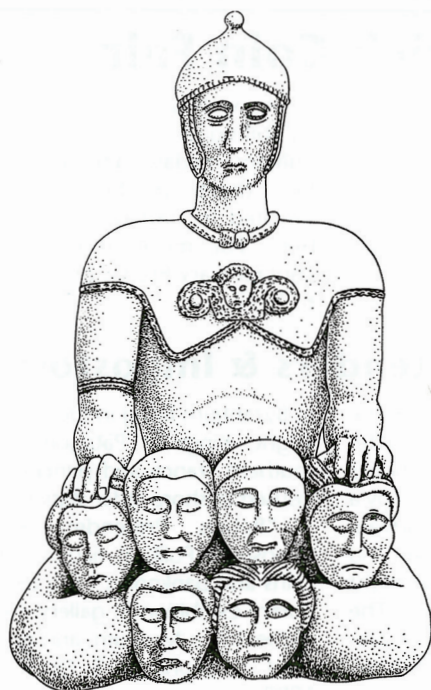


"When their enemies fall they cut off their heads and fasten them about the necks of their horses" - Diodorus Siculus. Drawing by Susan White.

# The Head Hunters

Chris Rudd

**S**ince boyhood I have been enchanted by the Celtic cult of the human head. My parents lived in Shipton Gorge, Dorset, and I well recall the local excitement that was caused when - just a few yards from our garden gate - two crudely carved Celtic stone heads were unearthed by builders. Both heads were life-size, sombre, glowering and still bore traces of colouring on them. Two thousand years underground had not diminished their "cower-power" and I felt a brief tremor of fear run up my spine when I first beheld their menacing faces.



Stone statue of Celtic warrior-god with severed heads, from Entremont. Reconstructed from Simon James, *Exploring the World of the Celts*, © Thames & Hudson, London & New York, 1993.

The Celts were obsessed with heads, especially human heads. They revered heads, cut off heads, preserved heads, collected heads, carved heads and carried heads about with them. The purpose of this short paper is to provide some evidence for this Celtic obsession with heads, particularly severed heads, and to seek the reason why. The evidence is iconographic, numismatic, literary and archaeological.

## Iconographic Evidence

The most dramatic iconographic evidence of the Celtic head cult comes from the Gallic temple sites of Entremont and Roquepertuse. In her *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (Thames & Hudson, 1992) Miranda Green writes

"Entremont was the capital of the Celto-Ligurian tribe of the Saluvii: the oppidum is about 3km north of Aix-en-Provence. The Celtic town was sacked and the tribe conquered by Rome in 124 BC. Here there was a native shrine which displays evidence of ritual associated, above all, with head-hunting. The sanctuary was situated on the highest point of the hill, and consisted of a stone structure whose porticoes were decorated with carvings of severed heads and adorned with real skulls nailed into niches; one of the latter had a javelin head embedded in the bone, supporting the view that the skulls were those of battle victims which were offered to the gods of the shrine.

Many sculptures depict head imagery, and it may be that if genuine human heads were unavailable, the gods were offered carved replicas instead. One stone, the so-called "head pillar", consists of a tall block with twelve severed heads incised on it: these are depicted with no mouths and with

closed eyes, perhaps suggestive of death; the lowest head is upside-down, maybe leading the others to the Underworld. The stone probably dates from the third to the second century BC. Another portico carving comprises a relief of a horseman with a human head dangling from the neck of his mount; this is very evocative of the comments of such Classical writers as Livy (X, 26; XXIII, 24), Diodorus Siculus (V, 29, 4) and Strabo (IV, 4, 5) who all allude to Celtic head-hunting.



Decapitated head of young man dedicated to the gods at Roquepertuse, Musée Borély Marseille. Photograph from Miranda Green's *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, ©Thames & Hudson 1992.

# Iconographic Evidence of Celtic Head Cult



Three-faced god on vase from Bavai, France.



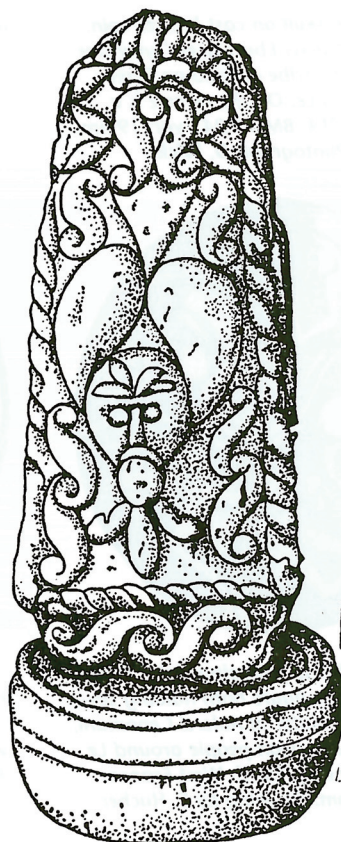
Phallic stone head from Broadway, Worscs.



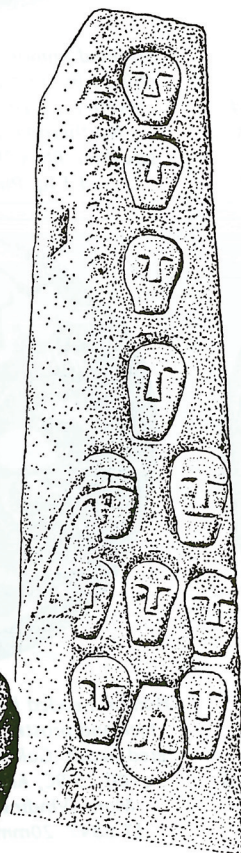
Stone relief with severed heads from Nages, France.



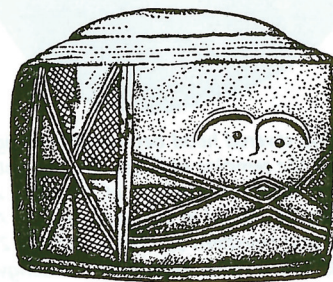
Severed heads in stone from Entremont, Provence.



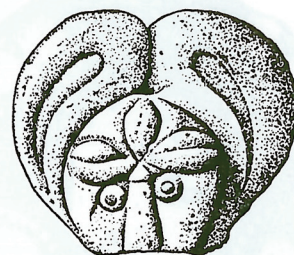
Stone cult-pillar from Pfalzfeld, Germany.



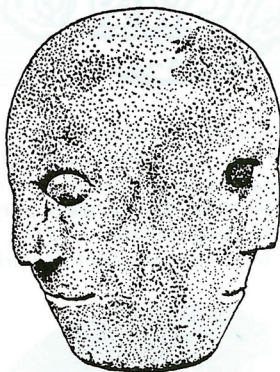
Stone cult-pillar from Entremont, France.



Chalk cylinder from Folton Wold, Yorks.



Stone head from Heidelberg, Germany.



Stone tricephalos from Corleck, Ireland.



Stone head from Hulme, Manchester.



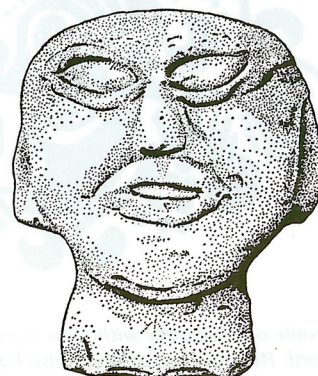
Antefix tile from Silchester, Hants.



Antefix tile from Dorchester, Dorset.



Stone Gorgon head from Bath, Avon.



Stone head from Beltany Ring, Donegal, Ireland.

## Numismatic Evidence of Celtic Head Cult



Facing severed head between two wings, with the remains of Greek wreath motif above. Silver tetradrachm of Noricum, 2nd century BC, found in Burgenland, East Austria and Northern Slovenia. LT 9924-25, BMC 156. 21mm. Photograph L. Lengyel.



Stylised human skull on cast bronze coin, c80-50 BC, of Aulerci Eburovices ("yew tree country"), Celtic tribe centred on Evreux, Northern France. On the reverse is a swastika. BN 5714, BMC S 242 var. 19mm. 4.13g. Photograph D. Wicks.



Severed head or skull hanging from arch, surrounded by serpent. Bronze coin of Vellocasses of Rouen (Rotomagus) area, Northern France, c80-50 BC. Similar to LT 8406, Blanchet fig. 360, BMC 8. 14mm. 3.60g. Photograph D. Wicks.



Head of male god with four small severed heads attached to cords. Gold stater of Veneti, c100-75 BC, the sea-faring tribe in the region of Vannes (Dariotum), North West France. LT 6828. 20mm. Drawing by E. Hucher.



Human-headed horse galloping right, charioteer and prostrate figure both holding severed heads. Gold stater of Aulerci Cenomani, c100-75 BC, Armorican people around Le Mans (Vindinum), North West France. LT 6847. 20mm. Drawing by E. Hucher.



Beardless Janiform head with long plaited hair, with CVNO below. Bronze unit of Cunobelin, king of the Catuvellauni and Trinovantes, cAD 10-43. Though the prototype is Roman, this design is Celtic. VA 2105, BMC 1998. 13mm. Engraving by F.W. Fairholt.



Profile of male deity with boar-standard and three small severed heads around, each tied to a cord. Human-headed horse also has small severed head before and after, with boar-standard and eagle below. Base-silver stater of Osismii, c75-50 BC, Brittany tribe around Brest. LT 6555. 22mm. Reconstruction by Derek Allen.



Celtic warrior with long sword slung around waist. His right hand carries a boar-standard and war-trumpet, his left hand holds a severed head. Silver quinarius of Dubnorex, chieftan of the Aedui, c60-52 BC. LT 5044, BMC 480. 13mm. Drawing by E. Hucher.



*Deathlike male head with empty oval eye and rictal grimace. Soham Dead Head silver unit of Ecani of East Anglia, c50-30 BC, found at Soham, Cambridgeshire, 1995. VA-, BMC-. 12mm. 1.13g. Photograph D. Wicks.*

Noteworthy also at Entremont are the stone images of warriors who sit cross-legged wearing cuirasses and helmets and often hold severed human heads in their hands. These may be war-gods with the heads of their victims, or alternatively they may be the gods of the dead.

Roquepertuse was the site of the pre-Roman Celtic cliff-top sanctuary in Provence, not far from Entremont. The shrine was entered by a portal or portico consisting of three stone pillars with lintels or cross-beams. The pillars were carved with niches in which were nailed the skulls of young adult men. Sculptures from the temple include a frieze of horse heads in profile; a large free-standing goose, perched on a lintel; a pair of Janiform heads held in the beak of a huge bird of prey; and statues of cross-legged warrior-gods. The iconography and the presence of the skulls closely resembles the material from the nearby sanctuary at Entremont. The heads may be those of battle victims, offered to the gods of the shrine as trophies of victory. Diodorus Siculus (XIV, 115) attests to the Celtic custom of placing the heads of vanquished victims in shrines.

The deity or deities venerated at Roquepertuse may have been war-gods, represented by the statues of men seated cross-legged, wearing cuirasses and helmets. The Janiform head watched both ways and guarded the shrine as did the watchful goose on the lintel. The images of horses accord with those at other Provencal sites, such as Entremont and Nages, where horses and human heads are represented in association, again reinforcing the remarks of Classical writers, that the Celts slung their head trophies from the saddles of their horses.

The mountain sanctuary of Roquepertuse may have been constructed as early as the sixth century

BC; and the sculptures may be of fourth century date, the human skulls may have been collected in the third century. The sanctuary fell at the time of the Roman conquest of the region towards the end of the second century BC."

Britain too has abundant iconographic evidence of the Celtic head cult, mostly in the form of crudely carved stone heads. All the Celtic stone heads you see today - hundreds have survived - have been removed from their original settings and transposed to churches, cottage walls, county museums and private collections. The majority of them are single heads, but they also occur as double heads and triple heads. At first glance you might suppose these heads may have been broken from statues showing the whole body, but look more closely and you'll see that this is not the case. They were carved as heads and heads only.



*Male figure (originally Perseus) with cloak draped over shoulder, club or staff in left hand, severed head in right hand and altar in background. Bronze unit of Cunobelin, cAD 10-43. VA 2109, BMC 2004. 15mm. Engraving by F.W. Fairholt.*

The head-carving habit probably began in the Bronze Age and continued right through the Romano-British period, which is why it is often hard (if not impossible) to date these heads accurately. Indeed, a few commentators have declared them to be of medieval date. However, if you compare British stone heads with continental stone heads and with the heads you find on Celtic coins - both known to be pre-Roman - then you must conclude that they are unlikely to be of post Roman manufacture.

### Numismatic Evidence

There is ample evidence of Celtic head hunting on Gaulish coins and to a lesser extent on British coins. The earliest Celtic coin which clearly shows a severed head is a Norican silver tetradrachm, probably struck sometime

in the 2nd century BC. Many small severed heads can be seen on the beautiful gold, silver and billon (base silver) staters of Armorica. Derek Allen says "A particularly striking use of the cords occurs in the west of Armorican Gaul. Here the head, in an elaborate hair style, is framed by a series of twisted strings. At the end of each string there is a small head echoing the main one. There may be two, three or four such echo heads. It looks as if we have an heroic head in the centre drawing its power or horror from the seething group of severed heads to which it is bound. It is very possible that many of the coin heads were thought of as severed; this is dominant motif in Celtic art and could be expected on the coins copied from classical models where the head is conventionally truncated. Small severed heads occur as ornaments as far apart as Limousin and Transdanubia. In a few cases there are signs that the severed head (or perhaps an image of a head) was conceived as actually affixed to a standard for carrying. In one Gaulish and one British case a standing warrior or priest is carrying in his hand a severed head. The separate head is often used as a minor device in the field."

Three ancient British coins show what seem to be severed heads. One is an extremely rare silver coin of the Ecani, which I call "Soham Dead Head". Another is a bronze coin of Cunobelin with a man holding a head by its hair. The third is a silver coin of Verica which appears to have a severed head on a spear, though this could alternatively be interpreted as a bust on a standard stuck into the ground. Another bronze coin of Cunobelin features a two-faced head, not decapitated, but certainly intended to be without a body. Small ithyphallic heads and faces are frequently incorporated in the designs of other British coins - further proof of the Celts' intense interest in the head. ➤



*Draped and helmeted figure standing with branch in right hand and a severed head on spear beside. Silver unit of Verica, king of the Atrebatas, cAD 10-42. VA 506, BMC 1450. 11mm. 1.22g. Photograph M. Dudley.*

## Literary Evidence

Many classical writers refer to the Celtic practice of head-hunting, mostly within the context of battle. They speak of warring Gauls collecting the heads of their enemies killed in battle. They attached these heads to the saddles of their horses or impaled them on the points of their spears.

In 216 BC the north Italian tribe of the Boii slew the Roman general Postumius, chopped off his head, cleaned it out, covered it in gold and used it as a cult vessel. Heads of significant victims were also embalmed in cedar oil and cherished above all other personal possessions. We are told, moreover, that the heads of slaughtered foes were sometimes offered to the gods in Celtic shrines.

One of the most vivid classical testimonies to Celtic head hunting comes from the pen of Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian of the 1st century BC, born in Agyrium, Sicily. He travelled in Asia and Europe, and lived in Rome, collecting for 30 years the materials for his immense *Bibliothèque Historique*, a history of the world in 40 books, from the creation to the Gallic Wars of Julius Caesar. He writes "When the enemies fall they cut off their heads and fasten them about the necks of their horses; and turning over to their attendants the arms of their opponents, all covered in blood, they carry them off as booty, singing a paean over them and striking up a song of victory, and these first-fruits of battle they fasten by nails upon their houses, just as men do, in certain



*Brigantian sandstone head from Yorkshire. Its left eye is larger than the right, indicating that it had extra power. The slab nose and slit mouth make it look severe. 24cm. Photograph D. Wicks.*

kinds of hunting, with the heads of wild beasts they have mastered. The heads of their most distinguished enemies they embalm in cedar-oil and carefully preserve in a chest, and these they exhibit to strangers, gravely maintaining that in exchange for this head some one of their ancestors, or their father, or the man himself, refused the offer of a great sum of money."

The other main body of literary evidence for the Celtic cult of the head is Irish and Welsh folk tales. The archaeologist who has done more research into these stories than anyone else is Dr Anne Ross. I shall now quote extensively from her seminal work, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, first published in 1967 by Routledge & Kegan Paul and last issued in 1992 by Constable.

"The literary and folk traditions of Ireland and Wales reveal the full significance of the human head as a venerated object. The vernacular tradition, although compiled some centuries after the advent of Christianity to the British Isles, does contain fragments of genuine pre-Christian cults and rites. Church censorship, especially in Wales, prevented anything descriptive of actual worship from penetrating the written material, but despite this, a certain amount of pagan tradition does come through to us, and this is of particular interest and value when it augments and substantiates what archaeological evidence suggests. Although there is no statement in early Welsh or Irish written traditions to the effect that the Celts worshipped the human head, the frequent references to it, and the nature of these references fully demonstrates that this was indeed the case, and throws

some light on the ways in which it was revered as a cult symbol.

## Bran's Head

The best-known, and the most convincing description of what we can only describe as a "god head", comes from Welsh tradition. It concerns the head of the mythological figure *Bran*, known as *Bendigeidfran*, "Blessed Raven". It has been suggested, and the suggestion carries conviction in the light of our knowledge of the cult of the head, that this title, with its Christian import, is a corruption of an earlier form containing the element *Pen*, "head" with a following epithet. In the *Mabinogion* he is described of being so vast in size that no house could ever contain him, a feature suggestive of his original deity. When he goes to attack Ireland he wades there, followed by his fleet, but he himself carries the poets and musicians, a fact suggestive perhaps of his special patronage of the arts. After the Welsh and Irish have virtually exterminated each other in a bitter fight, only seven Welshmen escape from Ireland, Bran amongst them, but mortally wounded. He asks his companions to cut off his head and take it with them on their travels. He prophesies how things will fare with them once he is dead. He tells them they will feast in Harddlech for seven years, and the birds of Rhiannon (an otherworld goddess), will provide sweet music for them. They will then pass fourscore years at Gwales in Penfro, and at both places the head will be with them, uncorrupted, and providing them with all their needs and entertainment. He warns them that when they open the door facing Aber Henfelen this phase will end and they will be unable to stay there any longer, and they must then make for London and bury the head there. When he has said these things, his head is cut off and his instructions followed. Everything came to pass as Bran had prophesied, and the head presided over the feasting and was a wonderful and delightful companion. And on account of this it was called the Assembly of the Wondrous Head. The talismanic qualities of Bran's head are illustrated by the following statement: 'They came to London and buried the head in the White Mount. And when it was buried it was one of the Three Happy Concealments, and one of the Three Unhappy Disclosures when it was disclosed, for no plague would ever come across the sea so long as the head was in that concealment.'

This legend, embedded in a medieval Welsh tale, is of extraordinary value in that it makes explicit all that the material representation of the human head in cult contexts implies. Bran is divine in origin, and the story of his decapitation is likely to have been a



*Brigantian sandstone head from Yorkshire. Indentations around the neck indicate some sort of neck ornament or torc. 18cm. Photograph D. Wicks.*

rationalisation of an original cult legend about a wonderful, superhuman head that traditionally presided over a divine feast. This head is accredited with all the powers attributed to the head by the Celts. It is apotropaic, in that it keeps all potential invaders away; it is divine. It presides over the other world feast and caters for all needs. It is prophetic and reveals the future. And, the fact that the epithet *bendigeit* carries a Christian connotation suggests that this is but a later corruption of an earlier title in which the word for head was incorporated.

### Fergal's Head

An oblique suggestion of the actual worship of a head is contained in the Irish story *Cath Almaine*. In this tale the Leinstermen allegedly fought a battle against a hero, Fergal Mac Maíle Dúin, who is slain. Fergal's head is carried off, and is treated honourably. It is washed and braided and combed smooth, and a silken cloth is put upon it. Then seven oxen and seven wethers and seven pigs are cooked and placed in front of the head. It immediately blushes and opens its eyes 'to God' and gives thanks for the honour and reverence that have been shown to it. Although this episode is concerned with fully historical characters, and is given a Christian emphasis in that the head thanks God for the offerings that are made to it, it is a very strange incident. It is suggestive of earlier traditions of actual offering being made to venerated heads, evidenced here by the placing of animals before it. The fact that it is given a feast in its

honour is reminiscent of Bran's head presiding at the divine festivities. Fergal's head attracts the attention of Badb, the bird goddess who presided over the battlefield. 'At midday in Allen, contending for the cattle of Brega, the red-mouthed, sharp-countenanced Badb uttered a shout of exultation round Fergal's head.'

### Donn Bó's Head

The story of the battle of Almu contains a second reference to a 'tête coupée' which continued to live after the death of the body. Donn Bó, a youth famed for the sweetness of his singing, and in the service of Fergal Mac Maíle Dúin, was also slain in the battle, and decapitated. He had promised before the encounter took place that he would sing that night for the pleasure of Fergal, no matter where they should be. At night, one of the victorious Leinstermen goes out to the battlefield to seek a head to take back to the feasting-place as a trophy. As he draws near the field of battle, he hears the severed heads singing and entertaining their lord on the field. The voice of Donn Bó is sweeter than all the other voices, but when the warrior approaches the head to lift it up, it checks him and says it will sing for Fergal alone that night, as promised. Nevertheless, the head is taken to the feast and is placed on a pillar. It is then requested to sing. It turns round so that it is facing the wall and in darkness, and it then sings so sweetly that everyone present weeps. Afterwards it is taken back to the battlefield. These two episodes contain the essential elements of belief in the continued existence of a severed head after the body has died. This strongly suggests that this tale, dealing with historical characters in a historical context, has attracted to itself elements that show the genuine and pagan belief in the powers of the human head.

### Lomna's Head

There are several other examples in the early literature of Ireland, which further testify to this cult. In one of the Fenian tales, Finn's fool, Lomna, betrays Finn's wife to her husband, and reveals to him her adultery with another warrior. Coirpre, the lover, then decapitates Lomna on account of his treachery. He goes off with the head. Finn finds the body and by means of his magic prophetic thumb, he divines that it is the body of his faithful servant. He then seeks the head. He finds Coirpre cooking salmon in a bothy and the head is beside him, impaled on a stake. Coirpre does not include the head when he is dividing out the fish, and the head protests. It does this twice, and it is put outside. It then protests from outside the door.



*Brigantian red-sandstone pebble head from Salkeld, Cumbria. The open mouth may suggest that it had the power of speech, a widespread belief among early Celtic people. 16cm. Photograph D. Wicks.*

### Fothad's Head

Another mythological character, Fothad Canainne, likewise loses his head. He was one of three sons born at a single birth and all named Fothad, a mythological motif. His other name was seemingly *Caindia*, 'Fair God'. He never sat down at a feast without severed heads in front of him, thus illustrating his prowess as a warrior. He had a band of followers and with them he waged constant war on a Ailill Flann Bec of Munster. He falls in love with Ailill's beautiful wife, and makes an assignation with her. They go off together, but Ailill pursues them with his war band, kills Fothad and decapitates him. The woman lifts up the head of her lover and it then sings a long, extempore poem to her, in which it bewails its sad state, and instructs her on what to do with its possessions.

### Conall's Head

The head of the great warrior Conall Cernach, whose origins as an ancestral deity are well attested, likewise has traditions attached to it. The head of the hero was taken in revenge for that of Cú Roí another euhemerised Irish god. This has been taken north by the Ulstermen. According to tradition the head remained in the west. Four one-year-old calves would fit into it, or four



*Dobunnic limestone head from Worcestershire. The slanting eyes give it a sad, somewhat sombre appearance, as if the deity was looking upward. 17cm. Photograph D. Wicks.*

men playing *fidchell* (a board game akin to chess) or a couple on a litter, all this emphasising its supernatural size. It was prophesied that it would be taken south again, and that the men of Ulster would regain their strength if they were to drink milk from the head. Conall Cernach himself is associated with a supernatural head on one occasion. He pursues the hero Mes Gegra and decapitates him at a ford. He places the head on a stone, but it passes from the top of the stone to the ground. It goes before Conall Cernach reaches the river. It is then taken to Buan, Mes Gegra's wife. It reddens and whitens alternately, to the amazement of Conall. Buan explains the reason for this, and the head is satisfied and becomes still.

### Ferchú's Head

An example of the placing of severed heads on stones occurs in the early Irish epic, the *Táin Bó Cuálgne*, the Driving-off of the Cattle from Cuálgne. The hero Cú Chulainn smites off twelve heads in the plain of Murthemne. "And Cú Chulainn cut off Ferchú's head to the east of the ford. And he set up twelve stones in the earth for them and he put the head of each one of them on its stone, and he likewise put Ferchú Longsech's head on its stone." *Cinnit Ferchon Longsig* is the name of the place where Ferchú Longsech left his head and his twelve men theirs, namely *Cenn-ait Ferchon*, the Head-Place of Ferchú. Another instance of the placing of a head upon a stone occurs in one of the *dindshenchas* when

the head of Etar is placed upon a grave-stone at Oe Cualard.

The virtual indestructibility of the head according to Irish tradition is attested by the legend of Dermot who met his death in a threefold manner. He was pierced by a spear, drowned and then burnt. Only his head remained untouched. This was carried to Clonmacnoise. The head of Sualtam, Cú Chulainn's 'earthly' father continues to speak after it has been severed from the body."

### Archaeological Evidence

The Celtic cult of the head is well attested by recent archaeological discoveries, which support the comments of Graeco-Roman authors and the later severed-head tales of Ireland and Wales. I have already mentioned the Celto-Ligurian shrines of southern Gaul, such as Entremont and Roquepertuse. There is another Celtic temple site at Nages, near Nîmes in Provence. A lintel survives from this shrine. Carved on the stone is a sort of frieze displaying severed human heads that alternate with images of galloping horses. Miranda Green writes:-

"In view of the abundant imagery from such nearby sites as Entremont and Roquepertuse, the imagery of the lintel at Nages may reflect the predilection of the Celts of this area for head-hunting. Classical writers allude to the Celtic practice of collecting the heads of slain enemies, hanging them from the saddles of their horses and offering them up in their shrines.

Elsewhere in the free Celtic world, heads were offered to the gods: at the Iron Age oppida (fortified towns) of Breton Hill, Worcestershire and Stanwick, Yorkshire, the position of some human skulls suggests their original attachment to poles at the gates of the forts. This is reflected, too, in northern Spain, at the Celtiberian oppidum of Puig Castelar. In Britain, there is strong evidence that the human head was on occasions consecrated to the supernatural powers: at the hillfort of Danebury, Hants, adult male skulls were buried in disused grain storage pits, perhaps to appease the spirits of the underworld, into whose territory the pits has penetrated. A simple rectangular shrine at Cosgrove, Northants was found to have a human head buried in one wall.

There is more evidence than has been cited for the abnormal disposal of human skulls and for decapitation. What is not so clear, however, from either the archaeological or historical sources, is whether or not human sacrifice was involved. The heads of battle victims could have been taken off after death, or decapitation may have been the method of killing."

More recent archaeological evidence of the Celtic head cult comes from the Cerne Giant carved into the hillside above Cerne Abbas in Dorset. In 1986 I suggested that this chalk-cut figure was Cernunnos, mainly because of the obvious link with the name of the village below it, which was formerly pronounced "Kern". Archaeologist Rodney Castleden has plausibly argued that the figure is of Helith. More importantly, Rodney Castleden has conducted geophysical surveys of the giant which reveal that he was originally portrayed with a cloak over his arm and carrying a severed head, in much the same way that the figure on the bronze coin of Cunobelin carries a cloak and head.

In *The Cerne Giant*, Rodney Castleden writes:-

"The image was that of a human face subtly and fairly accurately moulded in low relief, a face surrounded by what looked like a wild mop of hair - were these the lime-encrusted dreadlocks of a Celtic warrior decapitated in battle?

The eyes, one metre long slits, appeared closed in death. A third horizontal slot about two metres long represents the mouth sagging open across the lower part of the face. A ridge 1.5m. long represents the nose... Like other depictions of Celtic severed heads, this one is blank and expressionless, yet it has a curiously chilling, haunting quality... The position of the severed head knoll in relation to the hill figure is significant. Located 8m. below the outstretched left hand of the Giant, it looks as if it was intended to hang or swing from his fist. Everything so far discovered points to the severed head having been part of the original design of the hill figure. What could this extraordinary visual statement have meant?

The idea of a severed head associated with a religious icon may seem bizarre to many of us, but religious iconography is full of strange images: the Crucifixion which is represented both inside and outside most churches is nothing less than an image of a dead, near-naked executed man hanging on a gibbet; the Catholic image of Jesus showing us his sacred heart is even more surreal. Several lines of evidence speak of a widespread Celtic cult of the human head; the descriptions of classical authors, the archaeology, parallels in Romanised Gaul and Britain, and native British folk traditions. It is the best documented of all Celtic cults; the head was nothing less than a major symbol of spiritual power, a symbol that sums up the old religion in the same way that the cross sums up Christianity, the sign that best helps us to make the leap across the dividing centuries to an alien thought-world." ►



The druids and their belief in the immortality of the soul were central to Celtic religion and culture. Engraving by W. Stukeley.

Archaeologist Chris Copson believes the Cerne Giant is carrying a lion skin, not a severed human head (*Dorset Country magazine*, June 1998). He could be right.

## Why?

I've told you that the Celts were head-hunters, head-cutters, head-embalmers, head-carriers and head-carvers. I have offered you some evidence of the widespread nature of the Celtic head cult - evidence from iconographic, numismatic, literary and archaeological sources. We now come to the question why. Why were the Celts so obsessed with the human head? Why did they consider this part of the body so special, so desirable, so collectable, so worthy of worship?

Anne Ross says "In common with their continental neighbours, the insular Celts venerated the head as a *symbol of divinity and the powers of the other-world*, and regarded it as the most important bodily member, *the very seat of the soul*." In other words, the Celts believed that the spirit of a person was located in their head. So, if you took possession of a powerful warrior's head after death, you could share his spiritual power perhaps and benefit maybe from the positive attributes of his personality - bravery and generosity, for example - that he displayed when alive. To believe this so strongly that you would go to the extent of decapitating a man and carrying his head around with you on your horse means, of necessity, that you must be a deeply

religious person or, to use a more derogatory phrase, seriously superstitious.

Once again, classical authors (albeit biased) come to our rescue with documentary evidence. Caesar said "the whole nation of the Gauls is very much given to religious observances" and testifies to the universal power of the druids over everyone, including kings and warriors. Cicero said that the druids in Gaul practised divination. Diodorus Siculus pronounced "The Pythagorean doctrine prevails among them (the Gauls), teaching that the souls of men are immortal and live again for a fixed number of years inhabited in another body". Strabo said "So confident are the people in the justice of the druids that they refer all private and public disputes to them". Ammianus Marcellinus said that the druids were "members of the intimate fellowship of the Pythagorean faith; they were uplifted by searchings into secret and sublime things, and with grand contempt for mortal lot they professed the immortality of the soul". Lucan said "O druids... you tell us that the same spirit has a body again elsewhere, and that death, if what you sing is true, is but the mid-point of long life". Pliny wrote "At the present day Britannia it still fascinated by magic and performs its rites with so much ceremony that it seems as though it was she who had imparted the cult to the Persians". Tacitus said "The druids, lifting up their hands to heaven and pouring forth such dreadful imprecations, scared our soldiers".

Why is it that when I mention the druids, archaeologists cough nervously and back away from me as though they were frightened of catching some dread disease? My learned diggers, the druids and their belief in the immortality of the soul were central to Celtic religion and culture. Let the classical testimony continue:-

Dion Chrysostom declared "The Celts have men called druids, who concern themselves with divination and all branches of wisdom. And without their advice even kings dared not resolve upon nor execute any plan, so that in truth it was they who ruled, while the kings, who sat on golden thrones and fared sumptuously in their palaces, became mere ministers of the druids' will". And finally Hippolytus said "The Celtic druids applied themselves thoroughly to the Pythagorean philosophy... And the Celts believe in their druids as seers and prophets because they can foretell certain events by the Pythagorean reckoning and calculations". Graeco-Roman authors confirm beyond all reasonable doubt that the Celts were fervently reli-



The Celts believed the soul was in the head. So, if they had a man's severed head, they thought they had some of his power. Woodcut by Albertus Magnus.

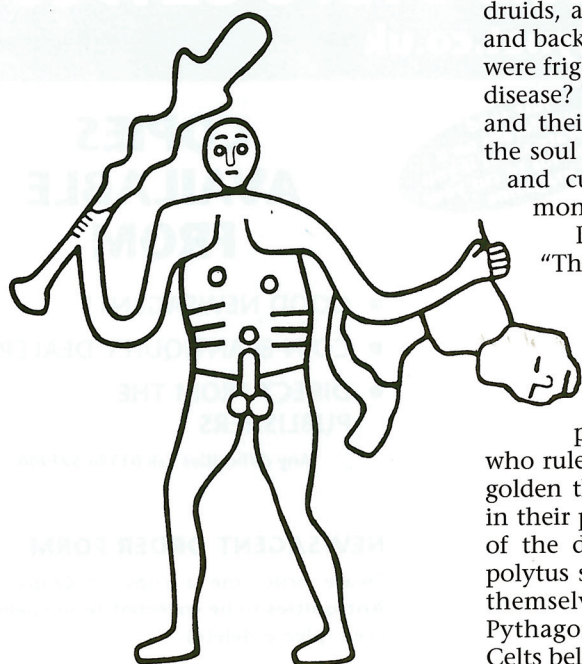
gious people, and that they were intensely influenced by their priests and that they believed in the immortality of the soul and the Pythagorean doctrine of reincarnation.

So, if my foe continues to live after I kill him, then I can share in the power and the glory of his afterlife by keeping his head with me, because his spirit - or part of it, at least - is still alive in his dead head. To speculate thus is, of course, a flight of fancy without the wings of archaeology and the parachute of scholarly approval. But tell me, where is fancy bred, in the heart or in the head? How else can one explain the Celtic cult of the head?

In *The Pagan Celts* (Batsford 1986) Anne Ross makes two important statements. She writes "Religion and superstition played a fundamental and profound role in the *everyday* life of the Celts. This is, in fact, the key to any understanding of their distinctive character... The symbol of the severed head sums up the whole of pagan Celtic religion and is as representative of it as is, for example, the sign of the cross in Christian contexts. In the symbol of the severed head one may find the hard core of Celtic religion. It is indeed an expression of 'a part for the whole', a kind of shorthand symbol for the entire religious outlook of the pagan Celts".

We may find Celtic head-hunting bizarre, barbaric and brutal. But we cannot ignore it. Head-hunting happened and happened frequently. And whilst with the hindsight of 20th century humanitarian eyes Celtic head-hunting may look inexcusable, it is at least understandable if we realise that it was motivated by religious beliefs.

C&A



Reconstruction of the Cerne Giant, Dorset, by Rodney Castleden, whose geophysical surveys show that the figure carries a head. 55m. Rodney says it's a human head. Chris Copson says it's a lionskin head.