nobile.' / Lors prist Gerbert par la manche d'ermine, / Jusqu'a la tonbe al viel Fromont le guie. / 'Dieus! dist Gerbers, 'dame sainte Marie! / Molt deüst estre en grignor segnorie! / Si m'eût Dieus, il n'i remenra mie, / Ainz li ferons sepouture molt riche.'" ["King Gerbert was very tricky and treacherous; / He said to Fromondin: / 'Tell me, handsome lord, where Fromont's corpse lies.' / Replied Fromondin: 'I shall reveal the truth to you: / He has been buried in front of Saint Seurin's altar.' / Then Fromondin took Gerbert's ermine sleeve / And led him to his father's tomb. / 'My God!' said Gerbert, 'Holy Virgin! / He should have been much more honoured! / May God save me, he will not remain in this tomb: / We will have a magnificent sepulchre made for him.'"].

4 *Gerbert de Mez*, v. 12735-12743.

Gerbert himself explains that he wants this done in order to commemorate Fromont's valour and simply to exalt him. However, Gerbert conceals his real purpose and makes the goldsmith swear not to reveal anything to anyone<sup>5</sup>. When the goldsmith gives Gerbert the cup, he is so satisfied with the artifact that he would refuse a hundred marks of gold in exchange for it<sup>6</sup>. On Pentecost Eve, Fromondin, who does not know anything of this intrigue, serves at table using the cup made out of his father's skull. The following day, when Gerbert is in the garden, a knight of the court reproaches Fromondin for drinking from the goblet and reveals the truth to him. When Fromondin asks Gerbert for explanations, Gerbert's answer is even more shocking than the knight's revelation:

*Gerbers l'entent, molt en fu airé,  
Si li respont par grant humilité:  
"Fromondins, sire, oez por amor Dé!  
Si m'eût Dieus et la soie bonté,  
Je ne le fis por nule malvaisté,  
Ançois le fis par molt tres grant chierté,  
Por ce que tant a eü de bontez."  
Dist Fromondins: "Molt grant tort en avez!  
En mon damaje voz voz gloirefiez<sup>7</sup>".*

Gerbert listened to Fromont's words and became dismayed,  
He answered with great humility:  
"Fromondin, my lord, listen to me for God's sake!  
May God and his goodness help me,  
I did this without malice;  
On the contrary, I did this with affection  
For Fromont was very valiant."  
To this, Fromondin replied: "You are wrong!  
You exalt yourself by damaging me."

Gerbert claims to have acted without malice just to honour his dead enemy as a valiant warrior deserves. One might think that this is just a mockery

5 *Gerbert de Mez*, v. 12828-12830.

6 *Gerbert de Mez*, v. 12845-12848: "Gerbers la voit, molt joianz en devint, / Et jure Diu, qui onques ne menti, / Que onques mais ausi belle ne vit; / Il n'en prendroit.c. marz de bon or fin." ["Gerbert looked at the cup and rejoiced, / And he swore to God, who never lied, / That he had never seen a cup as beautiful as that one; / He would refuse a hundred marks of fine gold in exchange for it"]. In another scene, Gerbert adds that he would not give the cup in exchange for the city of Laon (*Gerbert de Mez*, v. 13509).

7 *Gerbert de Mez*, v. 13035-13043.

and that Gerbert is a liar – which seems to be also the narrator’s point of view – but this explanation is repeated several times by Gerbert even when he offers to give Fromondin the cup as reparation<sup>8</sup>. In spite of what we may be lead to think, and as the French philologist Jean-Charles Herbin suggests, we must recognise that “pour un Celte, par exemple, cet épisode n’aurait probablement rien eu de choquant<sup>9</sup>”, for there is ample evidence of the cult of severed heads in the Germanic and especially in the Celtic areas.

Indeed, though memorable, the Fromont’s skull episode is not the only attestation of the custom of making a cup out of a human skull: this tale comes after a long series of ancient and medieval historical and literary accounts in which this practice has been already described. These sources deserve to be briefly analysed.

Herodotus, the “father of history” as Cicero once called him, opens the list: in the fourth book of his *Histories*, we find a reference to Essedones’ funerary rite in which a son is expected to eat his dead father’s flesh and to keep his severed head as a sacred relic<sup>10</sup>. In another chapter of the same book, Herodotus narrates that the Scythians make drinking-cups out of the head of their worst enemies after defeating them in battle<sup>11</sup>. What

8 *Gerbert de Mez*, v. 13066-13070, and v. 13490-13495, 13502-13509. See also D. Ion, “La parenté dans *Garin le Lohere* et *Gerbert de Mez*. Étude littéraire, linguistique et anthropologique”, *Perspectives médiévales*, 28, 2002, p. 75-79, at p. 77: “Les liens autres que ceux de consanguinité proviennent du souhait des membres d’un groupe d’entretenir des rapports positifs avec d’autres entités sociales. L’alliance matrimoniale, la parenté baptismale et le lien de vassalité sont généralement conçus comme des pactes de non-agression entre deux formations ennemies [...]. Lorrains et Bordelais multiplient les relations réciproques. Mais les liens de vassalité et de parrainage dans *Garin* et *Gerbert*, ainsi que l’alliance matrimoniale dans *Gerbert*, ne résistent pas devant l’esprit de vengeance.”

9 J.-Ch. Herbin, “L’épisode du crâne de Fromont dans *Gerbert de Metz*”, *Plaisir vos oïr bone cançon vallant? Mélanges François Suard*, ed. D. Boutet, M.-M. Castellani, F. Ferrand and A. Petit, Villeneuve d’Ascq, Université Charles de Gaulle-Lille 3, 1999, vol. 1, p. 407-422, at p. 420.

10 See the English translation of the original Greek text (*Histories*, IV, 26) contained in *Herodotus*, ed. A. D. Godley, London-New York, William Heinemann-G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928, vol. 2, p. 225-227: “It is said to be the custom of the Issedones, that whenever a man’s father dies, all the nearest of kin bring beasts of the flock, and having killed these and cut up the flesh they cut up also the dead father of their host, and set out all the flesh mingled together for a feast. As for his head, they strip it bare and cleanse and gild it, and keep it for a sacred relic, whereto they offer yearly solemn sacrifice. Every son does so by his father”.

11 See the English translation of the original Greek text (*Histories*, IV, 65) contained in *Herodotus*, vol. 2, p. 263-265: “The heads themselves, not of all but of their bitterest foes, they treat in this wise. Each saws off all the part beneath the eyebrows, and cleanses the rest. If he be a poor man, then he does but cover the outside with a piece of raw hide,

is even more interesting is that Herodotus specifies that the Scythians do the same with the heads of a relative with whom they have been feuding: honourable guests are served with this kind of goblet and on these occasions the host tells the guests how the dead were his kinfolk. Although Herodotus does not specify how the actual identity of the dead man is ascertained by the guest, one might probably infer that, besides the host's boasts, the cup itself, in its materiality, is to be taken as a proof.

These two passages have been conflated by the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela, who summarises the information given by Herodotus and ascribes it to the Essedones<sup>12</sup>. Thus, Mela's text is the result of a contamination. It is crucial to underline that in the Latin text only the features of the funerary rite are retained and that Mela's account drops any reference to warriors' customs. Mela's text has been epitomised by Gaius Iulius Solinus<sup>13</sup>, but neither Herodotus' Greek account nor the latter two texts could have been the source for Fromont's episode in *Gerbert*. We can also exclude the other two Greek authors, that is Diodorus of Sicily<sup>14</sup> and

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and so makes use of it; but if he be rich, he covers the head with the raw hide, and gilds the inside of it and so uses it for a drinking-cup. Such cups a man makes also of the head of his own kinsman with whom he has been at feud, and whom he has worsted in a suit before the king; and if guests whom he honours visit him he will serve them with these heads, and show how the dead were his kinfolk who made war upon him and were worsted by him; this they call manly valour."

- 12 Pomponius Mela, *Chorographie*, ed. A. Silberman, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1988, p. 36-37: "*Essedones funera parentium laeti et uictimis ac festo coetu familiarium celebrant. Corpora ipsa laniata et caesis pecorum uisceribus inmixta epulando consumunt. Capita, ubi fabre expoliuere, auro uincta pro poculis gerunt. Haec sunt apud eos ipsos pietatis ultima officia.*"
- 13 Gaius Iulius Solinus, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, ed. Th. Mommsen, Berlin, Weidmann, 1895<sup>2</sup>, p. 84: "*Inter Anthropopbagos in Asiatica parte numerantur Essedones qui et ipsi nefandis funestantur inter se cibis. Essedonum mos est parentum funera prosequi cantibus et proximorum corrogatis coetibus corpora ipsa dentibus lancinare ac pecudum mixta carnibus dapes facere: capitum etiam ossa auro incincta in poculorum tradere ministerium.*"
- 14 See the English translation of the original Greek text (*Bibliotheca historica*, V, 29, 4) contained in *Diodorus of Sicily*, ed. C. H. Oldfather, London-Cambridge (MA), William Heinemann-Harvard University Press, 1939, vol. 3, p. 173-175: "When their [i. e. the Gauls'] enemies fall they cut off their heads and fasten them about the necks of their horses; and turning over to their attendants the arms of their opponents, all covered with blood, they carry them off as booty, singing a paean over them and striking up a song of victory, and these first-fruits of battle they fasten by nails upon their houses, just as men do, in certain kinds of hunting, with the heads of wild beasts they have mastered. The heads of their most distinguished enemies they embalm in cedar-oil and carefully preserve in a chest, and these they exhibit to strangers, gravely maintaining that in exchange for this head some one of their ancestors, or their father, or the man himself, refused the offer of a great sum of money. And some men among them, we are

Strabo<sup>15</sup> – who quotes, for this part, Posidonius – for evident linguistic reasons. Nonetheless, their reports are of great interest because they do not describe a remote tribe of the East such as the Essedones, but they inform us of the Gauls' customs.

Some elements in Diodorus' and Strabo's accounts show important similarities with the Old French epic tale: for instance, as noticed by Herbin, the fact that the person who owns the head would not sell it or accept a ransom in exchange for it<sup>16</sup>. Strabo, in particular, underlines the barbarity of this custom to which the Romans put a stop. In his short account, Florus insists on the cruelty of this practice, too, and ascribes it to the Thracians<sup>17</sup>. As Paul Jal underlined, "ce paragraphe [de Florus] semble avoir été imité d'assez près par Orose<sup>18</sup>", although we

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told, boast that they have not accepted an equal weight of gold for the head they show, displaying a barbarous sort of greatness of soul; for not to sell that which constitutes a witness and proof of one's valour is a noble thing, but to continue to fight against one of our own race, after he is dead, is to descend to the level of beasts."

- 15 See the English translation of the original Greek text (*Geography*, IV, 4, 5) contained in *The Geography of Strabo*, ed. H. L. Jones, London-Cambridge (MA), William Heinemann-Harvard University Press, 1949, vol. 2, p. 247: "In addition to their [i. e. Gallic peoples'] trait of simplicity and high-spiritedness, that of witlessness and boastfulness is much in evidence, and also that of fondness for ornaments [...]. And by reason of this levity of character they not only look insufferable when victorious, but also scared out of their wits when worsted. Again, in addition to their witlessness, there is also that custom, barbarous and exotic, which attends most of the northern tribes – I mean the fact that when they depart from the battle they hang the heads of their enemies from the necks of their horses, and, when they have brought them home, nail the spectacle to the entrances of their homes. At any rate, Poseidonius says that he himself saw this spectacle in many places, and that, although at first he loathed it, afterwards, through his familiarity with it, he could bear it calmly. The heads of enemies of high repute, however, they used to embalm in cedar-oil and exhibit to strangers, and they would not deign to give them back even for a ransom of an equal weight of gold. But the Romans put a stop to these customs, as well as to all those connected with the sacrifices and divinations that are opposed to our usages."
- 16 Herbin, "L'épisode du crâne", p. 415.
- 17 Florus, *Œuvres*, ed. P. Jal, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1967, vol. 1, p. 90: "*Post Macedonas, si dis placet, Thracas rebellabant, illi quondam tributarii Macedonum [...]. Nihil interim per id omne tempus residuum crudelitatis fuit in captivos saevientibus: litare dis sanguine humano, bibere in ossibus capitum, cuiuscemodi ludibriis foedare mortem tam igne quam fumo, partus quoque grauidarum mulierum extorquere tormentis. Saeuissimi omnium Thracum Scordisci fuere.*"
- 18 Florus, *Œuvres*, vol. 1, p. 144; see also Orose, *Histoires (Contre les Païens)*, ed. M.-P. Arnaud-Lindet, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1991, vol. 2, p. 147-148: "*Interea Macedonicum bellum Claudius sortitus varias gentes quae Rhodopaeis montibus circumfusae sunt ac tunc Macedoniam crudelissime populabantur – nam inter cetera dictu audituque horrida quae in captivos agebant, naptis, cum poculo opus esset, humanorum capitum ossibus cruentis capillatisque adhuc ac per*



must include Ammianus Marcellinus' account between them<sup>19</sup>. Another possible source is represented by Livy, who describes the battle between the Boii and the Romans (216 BC), during which the Roman *consul designatus* Albinus Postumius was killed, carried to the most prestigious temple of the tribe and there beheaded, the skull being cleaned and mounted with gold in order to serve as a “*sacrum uas*”<sup>20</sup>. Leaving aside Pomponius Mela and Solinus, the only authors who might have influenced the composition of the Fromont's skull episode in *Gerbert de Metz* are: Livy, Florus, Ammianus Marcellinus, and, as we shall see, Paul the Deacon. It is important to specify that in none of these accounts the practice is endowed with a positive value or described as a means to honour a defeated enemy<sup>21</sup>.

As I noticed above, the account that shows the most striking similarities with the skull-cup episode in *Gerbert de Metz* is undoubtedly that contained in Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards*<sup>22</sup> though it

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*interiores cavernas male effosso cerebro oblitis, auide ac sine horrore tanquam ueris poculis utebantur: quarum cruentissimi atque immanissimi Scordisci erant – has itaque, ut dixi, Claudius pellere Macedoniae finibus bello adtemptauit*. Quoting Florus' account, Herbin notices that this practice seems to be always ascribed to Thracians (see Herbin, “L'épisode du crâne”, p. 415, n. 18). In fact, the Scordisci were a Gallic tribe whose territory stretched over regions comprising parts of present-day Serbia, Bulgaria and Croatia: they lived in Thrace and had probably mingled with local Thracians, but they were of Celtic ancestry.

- 19 Ammien Marcellin, *Histoire*, ed. M.-A. Marié, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1984, vol. 5, p. 112: “*Et partem earum [i. e. Thraciarum] habitauere Scordisci, longe nunc ab isdem prouinciis disparati, saeni quondam et truces, et, ut antiquitas docet, hostiis captiuorum Bellonae litantes et Marti, humanumque sanguinem in ossibus capitum cauis bibentes auidius.*”
- 20 Tite-Live, *Histoire romaine*, ed. P. Jal, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2001, vol. 13, p. 42: “*Ibi Postumius omni ui ne caperetur dimicans occubuit. Spolia corporis caputque praecisum ducis Boii ouantes templo quod sanctissimo est apud eos intulere. Purgato inde capite, ut mos iis est, caluam auro caelauere, idque sacrum uas iis erat quo sollempnibus libarent poculumque idem sacerdoti esset ac templi antistitibus.*”
- 21 Livy is the only Latin source in which this martial practice might be considered endowed with a positive value, even if we have to somehow infer it from the context. As a matter of fact, the sacred goblet itself may be interpreted simply as one of the most relevant spoils of war conquered by the Gauls.
- 22 Pauli *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. L. Bethmann and G. Waitz, MGH: *Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum (saec. VI-IX)*, Hannover, Hahn, 1878, p. 12-187, at p. 69 (first quotation corresponding to *Hist. Lang.*, I, 27), and at p. 87-88 (second quotation corresponding to *Hist. Lang.*, II, 28): “*In eo proelio Alboin Cunimundum occidit, caputque illius sublatum, ad bibendum ex eo poculum fecit. Quod genus poculi apud eos ‘scala’ dicitur, lingua uero Latina patera uocatur. Cuius filiam nomine Rosimundam cum magna simul multitudine diversi sexus et aetatis duxit captivam; quam, quia Chlotsuinda obierat, in suam, ut post patuit, perniciem, duxit uxorem.*”; “*Qui rex [i. e. Alboin] postquam in Italia tres annos*

is questionable whether or not we can consider it as a source for the Old French poem. As Francesco Borri underlined in a recent paper devoted to Alboin's myth, "Paul mentioned skull-cups also in his *Roman History* as a practice of the Barbarians dwelling in the Rhodopian Mountains", a piece of information which "he may have derived from Orosius, suggesting the possibility that the skull-cups were conceived as a literary strategy to denote barbarism<sup>23</sup>". As clearly demonstrated by the texts, in this case we are allowed to explain the similarities in terms of direct intertextuality: Paul the Deacon quotes Orosius, his source, verbatim<sup>24</sup> with the only difference that, because of an anachronism or a mere mistake, Paul ascribes to Lucullus what in Orosius was narrated about Appius Claudius Pulcher's expedition in Macedony<sup>25</sup>. That Orosius is the source for this account is demonstrated by Landolfus Sagax's *Historia Romana* – the so-called *Historia Miscella* –, which restores the original and appropriate collocation of this episode<sup>26</sup>. Paul's text also omits the reference to the Thracian tribe of the Scordisci, already used by Florus and Ammianus Marcellinus. In writing his *Roman History*, Paul acts as a perfect compiler and diligently copies down his sources feeling free to

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*et sex menses regnavit, insidiis suae coniugis interemptus est. Causa autem interfectionis eius fuit. Cum in convivio ultra quam oportuerat apud Veronam laetus resederet, cum poculo quod de capite Cunimundi regis sui soceris fecerat reginae ad bibendum vinum dari praecepit atque eam ut cum patre suo laetanter biberet invitavit. Hoc ne cui videatur impossibile, veritatem in Christo loquor: ego hoc poculum vidi in quodam die festo Ratchis principem ut illud convivis suis ostentaret manu tenentem. Igitur Rosemunda ubi rem animadvertit, altum concipiens in corde dolorem, quem conspescere non valens, mox in mariti necem patris funus vindicatura exarsit".*  
See also Gerbert de Mez, p. 412.

- 23 F. Borri, "Murder by Death: Alboin's life, end(s), and means", *Millennium*, 8, 2011, p. 223-270, at p. 257.
- 24 *Eutropi Breviarium ab Urbe condita cum versionibus Graecis et Pauli Landolfique additamentis*, ed. H. Droysen, in *MGH: Auctores Antiquissimi II*, Berlin, Weidmann, 1879, p. 98-99 (corresponding to *Hist. Rom.*, VI, 10): "Expugnavit [Lucullus] etiam gentes quae Rhodopaeis montibus circumfusae; inter cetera dictu audituque horrida, quae in captivos agebant, raptis, cum poculo opus esset, humanorum capitum ossibus cruentis capillatisque adhuc ac per interiores cavernas male effosso cerebro oblitis avide ac sine horrore tamquam ueris poculis utebantur."
- 25 See D. Bianchi, "Riflessi romani nella 'Historia Langobardorum' di Paolo Diacono", *Memorie storiche feroigiuliesi*, 25, 1929, p. 23-58, at p. 25-26.
- 26 Landolfus Sagax, *Historia Romana*, ed. A. Crivellucci, Rome, Tipografia del Senato, 1912, vol. 1, p. 138: "Interea Macedonicum bellum Appius Claudius sortitus leuia prelia habuit contra uarias gentes, quae Rhodopam prouinciam incolebant et Macedoniam crudelissime depopulabant. Nam inter cetera dicta audituque horrida, quae in captiuos agebant, raptis, cum poculo opus esset, humanorum capitum ossibus cruentis capillatisque adhuc ac per interiores cauernas male effuso cerebro oblitis utebantur. Quarum cruentissimi atque immanissimi Scordisci erant."

shorten or lengthen them at times<sup>27</sup>. Paul's account in the *History of the Lombards* is completely different: Paul narrates something about his own people and swears to have seen the goblet made out of Cunimund's skull while serving at Ratchis' court before the middle of the eighth century (744-749 CE), although we might question how reliable the detail is. Finally, Paul quotes the Lombard term used to designate this kind of goblet: it is called *scala*, corradical to German *Schale* ('shell, bowl') and English *skull*<sup>28</sup>. Quite significantly, a text sharing relevant features with Paul's tale is that included in *Atlamál*, in the Poetic *Edda*<sup>29</sup>.

Herbin, who finds the similarities between Paul's account and Fromont's episode in *Gerbert de Metz* "plus que frappantes<sup>30</sup>", wisely rejects the idea of a simple loan as a uselessly reductive interpretation also because we do not know whence Paul himself drew the most interesting – and morbid – elements of his tale<sup>31</sup>. However, Herbin underlines that both CuniMUND and FroMONT share the same second element (Germanic -MUND 'protection') and he adds that one finds the same parallelism between CuniMUND~RosaMOND and FroMONT~FroMONDin<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, Herbin remarked that the first

27 In this kind of intertextual transmission – which is typical of ancient and medieval historical accounts – the informative content generally undergoes an impoverishment or a decay directly proportional to the number of passages that have occurred between the original source and the text we read (in absence of interpolations, amplifications and other kinds of authorial intrusion). This semantic decay can be easily observed in the passage from Orosius to Paul and from the latter to Landolfus who shortens his source by omitting some parts of the original text – the Orosian parenthetical clause "*auide ac sine borrore tamquam ueris poculis*", retained by Paul, is absent from Landolfus' text – and sometimes misunderstands it.

28 In English, this Germanic term has undergone a semantic shift similar to that of the Latin *testa*, which originally meant 'pot, vase' and then acquired the meaning of 'head'.

29 See the English translation of the original Norse text (*Atlamál* 79) contained in *The Poetic Edda. Heroic Poems*, ed. U. Dronke, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969, vol. 1, p. 93: "You [i. e. Atli] have lost your sons / as you never should have done. / You have used their skulls, you know, / as drinking vessels. / I eked out your drink / by blending it with their blood." See also the different treatment of the same theme in the more ancient *Atlakviða* contained in *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 1, p. 10-11.

30 Herbin, "L'épisode du crâne", p. 416.

31 Herbin, "L'épisode du crâne", p. 417: "Il serait, au fond, peu intéressant de conclure que l'auteur de *Gerbert* a trouvé cet épisode chez Paul Diacre et qu'il l'a purement et simplement emprunté. Ce serait là une interprétation inutilement réductrice, puisqu'on ignore où Paul Diacre lui-même s'est servi". Moreover, as pointed out by Herbin, the use of a skull as a cup is also a widespread folk-tale motif: see Herbin, "L'épisode du crâne", p. 416, n. 27.

32 Herbin, "L'épisode du crâne", p. 418.

onomastic elements in CUNImund and FROmont are very similar, too: CUNI derives from the Germanic KUNNI meaning ‘race, family’, a root which is attested in such terms as *king* and *König*, whereas FRO derives from Germanic FRAW meaning ‘sir, master, lord’<sup>33</sup>. Herbin thinks that these similarities cannot be fortuitous and he claims that they might stem from a sort of transposition. According to the French scholar, this must have happened “à une époque et dans un milieu où l’on comprend encore le sens des éléments KUNNI- et FRAW-”, that is undoubtedly before the end of the twelfth century<sup>34</sup>. Herbin’s hypothesis is certainly intriguing, but I think that such similarities in anthroponyms, though suggestive, should not be overestimated.

It looks as if the poet who composed *Gerbert* had access to all the literary sources that we have detected and listed above, for he seems to have drawn something from each of them. Quite paradoxically, in the early fourteenth century, the Italian friar Odoric of Pordenone gave an account of a Tibetan funerary rite that shows relevant similarities with the Old French episode, but is also more recent than the composition of *Gerbert* itself<sup>35</sup>.

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33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*

35 Odorico da Pordenone, *Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tatarorum*, ed. A. Marchisio, Florence, SISMEL-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2016, p. 214-216 (corresponding to *Relatio*, XXXIII): “*De hac [i. e. provincia que vocatur Cansan] recedens, veni ad unum regnum magnum nomine Tybet, quod ipsi Indie est confine; totum hoc regnum est subiectum magno cani. [...] Consuetudo habetur in hac contrata. Nam ponatur quod pater alicuius moriatur, tunc ipsius filius sic dicit: ‘Volo honorare patrem meum’. Unde faciet convocari omnes sacerdotes religiosos, omnesque histriones de contrata, vicinos similiter et parentes, qui ad campaneam ipsum portabunt cum gaudio magno, ubi erit paratum discum magnum, super quo sacerdotes sibi caput amputabunt, quod postea filio suo dabunt; deinde eius filius cum tota sua societate cantat et pro eo multas orationes facit. Exinde sacerdotes totum corpus eius incidunt in frusta; quod cum sic fecerint, inde se reducant cum societate sua pro eo orationes facientes. Post hec veniunt aquile et vultures de montibus, et sic unusquisque suum frustum accipit et asportat; deinde omnes alta voce clamant dicentes: ‘Videas qualis homo iste fuit quia sanctus est; nam veniunt angeli dei et ipsum portant ad paradisum’. Et sic isto modo faciendo filius eius multum se reputat honoratum, cum pater eius ab angelis dei ita honorifice sit portatus. Tunc statim filius eius caput patris accipit quod coquit et comedit; de testa ipsius facit fieri unum cyphum, in quo ipse et omnes de domo sua semper cum devotione bibunt in memoriam patris sui defuncti, nam sic faciendo, ut dicunt, reverentiam magnam exhibent patri suo. Unde multa inconsueta et dissoluta fiunt ab istis.*” On this very interesting account, see also M. Di Febo, “Forme dell’antropofagia in alcuni testi medievali”, *Letteratura, alterità, dialogicità: Studi in onore di Antonio Pioletti*, ed. E. Creazzo, G. Lalomia and A. Manganaro, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2015, vol. 1, p. 327-339, at p. 335-336. As for the Byzantine Empire, another example of the use of a human skull as a cup can be found in Theophanes the

Unlike the case of the Fromont's skull episode in *Gerbert*, we can find a real intertextual tie between Paul the Deacon and the English poet John Gower whose source for the tale "Albinus and Rosemund" contained in his *Confessio Amantis* is a work by Godfrey of Viterbo, who follows for his part the *History of the Lombards*<sup>36</sup>. In his *Pantheon sive Memoria Sæculorum*, Godfrey of Viterbo speaks of *Gormundus* instead of *Cunimundus* and this onomastic shift has been taken by Herbin as a hint to speculate about the possible existence of a *Fromundus* among the textual variants of the Gepts' king's name in Paul the Deacon's text or in a text derived from this source<sup>37</sup>. As far as I know, there is no evidence for this speculation. Moreover, Herbin does not notice that in Godfrey's account also *Alboin* has become *Albinus* – the Germanic name has become a rather plain and common Roman *cognomen* – and, by a twist of fate, this new name of the Lombard king coincides with that of Livy's *consul designatus* Lucius Postumius Albinus. But even in this case there is no apparent intertextual tie at all.

In order to understand the meaning of this episode in all its complexity, I think we ought to extend the analysis and not to limit ourselves to written sources. Several cases of skull ablation as part of funerary rites in Merovingian Lorraine have been analysed by Alain Simmer, according to whom "au Moyen Âge a existé un culte des crânes et des ossements remontant aux périodes pré et protohistoriques, que le christianisme a étroitement endigué et adapté"<sup>38</sup>. As far as this head cult is concerned, archaeological finds seem to echo what we read in the classical historical accounts. As Marion Löffler and John Koch pointed out,

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Confessor's account relating Nicephorus the Elder's death after the defeat of his army in the campaigns against Krum's Bulgars. This episode could have been the literary model for Baldwin of Flanders' tragical end in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade as reported by the Byzantine historian George Akropolites; on these accounts, see Borri, "Murder by Death", p. 258-259; Herbin, "L'épisode du crâne", p. 416, n. 22.

36 A. Esch, "John Gower's Narrative Art", *Gower's Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology*, ed. P. Nicholson, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1991, p. 81-108, at p. 90; see also Herbin, "L'épisode du crâne", p. 416, n. 23.

37 Herbin, "L'épisode du crâne", p. 418.

38 A. Simmer, "Le prélèvement des crânes dans l'Est de la France à l'époque mérovingienne", *Archéologie médiévale*, 12, 1982, p. 35-49, at p. 48; see also B. Young, "Paganisme, christianisation et rites funéraires mérovingiens", *Archéologie médiévale*, 7, 1977, p. 5-81.

severed heads are a recurring theme in Continental Celtic sculpture, and severed heads and skulls seem to have been part of the architecture and equipment of sanctuaries and other sacred enclosures. [...] Important sanctuaries such as Chamalières, Gournay-sur-Aronde, and Ribemont-sur-Ancre [...] have yielded human skulls near the entrance, away from other finds, possibly indicating their display as part of entrance structures [...]. The three monolithic pillars found at Roquepertuse, which formed a kind of portico, featured niches in which human skulls were most probably displayed. They may have been the skulls of enemies or, according to new interpretations, of venerated ancestors and respected warriors. [...] Further north, at the Býčiskála cave in Bohemia, a human skull was found placed inside a cauldron, and a second skull had been fashioned so as to function as a drinking cup [...].<sup>39</sup>

Anthropologists such as Henry Balfour have managed to list several cultural reasons for making a cup out of the head of a defeated enemy, mostly linked to the ideas of taking the dead man's strength, of honouring him after his death and of celebrating a sort of posthumous kinship relation<sup>40</sup>.

Indeed, as Simmer highlighted<sup>41</sup>, not only archaeological data and anthropological finds, but also Christian era cultural practices can tell us something of great interest about the diffusion of this custom. In a footnote to his study, Herbin quotes the account provided by the

39 M. Löffler, J. Th. Koch, "head cult", *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. J. Th. Koch et al., Santa Barbara (CA)-Denver (CO)-Oxford, ABC-CLIO, 2006, vol. 3, p. 895-898, at p. 896-897.

40 Borri, "Murder by Death", p. 259; see also H. Balfour, "Life History of an Aghori Fakir; with Exhibition of the Human Skull used by him as a Drinking Vessel, and Notes on the similar use of Skulls by other Races", *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 26, 1897, p. 340-357; Herbin, "L'épisode du crâne", p. 414, n. 15; Löffler, Koch, "head cult", p. 895: "For the Celts, the severed head of an enemy may have been proof of a warrior's valour, providing confirmation of the number of enemies he had slain in a battle. But the efforts taken to preserve and display heads, and the frequency with which they are depicted, point to their religious importance as symbols of the supernatural, perhaps the seat of the soul, warding off evil, as well as conferring on the keeper the wisdom and energy of the person to whom it once belonged."

41 Simmer, "Le prélèvement des crânes", p. 48: "Il est probable que le culte des saints et de leurs reliques a joué un grand rôle dans la propagation de ces pratiques qui ont dû connaître une telle vogue qu'elles ont été officialisées par la construction d'ossuaires, dont les premières mentions se rencontrent vers 1150 en Lorraine et à peu près à la même époque en Autriche [...]. Le prélèvement des crânes à l'époque mérovingienne doit se situer à la résurgence de ce culte, du moins au moment où le christianisme commençait à canaliser les croyances ancestrales liant la pérennité de la vie à la conservation des substances osseuses."

*Itinerarium Antonini Placentini* – a report relating a sixth-century pilgrim’s travel to the Holy Land – but the French scholar, who indirectly quotes the *Itinerarium* from Ernout-Meillet’s *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, does not fully recognise the importance of this text<sup>42</sup>. Ernout-Meillet’s *Dictionnaire* quotes the text with many omissions: “*testam de homine...in qua...bibunt*”<sup>43</sup>. However, the original excerpt from the *Itinerarium* reveals something much more interesting: “*Vidi testam de homine inclausam in lucello aureo ex gemmis, quem dicunt quia de sancta martyre Theodote esset, in qua multi pro benedictione bibebant aquam et ego bibi*”<sup>44</sup>. The pilgrims used to drink from the goblet made out of St Theodote’s skull and this practice was thought to have healing properties (“*pro benedictione bibebant*”). This innocent oversight leads Herbin to claim that “le culte des crânes pourrait avoir traversé le Moyen Âge, mais il est vrai que, si le *chef* de certains saints fut considéré comme une relique insigne, jamais aucun ne paraît avoir été traité comme celui de Fromont”<sup>45</sup>. However, the fact that saints’ skulls were used in the Middle Ages as drinking-cups can be inferred on the basis of the evidence we possess. For instance, the relic of Saint Sebastian’s skull, worshipped in Ebersberg (Germany), was used as a drinking goblet by pilgrims until the very beginning of the twentieth century, and shares striking similarities with the artifact described in *Gerbert*<sup>46</sup>. Herbin underlines that “Gerbert prétend honorer Fromont et, dans la logique de la vénération des reliques, rien ne permettrait de mettre en doute sa bonne foi”<sup>47</sup>. This may be true, but with an important *caveat*: Fromont is not Saint Sebastian, he is an apostate, a renegade (that is, to use the Old French term, a *margari*); he dies fighting alongside the Muslims and against the Christian troops and when he dies, his soul instantly goes to Hell.

42 Herbin, “L’épisode du crâne”, p. 415, n. 18.

43 See the entry for “*testa*” in A. Ernout and A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, ed. J. André, Paris, Klincksieck, 2001<sup>4</sup>, p. 688-689: “Le passage du sens de *coquille* à *crâne*, *boîte crânienne*, puis à *tête* a son pendant en gr. *κόγχος* ‘coquille’ et ‘crâne’ (Lycophon 1105) et en germ. *Kopf* issu de *cuppa*. Il est inutile de supposer que le sens de ‘crâne’ provient de l’habitude qu’avaient les Barbares de boire dans des crânes; ainsi *Itin. Anton. Plac. 22, testam de homine...in qua...bibunt*”.

44 *Itinerarium Antonini Placentini: Un viaggio in Terra Santa del 560-570 d.C.*, ed. C. Milani, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 1977, p. 160.

45 Herbin, “L’épisode du crâne”, p. 419, n. 35.

46 R. Andree, “Menschenschädel als Trinkgefäße”, *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, 22, 1912, p. 1-33, at p. 1-10.

47 Herbin, “L’épisode du crâne”, p. 419.



For all these reasons, I think that even if Christian cultural practices – more or less widely spread across medieval Europe – may have played a role as a model for the Fromont's skull episode, the veneration and the honour Gerbert apparently wants to bestow upon Fromont remain part of a warrior belief system, and belong to a religiosity which is very different from Christian faith. As Alain Labbé clearly pointed out,

*si le monde des Lorrains n'est nullement un monde sans Dieu, ce que ne sauraient concevoir les structures de l'imaginaire épique, il est bien [...] un monde sans clercs, un monde comme hors de l'Église où la chevalerie se rêve libérée de l'emprise de clergie*<sup>48</sup>.

We will never know if Gerbert is sincere when he claims to have acted in order to honour Fromont, nor will we know why he conceals his purpose. I think that the poet who composed the episode as we read it now deliberately depicted Gerbert as the spokesperson of traditional lore during a time in which the practices inherited by that tradition had already become execrable and anti-social. As for the Italian area, a similar phase is already attested by Paul's account in the late eighth century, and, as for the Norse area, in the late twelfth century, judging on the basis of *Atlamál's* tale which belongs to "the last flowering of Eddic narrative verse", as Ursula Dronke remarked<sup>49</sup>. The skull-cup episode contained in *Gerbert de Metz* shows relevant similarities both with Paul the Deacon's account and Edda's tale, but, in my opinion, the relation between these texts cannot be ascribed to mere intertextual ties. If, as I think, one cannot speak of direct intertextuality in this case, it is necessary to think that the Fromont's skull episode dates back to a more ancient age than the last quarter of the twelfth century, to which the poem, as we know it, is generally dated. Finally, this analysis confirms Herbin's assertion according to which "*Gerbert* contient des éléments visiblement plus anciens que la fin du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle, à commencer par l'épisode du crâne de Fromont"<sup>50</sup>.

48 A. Labbé, "La dérision des clercs dans *Girart de Roussillon* et dans *Garin le Loberen*", *Burlesque et dérision dans les épopées de l'Occident médiéval*, ed. B. Guidot, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1995, p. 351-378, at p. 378.

49 *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 1, p. vii. According to Ursula Dronke, *Atlakviða* can be ascribed to "the end of the ninth century", whereas *Atlamál* should be dated to the end of the twelfth century, as it provides "a vivid contrast to the earlier treatment of the same themes in *Atlakviða*" (*ibid.*).

50 J.-Ch. Herbin, "Variations, vie et mort des *Loberains*", *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, 12, 2005, p. 1-26, at p. 7.



When I was writing these words, I reminded myself of Joseph Bédier's memorable admonition according to which

*les romans du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle sont des romans du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle, et [...] il faut les expliquer par cela que nous savons du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle, du XI<sup>e</sup> au plus tôt, et non point par cela que nous ignorons du siècle de Charlemagne ou du siècle de Clovis<sup>51</sup>.*

In my opinion, the Fromont's skull episode proves that there may be some exceptions to this rule.

Gabriele SORICE  
University of Trento

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51 J. Bédier, *Les légendes épiques: Recherches sur la formation des chansons de geste*, Paris, Champion, 1929<sup>3</sup>, vol. 4, p. 431.