

Celtic heads and holy waters.

ANNE ROSS

At the height of their powers the Celts were the masters of Europe, with territories stretching from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and the Black Sea to the western coasts of Ireland. Tribally-organised, with light, two-wheeled war-chariots – tyred with iron which they themselves had discovered – they swept across huge tracts of land, intimidating and defeating all who resisted them. By the third century BC their powers had reached a peak. The Roman Empire lay ahead and with its relentless growth their strength was weakened and their aggression tamed.

They spoke languages which we can still hear today in the form of Welsh, Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Breton, now simplified, but still recognisable as the speech commented upon by the classical writers who studied them from the ethnographic point of view, and as enemies. Europe is studded with place-names of Celtic origin and the oldest river names in Europe and the British Isles belong to these, our ancestors.

They were head-hunters, like many northern peoples. They decapitated their enemies and displayed the severed heads embing them with many powers. They envisaged divinity as a great head, sometimes three-faced, hosting the Otherworld feast, protecting the tribe or family, having powers of speech, prophecy, protection and independent movement. The cult of the severed head, real or artefact, was deeply-rooted in the Celtic psyche; and indeed it remains so in the folklore of Europe and the British Isles.

Real heads were venerated especially in conjunction with sacred springs and they are used as a cure for epilepsy and infertility, the upper part of the skull being cut to serve as a cup from which to drink the sacred waters. Fashioned from stone or wood, pottery or metal, their ancient powers still linger in the minds of those whose ancestors revered them. Many examples of such heads are coming to light all the time as more buildings are cleared and sites excavated, field dykes repaired and gardens created in virgin or long-used ground. These testify to the indestructible belief in the powers of this ancient symbol.

Cu Chulainn at the ford

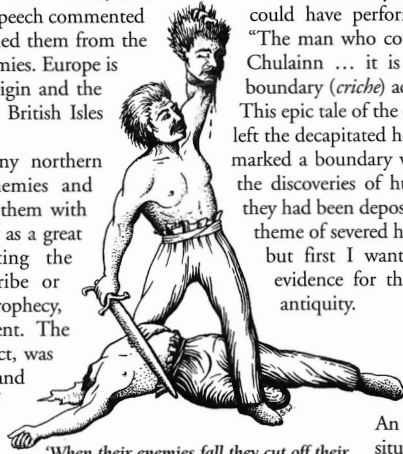
Just a mile down the road from where I live in Wales is a Welsh place-name, Rhydyppennau, 'Ford of the Heads'. According to local tradition, a battle was fought here against the Romans in the first century, and the heads of those slain were thrown into the ford by the Britons.

Fords were places of single combat, rivers clearly forming boundaries between tribal terrains, and thus they acted as neutral territory. In medieval Irish texts single combat between heroes regularly took place at fords. The boy-hero Cu Chulainn, in the epic tale *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, who

protects Ulster from Connacht in the first century BC according to tradition, comes to a ford. There he proceeds to cut down the forked branch of a tree with a single blow of his sword. He then drives it into the middle of the stream so that no chariot can pass over the stream.

While he is engaged in this work two warriors from the enemy and their two charioteers approach the boy. Single-handed, he cuts off their four heads and impales them on the four prongs of the forked branch. He then writes an inscription in Ogam down the side of the great branch. The ensuing remarks of the hero, Fergus, make it clear that this is indeed a boundary stream. When someone asks him who could have performed this amazing deed he replies: "The man who could have performed this deed is Cu Chulainn ... it is he who would have come to the boundary (*críche*) accompanied only by his charioteer".

This epic tale of the deeds of Cu Chulainn and of how he left the decapitated heads of his enemies at the ford which marked a boundary would seem to cast some light upon the discoveries of human skulls in watery places where they had been deposited in antiquity. I shall return to this theme of severed heads and sacred waters in due course, but first I want to look at some prime pieces of evidence for the cult of the human head itself in antiquity.



'When their enemies fall they cut off their heads and fasten them about the necks of their horses.' Diodorus Siculus 5,29.

Drawing by Susan White.

Head-temples and hillforts

An important group of sanctuaries is situated in Celto-Ligurian territory in south-east France in the vicinity of the Rhone delta, and dating to the pre-Roman period. All are within easy reach of

Massalia, the Greek trading post established circa 600 BC, which opened up the Celtic world of the hinterland by means of trading up and down the Rhone. The architecture of the Celto-Ligurian temples is sophisticated, and the cultural influence of Greece is evident. Thus it is remarkable to find that here, where access to classical civilisation was easy, the cult of the human head flourished.

Perhaps the most dramatic of these "head-temples" is that at Entremont, on the northern outskirts of Aix-en-Provence. Here the threshold incorporated a re-used pillar on which are carved in outline twelve mouthless human heads, all but one of which are upright, the other inverted. Here also is the carving on a stone slab of a schematic human head flanked by niches for the display of the real thing. Some fifteen skulls of adult males were recovered here; some of them still retained the large iron nails by which they must have been fixed or suspended from some wooden structure. There was also a series of stone sculptures of squatting warriors, some holding a severed head in one hand and a lance or spear in the other. The temple must have existed as a sacred place well before its destruction in the year 123 BC.

Hillforts, too, boasted their own quota of skull-trophies, set up, no doubt, as guardians, as in later times. A skull was set meaningfully in the wall of L'Impernal, the oppidum of the Cadurci, situated near Cahors, Lot. At Bredon hillfort, Gloucestershire, skulls had decorated the lintel of the gateway. When this was set on fire during an attack early in the first century AD the heads came crashing down.

The people-eating monster

The head cult is illustrated, too, by a sculpture of a sinister nature from Noves, situated – significantly perhaps – close to the river Durance, the Druentia, a tempting name. The sculpture is of a wolf-like creature of fierce countenance, with a human limb hanging from its lower jaw and an object now broken at either end in its mouth; it is powerfully ithyphallic. Known locally as “le Tarasque de Noves”, the sculpture represents a monster which, according to medieval legend, used to emerge from the river and devour people – leaving, it would seem, their doleful heads intact. Two lugubrious male heads are firmly held down, one by each fearsome talon. The monster may well date from the third century BC.

The classical writers amplify the evidence of archaeology in their descriptions of the custom of head-hunting by the early Celts. There can be little doubt that the taking of heads was an essential way of life and an integral part of Celtic religious belief and practice up to the Roman conquests, first of Gaul and then of Britain. Thereafter the taking of heads was banned, as were human sacrifices; but later literary and archaeological evidence demonstrates how deeply-rooted in the tradition this practice must have been.

On the Arc d'Orange, Vauluse, one of a series of triumphal arches set up by the Romans to mark their conquests of the troublesome Celts, the latter are portrayed with human heads hanging from their saddles – just as Diodorus Siculus describes them. Scalps are also depicted.

How Postumius lost his head

Heads were preserved with herbs and oils, and kept in chests, by the Gaulish nobles who would not part with them for any sum of money. Their apotropaic and protective powers were clearly appreciated from a very early date. That the skull was used as a drinking cup in solemn circumstances, e.g. in temple rites, is likewise made clear by the classics. Livy, for example (born 59 BC), describes how the consul Postumius was lost in Gaul together with his army in a huge forest called Litana, “The Broad One” (early Irish *lethan*, modern Gaelic *leathan*).

The Gauls ambushed and surrounded Postumius' two legions and virtually destroyed them. The consul died fighting, spoils were taken from his body and, predictably, his head was severed, and it and the booty were taken by the Boii, the Celtic tribe in question, to their ‘holiest temple’. Then, after they removed the flesh from the head they adorned the skull with gold according to their custom.

They used it as a sacred vessel to give libations on holy days, and their priests and the custodians of their temple used it as a goblet. The libations were presumably sacred water from the springs which served the temples; blood, perhaps, from sacrificial victims; and on occasion the mead or ale which were the favoured drinks of the Celts, although wine-

drinking early became popular when supplies became available.

Many heads were placed in significant positions in shrines and temples, pits, shafts and wells down the Celtic ages, testifying to the deeply rooted nature of this most Celtic of cults. A few of these will be noted here.

At Odell, Buckinghamshire, the decapitated head of a woman had been placed behind the wicker lining of a Romano-British well, perhaps to protect the waters and ensure a good supply.

Four babies under the floor

At the water-shrine of Springhead, which stands at the head of the Ebbsfleet Valley in northwest Kent, and one and a half miles from the River Thames, traces of head-ritual at two periods are evident. The temple is on the site of Vagniacis, which is from a British word meaning a marshy or boggy place – a good description of the site. Four babies were found to have been buried – two on the west side of an early floor and two on the east side of a later floor.

This happened in the original room of the Antonine period, and again some ten to fifteen years later in a new floor. In the first floor the baby on the southwest corner had been decapitated: in the later construction the infant in the northeast corner had been decapitated. The excavators supposed that one pair had been offered as a foundation sacrifice, and the second pair at a ceremony of rededication.

Constant rebuilding, and thus rededication, must have been a regular feature of Celtic sanctuaries. What happened to the heads is not recorded; excavation did not recover them. It is likely that they were placed in the sacred waters of this impressive Springhead shrine which must have been accorded worship some time before the second century, according to the evidence revealed by excavation.

Severed heads were much associated with waters, and sometimes it seems that a stone idol in the form of a human head could be used. A remarkable head-idol was dug up from a depth of twelve feet beside the Chapel well at Enniskillen in Ireland. The eyes are represented by deep holes, and the menacing slit mouth is made more alarming by the indication of teeth. The neck is long and pole-like. The idol is thought to date from the pre-Christian period.

Skulls from Thames and Walbrook

We have seen that the symbol of the human head and the deep regard accorded to it by the Celts indubitably goes back well into the Iron Age and probably before that period in our prehistory. The connection with sacred waters is likely to have an equally long history.

The River Thames gets its name from the Celtic Tamesis, ‘the Dark One’, probably the name of a goddess, because rivers seem to have largely been thought of as being feminine by the Celts. This is interesting because Adamnan, biographer of Saint Columba, mentions a river in Scotland called, in Latin, Nigra Dea, ‘Black Goddess’. Thus, here the river is a goddess, and so, we may suppose, was the Thames. There is, in fact, a whole series of ‘black goddess’ rivers in the Scottish Highlands. The Nigra Dea of Lochaber is the modern River Lochaidh. So the name of the Thames itself

points to an early belief in its dark powers which led, no doubt, to propitiatory sacrifice.

We began by looking at heads and boundaries and this theme recurs when we consider the heads taken from Thames and Walbrook. The Walbrook, 'Brook of the Welsh', a former tributary of the Thames, shared with the larger river an amazing offering of human heads. Moreover, the Walbrook was a boundary river. Many human skulls, most of Iron-Age date, were found in the Walbrook, some forty-eight of which are recorded. They showed no sign of injury and, predictably, they were usually the skulls of men in the prime of their lives, under forty years of age.

Human skulls were constantly found when the River Thames was dredged in the nineteenth century, often together with important finds of metalwork, mostly weapons, some of stunning workmanship. One location near Battersea Bridge, famous for its finds of Celtic metalwork, was actually known as a Celtic Golgotha in the nineteenth century. Because of the fine quality and richness of the metalwork the extraordinary number of human heads tended to be disregarded. Cuming wrote a paper entitled 'On the Discovery of Celtic Crania in the Vicinity of London' – a fine title – but a year later his attention was diverted to the stunning Battersea shield, and he seems to have lost interest in the skulls.

Forty-eight skulls have been recovered from the Walbrook, and others from Kew and Hammersmith. It is extremely fortunate that about 300 skulls taken from the Thames still survive today in museum collections; and this enquiry has set in motion a new interest in skull collections generally, and in the find-spots. A great many of the Thames skulls were found between Richmond and Mortlake. The same area has yielded major finds of Bronze Age and Iron Age metalwork.

Bran's head brought to London

Some of the skulls are dated to the late Bronze Age, which demonstrates a convincing continuity of ritual and practice of the cult of the head in connection with watery places. Of particular significance is the fact that rarely, if ever, were the skulls found together with other human remains. The skull itself, then, is the part that was offered. The continuity of this practice did not end with the coming of the Roman period: there are a few skulls dated to the post-Roman, Saxon, era.

Noteworthy are the ten human skulls and six mandibles which were found in the River Lea, a tributary of the Thames. It is interesting to note that Ekwall suggests, on etymological grounds, that Lea is likely to mean 'the river of the god Lugus'. The Lea, then, flows into the 'Dark One', and surely some ancient and profound cult is indicated. Is it by chance, I wonder, that Bran's head was brought to Londinium as a talisman, and buried in a place where many springs flow, as an apotropaic emblem, in order to keep all invaders away from Ynys Prydein, 'The Island of Britain'?

Perhaps the finest well in this country dating from the Roman period, and containing evidence of skull-worship is that at Carrawburgh, in Northumberland. Named Coventina's Well after the presiding goddess – who was also venerated on the Continent – excavation yielded many sacred objects which had been cast into or suspended above the well. From our point of view, the human skull is the

most telling. Whether it was first used for purposes of healing, or of prophecy, or of protection – or any or all of these – we shall never know. Its mere presence at the bottom of a hallowed well in a remote part of Roman Britain adds important evidence to the archaic and deeply rooted association of severed heads with sacred waters.

For epileptics only

Finally, I want briefly to tell the story of my own experience of a severed head and a sacred spring, in the Highlands of Scotland. Like so many wells in this wild terrain, the well was known as Tobar a'Chinn, 'The Well of the Head'. The skull is famed for its ability to cure epilepsy, of which there was a great deal in the Highlands in the past. The power of the skull could only operate, however, with the potent waters of a mountain spring. The sacred water must be drunk from the human skull, and so the cure was effected. This well and its healing properties were renowned throughout the Highlands, and people came from the Islands as well as the mainland to obtain the cure.

The well is situated on a mountain-side in a wild region of Wester Ross. I visited the township some years ago, and talked with the guardian of the skull and the well – for guardians are an essential and archaic feature of such healing sites. The skull is allegedly that of a suicide, and was found lying on the ground some two hundred years ago, according to the tradition. The 'wise men' of the community recognised that it would have powers to heal epilepsy, skulls of suicides allegedly being very potent in this respect. The waters of the spring were already accredited with healing powers, and it was somehow recognised that the well and the skull together would have magical powers; but always to be invoked in the name of the Trinity.

The skull was taken up to the well, and was kept in a small stone cist at its side: and there it remains to this day. The guardian, a local healer, was appointed, and the position has remained in the same family to the present day. The well must not be visited for any purpose other than the healing of epileptics: it is the deeply-rooted belief that the powers of the water are not inexhaustible, and must be expended with great care. The skull, too, must only be used in the healing ritual – otherwise it must lie hidden in its stone container. The healing takes place after the last rays of the sun have left the mountain and before first dawn. The climb, and the descent after the ritual has been performed, must be made in silence.

I was privileged to visit the well in the dead of night with the guardian, who explained the ritual to me in detail. He told me that after the healing was completed, and the sacred waters had been drunk from the skull, he 'put the prohibitions' on the patient. This is a very archaic feature; it occurs in Old Irish in the form of the word *geis*, (pl. *gessi*), meaning a tabu, a prohibition, a ritual constraint. *Geas* is the word still used in Scottish Gaelic, and it is this that the guardian of the well used. It was a rare and awe-inspiring experience, one which seemed to take me right back into the Celtic Iron Age.

Dr Anne Ross, formerly Research Fellow in Archaeology at the University of Southampton, is the author of Pagan Celtic Britain and many other books on Celtic culture.