

# CELTIC RELIGION

## The Ancient Celts

The Celts originated, as far as is known, in the eighth century BC in Eastern Europe - probably Hungary and Czechoslovakia - from where they migrated across Europe and were known as "Galates" by the Greeks and "Gauls" by the Romans. The first mention in Classical writing that has survived dates back to about 500BC. However, most of the references to this elusive people are of later date. Diodorus Siculus, writing in the first century BC, Julius Caesar in his "Gallic Wars" and Strabo, writing a generation later, remain our principal sources of information on the Celts before the Roman occupation. All three writers wrote their own travellers' tales but also quoted earlier authorities, usually of works that have not survived. Their descriptions are frequently borne out by the evidence of archaeology and the pictorial clues that can be deduced from Celtic artefacts and sculpture. As far as their religion, philosophy and customs are concerned, we are on much shakier ground. The Celts were by no means illiterate, but theirs was really an oral tradition, with the power of the word respected over the written document. Religious matters were never revealed in writing, which was initially used for civil and administrative matters and account keeping. Such writings as have been found use the Greek alphabet borrowed from the colonies around Marseille or, later, the Latin alphabet, usually using Celtic words that have not yet been translated, but sometimes employing a mixture of languages.

The Celts migrated in progressive waves, mingling with the indigenous people and absorbing some of their customs while bringing new skills and arts with them. Foremost among these was their mastery of iron, which gave them power over the warriors who knew only bronze, and rendered them the most formidable force in Europe. You have heard of their cultures known as "Hallstadt" and "La Tène", and know that their society was dominated in those days by princely chiefs of immense wealth. They established hilltop forts known as oppida defended by ramparts and wooden palisades where they lived in houses constructed of timber and mud thatched with straw, and from which they controlled the peasants who lived in the valleys, raising cereals, beef and pork. These princes enriched themselves by trading with the Greek colonies and as far afield as the Etruscans in Northern Italy. Their graves show evidence of these exchanges: the luxury products with which they furnished themselves for the afterlife include wine, bronze vessels and fine pottery which they purchased with minerals, furs and by selling slaves. These graves were usually dug near the oppida in vaults lined with wood and covered up with stone and earth. They would take with them their ceremonial four-wheeled cart and many precious items of silver and gold jewellery ornamented with coral, jade and other stones. Sometimes, the dead chieftain, richly clad in silk or wool with shoes decorated with gold, would lie on a kind of bronze couch with little wheels. A large bronze cauldron and some useful plates and glasses would be added to his equipment. Usually his armour completed the panoply of grave goods.

Women, too, might be buried with great pomp and splendour, witness the sumptuous grave goods of the Princess of Vix. But men also appreciated beautifully worked metal adornments for their personal possessions, their armour and the caparisons of their horses, with their intricate decorations.

At this stage the Gauls did not form a cohesive nation: they were constantly at war with neighbouring tribes, forming and re-forming alliances. From Germany and Switzerland the Celts swept north to Denmark and the British Isles, South to Italy, West and South West to France, and Iberia. Celtic culture survived in Ireland - which remained the last bastion of Celtic civilisation when the rest of the Gauls had become Romanised. In the fifth century AD, St Patrick brought Christianity to the Island. But pagan customs and old legends lingered on, were collected as literature by monks, and some of their lore has survived to the present day.

### **Funerary Rites**

From studies of the thousands of tombs that have been unearthed in Gaul, we know quite a lot about the funeral customs of the Celts. Not everyone enjoyed individual burial: some corpses, particularly those of children, were simply placed in ditches. Most, however, were laid to rest in cemeteries, in holy ground. These were situated away from the village centre, sometimes separated from the territory of the living by a trench and an enclosure.

By the fifth century BC the Hallstadt hill forts were becoming deserted and the new focus of wealth, known as “Latenienne” from the site found in “La Tène” in Switzerland was becoming pre-eminent. No doubt, this was as a result of changing patterns of trade following the Etruscan victory over the Greeks. The Celts of Bohemia, of the Rhineland and of Champagne were better placed to profit by the new trade routes and the patterns of domination changed too. The great feudal princes having become impoverished were no longer able to control vast areas. When they died they were subject to a more democratic form of burial in cemeteries where those of other social strata were buried too. Even the ceremonial chariots underwent an economic decline, and were usually found with only two wheels. A warrior was still buried with his armour and weapons, however, and usually with some useful equipment including joints of meat, mostly pork or dog. Throughout this period, and for another couple of centuries, the migrations continued, probably as a result of population increase. Some tribes already established in the North-East of Gaul pushed over the Alps to settle in Italy, pillaging Rome itself in 385 BC.

Others, starting from the Rhineland and Bohemia went across the Balkans to ravage Greece, even sacking the hallowed sanctuaries of Delphi before making for Turkey where they were to settle as Galatians. By the third century BC, the Belgae had populated the North of France and part of the British Isles where they became Bretons and Britons. It was around this time that the use of coinage was introduced to the Celtic world. From the fifth to around the middle of the third century BC, burial gave way to cremation, both practices co-existing sometimes in the

same cemetery. Normally just one person was buried in a rectangular cavity. Laid on his back, with his head to the West, he would have with him (unless he was very poor) various offerings such as terracotta vases, joints of meat – evidence of a belief in an after-life – and personal items, the quantity dependent on his social position. Women of a certain rank kept their jewels: often a torc, bracelets and anklets and (less frequently) rings. Warriors, who tended to be the richest people after the chieftains, whose tombs were sometimes distinguished by being in a square enclosure, were also buried with their torcs, fibulae (kilt pins worn on the shoulder), bracelets and armour.

Graves of the third century BC have been found where oval wooden shields were laid over the bodies of dead warriors, while an iron sword, its sheath and a lance completed the outfit. During this century cremation became the general custom. The ashes of the deceased, which had been burnt on a pyre with some of his personal belongings, were placed in a cavity or in an urn in a trench – sometimes within an enclosure – and sometimes accompanied by offerings which were frequently limited to pottery. No doubt, some of the objects that have been disinterred have a ritual significance. Armour is frequently found in a deliberately mutilated condition, shields buckled and swords twisted till they are unusable. The symbolism here is obvious. More mysterious objects include shallow pointed spoons like leaves, with short handles. Matched pairs accompanying a shallow drinking cup of similar manufacture have been found in graves as wide apart as Gaul and different parts of the British Isles. One of these pairs of spoons has the bowl engraved with a cross, perhaps representing the four seasons of the year or the four phases of the moon. We can only speculate on the role these could have played in the burial ceremonies. Often included in the panoply of grave goods was a wooden bucket with ornamented bronze mountings. I would imagine that this played a part in a ritual purification. We know that the Celts were surprisingly clean in their habits. After all, they were the inventors of soap!

## **Before the Romans**

As I have mentioned, the Celts were well known to classical historians and geographers who admired them as brave barbarians and fine specimens of humanity in a natural state. Herodotus wrote that they called themselves the “Keltoi” which is how the name of this nation has come down to us. A Greek writer of the 4<sup>th</sup> c BC, Pytheas, described a magnificent circular temple to Apollo which existed in Britain. This was probably Stonehenge or Avebury, which was not built by the Celts, but may have been used by them. Normally, however, the earliest Celts worshipped in the open air, in clearings in sacred woods or by lakes, rivers, springs and streams. There is, however, archaeological evidence of some wooden temples built by the Celts before the Roman invasion. Unearthed as far apart as Germany and England, it is likely that some of these structures must have been built in Gaul, too. One such temple found at Heathrow is believed to date back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> c BC. It is similar in plan to the later stone-built Gallo-Roman temples, and I shall have more to say of those presently.

It is a universal aspect of primitive religions to worship nature in all its forms. The sun was, of course, the greatest god as no life was possible without him, and other mighty attributes such as thunder and lightning might be added to his powers. Night and the moon were often seen as his other half – either his consort or his adversary. The early Celts were pantheists: they worshipped the sky and the stars, water and fountains, springs and rivers, rocks and trees – especially the mighty oak and the mysterious mistletoe. Springs and wells, rocks and caves all had their tutelary deities. In these early times, if the gods were represented at all, it was probably in animal form, especially those animals which symbolised strength and courage like the wild boar, the horse and the bull.

So the different strands of pre-conquest religion can be seen as existing on various levels: firstly the unevolved beliefs and superstitions of ordinary folk with their need for material help and reassurance in death. They worship natural phenomena and pray to be spared from thunder, lightning, cold, dark, famine, sickness and death. They make offerings and pray for success with their harvests and animal husbandry, for fertility, cures and triumph over their enemies. They respect those who can provide for them, give them protection and good counsel: their chiefs and heroes. They also respect the medicine man, who has found out the healing properties of various plants and can interpret the future and the will of the gods.

When the Celts arrived to Gaul around 800BC, they brought – no doubt – such ideas with them, but they must also have found similar beliefs already in force among the indigenous people who were the original megalith builders of Western Europe. To some extent, there must have been a meeting of minds, as Druids were known to have made use of Stonehenge and other megalithic sites. It would have been surprising indeed if the two peoples did not intermarry over the centuries, so the Gaulish nation conquered by the Romans must have been a fusion not only of people but also of beliefs.

Before the Roman occupation, between the dearth of inscriptions and of representations of their gods, the Celts' remains one of the most inscrutable religions. We know that far from being deficient in the areas of sculpture and decoration, the Gauls were among the most talented artists known to civilization. Their mastery, not only over iron but of silver, gold and other metals is witnessed by the beautiful weapons and jewellery, from which we also know that they had a superb approach to design. These designs of curlicues, festoons and floral, animal and human details running riot over every form of artefact no doubt contains a wealth of symbolism that is mostly lost to us. One detail that recurs ceaselessly is the triskele or three-legged ornament often made up of triangular curlicues on triangular roundels. This must surely be a reminder of the all-powerful trinities beloved of the Gauls. The three legs of the Isle of Man is another example of this kind of decoration, as is the ubiquitous four-legged Aryan swastika found all over India. The famous Celtic patterns of interlaced scrolls and swirls which reached their zenith in the wonderful illuminated manuscripts known as the Book of Kells in the eighth century AD, has an ancestry that can be traced back to the Hallstadt period. So why are the very few representation of people or gods from before the Conquest so crude and formless?

Probably for a reason similar to that which forbade the Moslems from depicting created forms in their art: only Gods may create life.

Just as the Celts would not risk putting their sacred lore in writing, so too, were depictions of their gods jealously guarded from the vulgar hordes. The Druids had a monopoly on all areas of learning apart from the crafts of the artisans, and no doubt even they were controlled.

## **The Celtic Pantheon**

Our information regarding the complex religion of the Celts in Gallo-Roman times comes from three main sources :

- Classical literature, as described in the works of Poseidonios, Phylarchus, Pytheas, Dinoysos of Laerce, Herodotus, Caesar, Pliny, Livy, Strabo, Tacitus, Diodorus Siculus and others. Some of these writers were, possibly, politically biased, some largely sympathetic, others frankly contemptuous.
- Archaeology – with its evidence of burial customs, votive offerings found in sacred wells, carvings on sacred stones or in caves. These are difficult to interpret, though some fragments, using either Greek or Latin letters and some borrowed vocabulary have been pieced together.

Iconographic, from the vast array of artefacts in stone, bronze, precious metals, etc. that have come down to us through the centuries. However, interpretation is very patchy here, too.

Commerce with the more evolved civilisations of Greece and Rome had influenced the Celts for centuries, as can be observed from their art, and many alignments can be made between the gods of the Classical Mediterranean world and those of the Norse, the Celts and Gaulish people. More tenuous, but no less valid is comparison with Brahminism, which derives from the same Aryan origin as the Celtic civilisation in the most distant times. I will discuss this aspect presently.

Julius Caesar wrote that he had seen a few representations of Gaulish gods, but these may well have been votive offerings: crudely carved wooden dolls or limbs, many of which have been found in holy wells and healing springs. One aspect of the Romans was their tolerance of other religions. Another was their eagerness to absorb them. Occasionally they would take on a new cult from an exotic outpost of the empire, such as those of Isis, Mithras and Cybele. More often, however, they liked to tidy them up by tabulating them to fit in with their own gods and goddesses, saying that Odin was the same as Jupiter, his wife Freya the same as Juno, etc. This facile kind of comparison was not so easy when it came to Celtic religion. Julius Caesar said

the Gauls worshipped Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, Apollo, etc., neither knowing nor caring to give us their Gaulish names.

Thanks to inscriptions on Gallo-Roman sculptures, or in writings by classical authors or later, Irish monks, we know the names of over 400 gods of Gaul, often found only once. No doubt, many of these were different names for the same deity, or local names for universal gods known by other names in other parts of Gaul, but each extended family or settlement liked to have its own tutelary god or goddess, like Vesunna in the place we now know as Périgueux.

Perhaps this proliferation of supernatural people to whom one might pray for help or success in one's endeavours can be compared to the more modern custom of praying to saints, which exists not only in the Catholic religion but in Buddhism and many others. Humble people might have quailed at addressing the mighty gods and feared that they would be ignored. A personal devotion to a less important, local deity might prove more successful. Chieftains and leaders might have prayed to their ancestors, valiant heroes like themselves, who they believed would now be in heaven, so empowered to intercede for them with the reigning gods.

The earliest humanoid statues are often of the triads of Matrones or Mother Goddesses and of the Taranis-Teutates-Esus triad. Cernunnos, with his antlers bridged the gap between man and beast for he had a man's body, wore breeches and a torc, but his legs ended in deers' hooves.

Triads, or families of three gods are found frequently in many religions – Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu in Hindu mythology; Isis, Osiris and Horus in Egyptian; Zeus and Hera or Jupiter and Juno in Classical mythology, with their large families, right down to the Holy Trinity in Christian religion. The Celts had a multiplicity of three-in-one and one-in-three images. Three was their most sacred number, and their triple deities were three of a kind: three male gods or three female divinities, often a triple-headed personage, but usually with each of the three elements being identical in appearance. The inference seems to be added potency – thrice or threefold being an image of omnipotence. The “Three Mothers” – usually represented as seated, with attributes of fertility such as fruit, flowers, cornucopias or occasionally babies, were found frequently in Burgundy but also in the Cotswolds. A particularly fine example of the Tricephalos or three-headed god from the second century AD was found at Bavay, in Picardy. Another triple motif used in Celtic art, probably with a mystical purpose, is the Triskele to which we have already referred. A simple decoration consisting of three elements, which appear to move in the same direction around a central point, it probably derives from a solar symbol.

Among the multitude of divinities, many of purely local character and dedicated to nature or the animal kingdom, a few universal figures emerge. Chief among their gods was he who (according to Caesar) “invented the arts, guided voyagers and watched over roads”. This was probably Lug, who was venerated over a wide geographical area. Lug, like Mercury, was patron of the arts and also of fighting. His name means “the shining one” and is found in the

names of cities such as Lyons (Lugdunum), maybe even London, which the Romans knew as Londinium, and possibly Lugano, and even Louth.

Teutates was the protector of the tribe; his name is associated with the Celtic word “tuatha” which means “people”. Caesar called him Mars, as he saw him as the god of war, to whom captured armour was offered after the battle, and he is sometimes thought to be the same as Esus, who is represented as an elderly man, sometimes in the act of chopping down trees with his mighty axe.

The sun god was Belenus, known as Bel in some places, whom Caesar referred to simply as “Apollo”. His name means “bright” or “brilliant” and he is the healer, associated with both the healing power of the sun and healing springs. The horse, too, is one of his attributes; clay horse figurines were found at his shrine in Saint-Sabine, Burgundy. Sometimes he is shown riding a horse or hurling a thunderbolt, so he, too, is associated with Jupiter. He has been depicted with his hair radiating like the sun’s rays, and with his wheel, with its radiating spokes being used as a shield.

However, just to complicate matters, the wheel is also an attribute of the god Taranis, who reigned in the sky. Taranis was represented as a bearded man holding a thunderbolt, a wheel and the Celtic spirals. He was a cruel god, and humans were sacrificed to him.

There is the great earth-mother who married firstly Taranis, god of the sky, and then Esus, god of the earth.

Where gods are represented in human form, they are often shown seated cross-legged, like Buddha. Goddesses, however, usually sit on some form of chair, with or without a baby or a basket of plenty.

The representation of Esus, as of certain birds and animals, changed with the seasons. Sometimes he bore the shape of a man and the name, Esus. At other times, half man-half stag with massive antlers, as Cernunnos. Then he was either the god of vegetation or the god of the underworld and of death. Like Taranis, he was a bloodthirsty god. His companion and protector was called Smertios, and he was often assimilated with Hercules as he had killed the giant hound of Taranis just as Hercules fought the lion of Nemea or the hellhound Cerberus.

One of the strangest gods was Cernunnos, with his antlers and deer’s hooves, often shown sitting cross-legged, sometimes accompanied by a serpent with the head of a ram. He was the god of prosperity, so very important in the daily lives of rich and poor alike. The Celts believed that their ancestor was the god of the underworld. Perhaps this was Ogmios, who is shown leading the dead who are chained by their ears to his tongue; Ogmios may well be the original of the mighty Og who features in later Celtic legend as a hero and the inventor of the graffiti known as Ogham script.

The most popular goddess associated with horses is Epona, and of all the Celtic pantheon, she is the only deity to have been adopted under her own name by the Romans. She is usually shown astride a horse, and her name is cognate with the Greek “hippos”, whether because of the influence of the Greek colonies or because both Greek and Celtic stem from an earlier, Indo-European root. Robert Turcan, in “the Cults of the Roman Empire” alleges that “Celtic... gods had scarcely any influence in the Mediterranean world” with the exception of Epona, who “was known & honoured in Cisalpine Gaul, Transylvania and Rome itself, but only among the horsemen or circus charioteers, because of either her worshippers’ ethnic origins or their professional activities.”

### **The Gallo-Roman Synthesis**

How many Celts lived in Gaul at the time of the Roman Conquest? Estimates vary considerably – from 5 million to 30 million, but they were certainly numerous, though there was little Celtic presence in the Pyrenees where the Basques were – and remained – pre-eminent. As the Gauls gradually became Gallo-Romans, their religions began to merge and evolve. The Emperor Augustus became the religious leader and the Romans established his cult in Gaul as well as the cult of Rome herself, witness the still splendid “Maison Carré” in Nimes, which was a temple dedicated to his worship together with his wife, Livia .

Although the Druids were suppressed for political reasons, the gods of the Gauls were accepted and reciprocally, the Gauls gradually came to make a place not only for the gods of Rome but for those from Greece, too, and for others from the East such as Mithras from Persia, Isis and Serapis from Egypt and Cybele the Mother Goddess and her companion, Attis, from Asia Minor.

Animal divinities continued to be honoured ; Cernunnos with his stag’s antlers, Taruos Trigaranus, the “bull with three cranes” represented on bas-reliefs in Lutetia (Lutèce) and Artio the bear-goddess. Some major gods were worshipped throughout Gaul, like Epona, Grannos, Belenos – frequently aligned with Apollo; Rosmerta, Sucellus and his companion Nantosuelta; Esus and Taranis the god of thunder who was the equivalent of Jupiter. In addition, there were the many local divinities. Some of them bore the names of localities or of peoples, many were linked with a great Roman god such as Mars or Mercury who were the most popular in Gaul. Mercury’s name has been found on nearly four hundred and fifty inscriptions and three hundred and fifty documents as well as many temples. Caesar recorded the popularity of this god throughout Gaul, and added that he was also known as the protector of roads and journeys and had the greatest influence over trade and profit. It was probably this aspect of Mercury’s power rather than his quality of patron of arts that induced the Gauls to worship him above other gods.



Next in popularity was Mars, the god of war and Minerva who presided over manual work and all crafts. But most popular, too, was Diana, goddess of the hunt, of forests and springs, who reminded them of Sirona who had been much in favour in pre-Roman times. Thus, Sir James Frazer, in his famous compilation of folklore and legend, “The Golden Bough”, first published in 1922: “the Celts used to offer an annual sacrifice to Diana on her birthday, purchasing the sacrificial victim with the fines they had paid into her treasury for every fox, hare and roe that they had killed in the course of the year. The custom clearly implied that the wild beasts belonged to the goddess, and that she must be compensated for their slaughter.” Here, he is quoting Arrian, writing in the fifth century AD.

So Julius Caesar’s arrogant assumption of Celtic religion as a primitive reflection of his own – reminiscent of Victorian missionary attitudes – eventually became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Probably his knowledge of history made him confident that this would be the inevitable outcome of colonialisation, yet the Gauls did manage to retain some of their ancient traditions among the more modern fashions brought in by their conquerors.

### **Sacred Places and Sanctuaries**

During the heyday of Celtic dominance, Europe was covered in vast tracts of forest. Caesar wrote that one might wander through an area of forest for sixty days without emerging from it. Life in the forest might be lived secretly: the Druids held their assemblies in the forest of Carnutes near Chartres, and it was in the forests that they sought the mistletoe, essential to their rites and ceremonies according to Pliny. For a people so close to nature, the forest with its light and shadow, its mysterious thickets teeming with the mighty aurochs and fierce wild boar was a limitless reserve of game and adventure, a magical place full of gods which awed priests, and inspired artists and poets. So the warriors who hunted for pleasure and the pot between battles, recognised that the animals of the forest belonged to the gods, and invariably sought their permission before embarking on a chase and brought thank offerings when their venture met with success.

Shrines and altars were constructed in the forests. Usually built of wood, at least in the earliest times, many have vanished without trace, but some are mentioned by classical authors. Lucan writes of one in a forest near Marseilles, where “altars were erected on little hillocks and all the trees were purified with human blood”. You can see a place like this not far from here in the woods between Celles and Grand Brassac, where the ancient chapel is believed to have replaced a Druid shrine, and where a modern altar has been built on a small artificial hillock which may well have housed a pagan altar long ago. This is St Jean de la Lande with its traditional annual pilgrimage on St John’s Day – 24<sup>th</sup> June – which I believe replaced one of the summer solstice festivals. There is even a little holy well just down the hill which is the focus of the procession, and where mothers dipped their feverish babies right up till recent times.

The waters of pools, lakes, marshes or rivers were sacred too, as were springs and wells which were often believed to have healing powers. The Celts often made offerings in such places and the museums of Europe are filled with artefacts, jewellery, arms and armour, statuettes and votive figurines which have been found in watery places from the Thames to the marshes of Denmark where the wonderful Gundestrop cauldron, source of so much of our knowledge of Celtic religion was found. Strabo, a generation before Lucan, writing soon after Caesar's conquest of Gaul, said that the people around Toulouse (as we now call it) were in the habit of throwing silver and gold ingots into lakes in honour of Belenus.

Small, cup-shaped gold coins, sometimes known as "rainbow gold" were specially manufactured for use as offerings in temples, and were never stolen, to the wonder of Diodorus Siculus, who wrote of the custom.

Many of the shrines that have been found in Gaul are in Picardy, and were built by the Belgae. Often constructed on a height, they might be placed in the middle of a tribe's territories or on its frontiers. Usually these consist of a square enclosure with rounded corners measuring about 30 to 50 meters from the side, defined by a ditch and protected by a wooden palisade. The entrance is on the East, and might be monumental, like the sanctuary found at Gournay-sur-Aronde in the Oise, whose portals were adorned with human skulls, and those of cattle. In the middle of this enclosure there might be a wooden shrine, often square, known as a cella or inner chamber, possibly with a walkway around it. Offerings of armour might be hung on masts or placed in the ditch along with huge numbers of human and animal remains from sacrifices, as at the sanctuary of Ribemont-sur-Ancre in the Somme.

Among the earliest sanctuaries discovered in Gaul is a small, square temple at Vix, associated with the princely tomb found there. The entrance is in the middle of the wall facing West, i.e., towards the setting sun, so probably it was built as part of a funerary complex. The temple is surrounded by a wide, deep ditch in which was found two life-size stone statues: one male, with armour and the other female, wearing a torc. These may have taken part in the funeral banquet, as other finds included the bones of oxen, pork and mutton as well as dog, and many fragments of drinking cups. So, as early as the fifth century BC there is evidence of the practice of religious rites and sacrifices which would have necessitated priests. If you want to see a building of this kind, visit the tiny chapel of St Mandé in l'Hopital, just above our house. From drawings of Celtic square temples – whether of wood or stone, thatched or tiled, I think it is basically similar. Don't forget to spot the stone head built into the wall just above the central, west-facing door. Although it represents a saint and is probably twelfth century, it is not so different from some of the bearded Gaulish gods.

## **Tribal Rites**

At the time of the Roman conquest, half way through the first century BC, the people of Gaul were governed by two officials known as the vergobret who held civic powers, and a military

chief who commanded the soldiery. Elected annually, these officers were chosen from among the nobles on the one hand by a Senate, and on the other by a military council. Nevertheless, neither commander could undertake any enterprise without having obtained the permission of the gods: that is to say, of the Druids of the tribe. In the same way, no important political decision could be made without the Druids, whose presence guaranteed the goodwill of the gods.

In Rome, all public activities took place in the Forum or in the Senate House. In Gaul, however, these functions were carried out in temples or near shrines and sanctuaries. Archaeology has revealed some of the rites practised by the Druids for the good of the community. Priests offered numerous sacrifices to the gods of the underworld. In the temple at Gournay, for example, large numbers of cattle were sacrificed, and these were raised near by, in readiness for these ceremonies. Approximately every ten years, animals were slaughtered or felled by blows from an axe and then dragged into a great ditch. There their bodies were left to decompose for a number of months, to nourish the earth and the gods below who were supposed to reward the people with good fortune and produce in return.

## **The Druids**

What are the origins of the Druids? This was already a source of speculation to classical writers of the third century BC! Julius Caesar thought they began in the British Isles. This was a popular view throughout the nineteenth century, especially among British researchers and folklorists, but the archaeological evidence does not bear it out. On the contrary, the British Isles and especially Ireland were the last bastion of Druidical teaching, but probably not the cradle.

The ancient authors referred to were Sotion of Alexandria and the author of a treatise entitled “Magic” wrongly attributed to Aristotle. Only fragments remain, but the mere fact that Druids were known so far from home and so long ago places their origin a century or more earlier, say four or five hundred BC. Their theories were quoted by Diogenes of Laerce who wrote “some say that philosophy began among the Barbarians. It was practised by the Magi of Persia, the Chaldeans of Babylon or the Assyrians . . . as well as by the Celts and the Gauls who were called Druids and Semnotheans.” Now, Semnothean is a word that was only used once (as far as we know) and is Greek for “venerable men of divine origin” which was also the meaning of the word “Druid”. So among the first things we learn about Druids is the very high status they held among the Celts, similar to prophets, saints or demi-gods. No wonder that the Roman administration came to view them as politically dangerous, especially after the establishment of the cult of the Emperor as god.

Diogenes also quotes his sources as saying that the Druids held three truths as self-evident: the need to honour the gods, do no evil, and be brave. Already, in the first century BC, learned writers compared the philosophies of Pythagoras with those of the Druids, and speculated on

which came first. Pythagoras had lived in Greece, and later in Italy, around the fifth century BC, founding an important school of philosophers, with, allegedly, around six hundred members. Similarities suggested included the length of time that was spent on instruction and its secret nature; the fact of being clothed in white and living communally; interest in astronomy and numbers, but above all a belief in reincarnation. Of course, these characteristics are shared with other priesthoods, and comparisons have also been made between Druids and Brahmins. In “Les Druides et le Druidisme”, Françoise le Roux writes : The Brahmin “laws of Manou” describes three castes: the brahmins or priests, the warrior class and the working class. Similarly, in Gaul there were the Druids, the heroes and the craftsmen. Although Caesar alleges that there were two classes, Druids and knights, this is because he did not consider the plebeians to be worth mentioning.

It is likely that the Druids were influenced by the Greeks and Etruscans (another mysterious and secret people of whom relatively little is known). But also, it is possible that their ideas and modus operandi were arrived at independently. By the third century BC the system was in place, with all its apparatus of philosophy, religion, natural sciences, arts, crafts and technology. After Diogenes of Laerce, the next writer to travel in Gaul and quoted extensively by later authors, was Poseidonios, at the beginning of the first century BC. According to him, there were three professions whose fame rested neither on the riches nor on the status of warrior: the Bards, the Vates or seers, and the Druids. The Vates would occupy themselves with conducting religious ceremonies, but were also interested in natural sciences. The Druids did all this too, but in addition they were moral philosophers and judges. Did Poseidonios misunderstand, or was there a transitional period when specialisation could be carried on in this way before the Druids as a whole had a stranglehold on every profession apart from soldiery and craftsmanship?

Poseidonios is full of praise for this order of holy men, and it is on his accounts that Caesar, a century later, relied in book VI of his *Bellum Gallicum*, as did other writers, like Strabo. Although Poseidonios had visited Gaul himself, and left precise and invaluable descriptions of what he saw and heard in Gaul, he is also responsible for some of the ambiguous information about the Druids. As a philosopher he yearned for a mythical golden age of simple but noble savages who were guided by their wise men and lived pure and innocent lives. He visited the old Greek colony of Marseilles, and some other Greek & Phoenician ports along the coastline and travelled a little in the hinterland, but he was certainly not a witness to religious ceremonies which would have been barred to an outsider, and his descriptions of white-clad druids cutting mistletoe with gold sickles repeated by Pliny the Elder, among others, were probably a couple of centuries out of date already.

That the Druids were influenced by the Greek philosophers is not in doubt. The Celts admired Hellenistic culture enormously. Their earliest coins were based on staters of Phillip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, and of the goods dug up in graves and holy sites, many were purchased from Greeks or Etruscans, or are influenced by their art forms.

An important aspect of the Druidic lore was that it was entirely oral, being too sacred to risk committing it to writing. Thus, most of the Druids' teachings remained secret, as was their intention. The Druids would spend years in learning the sacred texts and in passing them on to their chosen disciples. No doubt the bardic tradition of singing and reciting stories of gods and heroes at feasts and festivals was not exclusively for entertainment, any more than are the Bible stories with which we are familiar. Much of what was recited or sung must have been for teaching the audience, at least as far as the heritage of hero-sagas and tales of the gods was concerned.

Like our archbishops, the Druids held an important position with regard to the aristocracy who could do nothing without their advice or support. Clearly, they gave credibility to a ruling house, and bolstered the respect which they could expect from their followers. Not only priests, the Druids also made up the professional class who acted as teachers, judges, wizards, healers and astrologers, but above all, directed religious practise in every aspect of daily life. They had an internal organisation of ranks or castes and met annually in the sacred wood around Chartres to elect a supreme leader whose word was law. At this conference they would discuss the problems of their people.

There was a privileged élite in the heart of Celtic society, and they were excused taxes and military service. It was an aristocratic élite, and postulants were recruited exclusively from the upper classes. The education of a young Druid was lengthy – up to twenty years – and consisted chiefly of learning the sacred texts transmitted in the form of epic poems and songs. Intermediaries between men and Gods, “they occupied themselves with religious matters, made public and private sacrifices and ordered religious observations”, writes Caesar. Among the ceremonies over which they presided was the famous gathering of the mistletoe, with which they are invariably associated. Pliny the Elder wrote : “the Druids hold mistletoe in the highest esteem and cut it in a ceremony that is strict and detailed. This takes place on the sixth day of the moon, when the planet has sufficient strength but is not yet half full. The priest is clothed in white, his sickle is gold, a white tunic is ready to receive the plants.” He goes on to add that next to the mistletoe, the oak was the tree held in greatest reverence: “they choose oak woods for their sacred groves and perform no sacred rites without oak leaves; so that the very name of Druids may be regarded as a Greek appellation derived from their worship of the oak.”

Françoise le Roux disagrees with this interpretation. It is true that the Greek for oak is “drus” (delta, rho, upsilon, sigma), but she alleges that “Druid” is actually a celtic word made up of two prefixes, do- and ro- added to the root “uid” meaning “wisdom” as well as “wood” and that the compound means “very wise”.

Under the elected Chief Druid, they established a college whose headquarters was near Chartres, where they met regularly to discuss problems and organise specialist in the different professions. There were three main categories of Druid: the *gutuatri*, the *vates* and the bards.

The former category were the priests charged with the responsibility of making sacrifices and disposing of the remains; the vates were seers and auspice readers, presumably with responsibility for future planning, while the bards probably represent everyone's archetype of the old Druid with his long white beard and flowing hair, his harp and his sagas, poems and songs. Whatever their area of specialisation – and we have no idea how fluid the possibilities for mobility within the profession might be – all the Druids expected obedience from the lowest peasant to the mightiest chief, but every Druid was obedient to the Chief Druid.

## **Education**

The Celtic noblemen were keen for their sons to receive a good education, both military and intellectual and moral. The former was carried out by warriors. The Druids, of course, were responsible for the rest. No written evidence remains to inform us of the content of their lessons, but we may suppose that the young Celts had to learn a great deal by heart. No doubt there were poems, songs and rhymes to cover every aspect of lore and knowledge.

Among people with an oral tradition, the memory becomes highly developed. For example, we know that a Druid was supposed to be able to recite 350 long sagas and 350 shorter poems. Thus, each pupil, through these long poems, would learn about the history of his ancestors and of his tribe.

Certainly religion would have been an essential part of the teaching. The Druids would tell their charges stories about the gods, the meaning of certain ceremonies and teach them prayers appropriate to each area of their daily lives. Some of the most pious pupils might go on to become Druids themselves, extending their education to last about twenty years.

All the children learnt that each man has a soul which would survive after his death. People were so certain of this that it was not unusual to agree to loans that might be repaid in the next world. Some classical writers thought that the Celts believed in re-incarnation. Others, that the dead would go to a paradise where they would rejoin their loved ones.

The Druids also taught their children moral precepts, how to conduct themselves in their daily affairs. The only one that has survived is: "Honour the gods, be brave and tell the truth".

## **Mysterious Festivals**

We know, from Classical authors, that the Celts held great festivals from time to time, consisting of feasts, processions, the making of offerings and human and animal sacrifices. Tacitus, writing of Germanic practices, says that at a certain time of year the priests would lead a cart drawn by heifers on which a statue of a goddess was displayed. "Every village honoured by a visit from this procession would have a fete", he wrote. "During this time no war could take place, no one might wear armour, all iron was hidden. Then the cart and the goddess

herself were bathed in a sacred lake.” It is easy to imagine that modern religious parades of the Virgin Mary borne on a float have their origin in similar customs.

As will be seen presently, the last Druids, descendants of those who took refuge in Ireland, eventually converted to Christianity, and seem to have settled quite happily into becoming monks. I have even found a reference to St Patrick having been a Druid before his conversion. From this we may infer that there was enough in common between the college of Druids and the early monastic orders to make this transition relatively pain-free. Certainly, it was these monks who, from the fifth century AD, collected and wrote of the last pagan festivals which we have reason to believe were largely observed by the European Celts as well as those of Ireland.

There were four principal festivals :

SAMAIN meaning “assembly, reunion or coming together” was celebrated on the 1<sup>st</sup> November, alleged by some to be the beginning of the Celtic year. The calendar of Coligny in Gaul refers to it as SAMONIOS. This was a special moment when the veil between this world and the next was lifted, allowing meetings and communication between the living and the dead, between men and gods. The church accepted the tradition and renamed it “All Souls” for the day before and “All Saints” on the day itself. The night of the Souls is, of course, All Hallows Eve, or Halloween. Not only was this an important religious festival with appropriate ceremonies and sacrifices, but also a day for considerable political and administrative functions. Barry Cunliffe in “The Celtic World” writes: “During Samhain, the limbo period between the ending of one year and the beginning of the next ... the whole tribe presumably assembled for feasting and to ensure, through sacrifice, the continued fertility of the crops and herds. This was the time of reconciliation between the tribal god and the earth mother in her tribal guise, when they came together for intercourse.” Babies conceived at this time would thus be born in July, when food was plentiful, the sun warm, and survival most likely.

IMBOLC means “lustration” ie purifying by expiatory sacrifice, ceremonial washing, or other such rites. This took place on 1<sup>st</sup> February, just next to Candlemas, the Catholic feast commemorating the Purification of the Virgin Mary and the presentation of Christ in the Temple – again, not a co-incidence, surely? Presumably there was a need for spring cleaning and general hygienic precautions against February, which comes from the Latin word meaning “the fever month”. A superstition associated with this festival is still known to Catholics in France. Candles that have been blessed during the mass on this day – which is also the feast of St Blaise – are stroked against the throats of children to protect them from sore throats and associated maladies. This feast was later christianised as the Feast of St Bridget, probably recalling the Celtic goddess Brigit.

BELTEINE or BELTANE, the “fire of the god Bel” falls on May Day. This is the feast of light and the season of bright weather, the day on which the Druids lit the beacon fires to bring the good news of the new season from hilltop to hilltop. In Germany it became Walpurgisnacht,

the feast of witches. Echoes of pagan festivals, of licentious games and dancing around the maypole so displeased the Puritans that they forbade May Day celebrations altogether. Centuries earlier, you remember, Joan of Arc had been reproved for dancing around a maypole on the village green. The eve of the Feast of St John – Midsummer Eve – was another occasion for beacon fires and bonfires which survive to this day. The custom of leaping over the dying embers for good luck can be traced back to the Celtic belief that women who managed to do this would conceive. As with Samain, this was a day for great ceremonies and sacrifices. It was probably a kind of rogation time to entreat the gods for fertility and fecundity in man, beast and crops, so the rites of spring may have been of an orgiastic nature.

LUGNASAD the “reunion of Lug” took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> August – with May Day, still a popular Bank Holiday in many countries. This was the feast of harvest and plenty held under the auspices of the king who was seen as chief provider and guarantor of prosperity.

These four great feasts of the Celtic calendar are 40 and 45 days apart.

## **Magic**

I have already mentioned that the Gauls had no letters of their own. They were not illiterate, and used writing for various legal and property transactions, as well as merchants’ tallies, but they used the Greek letters picked up from the Greek colonies of Provence, and later, the Latin ones. Centuries later, in Ireland, Celts used a runic script called Ogam to scratch inscriptions in rocks or on wood. As long as the incisions remained legible it was believed that the incantation or curse would remain efficacious. However, it was the spoken word that remained pre-eminent: in any conflict between a verbal agreement or a written contract, it was the word that won over the writing.

Nevertheless, of the inscribed fragments that have been excavated, many are magic spells or curses. Large numbers of these, mostly in Latin, can be seen at the Roman Baths, in Bath. As Lambert remarks in “La Langue Gauloise”, there is no reason to believe that the Celts were more credulous than any other people of their time. The practice known as “defixio” in Latin, which forms the *raison d’être* of this type of inscription was known throughout the Mediterranean basin including Greece and Rome. It consisted of writing curses with the names of the victims on them on a piece of metal or pottery and then subjecting it to various magic tortures or spells to make the curse take effect. Perhaps it was hoped that a fragment dropped in water would provoke death by drowning, or thrown in the fire – by burning. We are more familiar with the idea of making images to stick pins in, or wax images that could be melted, as in the accusations against alleged witches that were made right up to the witches of Salem in seventeenth century America. The Gauls did not invent this custom: they copied it from their conquerors.



Another Roman custom also practised by the Druids was divination based on the flight of birds or inspection of their entrails or those of other victims. They made talismans like strings of amber beads which warriors might wear in battle and which have frequently been found in their tombs. The most valued talisman, however, was known as a serpent's egg. This may have been the shell of a sea urchin, which would have been a reasonably exotic object, so far from the Mediterranean. Female magicians and prophetesses might be affiliated to the Druids, but would not be allowed to partake of all their privileges. Jules Michelet, in his "Roman History" of 1831 writes: "They were subject to bizarre and contradictory embargoes. In one case a Druidess might only be allowed to unveil the future to the man who had violated her; in another, she would have to take a vow of perpetual virginity; in a third, she must accept a lengthy period of celibacy even though married. Sometimes these women had to take part in sacrifices at night, entirely naked, their bodies stained black, their hair in disarray, shaken in a state of frenetic transports." Where did he get his information from? I have not yet discovered the answer. Perhaps from Chateaubriand's novel "Les Martyres" in which he writes of a druidess called Velleda. She was so popular in France that a statue of her was placed in the Jardins du Luxembourg.

Later inscriptions used the Latin alphabet but with the addition of a letter called the "tau gallicum". This was actually a d with a line across it which had evolved from the Greek letter "theta", but which represented the "ts" sound for the Celts. The Romans, themselves a very superstitious people, were worried by this letter which they feared had a magic of its own giving potency to the curse. I'll give you just one example from Lambert's book, of a piece of inscribed lead found near Poitiers. This is not actually a curse, but a spell to relieve stomach ache – or possibly impotence. It reads as follows:

BIS GONTAVRION ANALABIS BIS GONTAVRIO SV  
CEANALABIS BIS GONTAVRIOS CATALAGES  
VIM C ANIMA VIM S PATERNAM ASTA  
MADARSSET VTATE IUSTINA QUEM  
PEPERIT SARRA

This is a mixture of words in Latin and Greek, with not much Celtic content from the fifth century AD, not easy to interpret by classical scholars – Lambert quotes three separate attempts – and this is one of the simpler texts! Those with a heavier content of Celtic words are more inscrutable, but having said that there are about 400 French words of probable Celtic origin, some of which are familiar to us in English too, such as bar, barque, barge, coombe, flannel, gob, mutton, and vassal.

## **Guardians of Wisdom**

Men of antiquity made no difference between science and religion. Egyptian doctors and Babylonian astronomers were usually priests, exercising their art in their temples. So in those early days the study of science was not so much in order to understand the world as to interpret the will of the gods. Likewise among the Celts all knowledge was the province of the Druids, who used it the better to serve the Immortals. They were good astronomers, capable of foreseeing an eclipse or of knowing when the winter and summer solstices would take place. Thus, through patient observation, they had established a calendar, an indispensable tool for calculating the proper days on which to hold different ceremonies appropriate to different gods.

The most famous of these was found in 1897 at Coligny, in the Ain, engraved on a brass plaque. It took thirty years to piece it together, and it has become virtually the Rosetta Stone of the Gauls, being the longest inscription found so far. It is, in fact, a five-year calendar, divided into 62 months, five dozen ordinary months and two more inserted. These months are laid out in 16 columns, each comprising four months except the first and the ninth which have three plus the inserted extra month. Before each month is its name, headed by “lucky” or “unlucky”. Each month consisted of 29 or 30 days, divided into two fortnights, so it is understood that the Celts had a luni-solar calendar. As such, it is closer to the Greek calendar than the Roman, on which ours is based. As the calendar dates from the first century AD, during the height of Roman influence, this conservatism is particularly interesting. The months are called : Samon, Duman, Riuros, Anagantio, Ogron, Cutios, Giamon, Simivis, Equos, Elembiu, Aedrini and Cantlos. This seems to be a mixture of Greek, Latin and Celtic roots. Of course all three languages had a common origin as Indo-European tongues. Pomponius Méla, writing at about the time the Coligny calendar was made, says : “The Druids boast about knowing the dimensions and shape of the earth as well as the movements of the stars, and the wishes of the gods.”

## **Medicine**

In a warlike society like the Gauls’, medicine and surgery were very important. Even if the soldiers viewed death on the battlefield with equanimity, those that survived in a wounded state were glad to be healed. The Druids knew how to deal with a fracture, stitch up a wound and heal a fever with herbs and medicinal plants. Mistletoe, whose Celtic name means “all-heal”, is known to have been their most highly-prized medicine.

It was not only the Druids and Gauls who believed in the efficacy of oak mistletoe as a panacea for all ailments. Pliny, writing of the superstitious folk beliefs of his own country said it was believed to cure epilepsy; carried by women it helped them conceive; it healed ulcers if the sufferer both used it on his sores and chewed it; it would even help to extinguish a fire! For increased efficacy, he wrote, his countrymen believed it must be gathered on the first day of the moon without the use of iron and must not touch the earth. So another thing that Romans and Celts might have in common in their system of beliefs was that of the mistletoe as a magical

medicine, including some of the rituals associated with gathering it. An interesting detail here is that Fraser alleges that these beliefs have been found in modern times as far from Europe as among the Aino of Japan and the Walos of Denegambia. The common origin for this widespread superstition was suggested by Pliny himself : the mysterious mistletoe, alive and beautiful with no roots and no obvious origin must have descended from heaven, so was itself divine. This is reminiscent of the cargo cults which evolved during the second world war, when parcels of food dropped from heaven to the delight of the islanders who found them.

Nevertheless, as is so often found with ancient vegetal remedies, mistletoe really does have some healing properties. Despite a certain toxicity it helps reduce hypertension, is a remedy for certain cardiac conditions, a vasodilator and can even help conquer some tumours. However, religion, in the form of appropriate prayers, offerings and sacrifices was considered to be an essential part of doctoring.

### **Judges and Diplomats**

In keeping with their traditions, the Gauls knew no written laws, but laws existed nevertheless, no doubt memorised as part of their lengthy oral education. We know from Caesar that the Druids saw to legal matters and were consulted in both civil and criminal matters. Problems of inheritance, of trouble with neighbours, crimes of all kind, were all under their jurisdiction. We do not know how they conducted their affairs, but no doubt it was based on a religious approach. Strabo writes of a case which was judged in the following manner: the two plaintiffs were called to present themselves at a certain place, bringing cakes with them. Each man had to place his cakes on a plank suspended from a tree and wait for them to be eaten by crows. The man whose cakes were consumed first won his case.

We also know that miscreants condemned by the Druids were excommunicated. They were no longer allowed to participate in religious ceremonies, and nobody was allowed to give them aid or comfort. More serious crimes were subject to capital punishment, and the guilty were executed during periods of human sacrifice.

Sometimes Druids even had to judge between entire tribes or peoples. When the Eduens sought help from the Romans, they sent a Druid to Rome to plead their cause before the Senate. Diodorus Siculus wrote that their authority was so respected that they could halt a battle in mid-conflict simply by standing between the opposing armies.

### **Human Sacrifice**

Many accounts exist of the Gauls' human sacrifices: impaling or drowning their criminals and prisoners of war, or – more horrible still – burning them in huge wicker cages constructed to represent a giant man. Sometimes cattle were included in this holocaust, and if there were not enough criminals to furnish an appropriate sacrifice, innocent men might be roped in. Caesar

may have exaggerated these stories in order to justify his own brutal attacks on the Gauls – but in any case, human sacrifice was banned throughout the Empire in 55BC.

Who was responsible for publishing these tales and can they be believed? Sir J G Frazer says: “The earliest description of these sacrifices has been bequeathed to us by Julius Caesar. As conqueror of the hitherto independent Celts of Gaul, Caesar had ample opportunity of observing the national Celtic religion and manners, while these were still fresh and crisp from the native mint and had not yet been fused in the melting-pot of Roman civilisation.” With his own notes Caesar appears to have incorporated the observations of the Greek explorer, Poseidonios, who travelled in Gaul about fifty years before Caesar carried the Roman arms to the English Channel. The Greek geographer Strabo and the historian Diodorus Siculus seem also to have derived their descriptions of the Celtic sacrifices from the work of Poseidonios, but independently of each other, and of Caesar, for each of the

three derivative accounts contains some details which are not to be found in either of the others. By combining them, therefore, we can restore the original account of Poseidonios with some probability.

Frazer observed : “it appears that the sacrificial rites of the Celts of ancient Gaul can be traced in the popular festivals of modern Europe. Naturally it is in France, or rather in the wider area comprised within the limits of ancient Gaul, that these rites have left the clearest traces in the customs of burning giants of wicker-work and animals enclosed in wicker-work or baskets. These customs, it will have been remarked, are generally observed at or about midsummer. From this we may infer that the original rites of which these are the degenerate successors were solemnised at midsummer ...the most widely diffused and the most solemn of all the yearly festivals ...with Beltane (May Day) and Hallowe’ en (the last day of October.”

Frazer goes on to speculate about the meaning of such sacrifices. In more recent times the victims of burning were people condemned as witches, burning being thought to be the most effective way of annihilating evil beings. Thus, he suggests, the Druids, too, may have condemned numbers of people, cattle and other animals as possessed of evil spirits or actually wizards in animal form. He draws on the fact that the most commonly burned animals up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century were cats, hares and snakes, and these are precisely the beasts that were most often thought to be evil magicians in disguise.

This theory is not necessarily at variance with the other mainstream idea of sacrifices – human or animal – being offered to the gods in expiation and the hope of obtaining favourable victories, fertility rates and harvests. If the function of witches is to wish evil, causing bad weather, blighted crops, abortions, death and bad luck generally, their removal must result in a renewed phase of success on all these fronts.

Survivals of the ritual sacrifice by burning of humans or animals – whether in wickerwork giants or baskets were found by Frazer in annual folk festivals in various parts of France. These included Douay, Dunkirk, Luchon, the rue aux Ours in Paris, Brie in the Isle de France and many other places. (I quote) “and in most towns and even villages of Brabant and Flanders” where “wicker giants were annually led about to the delight of the populace, who loved these grotesque figures.” Does our Guy Fawkes bonfire replace a pagan survival that used to take place at Halloween, or rather Samain? What about the carnival giants covered in flowers at Epéluche, near Ribérac? Can most of our European parades trace their origins back to Celtic sacrifices?

Major sacrifices were celebrated every fifth year, but smaller ones would take place during the four annual days of Samain, Imbolc, Beltane, and Lughnasa. The Celts believed, in common with many less evolved religions, not only in an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” but in “a life for a life”, so a sick man’s relatives might sacrifice someone so that the gods might spare his life. Before a battle, large numbers of prisoners might be burnt to ensure the survival of the warriors. Jean-Luis Brunaux, in his fascinating article “Etre Pretre en Gaule” believes that human sacrifice was not carried out frequently, but only as a form of capital punishment for criminals or prisoners of war at certain specified times such as the quinquennial, or before a major battle, or in times of great need, such as plague or famine. This is based on archaeological evidence. The vast majority of bones found in the pits dug near sanctuaries contain the bones of sacrificed animals, not humans. These were usually sheep, cattle and pigs, but sometimes included dogs and horses. You might suppose that the majority of these animals, having been ritually sacrificed, were then the main course at the great feasts, but in fact the most choice beasts were reserved for the exclusive use of the gods as their corpses were buried in pits and allowed to rot. This leads us to think that they were specifically offered to the gods of the underworld.

## **The Rites of War**

After the Druids and the Chieftains, the warriors, on whom the people depended for their safety, held the place of honour in the community. For all free men, fighting was not only an honour but also a right which even the old men wished to carry on as long as possible. A warlike people who were also profoundly religious, as Caesar observed, all the Celts engaged in a variety of rituals to ensure the favour of the gods.

Before leaving for a war, the Druids, who were not expected to fight, interpreted the wishes of the gods by omens and portents. Then, each soldier vowed magnificent offerings to their deities if their endeavours met with success. Unlike the Romans, who would share the booty between themselves, the Celts consecrated all their trophies to the gods. Prisoners and captured horses would be sacrificed, chariots would be burned and armour piled up in sanctuaries. Warriors likewise sacrificed their weapons and armour. This wasn’t just a question of

displaying their fine gear in the temples, as in Rome, but of really subjecting it to the same treatment as was meted out to the animals.

Then the armies would march off, each man hoping to achieve mighty exploits or to die gloriously in the battle.

Their faith in the afterlife led them to care so little for death that, according to Diodorus, they might even enter the fighting entirely naked. No doubt their motivation was religious: not only were they thus deriding the Romans by exposing themselves, they were also offering their lives for their people and to the gods whom they believed were watching them.

Titus Livius (XXIII,24) writes of a shocking defeat in a forest of Gaul, when 25,000 Roman soldiers were crushed by falling trees which had been previously prepared for a domino-style onslaught by being “nearly” felled. Only a handful escaped and were taken prisoner, and the Consul, L Postumius was among the dead. The victors, the Boiens, cut off his head and carried it in triumph to their most venerated temple. Later, the head was hollowed out, and “according to their custom”, Livy writes, “the skull, adorned with a gold circlet, was used as a holy vessel for libations at their feasts. Their bishops and priests used it as a chalice, too, and in the eyes of the Gauls this booty was as valued as their victory”.

Diodorus Siculus wrote: “They cut the heads off their fallen enemies and tie them to the necks of their horses; then give the blood-stained remains to their servants. They carry off these trophies, praising their gods and chanting hymns of victory; finally they nail these first fruits of their booty to their houses as though they had killed some wild animal in a hunt. As for the heads of their most famous enemies, they impregnate them with cedar oil and keep them carefully in chests and show them to visitors, each man boasting about how – for one or other of these heads one of his ancestors – or his father – or he himself had refused a large sum of money.”

This practice was not merely bloodthirstiness. In common with many primitive peoples, the Celts believed that the soul resided in the head which symbolised the very essence of being. By possessing someone’s head, one controlled his spirit, too. When the victorious raiders returned with the heads they had just cut off their victims and placed them on their house walls or in their temples, they believed they were now using the power still resident in them for the protection of their own people and sacred places. Severed heads have often been found in excavations of farms, hill forts, nailed over gates and even in storage pits as well as in temples, while fragments of skulls appear to have been worn as amulets.

But the most dramatic evidence for the cult comes from the oppidum of Entremont in Provence, which was destroyed by the Romans in 124 BC. Here, a shrine was uncovered on the hilltop, approached by a pathway lined with statues of heroes. Within the shrine itself

stood a tall pillar carved with twelve simplified human heads. Here, too, were found many more carved representations of severed heads of men, women and children.

Similar sculptures have been found at the nearby sanctuary of Roquepertuse, at Noves, and at several sites in the hinterland of Marseilles. The Celts did not necessarily invent this gruesome practice, however. The head cult in France is probably much more ancient, for the early prehistoric inhabitants of Eastern France, in sites such as a cave in the “Dame Jouanne” hills in Seine-et-Marne, practised a severed head cult long before the coming of the Celts.

The survival of the cult almost into the Christian era can be read in the myths of both Cuchulain in Ireland and in the saga of the Mabinogion in Wales. But it is in Celtic art, and especially in sculpture, over a wide geographical area and several centuries that the severed head has its most frequent and lasting representation. Carvings on pillars, on capitals, on altars, decoration on plinths, on lintels and archways, culminating in the memento mori deaths’ heads decorating church porches and tombs all attest to the power of the motif to the Celtic craftsman and his clients.

If the origins of the cult of the human head are lost in the mists of time, well before the coming of the Celts to Gaul, the power of the concept of the dignity and divinity of the resting-place of the mind or the soul can be traced beyond Celtic civilization to art and literature, through Grimms’ Fairy Tales, and Isabella with her lover’s head hidden in her pot of basil, through Bacon’s brazen head which could prophecy to Zardos in science fiction.

## **Heroes and Kings**

The Greeks believed that heroes of exceptional valour might become demi-gods after their human death, to be venerated in their turn, for favour and protection. Thus, Cyrus in Persia and Alexander the Great in Macedonia were considered as semi-divine, and the Romans, too, established a cult of the Emperor as god.

The Celts also revered their greatest warriors, often their ancestors. In battles between tribes, wrote Dionysos of Halicarnassus, individual heroes would step out of line as the armies faced each other, challenging their opposite numbers to single combat, and chanting out stories about their famous forebears and their own courageous exploits.

Poseidonius, writes of ceremonies associated with great banquets. The feasting sometimes took place in the open air but more often in the large communal house that served as the chieftain's dwelling. He established his status by offering huge amounts of meat and quantities of mead or spiced and honeyed beer to his heroes. The meat was stewed in a huge cauldron and removed with the aid of meat hooks. Pecking order was then established through the claiming and sharing of the large joints. The hero who considered himself pre-eminent would

claim the best bits and any contestant would have to fight him – sometimes to the death – unless their companions restrained them. Did the classical writers describing these barbarous scenes misunderstand what was actually happening? Much of the information would have come at second hand, from travellers' tales. I fancy a sub-text of ritual significance here. Yes, these men were behaving like beasts, but their gods were often represented as animals. One of the mightiest and most terrible was Cernunnos, with his stag's antlers, and mortal combat is the stags' annual rite of passage to gain the position of leader of the herd as well as to claim their does.

There was a ritual element too, about the drinking, for all shared a chalice that was passed around the feasting men as they sat in a circle on the rush-strewn mud floor. Like the pipe of peace of the American Indians or the communion wine at the eucharist, this surely signified the unity of the people, their trust in each other and in the chieftain who provided them with wholesome drink. Then the story-telling began. In different places, at different times, this might have consisted of Homeric sagas of gods and heroes, of ancestors, of myth and legend sung by the bard. In the images we have of the old man with his long white hair and beard and his harp or lyre we may imagine the prototype of Homer himself or of any Druid. Though records are scant the written or pictured images of the bard that have become a sort of cliché are so settled in our minds, that we may almost fancy them to be an archetype of our collective folk-memory.

Another historian, Phylarcus, writing in the third century BC describes the generosity of a very rich Celtic ruler who, for a whole year, made a stately progress through his realm, along existing roads, giving huge feasts for up to 400 people at a time, necessitating the building of large thatched wooden shelters. A whole apparatus would have been needed, including huge cauldrons for stewing the meat, which was otherwise spit-roasted. Such cauldrons were invested with magical powers, with legends about their ability to serve huge numbers and never run out, or even to bestow eternal life on those who partook of them. Echoes of rituals from the dawn of time may be imagined, down to gospel accounts of Christ's miraculous feeding of the five hundred and the Eucharist. What is certain is that beautiful ceremonial cauldrons were made by the Celts, the most famous of which, the silver Gundelstrup cauldron, was made in sections, each portraying divinities and it was deliberately taken apart and placed in a holy spring as an important sacrifice or offering to the gods.

Thus, at the earliest known period, ritual was still in the hands of the great princes, who frequently made the sacrifices themselves, and alone had the means to make huge offerings, sacrifices and feasts. As society evolved, power and wealth were distributed on a wider basis, requiring a priesthood which also provided the ministry of education to its chosen élite as well as a civil service. This pattern can be observed in a later and more sophisticated form in the twelfth century as feudalism evolved into a wide-ranging organisation devolving from the king to the Church, which provided a similar service of administration in both religious and political affairs. When Henry II made his Chancellor, Thomas à Becket take on the role of



Archbishop, he was demonstrating the fluidity of these services. In a similar way, the great chieftains of Gaul came to require a priesthood that would serve as an administration as well as oversee every area of religious practice, hence the body of venerated wise men known as the Druids.

Archaeologists believe that some Celts developed cults around their illustrious fighters. At Entremont, near the great stone portico studded with human skulls, statues have been found of warriors sitting cross-legged, with a hand placed on a couple of severed heads. These may be deified tribal heroes or ancestors to whom prayers and sacrifices were offered.

### **The Last of the Druids**

Tolerant though the Romans were of other peoples' religions, willing though they might be to assimilate them into their own, this tolerance did not extend to political stirrings under the cloak of religion. The Druids were seen as a menace, fomenting rebellion and resistance to Roman supremacy, so they had to go. According to Julius Caesar, they had originated in Brittany and then spread through Gaul, though more in the North than in the Midi. As I have already mentioned, their centre of power was among the Carnutes, in the place that became Chartres. I find that interesting, as it carries the concept of Chartres as a high place of religious worship back for hundreds of years before the first Christian church was established there.

After the demise of Julius Caesar, the emperors Augustus and Tiberius both published edicts against the Druids but it was the Emperor Claudius who finally forbade the Druids to practise their rites and they gradually withdrew to the British Isles, especially Ireland and the sacred isle of Mona, or Anglesey. It is curious that this otherwise relatively tolerant emperor, who was fascinated by the lost civilization and language of the Etruscans thus caused the decline of the Druids and with them the essentially Celtic element of Gallo-Roman civilization.

### **A Mysterious Mythology**

The Celts of Gaul had an extraordinary mythology involving beasts with human heads, gods with animal heads, with deer's antlers, with three faces, and so on. In Ireland, which, as we have said, was the final bastion of Druidic lore, medieval monks recorded hundreds of tales of warriors and mythical beasts. By deconstructing these, we may be able to trace some of the essence of Celtic religion.

This body of lore and legend is very extensive. The two most important collections are known as the Book of Conquests and the Ulster Cycle. The former explains through a series of fables, the origin of the people of Ireland, of how laws came into being, and of the relations between men and the supernatural universe of the hereafter, known as "Sid" or "Sidhe". Many ancient writers assert that the Celtic idea of immortality embodied the Oriental concept of the transmigration of souls, and to account for this the hypothesis was invented that they had

learned the doctrine from Pythagoras, who formulated it in classical antiquity. Thus Caesar : "The principal point of their [the Druids'] teaching is that the soul does not perish, and that after death it passes from one body into another." And Diodorus: "Among them the doctrine of Pythagoras prevails, according to which the souls of men are immortal, and after a fixed term recommence to live, taking upon themselves a new body." Like the Egyptians, the Celts, from seeing the sun sink in the West, believed that it died each night to be reborn in the East each subsequent morning. Therefore, the Kingdom of the Dead or the Isles of the Blest lay beyond the Western horizon. This land was called "Sidhe" in Ireland, Avalon: the Island of Apples or the Fortunate Island in Britain. The 12<sup>th</sup> century poet, Geoffrey of Monmouth, described this Paradise in his "Life of Merlin". No one had to work here, he said, as the land was so fertile that all manner of delightful fruits grew spontaneously. Was this a genuine Celtic tradition, or a poetic invention?

In any case, we can be sure that the Celtic attitude to death and the after life was very different from that evinced by most Greeks and Romans. The latter saw the underworld as a gloomy place where ghosts flitted like shadows, to be called forth occasionally, for a brief moment by pious libations which would give them a little respite from the obscurity of their half-life. Virgil's description of "the grateful dead" in the Aeneid is typical of this viewpoint. The story of Orpheus descending into Hades to try to rescue Eurydice shows a similarly dark and sad side to the afterlife among the Greeks, as does the tale of Persephone who ends up enjoying Spring and summer on earth, only to endure a long bleak winter underground each year. Both these tales gave rise to mystery cults for initiates only. Joyous life and feasting on Mount Olympus or the Elysian Fields were for gods and heroes alone. Ordinary people in classical times had little to look forward to after death.

The Celts, by contrast, believed that they would live happily ever after in sunlight, green fields and woods among streams and fruit trees, with love and laughter. Whether this would be in their own bodies or in new ones, as men or animals, for a period or for ever, it was this expectation of future happiness that gave the Celts the courage to go into battle – the women no less than the men - as classical writers observed with something like envy.

Often changed by the monks, to fit in with the new religion, these stories nevertheless may be a precious clue to the lost religion of the Druids. For example, an episode in the Saga of Cuchulainn shows this famous hero pursuing a sacred bull which has taken refuge in the forest. In order to flush it out, Cuchulainn fells the trees which protect it. This story may explain a Gallo-Roman sculpture found at Trier, showing a woodcutter felling a tree through whose foliage a bull's head can be seen. If a sculpture from the first century AD can be linked to a story collected centuries later, how many more such parallels may be found? The implication for throwing light on the religion of the Celts by close scrutiny of Celtic fables transcribed in medieval Ireland is as thrilling as it is boundless.

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