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The Celts: Origins to Modern Era

Essay 2.: Discuss in detail the religious beliefs of the ancient Celts paying particular attention to the role of the druid.

17 February 2009

Any evidence we have for the religious beliefs of the ancient Celts comes from three primary sources: the archaeological record, the writings of people in neighbouring Mediterranean cultures contemporaneous with the Celts, and the vernacular works of the insular Celts written after the coming of Christianity.

The period of the ancient, pre-Roman conquest, 'free' Celts¹ lasted from approximately the 6th century BCE ending in the 1st century CE, depending on when the Romans conquered any specific area. After this we see a merging of the two cultures in many of the Celtic lands (though not in Ireland), and things change markedly.

The Sources and Their Problems

Archaeology, by its very nature, is the study of items found in or on the ground or in water that, by circumstance of durability or the vagaries of decomposition, are still in existence after many centuries, and which just happen to be located by the archaeologists. These cult sites, shrines, votive and sacrificial objects, iconography, pre-Roman coins, and (in the Romano-Celtic period) inscriptions, can only show us part of a culture and its religious system, and these can be both incomplete and

¹ M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, (Dover, NH: Alan Sutton Publishing, Inc., 1993), 7.

ambiguous.² The Celts did not write down their own sacred teachings, verses or lore, though the Celts in Gaul did use Greek letters for commercial purposes³ and a form of writing, called *ogam*, did appear in Ireland and Wales during the 5th and 6th centuries CE, but these writings are only seen as inscriptions of male personal names carved on stone.⁴ Instead, the ancient Celts seem to have relied on their memories for matters spiritual and religious.

The writings we do have from the time before and during the Roman conquest of Gaul and Britain come from their neighbours along the Mediterranean. The Greek Stoic philosopher, Posidonius, wrote his *Histories* towards the end of the 2nd century BCE and he actually travelled in Gaul (at least in the south) and reported on what he saw, though he may have filtered his understandings through his stoic beliefs. Though all his works have been lost, we know of him because his work was quoted and borrowed by other writers whose works exist today.⁵

Four classical authors borrowed from Posidonius. Strabo (c. 63 BCE to 21 CE) had actually known Posidonius; Diodorus Siculus (who wrote c. 60-30 BCE) was a contemporary of his; while Athenaeus (around 200 CE) came long after, but he mostly wrote about food. All three of these men credited Posidonius in their works, unlike the fourth author, Julius Caesar, who seems to have borrowed from Posidonius without attribution, in addition to recording his own observations.⁶

Other authors we have include Lucan, a poet who wrote of Caesar's campaigns and who stressed the barbarity of Celtic religion; Pomponius Mela (1st century BCE); the Elder Pliny (1st century CE) who wrote about druid magic as well as simple folk magic in his *Naturalis Historia*; and Tacitus (1st century CE) who described the final Roman attack on the Druids at the Menai Straits in Wales in his *Annales*.⁷

² Piggot, Stuart. *The Druids*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1985, reprinted 2003), 12-13; and M. Green, 1993, 7.

³ J.T. Koch, editor, in collaboration with John Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland & Wales*, (Oakville, CT and Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2001), 21-22.

⁴ J. Koch, editor, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2006), 1390.

⁵ S. Piggot, 96.

⁶ S. Piggot, 96-97.

⁷ S. Piggot, 98-99.

Many of these classical authors lived around the same time as the Celts, but their works must be used with caution. Some, like Caesar, had their own motivations in how they depicted the Celts, as he was intent on showing how important his conquests were in order to raise support in Rome. Other authors looked at the Celts through the lenses of their own cultures and beliefs and most of them were far removed from the pre-Roman Celts in space and, in some cases, time as well.⁸

The third primary source we have for the religion of the ancient Celts is the vernacular literatures of Ireland and Wales (and to a lesser extent Scotland and Brittany). While they were written after the conversion to Christianity, some of them, particularly the Ulster Cycle of stories in Ireland, probably reflect the pre-Christian society of the 4th century CE when Ulster was still dominant.⁹ In this cycle, the main activities appear to be fighting, cattle raiding and feasting.¹⁰ And while these stories may not have been written down until the Middle Ages, they do appear to be based on archaic oral traditions. But all of these tales were written down by clerics who were totally capable of creative writing themselves. They were very aware of the Bible and other Christian writings and were no doubt greatly influenced by them.¹¹ In any case, references in the Irish or Welsh vernacular traditions need not apply to any other part of the Celtic world, particularly ancient Gaul.¹² Pagan names and ideas surely survived in the traditions and literatures of Ireland and Wales, but to what extent we currently don't know, and this continues to provide scholars with much room for debate.

The Druids

⁸ M. Green, 1993, 7.

⁹ S. Piggot, 100.

¹⁰ M. Green, 1993, 15.

¹¹ K. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, (Maynooth: Dept. of Old Irish, National University of Ireland, 2000), 18.

¹² M. Green, 1993, 15.

The priests of the ancient Celts were called Druids, and almost everything we know about them comes from the classical authors and the literature of Ireland. There is no mention of them in any of the carved inscriptions of the Romano-Celtic period. The word ‘druid’ (according to Pliny, 16.24) may be related to the Greek word, *drus*, which means ‘oak’.¹³ Bernhard Maier suggests that it comes from the Celtic **dru-vid-es*, meaning ‘those knowledgeable about the oak’.¹⁴ Caesar (6.13) tells us that there are two classes of men in Gaul who have rank and honour, the first being the Druids and the second being the ‘warriors with horses’ whom we can call the nobility. The Druids ‘intervene in divine matters; they look after public and private sacrifices; they interpret religious matters’.¹⁵ Pomponius Mela (*De Situ Orbis* 3.2.18-19) writes that ‘They claim to know the size of the earth and cosmos, the movements of the heavens and stars, and the will of the gods.’¹⁶ Strabo (4.4.4) goes on to elaborate on the divisions of the Druid class, saying,

As a rule, among all the Gallic peoples three sets of men are honoured above all others: the Bards, the *Vates*, and the Druids. The bards are singers and poets, the *Vates* overseers of sacred rites and philosophers of nature, and the Druids, besides being natural philosophers, practice moral philosophy as well.¹⁷

Diodorus Siculus (5.31) refers to these three types by saying that the Druids are also theologians (those who speak about the gods), and that no one may sacrifice or ask favours of the gods without a Druid present. The seers (Caesar’s *Vates*) are greatly respected and have great authority, using auguries and sacrifices to foresee the future, and their Bards sing both praise and satire.¹⁸

¹³ J. Koch, 2001, 32.

¹⁴ B. Maier, *Dictionary of Celtic Religion and Culture*, Cyril Edwards, translator, (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 1998), 98-99.

¹⁵ J. Koch, 2001, 21.

¹⁶ J. Koch, 2001, 31.

¹⁷ J. Koch, 2001, 18.

¹⁸ J. Koch, 2001, 13-14.

Both Strabo (4.4.4) and Caesar (6.13) tell us that the Druids acted as judges, entrusted with settling disputes both private and public, and Caesar goes on to explain that should anyone not yield to their decisions, then they would be prohibited from attendance at sacrifices, which would essentially cut them off from society. Caesar also says (alone among our authors) that there is a chief Druid who is chosen by vote of the other Druids or even by force of arms, and that the Druids in Gaul would sit in great assembly at a certain time of the year in a ‘consecrated place’ at the centre of all Gaul.¹⁹

The power of Druidical pronouncements seems to have been very great. Diodorus Siculus (5.31) remarks that, ‘Often when two armies have come together with swords drawn these men have stepped between the battle-lines and stopped the conflict, as if they held wild animals spell-bound.’²⁰ In Ireland, at least in the Ulster Cycle, no one could speak before the king, and the king could not speak before his druids.²¹

Druids were also exempt from military service, suffered no taxes and could not be sued. Caesar claimed that this is why great hordes of young men would undergo the 20-year training involved to become a Druid where they would memorize a great number of verses, since sacred writing was prohibited.²² And Caesar says that the knowledge of the Druids was discovered in Britain and those who wish to learn this knowledge must go to Britain to do so.

The oracular knowledge of the Druids would seem to have been quite important. In Gaul, the Coligny Calendar divided the months up into lucky and unlucky halves, and there were lucky and unlucky days as well which might need careful navigating.²³ In the Irish tale *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge*), part of the Ulster Cycle, Medb consults with Feidelm of Connecht who has just returned, ‘from Albion [Britain] after learning the art of divination.’ Feidelm prophesizes that

¹⁹ J. Koch, 2001, 21.

²⁰ J. Koch, 2001, 14.

²¹ C. O’Rahilly, editor, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Recension 1, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), 217.

²² J. Koch, 2001, 21.

²³ S. Piggot, 116.

Medb's army will be destroyed, 'Men's bodies will be hacked and women will weep because of the Hound of the Smith whom I now see,'²⁴ but Medb discounts the prophesy to her peril.

Both Diodorus and Caesar remark that the Druids performed human sacrifice. Presumably, the classical authors would have accepted animal sacrifices as normal and therefore saw no need to mention them. But on human sacrifice, Diodorus (5.31) notes that for knowledge of great importance, the person chosen for death would be stabbed, and they could foretell the future based on the convulsion of the victim's limbs and the spurting of blood.²⁵ Caesar (6.16) says that, 'unless for a man's life a man's life is given back, the will of the immortal gods cannot be placated' and that criminals (or innocent men if no criminals were available) would be sacrificed by being burned in large wicker effigies.²⁶ The archaeological record is not clear on the issue of human sacrifice, but there have been many, very suggestive finds, particularly in bogs,²⁷ under foundations,²⁸ and in some Gallic religious sites²⁹.

Sacred Space

In the classical texts there are references to natural, sacred spaces as being in groves, in the woods or among the trees. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, describes a Druidic rite under an oak tree for the collection of mistletoe³⁰ and elsewhere (16.24) states that, 'they choose only groves of oak and perform no rites unless a branch of that tree is present',³¹ and Lucan, in his *Pharsalia* (a poem

²⁴ C. O'Rahilly, 128,

²⁵ J. Koch, 2001, 14.

²⁶ J. Koch, 2001, 22.

²⁷ M.A. Green, *Dying for the Gods: Human Sacrifice in Iron Age & Roman Europe*, (Charleston, SC: Tempus Publishing, Inc., 2002), 51-53.

²⁸ M.A. Green, 2002, 154-155.

²⁹ M.A. Green, 2002, 150-151.

³⁰ Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, XVI.103-4, Sir Edward Ridley, translator, John Bostock, editor (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137&layout=&loc=16.103> (viewed 2/12/09).

³¹ J. Koch, 2001, 32.

describing the Roman Civil War), describes the dark wood used for barbarous rites outside of the Greek colonial city of Massalia in southern Gaul.³² Miranda Green states that an essential animism underlay Celtic religion and that every part of the natural world and feature of the landscape was filled with spirit.³³ Posidonius, on the other hand, as reported by Strabo (*Geography* 4.4.6),³⁴ tells of the re-roofing of a temple (the Greek word he used, ἱερόν, normally means a sanctuary at the centre of an enclosure)³⁵ at the mouth of the river Loire. While it is true that little archaeological evidence would remain from religious practices held in groves of trees, archaeology does show us that the Celts also used cult enclosures during the Iron Age.

Jean Louis Brunaux identifies four types of sanctuary found in Gaul and the surrounding areas that existed before the arrival of the Romans. These are the Belgic type, the *Viereckschanzen* (quadrangular enclosures), the Celto-Ligurian sanctuaries, and those sacred places (*loci*) of the natural world.

The primary characteristics of the Belgic type of sanctuary are rich archaeological finds of offerings, an enclosed ritual space, usually bounded by a ditch and bank, often with a palisade, and in the centre of the enclosure there are posts, pits and perhaps a small temple. A prime example of this type would be the sanctuary at Gornay-sur-Aronde, France, just inside the gate of an *oppidum* (a fortified town) in the tribal area of the Bellovaci. An enclosure was built here by the end of the early la Tène period, during the 4th century BCE, and rebuilt many times. This sanctuary was a large rectangular enclosure with rounded corners surrounded by a ditch. Inside the enclosure there were a series of 9 pits that surrounded a larger, oval-shaped 10th pit. Animals were sacrificed and their remains left in the central pit to rot until the flesh fell off the bones, and then the skeleton was thrown into the ditch.

³² Lucan, *Pharsalia*, III.453-471, Sir Edward Ridley, translator, 1896, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896) at <http://omacl.org/Pharsalia/book3.html>, (viewed 2/12/09).

³³ M.J. Green, 'The Gods and the Supernatural', in Miranda J. Green, editor, *The Celtic World*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 465.

³⁴ J. Koch, 2001, 19.

³⁵ J. Webster, 'Sanctuaries and Sacred Places', in Miranda Green, editor, *The Celtic World*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 446.

Weapons were put into the surrounding pits, temporarily, before being moved to the ditch. On the east side, the entrance to the enclosure included a large gate with monumental portico that may have been reached by a small footbridge. On this gate human and bovine skulls would be displayed, and great piles of cattle skulls and weapons were placed on either side of it. All of this may have been seen as an accumulation of apotropaic power used to protect the only weak place in the sacred enclosure, the entranceway.³⁶ At the end of the 3rd century or beginning of the 2nd century BCE an oval, hut-like temple was built over the pits, probably to give the central pit shelter from the weather. The entire complex was closed down, buildings razed and the pits filled in just before the Roman conquest.³⁷

The second type of sanctuary in Gaul was the *Viereckschanzen* (quadrangular enclosures) found from Bohemia to southern France. Banks up to 3 metres high surround these enclosures. Generally, few sacrificial deposits have been found in these, and they may have been built as secular enclosures for important feasts, as described by Athenaeus in his *Deipnosophistae* (4.37).³⁸ However, at one of these *Viereckschanzen*, at Holzhausen, Bavaria, a shaft was found about 7.5 metres deep, and at the bottom of this shaft there was a wooden stake set in an upright position. An analysis was made of the surrounding fill material, and in it was found the decayed remains of flesh and blood.³⁹ Sacrificial offerings to pits may have been made as gifts to chthonic deities, those gods of the earth or of the Underworld. It is interesting to note that at some sites there are foundations that appear to be for altars or raised platforms, such as at Zavist, and these might have been used for the burning of offerings made to beneficial, celestial deities, such as was done in Greece and Rome.⁴⁰

The Celto-Ligurian sanctuaries were all located at *oppida* near the Rhône Delta in France. These sanctuaries were stone structures found with pillars that had niches for holding human skulls, and stone statuary of animals, birds and seated gods were also found. One such sanctuary at Entremont was inside

³⁶ J.L. Brunaux, 27.

³⁷ J.L. Brunaux, 13-16.

³⁸ J. Koch, 2001, 11.

³⁹ S. Piggot, 74.

⁴⁰ J.L. Brunaux, 33-35.

the *oppidum* by the gate and consisted of a long building in the form of a portico.⁴¹ These stone sanctuaries are very unusual for the Celtic world, and one possible explanation for them is that they were located close to the Greek colony of Massalia and the Etruscan city-states, who may have influenced the local Celts in the building of their temples. In all three cases, some sort of a boundary enclosure is present.

Natural *Loci*

The Gaulish word, *nemeton*, is a term for a natural space dedicated to pre-Christian religious activity. These could be sacred trees or a clearing in a grove, e.g. the Irish word, *fidnemed*, means ‘sacred wood’.⁴² Later the meaning of the word *nemeton* shifted to include, in addition, a shrine or temple built in stone.⁴³ These sacred woodland clearings did not leave much for the archaeologists to discover, however. The annual assemblies of the twelve tetrarchs of Galatia were said by Strabo (XII.5.1) to take place at Drunemeton, which translates as ‘sacred place of oaks’.⁴⁴ Whether or not a *nemeton* was a grove of trees or an enclosed sanctuary, it was a very sacred place.

Springs, Lakes, Rivers and Bogs

Water was a very sacred and potent focus of worship for the ancient Celts. While there are many deposits at springs from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, Celtic Iron Age deposits are quite rare. They only increase again during the Romano-Celtic period.

⁴¹ J.L. Brunaux, 37-38.

⁴² J. Koch, 2006, 1350.

⁴³ B. Maier, 207.

⁴⁴ J. Koch, 2006, 1351.

Lakes, rivers and bogs, on the other hand, show ample evidence of ritual deposition. Weapons, jewellery, slave chains, and gold and silver objects have all been found in bodies of water. The Volcae Tectosages would make fabulous offerings of silver and gold to a lake near Toulouse, France, in honour of the god Belenus. Strabo (*Geography*, 4.1.13),⁴⁵ quoting Posidonius, said that the lakes (as well as some sacred enclosures there) contained fifteen thousand talents in unwrought silver and gold (approximately 110,000 lbs. of silver and 100,000 lbs. of gold),⁴⁶ which was later dredged up and sold in public auction when the Roman consul Caepio came to power in the area. Archaeology shows us that there were many sacred lakes in Celtic lands, including the one at la Tène in Switzerland, where several thousand iron weapons, tools, some jewellery and coins were found.⁴⁷ The deposits at Llyn Cerrig Bach, discovered when peat was removed for the building of a new landing ground at Royal Air Force Station, Valley, in Anglesey, date from the 2nd century BCE into the 1st century CE.⁴⁸ There were 138 items found there, including weapons, equestrian gear, slave gang-chains, currency bars, cauldrons, a trumpet, bronze ribbons from ash staves, and a magnificent ornamented crescent plaque.⁴⁹ Deposits such as these indicated that water must have been a liminal place where access could be made to the underworld, much as pits may have been seen in the enclosures. The Celts were also known to make offerings in bogs, and streams, similar in function to pits and lakes. In Ireland, ornate bronze scabbard plates and a large bronze disk have been discovered in the River Bann, a hoard of gold objects, including torcs, was found in the River Roe in Co, Derry, and four high quality bronze trumpets were found with human skulls in Lake Loughnashade at the base of the hill on top of which stood Emain Macha.⁵⁰

Enclosure

⁴⁵ J. Koch, 2001, 15.

⁴⁶ J.L. Brunaux, 42.

⁴⁷ J.L. Brunaux, 42.

⁴⁸ M. Green, 1993, 142.

⁴⁹ C. Fox, *A Find of the Early Iron Age From Llyn Cerrig Bach, Anglesey*, (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 1946), 5.

⁵⁰ B. Rafferty, *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 183-184.

Enclosure, be it in the form of a ditch or within water or a pit, was primary and indispensable to Celtic cultic sites.⁵¹ The boundary between sacred and profane space, be it the ditch surrounding the *nemeton*, or the surface of the lake, stream or bog, must have been an important religious marker. For religious man, space is not homogeneous - sometimes he experiences breaks or interruptions in it. In the minds of the religious Celts, the structure of the cosmos would have been apparent in the arrangement of space. Where the sacred manifests, there is not only a break in the secular space that surrounds it, but there is also a different reality, a place where there can be no spatial reference points, but only a *centre*. And at this centre, communication between all the worlds (the heavens, the underworld and this world) is made possible.⁵² At cultic sites such as Gornay-sur-Aronde, the sacrificial deposits were placed in the ditch surrounding the *nemeton*. Deposits in lakes, bogs and streams were placed below the surface of the water. In both cases, it isn't just the *site* of the sacrifice itself, the place where animals or men are killed or weapons broken, that is all-important, but also the place of deposition as well. Boundaries, by their very nature, are liminal spaces. The ditches and water surfaces could be seen as thresholds between the world of men and of the Otherworlds,⁵³ so not only would these ditches, etc., be boundaries marking the edges of sacred space, but they would also be sacred spaces themselves.

The Afterlife and the Cult of the Head

If the classical commentators are to be trusted, the Celts believed that there was life after death, and one that reflected their social statuses on earth. Of Celtic belief in an afterlife, Diodorus Siculus (5.28) writes,

⁵¹ J.L. Bruneax, 25; J. Webster, 458.

⁵² M. Eliade, Willard Trask, translator, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, (New York: Harcourt, Inc. 1959), 20-22, 36-37.

⁵³ M.A. Green, 2002, 134.

“...the human spirit is immortal, and will enter a new body after a fixed number of years. For this reason some will cast letters to their relatives on funeral pyres, believing that the dead will be able to read them.”⁵⁴

Strabo (*Geography* 4.4.4) writes that, ‘Both these men [the druids] and others aver that men’s souls and the universe are imperishable, although both fire and water will at some times prevail over them.’⁵⁵ In writing of the druids, Pomponius Mela (*De Situ Orbis* 3.2.18) says they claim that, ‘the spirit is eternal and another life awaits the spirits of the dead.’ He goes on to show that this belief must have been strongly held,

For this reason also, in past times, they would defer business and payment of debts to the next life. There were some who would even throw themselves willingly onto the funeral pyres of their relatives so that they might live with them still.⁵⁶

Caesar (6.15) complained that the Druids taught this doctrine of life after death because it would incite Celtic warriors to greater acts of bravery and ferocity, since they had no fear of dying.⁵⁷

Archaeology also gives clues to Celtic ideas about death. In the late Hallstatt period of southwest Germany and eastern France, around 600-450 BCE, there existed a complex and very hierarchical chiefdom-type Celtic culture whose high-status graves were richly appointed. The graves of the ‘paramount chiefs’ show inhumation in wooden chambers accompanied by four-wheeled carts and horse harnesses, all filled with imported luxury goods including Greek and Etruscan drinking

⁵⁴ J. Koch, 2001, 12.

⁵⁵ J. Koch, 2001, 18.

⁵⁶ J. Koch, 2001, 31-32.

⁵⁷ J. Koch, 2001, 22.

vessels of bronze and silver, and lots of gold jewellery and torcs. These prestige barrows are surrounded by less high-status barrows with fewer grave goods, and inserted into all these barrows were secondary burials of more common folks with far fewer grave goods. Those who had more got to take more with them.

There was a change from inhumation to cremation burials in the Late Iron Age, but this need not imply a change in beliefs about death. In the cremation burials, grave goods would still be included, as Caesar states (*de Bello Gallico* 6.19), ‘The funerals, by the standards of the Gauls, are splendid and expensive. It is judged that all which was held dear [by the deceased] while alive should be put into the fire...’⁵⁸

The Cult of the Head

It is well known that the Celts (among other peoples) practiced headhunting in war. Both Strabo (*Geography* 4.4.5)⁵⁹ and Diodorus Siculus (5.29) mention that the Celts would hang the heads of their enemies from the necks of their horses after battle and then on the doorframes of their houses when they got home. Diodorus continues,

They preserve the heads of their most distinguished enemies in cedar oil and store them carefully in chests. These they proudly display to visitors, saying that for this head one of his ancestors, or his father, or he himself refused a large offer of money.⁶⁰

Livy (23.24) tells of the skull of consul designate Lucius Postumus who died in battle against the Gauls in 216 BCE. The tribe of the Boii took his head,

⁵⁸ J. Koch, 2001, 23.

⁵⁹ J. Koch, 2001, 18.

⁶⁰ J. Koch, 2001, 13.

...to their holiest temple. Then, after they removed the flesh from the head, they adorned the skull with gold according to their custom. They used it as a sacred vessel to give libations on holy days...⁶¹

In the Irish tradition, heads are taken in battle. In *Scéla Mucce Meic Dá Thó (The Story of Macc Da Thó's Pig)*,⁶² warriors argue over whom has the right to carve the pig, and many claim this right due to the heads they had collected. Conall Cernach declares that he has “never slept without a Connachta head under my knee” and later wins the right to carve the pig when he displays the head of Anlúan (a great Connachta hero) and throws it at his rival.⁶³

The human head could be seen as the centre of a person's activity, the place where speech resides and vision is present. As such, it could be considered the repository of the whole person, or at least his soul. In Welsh tradition, the Second Branch of the *Mabinogi* tells the tale of Bran and how after a battle where he receives a mortal wound, he orders his head cut off, and it spends many years entertaining his companions who ‘were not aware of having spent a more pleasurable or more delightful time.’ Finally, after a taboo is broken, the head is taken to London where it is buried on Gwenfryn (White Mount), facing France, ‘for no oppression could come over the sea to this island while the head was in that hiding-place.’⁶⁴ The apotropaic function of Bran's head here is very reminiscent of the severed heads nailed to the gateway of Celtic sanctuaries such as Gournay-sur-Aronde and placed in column niches such as at Entremont.

⁶¹ J. Koch, 2001, 36.

⁶² J. Koch, 2006, 472.

⁶³ J. Gantz, translator, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 180-187.

⁶⁴ S. Davies, translator, *The Mabinogion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 33-34.

Often, heads are associated with wells and springs in Britain. A well dedicated to the goddess Coventina along Hadrian's Wall was found to contain a human skull and several small bronze heads.⁶⁵ Stone heads with two or three faces appear in Ireland,⁶⁶ and even in the *Vitae* of the Welsh Saints, female saints often lose their heads, causing springs to erupt from the ground where the head falls, as happened to Saint Gwenfrwry.⁶⁷

The Gods

Before the Roman conquest of Gaul, stone images of Gods or heroes are rare in the archaeological record, but some do exist. There is a huge sandstone figure found near a Hallstadt era tumulus at Hirschlanden dating to the 6th century BCE of a naked man wearing a helmet, torc, belt and dagger, which might possibly depict a war god. Other figures exist in stone as well, such as a two-faced pillar from Holzerlingin, with horns on their heads, and another head, very Celtic looking with a moustache, from Czechoslovakia. However, a chance preservation of an Iron Age wood head from a sacred spring at the source of the Seine allows us to consider the possibility, at least, that wooden sculpture may have existed in the Celtic world in far larger quantities than we have now.⁶⁸ Lucan's remarks in his *Pharsalia* (III, 468-469),⁶⁹ 'effigies of gods rude, scarcely fashioned from some fallen trunk,' may need to be borne in mind.

For the pre-Roman Celts, the gods were everywhere,⁷⁰ and this might account for the paucity of god images. Such an understanding of divinity might not fit well within an anthropomorphic image. The sanctity of natural features is displayed in Romano-Celtic times in the names of deities that are linked to specific topographical places or forests, such as the goddess Artio (a bear goddess) associated

⁶⁵ A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1996), 140-142.

⁶⁶ P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983), 17-19.

⁶⁷ R. Pepin and H. Feiss, *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, pp. 97-101.

⁶⁸ M. Green, 1993, 151-152.

⁶⁹ Lucan, <http://omacl.org/Pharsalia/book3.html>.

⁷⁰ M. Green, 1993, 22.

with the place name Artomagus, and the goddess Arduinna (the boar goddess) associated with the forest of the Ardennes.⁷¹ Of the classical authors, only Lucan mentions gods with Celtic names (*Pharsalia*, Book 1, lines 498-500), ‘And those who pacify with blood accursed savage Teutates, Hesus’ [Esus’] horrid shrines, and Taranis’ altars cruel...’⁷² Teutates is thought to mean a ‘local, tribal deity’,⁷³ Esus means ‘Lord’ or ‘god’,⁷⁴ and Taranis means ‘thunderer’.⁷⁵ These are titles as opposed to names, and these gods might not have been that important since they are rarely listed in stone inscriptions.⁷⁶

After the suppression of the Druids, the religion of the Celts merged with Roman religious ideas to create a uniquely new religion, for Druidism wasn’t a formal system outside of Celtic religion, but the religion itself.⁷⁷ This change also brought about a great increase in iconography in the classical style as well as inscriptions on stone. But the Celts did not share the Roman concept of a limited, unified pantheon. Most gods were local; very few (if any) were worshipped across the Celtic world. Those with somewhat larger circulation include the 3-headed god on the Marne and Côte-d’Or; the wheel god in the Massif Central and the lower Rhône; the god with a hammer (sometimes called Sucellos) in the Midi, on the Rhône, the Seine and in the Rhineland; and the horned gods scattered throughout Gaul.⁷⁸ Other types that would show up in Roman era carvings include the Mothers (*Deae Matres* or *Matronae* - three goddesses shown together, either all the same age or as a young woman flanked by two matrons) carrying signs of fertility (coins, fruit, wheat, etc.),⁷⁹ single mother goddesses (such as Nehalennia, who also is shown with fertility symbols),⁸⁰ the *genii cucullati* (hooded dwarves often seen in triplicate,

⁷¹ M. Green, 1993, 32.

⁷² Lucan, <http://omacl.org/Pharsalia/book1.html>

⁷³ J. Koch, 2006, 1665.

⁷⁴ B. Maier, 110.

⁷⁵ J. Koch, 2006, 1659.

⁷⁶ M. Green, 1993, 14.

⁷⁷ A. Ross, ‘Ritual and the Druids’, in Miranda J. Green, editor, *The Celtic World*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 431.

⁷⁸ S. Piggot, 85.

⁷⁹ M. Green, 1993, 78.

⁸⁰ M. Green, 1993, 86-88.

sometimes accompanying a single mother goddess and probably connected with fertility),⁸¹ and named god-forms, like Epona (the horse goddess).⁸² Romano-Celtic divine couples were often portrayed together as a Roman god with a Celtic goddess, such as Mercury and Rosemerta, though purely Celtic couples, like Sucellos and Nantosuelta, were also paired.⁸³ None of these gods were new, necessarily, but the forms of their worship were changed by Mediterranean influence.

The early wheel image found in Celtic art is now assumed to represent sun and sky cults, with the hub representing the sun, the spokes representing the rays, and the wheel itself being the nimbus of light.⁸⁴ By Roman times, the wheel would become associated with gods such as Taranis, and with other deities conflated with the Roman Jupiter (a sky, thunder and father deity). In fact, where Celtic and Roman deities are equated in epigraphy on stone, one Roman god may share the attributes of several Celtic ones.⁸⁵ Roman syncretism was so pervasive that Caesar (6.17) managed to describe the Celtic gods by only using the names of a few Roman deities:

Of the gods they worship Mercury most of all...After him, Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva.⁸⁶

Caesar also says (6.18) that ‘The Gauls proclaim that they are all sprung from the same father, Dis, and say that this has been transmitted from the Druids.’⁸⁷ Dis Pater was the Roman god of wealth and the dead and it is unclear to which god Caesar was referring. John Koch states that it could be Sucellus in Gaul, and perhaps even Donn in Ireland.⁸⁸ I suspect Cernunnos. In any case, the worship of this god probably indicates some form of veneration of the tribal ancestor.

⁸¹ M. Green, 1993, 90-91.

⁸² M. Green, 1993, 91-94.

⁸³ M. Green, 1993, 95-97.

⁸⁴ M. Green, 1993, 39.

⁸⁵ S. Piggot, 15-16.

⁸⁶ J. Koch, 2001, 22.

⁸⁷ J. Koch, 2001, 23.

⁸⁸ J. Koch, vol. 2, 2006, 600-601.

It is clear that we know a lot of detail about ancient Celtic religion, from archaeology to the works of ancient authors, but with all this we are still not able to form a complete picture without the use of speculation and argument. While we know that the Celts had a rich and varied religious life, some areas of their beliefs may never be known. We can only hope that future archaeological investigations and textual analysis will help fill in some of the gaps.

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