

Reconstructing the *Carole*

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The Abbot Guibert de Nogent, writing his autobiography (in Latin, of course), in the years 1114–1115, remarked that there was something very strange about the disposition of the graves at his Abbey of Nogent-sous-Coucy. They were not laid out in normal fashion (presumably in rows) but in a circle around a single grave. The vases found in them indicated no Christian burial rite. From these facts he concluded that there was no other explanation but that these burials were of pre-Christian origin. The phrase that he uses to describe the manner in which the graves are arranged is 'in modum caraulae'. The most obvious translation of this phrase is 'in the manner of a carole' [All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine]. In any case it has been argued that *caraula* is a Latinization of the French, *carole*. Nevertheless the actual French word *carole* does occur in Anglo-Norman biblical translations from the early 12th to the very early 13th centuries.

These translations, although in French, were written in England, where, in fact, most of the earliest writings in French were copied. Original compositions in French, composed on the Continent, in which the *carole* is described, start to appear in the second half of the 12th century, notably in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes.

It is not until we move into the 13th century, however, that we start to gather together details enabling us to discover how the dance was performed. It is then that descriptions in French, both in fictional and non-fictional sources, combine to present us with a clear impression of how this very simple dance seems to have been executed. Such evidence continues to be found throughout the 14th century. These sources not only provide us with ideas about the choreography, but also sometimes with the appropriate music for the dance as well, since they occasionally include musical insertions. In this paper, however, I want to concentrate exclusively on the details that French texts furnish about the choreography.

The *carole*, then, is first mentioned as a dance in the early 12th century. It was certainly the main social dance in the 13th century, and in the first half of the 14th century. It went out of fashion as a dance about 1400. So how can we reconstruct the *carole*?

First of all we should note the distribution of the sexes. Although there is one description of a *carole* consisting entirely of men (in Jean Renart's *Guillaume de Dole*) *caroles* composed entirely of girls or women are more usual. But commonly, as one might expect, the sexes are mixed.

A number of commentators have suggested that the *carole*, at least on some occasions, might have been performed in a line. But this conclusion relies on an extremely dubious interpretation of two or three texts. In fact it is a circular formation that is suggested in numerous texts by the use of such words as the adverb *entor* (around) or the noun *tour* (a round). In Raoul de Houdenc's *Méraigis de Portlesguez*, we are told 'entor le pin por caroler / avoit puceles qui chantoient.' ('around the pine in a *carole* were girls singing'). In the *Roman de Laurin*, Synador suggests to Dyogenne 'Alons .i. tour a la querole' ('Let us make a round in the *carole*'). Jean Froissart, in a *pastourelle*, describes shepherds and shepherdesses 'en carollant tout autour vont / de la fontainne' ('in carolling they go right around the spring').

Now it might be inferred from the texts such as I have quoted so far that, although the *carole* could be a circle, it was also possible that it could also be a line. That, however, is not the case. You will remember that at the beginning of this paper I drew your attention to the fact that Guibert de Nogent describes the graves arranged in a circular form as being disposed ‘in modum caraulae’; so that if the Latin word *caraula* is formed from the French *carole*, it not only clearly designates a circular form for the dance, but also denotes this form as being typical. But there are less ambiguous examples of how the term *carole* was associated with people or objects arranged in a circle. Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historia Regum Britannie* (The History of the Kings of Britain), written in the years 1135 to 1138, calls Stonehenge the *chorea gigantum* (‘the giants’ dance’). When Wace completed, in 1155, his version in French verse of Geoffrey’s celebrated history, he rendered the phrase *chorea gigantum* as ‘carole as giaz’ (‘the giants’ *carole*). Between 1370 and 1377, Nicole Oresme wrote *Le Livre du ciel et du monde* (The Book of the Heavens and the World), a work expounding the theory of heliocentric motion—that is more than a century before Copernicus. In it he compares the movement of the earth to a wheel which is ‘comme des personnes en une carole’ (‘like people in a *carole*’). The image of the *carole* as being like a wheel is one that had been used by Dante in his *Divine Comedy* (*Paradiso*, Canto XXIV) when he compares the blessed in Heaven dancing in ‘quelle carole’ (‘those caroles’) to the wheels of clocks. Francesco da Buti in his commentary on the *Divine Comedy*, completed in 1393, glosses the phrase ‘quelle carole’ thus: ‘cioè quelli beati spiriti, che seguitavano come fanno le persone nel ballo tondo: carole è ballo tondo’ (‘that is those blessed spirits, who followed as those persons do in the round dance: the *carole* is a round dance’). These citations underline the fact not simply that the *carole* could be a circular dance, but that the circular form defined the dance.

Of course the dancers held hands. Most texts mention this fact: ‘lors s’entreprestrent par les mains (‘then they took one another by the hands’, *Guillaume le Maréchal*, William the Marshal) and ‘Les dames pas ne se lassoient, / Ains carolaient main a main’ (‘the ladies did not become weary, but carolled hand in hand’, Froissart, *La Prison amoureuse*, The Prison of Love).

The dancers, then, held hands in a circle. The question now is in which direction did this circle move? To the left or to the right? Clockwise or anticlockwise? Unfortunately almost all the texts that I’ve cited so far are silent on this point. There was, however, one group of writers who were very exercised by the *carole*, and the direction in which it turned – moralists. Their condemnation of the dance was forthright and explicit. Take, for example the anonymous author of the *Mireour du monde* (The Mirror of the World) writing in the 1270’s although the manuscript is 14th century:

Que les caroles sont les processions au déable, il apert parceque on tourne au senestre costé. De quoy la Sainte Escripiture dist: ‘Les voies qui tournent à destre connoist Dieu; celes qui tourne à senestre sont perverses et mauvaises, et les het Dieu’.

That caroles are processions to the Devil is obvious, because they turn to the left. Of which Holy Scripture says ‘God knows the ways that turn to the right; those that turn to the left are perverse and bad, and God hates them’.

The biblical reference is apparently to the Old Testament (Proverbs 4.27). The circle turns to the left, and the author seizes on the symbolic significance of this fact. The author of *Le*

Mireour is not alone in drawing attention to this symbolism. Thomas of Cantimpré, the 13th–century author of the *Bonum Universale de Proprietatibus Apum* (the Universal Good of the Properties of Bees), likewise denounces the *chorea*, which, in this context, seems to mean the *carole*, although it must be pointed out that *chorea* is the normal late medieval Latin for any kind of dance.

Signum in choreis est evidentissime manifestum quod ad sinistram circumventes in qua parte die maledicti ponentur regnum perdituri sunt quod benedictis ad dextram a Iudice conferetur.

Most obviously it is a sign in dances that they move to the left, on which side on the day of the damned those who are about to lose the Kingdom of Heaven will be placed because the blessed will be placed by the Judge on His right.

Here the reference is to the New Testament and to the description of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25.33. Although it is the moralists who are principally concerned with the direction in which the dance turns, and with its theological significance, for others it had a social import. You will remember that Nicole Oresme in describing the movement of the planets around the sun, compared this movement to dancers in a *carole*. Both, he explains, move to the left: ‘et donques chascun de la carole va devant celui qui est a sa destre et derriere celui qui est a sa senestre’, which, in Albert Menut’s translation, reads ‘thus, each member of the dance goes ahead of the person on his right and behind the person on his left’, which is one way of saying that the dance moves to the left. In the course of his exposition, Nicole Oresme adds ‘destre est plus noble que senestre’ (‘right is more noble than left’).

If the *carole* moved to the left, then the dancers must have been stepping to the left. They might have passed one foot in front of the other so that in fact they are walking around in a circle. That is not, however, what the few texts that refer to the steps imply. The verb that is almost invariably used is *ferir*, literally ‘to strike’. When, in *Méragis de Portlesguez*, the hero joins the enchanted *carole*, ‘il chante avant et fiert dou pié’ (‘he leads the singing, and strikes with his foot’). In the *Roman de la Rose* (The Romance of the Rose), it is said of *Leesce* (the allegorical figure of Gladness) when she sings for the *carole* in the Garden of Pleasure, ‘ainz se savoit bien debrasier / ferir dou pié et envoisier’ (‘but she knew how to enchain the notes, strike with her foot, and be joyous’). In the prose *Lancelot*, the hero comes upon another magic *carole*, this time in a clearing in a forest and, in a manuscript of the second half of the 13th century chosen by the latest editor as the base manuscript for his edition (Cambridge, Corpus Christi Library, MS 450), it is said of Lancelot ‘et lors conmance a chanter et a ferir del pié ausi conme li autre’ (‘and then he begins to sing and to strike his foot just like the others’). All these quotations might seem to indicate some kind of stamping movement; but evidently this is not what is intended. In another manuscript of the early 14th century (London, British Library, Additional MS 10293), the text of the prose *Lancelot* that I’ve just quoted reads differently: ‘& lors commence a canter & a ferir lun pie encontre lautre’ (‘and then he begins to sing and to strike one foot against the other’). This may not be the meaning that the author intended, but it makes perfectly good choreographic sense. Lancelot makes simples to the left.

On the general character of the dance, evidence is almost non-existent. We are, however, told in the *Tournoi de Chauvency* (The Tournament at Chauvency) that the ladies ‘karolent mout cointement’ (‘they carol very gracefully’). And the manner of performing the

carole excites the wrath of the author of the *Mireour du monde* once more: ‘quer tous ceus et toutes celes qui carolent font péchié de tous leurs membres: en passer cointement, en bras démener et hochier’ and so on (which seems to mean that ‘for all those men and women who carol sin in every member of their bodies, moving gracefully and raising and lowering their limbs’). The reference here is presumably to the movement made by the arms as the circle progressed.

Indeed the dance is well summarized by one famous moralist of the late 12th – early 13th century, Jacques de Vitry, in his ‘Sermones Vulgares’. These sermons were originally written in French, but are preserved only in Latin. The passage that concerns us is contained in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, f. fr. 17509, fol. 146v, but has been quoted in print. The author sums up the features of our dance in his forthright condemnation, in which the Latin *chorea* seems unmistakably to indicate the *carole*:

Chorea enim circulus est cuius centrum est diabolus; et omnes vergunt in sinistram, quia omnes tendunt ad mortem eternam. Dum autem pes pede comprimitur vel manus mulieris manu viri tangitur, ignis dyaboli succenditur.

The *carole* is a circle whose centre is the Devil; and everyone turns to the left because everyone is heading for everlasting death. When foot is joined to foot, or the hand of a woman is touched by the hand of a man, the fire of the Devil is kindled.

Here we have it all. The circle moves to the left with its sinister implication; the two sexes holding hands with foot joined to foot.

The *carole* does not seem to have changed during the three centuries in which it was in vogue. It is a circular dance for Wace in the middle of the 12th century, as it is for Francesco da Buti at the end of the 14th century. The dancers hold hands in Chrétien de Troyes as they do in Froissart. The *chorea* of Jacques de Vitry moves to the left as the *carole* does for Nicole Oresme. On the other hand there is some evidence that the songs that accompanied the dance shifted from predominantly very short and simple ones in the 13th century to a preference for the more formal structures of the *rondeau* and the *virelai* (but not the *ballade*) in the 14th century, at least in courtly circles.

It is important to add that there was another social dance performed in France in the period under review. This was the *tresche*. This dance however, seems to have been identical to the *carole* except that it was performed in a line.

One final point. The *carole* has sometimes been associated with the *branle* or the farandole. The *branle* could be a circular dance like the *carole*, but otherwise there is no relationship between the two. Moreover the *branle* was not a medieval dance. Neither was the farandole related to the *carole*. It was not a medieval dance either. It is not mentioned in dictionaries of Occitan or of Old French, and does not seem to have been recorded before the second half of the 18th century

[Members of the audience were then invited to perform a reconstruction of the *carole*].