

Celtic, Roman, and Everything in Between:  
The Evolution of the Sacred in Romano-Celtic Wales

by

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A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfilment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Classical Studies

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2021

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

Celtic religion is usually summarized with a quick discussion of druidic practices and human sacrifice. The actual ancient religion of the Insular Celtic populations was a lot more complicated. This thesis introduces the ancient Celtic religion practiced in Wales and discusses how the cultures of the Celtic and the Roman peoples interacted during their co-occupation of the British Isles, with emphasis on the evolution of the beliefs and practices which were considered sacred to those inhabiting the land. The syncretism of Celtic and Roman religious activity (beginning in 43 BCE until the arrival of Christianity around 200 CE) is difficult to separate in some instances because of the substantial similarities in the practices and beliefs. Hybridity of the sacred in ancient Wales can be seen in the historical written records of the Roman peoples, the archaeological evidence remaining in Britain, and in the socio-cultural outcomes which can be seen in the written medieval Welsh *chwedlau* (tales). While the Roman authors generally speak on the druids, the philosophical beliefs, and sacred practices of the Celtic peoples, the archaeological finds and epigraphic evidence provide more insight into the deities worshipped in Britain by both Roman and Celtic individuals, as well as some cultic customs. Later works, written by Welsh scribes, reveal (traditionally oral) mythologies and their portrayal on topics such as Celtic deities, the Otherworld and its inhabitants, and various Celtic festivals. The findings of this thesis have concluded that the practices of the Roman people did not displace those of the Celts completely but that the cultural and sacred practices of the Celts were integrated into the traditions of the Romans.

## Acknowledgements

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I received a great deal of support and encouragement from many people in my life.

I would like to thank Dr. David Porreca, my supervisor, for his continued support throughout both my undergraduate and graduate degrees. Writing this thesis would not have been possible without your patience or insight, and it certainly would not have been quite as enjoyable without your fun tangents alongside your invaluable critiques.

Next, I would like to thank the Classical Studies department as a whole for fostering such a welcoming environment for me as a Medieval Studies student, and others like me, to collaborate with students as well as with professors. Specifically, to the members of my committee, Dr. Craig Hardiman, and Professors Andrew Faulkner and Reimer Faber, for taking time out of their summers to provide me with feedback to help me strengthen my thesis.

To Brigitte Schneebeli, thank you for all that you do for the department and its students. Whether it be helping when my computer would not print my funding applications or setting up weekly online meetings to keep the community aspects of the department going during quarantine, the writing of my thesis would not have gone as smoothly without your assistance.

To the friends I met at Waterloo, Jordan, Moira, Michelle, Zohra, Shannon, Armand, and Elakkiya, each of you is responsible for who I am today. I thank you for all the love you have shown me, the support you have given me, and all the hours we have shared working late on campus over the past few years. František, thank you for answering all the questions I had about folk traditions and British websites no matter how odd they seemed or how late I posed them. To Joanne, thank you for distracting me with our weekly coffee catch ups during this process and for being there for me regardless of how far away you were living.

Finally, thank you to my family for your unwavering support. To my grandparents and my aunt who took me to Wales for the first time, thank you for piquing my interest in our genealogy and always encouraging me to pursue my love of history. A special thank you to my parents, you both have always encouraged me in my studies and have shown a great interest in my work throughout the years. I could not have completed this degree without your love and support.

To my late cousin John.

Thank you for sharing your love of British history with me.

I wish I could have appreciated it more fully before your passing.

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## List of Abbreviations

- AGr. *Arch.* Miranda J. Aldhouse-Green, *An Archaeology of Images: Iconology and Cosmology in Iron Age and Roman Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- AGr. *Caes.* Miranda J. Aldhouse-Green, *Caesar's Druids: Story of an Ancient Priesthood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
- AGr. *GC* Miranda J. Aldhouse-Green, *Gods of the Celts* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1986).
- Amm. Marc. Ammianus Marcellinus, *History Volume I, Books 14-19*, trans. John C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 300 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).
- Ath. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, trans. Charles Burton Gulick, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library 208 (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1967).
- Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, trans. Charles Burton Gulick, vol. 3, Loeb Classical Library 224 (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1967).
- B. *HE.* Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, ed. R.E. Latham, trans. Leo Shirley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1990).
- Caes. *BGall.* Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, trans. H. J. Edwards, Loeb Classical Library 72 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917).
- Cass. Dio Cassius Dio, *The Roman History*, trans. Ernest Cary and Herbert B. Foster, vol. 7, Loeb Classical Library 175 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).
- Cassius Dio, *The Roman History*, trans. Ernest Cary and Herbert B. Foster, vol. 8, Loeb Classical Library 176 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).
- CIL* Ernest Willibald Emil Hübner, *Corpus Inscriptum Latinarum consilio et auctoritate Academiae litterarum regiae Borussicae*, ed. Aemilius Hiltbner, vol. 7 (Berolini: Apud Georgium Reimerum, 1873).
- Dio Chrys. *Or.* Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, trans H. Lamar Crosby, Loeb Classical Library 376 (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962).
- Diod. Sic. Siculus, Diodorus, *The Library of History, Volume II: Books 2.35-4.58*, trans. C.H. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library 303 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935).
- Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History, Volume III: Books 4.59-8*, trans. C.H. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library 340 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939).

- Diog. Laërt. Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers, Volume I: Books 1-5*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks, Loeb Classical Library 184 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).
- El. AWC Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Ancient World of the Celts* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1999).
- El. *Caes.* Peter Berresford Ellis, *Caesar's Invasion of Britain* (London: Orbis Publishing Limited, 1978).
- El. *HDru.* Peter Berresford Ellis, *A Brief History of the Druids, A Brief History Of* (Philadelphia: Running Press Book Publishers, 2017).
- Enn. *Ann.* Quintus Ennius, *Fragmentary Republican Latin, Volume I: Ennius, Testimonia, Epic Fragments*, trans. Sander M. Goldberg and Gesine Manuwald, Loeb Classical Library, 294 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- G. *Mab.* Charlotte Guest, trans., *The Mabinogion from the Welsh of the Llyfr Coch o Hergest (The Red Book of Hergest)* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1877).
- Gild. *Ex.* Gildas, "On the Ruin of Britain," trans. J.A. Giles, (Project Gutenberg, 1999).
- Gr. *Ani.* Miranda J. Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- Gr. *CW* Miranda J. Green, ed., *The Celtic World* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- H. *PRB* Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).
- Hdt. Herodotus, *The Histories*, ed. John Marincola, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (London: Penguin Books, 1996).
- Hippol. *Haer.* St. Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, ed. S. D. F. Salmond, trans. J. H. Macmahon (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868).
- Just. *Epit.* Marcus Junianus Justinus, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*, trans. John Shelby Watson (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853).
- Luc. M. Annaeus Lucan, *The Civil War (Pharsalia)*, trans. J. D. Duff, Loeb Classical Library 220 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928).
- Ma. *Imp.* David Mattingly, *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire, 54 BC-AD 409* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).
- Me. *Rit.* Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1987).
- Mon. *HRB* Geoffrey Monmouth, *Geoffrey of Monmouth: The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. J.A. Giles, trans. Aaron Thompson, Medieval Latin Series (Cambridge: In Parentheses Publications, 1999).

- Nen. *HB* Nennius, *History of the Britons (Historia Brittonum)*, trans. J.A. Giles, Medieval Latin Series (Cambridge: In Parentheses Publications, 2000).
- Plin. *HN* Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History, Volume VI: Books 12-16*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 370 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945).
- Plut. *Super.* Plutarch, “Superstition” in *Moralia, Volume II*, trans. Franklin Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library 222 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928).
- Pomp. Pomponius Mela, *Pomponius Mela’s Description of the World*, trans. F.E. Romer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).
- Procop. *BGoth.* Procopius, *History of the Wars, Volume V: Books 7.36-8 (Gothic Wars)*, trans. H.B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library 217 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928).
- RIB* “Roman Inscriptions of Britain,” 2020, <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/>.
- Ros. *PCB* Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London: Butler and Tanner Limited, 1967).
- Ros. *PC* Anne Ross, *The Pagan Celts* (Ruthin: John Jones Publishing Lyd., 1998).
- Ros. Rob. *DP* Anne Ross and Don Robins, *The Life and Death of a Druid Prince* (London: Rider, 1989).
- S. *FABW* William F. Skene ed. And trans., *The Four Ancient Books of Wales: Containing the Cymric Poems Attributed to the Bards of the Sixth Century*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1868).
- William F. Skene ed. And trans., *The Four Ancient Books of Wales Containing the Cymric Poems Attributed to the Bards of the Sixth Century*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1868).
- SHA *Alex. Sev.* Aelius Lampridius, “Life of Alexander Severus,” in *Historiae Augustae Volume II: Caracalla. Geta. Opellius Macrinus. Diadumenianus. Elagabalus. Severus Alexander. The Two Maximini. The Three Gordians. Maximus and Balbinus.* trans. David Magie, Loeb Classical Library 140 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 178-313.
- SHA *Aurel.* Flavius Vopiscus Syracusanus, “Deified Aurelian,” in *Historiae Augustae Volume III: The Two Valerians. The Two Gallieni. The Thirty Pretenders. The Deified Claudius. The Deified Aurelian. Tacitus. Probus. Firmus, Saturninus, Proculus and Bonosus. Carus, Carinus and Numerian,* trans. David Magie, Loeb Classical Library 263 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 192–293.
- SHA *Car.* Flavius Vopiscus Syracusanus, “Carus, Carinus, Numerian,” in *Historiae Augustae Volume III: The Two Valerians. The Two Gallieni. The Thirty*

*Pretenders. The Deified Claudius. The Deified Aurelian. Tacitus. Probus. Firmus, Saturninus, Proculus and Bonosus. Carus, Carinus and Numerian*, trans. David Magie, Loeb Classical Library 263 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 417–51.

- Strab. Strabo, *Geography, Volume II: Books 3-5*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, Loeb Classical Library 50 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923).
- Strabo, *Geography, Volume III: Books 6-7*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones, Loeb Classical Library 182 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).
- Suet. *Ner.* Suetonius, “Nero,” in *Suetonius: The Lives of the Twelve Caesars: An English Translation, Augmented with the Biographies of Contemporary Statesmen, Orators, Poets, and Other Associates*, ed. Alexander Thomson, Perseus Digital Library (Philadelphia: Gebbie and Co., 1889).
- Tac. *Ann.* Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, trans. John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 322 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937).
- Val. Max. Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings, Volume I: Books 1-5*, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb Classical Library 492 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- W. B. *Oth.* Gerald A. Wait, “Burial and the Otherworld,” in *The Celtic World*, by Miranda J. Green (London: Routledge, 1996), 489–511.

## Introduction

Even though the modern idea of ‘Celtic’ has been intrinsically associated with the modern populations of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, the ancient ancestors of these peoples came from much further east. The Insular Celts (those residing in the British Isles) and those from Brittany in France are the only modern survivors of a vast number of tribal communities which shared cultural traits. ‘Celtic’ is an antiquated term which has been used for centuries to describe many different tribal communities, not all of whom left Continental Europe. Unfortunately, no better term has been developed to designate the larger cultural group, and for that reason ‘Celtic’ and ‘Celt’ will be used throughout this thesis.<sup>1</sup> These groups once were found as far east as Turkey, with prominent art and culture being discovered in the modern countries of Germany, Czech Republic, Switzerland, and France to name a few.<sup>2</sup> Some of the Celtic peoples of Continental Europe migrated north and west into Britain around 900 BCE where they quickly became the dominant culture on the islands until the Roman invasion of 43 CE.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis will focus on the Britons, of the Brythonic linguistic branch, who settled on the island of Britain (in both Wales and England). The following discussion will specifically concern the religious practices of the Britons of Wales and the Marches in order to expand on an area of history which has been neglected as compared to the study of such topics in England. The 500 years before the influence of Christianity arrived in Wales are the darkest in terms of source survival and therefore present a challenge in the investigation of the religious practices of the

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<sup>1</sup> Donnelly, “The Celtic Question,” argues that this term should not be used at all to discuss the cultural group.

<sup>2</sup> El. *AWC*, 9. The Celts and Germanic populations have a lot of cross over archaeologically speaking during the Roman expansion into Gaul and received very mixed descriptions from the Greco-Roman authors who interacted with the ‘barbarian’ tribes in Western Europe. For more information on the conflation between the Celtic tribes and the Germanic tribes of Europe see Kulikowski, *Rome’s Gothic Wars from the Third Century to Alaric*, 56-62.

<sup>3</sup> For migration of Celtic peoples to the British Isles see El. *AWC*, 25. There was a second wave of migration around 450 BCE which brought the La Tène culture to the British Isles; for more on the second wave migration, see Ros. *PC*, 25. The Roman invasion of 43 CE was the second invasion of the British Isles by the Romans. The first attempt under Julius Caesar in 55 BCE was not as successful as the one under Emperor Claudius. Blair, *Roman Britain and Early England: 55 B.C.-A.D. 871, 273*.

time.<sup>4</sup> Seven known tribes (excluding any which are thought to be subgroups of larger tribes) inhabited these areas at the time of the Claudian invasion (in no particular order): the Silures, the Ordovices, the Decangi, the Dobunni, the Demetae, the Gangani, and the Cornovii (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> Some of these tribal territories breach the modern border between Wales and England (namely the Dubunni and the Cornovii) but are still included in this study due to the majority of their territory being in the western part of the island.<sup>6</sup> When the Roman army left Britain in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, Anglo-Saxon tribes entered the picture and forced the Romano-Britons to retreat to the fringes of Wales (and Cornwall). The invaders gave the Romano-Celts the new moniker of *welisc/welc*, meaning foreigner.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of the Roman departure from Wales, the tribal and cultural make-up of that area shifted. A new cultural identity eventually emerged between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries which was conveyed through written tales (*chwedlau*) which became the mythology and folktales that passed on ancient beliefs to more recent generations.<sup>8</sup>

Julius Caesar led the first Roman expedition into Britain, making cultural contact with the Celtic populations inhabiting the island during his invasion of Gaul in 55 BCE. The Britons were a fierce group that resisted Caesar's forces, sending him back to the Continent in 54 BCE. It was almost a century later when the Emperor Claudius was able to conquer and colonize Britain successfully after his troops' arrival in 43 CE.<sup>9</sup> The Roman occupation of Britain lasted almost

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<sup>4</sup> Wheeler, *Prehistoric & Roman Wales*, 205.

<sup>5</sup> There are many variant spellings of these names found within both the primary sources and the scholarship on the tribes, specifically regarding the Decangi, who are also referred to as Deceangli. There is also some hesitation in linking this tribe with the name Decanti, a name which appears in post-Roman times but could also refer to a different tribe. Jarrett and Mann, "The Tribes of Wales," 166.

<sup>6</sup> This paper will refer to the territory of the Dobunni tribe as including areas around the towns of Bath and Bristol in southern England because archaeological finds from this area include Iron Age coins from the Dobunni tribe. Around the time of Caesar's invasion of Gaul, another tribe known as the Belgae were migrating into Britain and are believed to have settled in the strip of land between the English Channel and the Bristol Channel. Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, 108-110.

<sup>7</sup> This term later became the English word Welsh. Davies, *The Celts*, 117.

<sup>8</sup> The Welsh terms and spellings of names will be used throughout this thesis, except when they appear in the titles of works cited, for precision and also to celebrate the Welsh culture which has been Anglicized throughout history. These terms can be found in the Glossary of Welsh and Irish Terms at the end of this thesis.

<sup>9</sup> Cass. Dio, 60.19-60.23.

400 years (43-410 CE), with the Romans only abandoning their British posts when Germanic tribes breached Roman frontiers closer to the capital at the turn of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

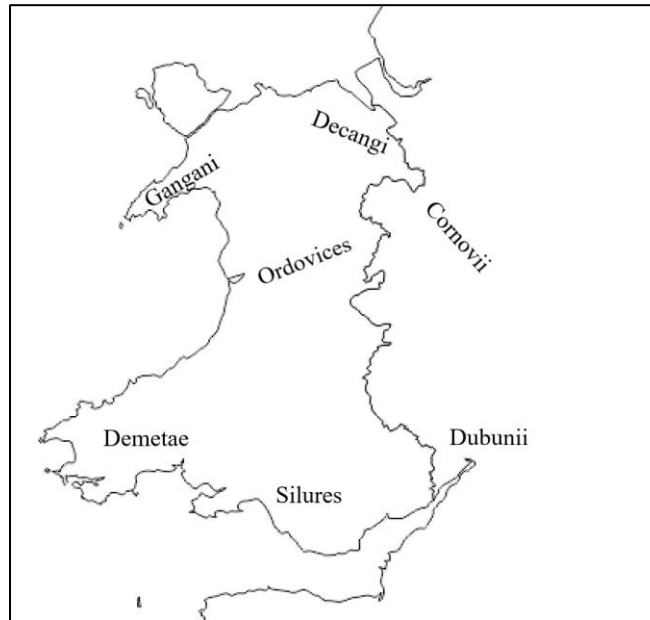


Figure 1: Map of the location of the Celtic tribes which inhabited Wales and the Marches during the Roman Invasion. Blank map “England (United Kingdom): boundaries (white)” from [https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=5583&lang=en](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5583&lang=en). The information added to the map was done so by the author of this paper with the aid of Frere, *Britannia: A History of Roman Britain*, 13 and Ma. *Imp.*, 49.

This thesis focuses only on the interaction between the religious ideas and practices of the pre-Christian Romans and Celtic Britons. Celtic Christianity and Roman Christianity, although vibrant forces in the religious evolution of the province, will not be taken into consideration. There are several different estimates on the timing of Christianity’s arrival in the British Isles, including 156 CE and 180 CE, as presented by Geoffrey of Monmouth and Bede, respectively.<sup>10</sup> There has been plenty of discussion and research done on this topic which led to the refutation of these dates and all of their variations.<sup>11</sup> For the sake of simplicity, this paper will use the year

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<sup>10</sup> B. *HE*, 1.4 and Mon. *HRB*, 4.19.

<sup>11</sup> Thornhill, *The British Martyrs: Aaron and Julius*, 467-507; Smith, *Lucius of Britain: Alleged King and Church Father*, 29-36.

200 CE as a rough end-point for the thriving of Romano-British paganism in Wales.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that paganism disappeared over-night in Wales. Remote settlements would have been largely unaffected by any change during the Roman period.<sup>13</sup> The resulting religion which is described in later medieval texts cannot be said to be completely Celtic in nature due to the sources' post-12<sup>th</sup> century dates, but the core aspects of these texts retain characteristics of the Celtic faith.<sup>14</sup> The medieval stories can be compared with the earlier Roman descriptions, as each base their understanding on pre-Roman Celtic culture. While multiple centuries and multiple invasions of the British Isles separate these medieval texts from the time of pre-Roman Celtic independence, the *chwedlau* are the result of centuries of oral traditional lore (*cyfarwyddyd*) passed down through generations.<sup>15</sup> The later tales and poems contain names and motifs which are Celtic in origin.<sup>16</sup> It was a common practice in Welsh oral traditions to preserve the histories of ancestors by creating *chwedlau* which were passed on through generations until said ancestors became mythologized figures.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This date represents a time between when B. *HE*, 1.4, Nen. *HB*, 3.22 and Mon. *HRB*, 4.19 claim the Celts welcomed Christianity (between 150 and 180 CE) and the dates given to the first 'Welsh Christian martyrs', Aaron and Julius (around 300 CE), by Gild. *Ex.*, 10, B. *HE*, 1.7 and the appearance of the Bishop of London at the Council of Arles in 314 CE. Smith, *Lucius of Britain*, 29-31. See Thornhill, *The British Martyrs* and Smith, *Lucius of Britain* for more on the problems associated with dating the introduction of Christianity to Britain.

<sup>13</sup> Wagner, de Gezelle, and Komarnytsky, "Celtic Provenance in Traditional Herbal Medicine of Medieval Wales and Classical Antiquity," n.p. When the Anglo-Saxons arrived in England, they introduced their own pantheon of pagan deities in the larger urban centres. This change would have increased the migration of Christian (and to a lesser extent pagan) Romano-Britons into Wales. B. *HE*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> The major medieval texts (10<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> century dates) which will be included in the following discussion are found in G. *Mab.* including the two of the *Pedeir Ceinc y Mabinogi* ("Pwyll Prince of Dyved," "Branwen the Daughter of Llyr"), and the native tales "The Story of Lludd and Llevelys," "Kilhwch and Olwen or the Twrch Trwyth," and "The Dream of Rhonabwy." To a lesser extent, middle Welsh tales and poems contained in what are considered the ancient works of Wales (attributed to 6<sup>th</sup> century authors Aneurin and Taliessin, but not recorded in their present forms until the late 12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries) "Book of Aneurin," "Book of Taliessin," and "The Black Book of Caermarthen," in S. *FABW* will also be examined.

<sup>15</sup> Rider-Bezerra, "The Mabinion Project," n.p., Ros. Rob. *DP*, 36, and Davies, "Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales," in Gr. *CW*, 785.

<sup>16</sup> Compare to the Irish tales which survive in a less corrupted narrative than the Roman and Christian influenced Welsh texts.

<sup>17</sup> Rider-Bezerra, "The Mabinion Project," n.p., Williams, *History of Wales: Derived from Authentic Sources*, 1, and Davies, "Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales," in Gr. *CW*, 787. AGr. *Arch.*, 65, warns against direct links being drawn between medieval prose and the archaeological record but does recommend the addition of the tales when discussing the Insular Celts. While most scholars agree that some insight on ancient ideas can be found in the medieval texts, the idea is not universally accepted. See H. *PRB*, 147 for an expression of skepticism on the presence of ancient Celtic ideas in medieval works.



This thesis argues that before the prominence of Christianity in Wales, there was much syncretism between the Roman and British Celtic sacred practices.<sup>18</sup> This hybridization between Roman and British Celtic religious activity happened so seamlessly due to the substantial similarities between the Britons' and the Romans' practices and beliefs, in addition to the Roman habit of adapting and adopting various elements of foreign religions into their own practices.<sup>19</sup> Both cultures had their own respective pantheon of nature-related gods, whose names and attributes varied depending on which local variant was being worshiped, and both also had semidivine heroes who fought off mythical creatures in their mythologies. Both religions had practices of ritual, worship, and sacrifice that were overseen by priests of some distinction who held substantial political power. These ideas will be discussed in subsequent chapters, in addition to addressing how much of the surviving notions of the sacred in the context of pre-Christian Wales is truly Celtic, and how much has been influenced by Roman culture. In order to do so, the term 'sacred' must first be defined. It can be applied to anything pertaining to the beliefs or practices which a group of people hold in reverence, or which has an association with religion. In the pre-Christian context of Roman Wales, this includes anything considered to be mystical, magical, and hallowed.<sup>20</sup>

Within the fields of Classical, Medieval, and Celtic Studies, there is little modern scholarship focused solely on the religious impact of the Roman occupation in Wales. The

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<sup>18</sup> In recent years, the use of 'syncretism' has gained some criticism as it originally meant the combination of native religion with Christian belief. In this paper this term will be used interchangeably with 'hybridity' which has been a proposed replacement term for the antiquated 'syncretism'. The problem with only using 'hybridity' is that the term originally was used to describe general cultural colonial assimilation, which is less specific than 'syncretism.' Graf, "What is Ancient Mediterranean Religion?" in Johnston ed., *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> This can be seen in the formal Roman practice of *evocatio*, where Rome calls upon the protective deities of their enemy during war, rewarding the deity with a Roman cult upon victory. An early example of *evocatio* is described by Livy regarding Juno of the Veii in Warrior, *Roman Religion: A Sourcebook*, 86-87. The reinvention of the British Celtic religion in Roman guise was used as a form of suppression and a tool for conversion. Ma. *Imp.* 106.

<sup>20</sup> "Sacred," in *Collins English Dictionary*, and "Sacred," in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.

majority of the scholarship published in the last decade focuses on archaeology and linguistics,<sup>21</sup> providing an opportunity for this paper to re-examine some of the questions which were asked by scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries surrounding who the Celts were and what they believed.<sup>22</sup> These questions include: who were the druids really, what was the religion they presided over, and how does Welsh folklore fit into the narrative?<sup>23</sup> Reviving this conversation is important to all the aforementioned fields as it will attempt to engage in a multidisciplinary discussion about the hybridity of the sacred. This discussion will include historical, archaeological, and sociological methodologies as it delves into the socio-cultural impact and outcome of Roman traditions on the Celtic populations of Wales. The archaeological record and epigraphic evidence are vital to understanding the pre-Roman religion and its survival into the Roman period as well as using literary analysis of the written primary sources to investigate the extent of Roman and British-Celtic hybridization of sacred practices and beliefs.<sup>24</sup>

As knowledge becomes more widely available to the general public, it also becomes increasingly problematic in the world of academic history to separate fictional ideas from historic events. Early modern notions, subsequently disseminated widely in popular culture,

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<sup>21</sup> The seminal scholars who have published on Celtic religion in the past few decades are mostly archaeologists, including Miranda J. Aldhouse-Green (née Green) (Celtic art and myth), Anne Ross (pagan Celtic religion), the late Stuart Piggott (British antiquarianism), Barry Cunliffe (Roman and Celtic Archaeology in Britain), Ian M. Stead (British Iron Age), and David Mattingly (Roman archaeology in Britain and Europe). The primary historians or Celtisists include Peter Berresford Ellis (Celtic studies) and Ronald Hutton (pagan studies). Nora Chadwick (Anglo-Saxon and Celtic studies) is one of the leading philologists who extends her studies into the field of history.

<sup>22</sup> John Rhys (the first professor of Celtic Studies at Oxford University in 1877), Samuel Rush Meyrick, and Wirt Sikes all wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the nature of Celtic religion.

<sup>23</sup> Rhys, *Celtic Folklore: Welsh & Manx*, vii-xiv and Sikes, *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-Lore, Fairy Mythology, Legend and Traditions*, vii-viii both inquire mostly into the folklore and mythologies of Wales, while Meyrick, "On the State of Druidic Religion in Britain," 13-29 inquired about the role of the druids during the Roman period. How reliable the antiquarians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were differs greatly between the sources. Wirt Sikes was an American-born journalist with no formal education in Celtic History. John Rhys, however, was the first professor of Celtic studies at Oxford University. Many other antiquarians, not included in this thesis, such as John Daniel's early 20<sup>th</sup> century work, *Philosophy of Ancient Britain*, came to the conclusion that druidism was a natural precursor to Christianity and connected every aspect of the religion to Christian religious beliefs. Works that had strong Christian influence and reasoning when discussing Celticism and druidism were purposefully left out of this discussion.

<sup>24</sup> This methodology is commonly followed when discussing the Celts in any capacity. Historian Ellis and archaeologists Aldhouse-Green, Ross, and Piggott all apply similar methodologies in their various works.

glorify and romanticize the idea of druidism and associated Celtic beliefs; such interpretations have been consciously avoided in this discussion.

In order to explore such a complex topic, this paper is structured in order to provide an introduction to the different aspects of Celtic religion and how each aspect was altered by Roman intervention. Druids, their various roles within society, and the philosophical beliefs attributed to the Insular Celts, are the focus of Chapter 1, as the priesthood is the most well-known aspect of Celtic religion. The discussion on druids will be followed by an investigation of the different deities which were worshiped and the sacred locations where the worship took place (Chapter 2), followed by a discussion regarding the Celtic Otherworld, its inhabitants, and the human dead (Chapter 3). The final chapter (Chapter 4) will cover the ancient Celtic festivals, celebrations, and associated offerings to various deities. This chapter will also include a look into the more recent past with the continuation of some of these festivals in modern Welsh traditions as they are commonly included in discussions on the Celtic religion in Wales.

## **Chapter 1: The Druidic Belief System**

Not much is known about how exactly the Celtic populations of Britain put their religious beliefs into practice, as no native writings survive from pre-Roman times. What little is known from written sources was produced by Greek explorers and Roman colonists, which unfortunately added an ‘othering’ lens to the various descriptions these foreigners provided. The first mention of Britain was around the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century BCE by geographers regarding the mining and trade associated with tin following Pytheas’ exploration.<sup>25</sup> Following this mention, around 50 Greek and 80 Latin authors refer to the British islands, yet not all of these were substantial or accurate recordings.<sup>26</sup> The number of surviving ancient works that specifically refer to those who dwelt in the British Isles is only a fraction of the roughly 500 sources which mention the ‘Celts’ as a race, specifically on mainland Europe, between the sixth and first centuries BCE.<sup>27</sup> When the ancient authors refer to the ‘Celts,’ the term was used to describe the inhabitants of Gaul (modern France), as only one ancient author had firsthand experience with the tribes of Britain: Tacitus.<sup>28</sup> These works on Gaul will be included in this discussion as there is enough evidence of migration between Gaul and Britain that the cultures manifest similar religious beliefs and practices. Even though the Romans, and to lesser extent the Greeks, who encountered the northern Celtic tribes did not often record information about them in a positive light, these documents are still invaluable as they represent sources that can be compared with archaeological finds and later written works to gather some insight into how these tribes lived before they were colonized by the Romans.

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<sup>25</sup> Herodotus was skeptical about the existence of Britain when he was writing c. 445 BCE, but the existence had been corroborated by the time of Polybius who wrote about the island in 260 BCE. Stevens, “Ancient Writers on Britain,” 189.

<sup>26</sup> Stevens, “Ancient Writers on Britain,” 189.

<sup>27</sup> El. *AWC*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> H. *PRB*, 146.

## 1.1 Religious Castes

A now lost work from around 200 BCE by the Greek doxographer Sotion of Alexandria is cited as the earliest mention of what would become the most well-known part of Celtic religion: the druids.<sup>29</sup> This knowledge is persevered in the writing of Diogenes Laërtius who mentions the druids as *semnotheoi* in his work on the lives of philosophers.<sup>30</sup> Druids are only mentioned in relation to the tribes of Gaul and Britain, which has led to speculation about their origin since they do not appear to be present in Celtic populations east of the Rhine. Yet they were, and continue to be, compared to the Brahmins of the Hindus of India by ancient and modern authors.<sup>31</sup> While the shared Indo-European background of the Celts and Hindus leads some scholars to believe that druidism is inherently ingrained in the universal ‘Celtic’ religious experience, others suggest that druidism may have been part of an older religion which existed in Britain before the migration of the Celts.<sup>32</sup> Either way, by the time that Caesar launched his invasion of the island, the druids were an integral part of Celtic religion in Britain as well as in Gaul.

Caesar was the first to mention that druidic beliefs were not only present in the British Isles, but originated from there. Caesar believed that somewhere in Britain was a school where Gallic (and British) nobility would send their sons to study the art of druidism, sometimes taking as long as twenty years to master the craft.<sup>33</sup> At this school, the young aspiring druids would

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<sup>29</sup> Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, 2 and Spence, *The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Diog. Laërt., “Prologue,” 1.

<sup>31</sup> There are multiple similarities between the Celtic religion and Hinduism. In Ellis and Sadasivanathaswami, “Our Druid Cousins: Meet the Brahmins of Ancient Europe, the High Caste of Celtic Society,” n.p., the authors conclude that these are due to the parallel development of these religions from a shared Indo-European root. Hippol. *Haer.* 1, includes both brahmins and druids in the discussion on philosophy, and Dio Chrys. *Or.*, 49.7-49.8, also discusses the similarities.

<sup>32</sup> El. *Caes.*, 36 expresses belief in a universal understanding of druidic practices by the Celts of Europe, while Rhys, *Celtic Britain*, 70 argues that the non-Celtic natives of Britain were druidic followers.

<sup>33</sup> Caes. *BGall.*, 6.13-6.14. Piggott, *The Druids*, 108 suggests that the twenty years Caesar claims as the length of study could be in reference to the nineteen-year cycle of the Celtic calendar. Piggott also draws the same parallel between the structure of Celtic and Hindu priesthoods, as both druids and brahmins spend a very long time studying in remote locations.

spend their time learning oral teachings and lore from their elders. The curriculum included learning and respecting “the stars and their movement, the size of the universe and of the earth, the order of nature, [and] the strength and the powers of the immortal gods.”<sup>34</sup> The reason that no religious texts survive about Celtic religions is that it was against their beliefs to record any sacred information in writing.<sup>35</sup> Caesar suggests that this was to keep the notion of the sacred out of the hands of the masses, thereby preserving the druids’ power, but also to test the dedication of the druids themselves as memorization requires more care and concentration than simply reading from a book.<sup>36</sup> Additional measures were taken to preserve the secrecy of the druidic teachings, which included speaking of their philosophy in riddles.<sup>37</sup> Druids were expected to learn how to facilitate the sacred practices of the community, and their roles extended into the secular realm as well. Druids were described admirably as priests, magicians, soothsayers, astrologers, and prophets despite the ancient authors going on to discredit the druids’ roles as noble figures and pillars in the community.<sup>38</sup> Druids were consulted, just as Roman priests were, on a wide variety of issues, including prophetic aid, sacrifice supervision, and communication with the gods. Besides the sacred aspects of their role, druids also functioned as judges, historians, doctors, and teachers.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Caes. *BGall.*, 6.14, “Multa praeterea de sideribus atque eorum motu, de mundi ac terrarum magnitudine, de rerum natura, de deorum immortalium vi ac potestate disputant et iuventuti tradunt.” All translations, unless otherwise stated, are drawn from the Loeb editions with facing English and Latin translations.

<sup>35</sup> This was exclusive to religious activities; despite what was previously thought about the Celtic population in Gaul and Britain, Celts were literate to some extent. The astrological feat which is the Coligny Calendar dates to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and includes writing in the Gallic language using Greek characters. El. *HDru.*, 25, 230 and El. *AWC*, 121-124.

<sup>36</sup> Caes. *BGall.*, 6.14.

<sup>37</sup> Diog. Laërt., 1.6 and Diod. Sic., 5.31. This of course must be read with caution as neither author is Celtic. According to Graves, *The White Goddess*, 29, however, the *Hanes Taliesin*, like many medieval poems, is meant to be read as a riddle even though this is not explicitly stated. See “Taliesin,” in *G. Mab*.

<sup>38</sup> Just. *Epit.*, 26.2, Hippol. *Haer.*, 22, Pomp., 3.19, and Dio Chrys. *Or.*, 49.9.

<sup>39</sup> Strab., 4.4.4, El. *AWC*, 37 and Forbes, *The Last of the Druids: The Mystery of the Pictish Symbol Stones*, 23. In Ellis and Sadasivanathaswami, “Our Druid Cousins,” n.p. the authors compare these with the identical roles that Brahmins play in Hindu culture.

The druids were not the only religious caste in Celtic society, nor were they the only ones tasked with both sacred and secular duties. There are commonly believed to have been three learned classes in Britain: druids (*dryw/derwydd*), bards (*gweledydd*), and *vates* (*gwawdawr*).<sup>40</sup> The survival of Celtic culture in Wales is due in part to the abiding presence of bards throughout history. As poets, bards were *chwedleuwr* (storytellers) whose tales included myths, histories, legends, and folklore which were passed down for generations, ultimately laying the foundation for Western European medieval literature according to Pennick.<sup>41</sup> Like the druids, bards held official positions under tribal chiefs.<sup>42</sup> In ancient times, these men were held in high esteem as entertainers, *chwedleuwr*, and men of civilized culture even by the Greek and Roman authors who encountered them.<sup>43</sup> Bards also held other positions depending on the needs of the community. In some instances, they were looked upon as prophets, the most famous being Taliesin (fl. 550 CE).<sup>44</sup> Diodorus Siculus places bards as equal to druids on the battlefield when he speaks of them halting war and impressing the Greek god Ares.<sup>45</sup> Not all sources list bards as a caste of seers or prophets, since usually this role was saved for the *vates*, the lesser-known caste which appears under multiple titles including *ovates* and *euhages* (both of which are Gallic).<sup>46</sup> In some instances, this caste was only referred to as diviners whom the Celts of Gaul held in high esteem as they could tell the future by means of birds' behaviour or the entrails of sacrificed animals, which is highly reflective of Roman practices, and the choice of term could

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<sup>40</sup> Not all sources include all three, Luc. Books 1 and 3 only mention the druids and bards. For the Welsh equivalents, see Ross, "Ritual and the Druids" in Gr. *CW*, 428.

<sup>41</sup> In Ireland there were specific schools for bards, but this seems to be a local phenomenon. El. *HDru.*, 158. For information on the northern bardic influence on medieval literature, see Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes*, 8. Ellis, *The Chronicles of the Celts*, 178.

<sup>42</sup> El. *Caes.*, 37 and Hywel Dda, *The Laws of Hywel Dda*, 250, 254, 256. In Gaul, the bards may have also been tasked with recording local histories and ancestries using Greek characters. Williams, *History of Wales: Derived from Authentic Sources*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Amm. Marc.*, 15.9.8, *Ath.*, 6.246 and 4.152E, and *Strab.* 4.4.4.

<sup>44</sup> Davies, *The Mythology and Rites of British Druids*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> *Diod. Sic.*, 5.31.

<sup>46</sup> *Amm. Marc.*, 15.9.8, *Strab.*, 4.4.4. *Vates* is usually translated into English as seer, see *Enn. Ann.*, 232.

have represented Diodorus Siculus' attempt at expressing Celtic practices to his Greco-Roman audience.<sup>47</sup> The Latin term *vates* has come to mean seer or divinely inspired poet which has cognate words in many Indo-European languages, including Gallic, Irish, Welsh, and Icelandic.<sup>48</sup> *Vates* survives as *fáith* in the Irish language, which means seer, prophet, or prophecy. *Vates* do not survive into the Middle Ages as their own named caste, but their role as diviners, seers, and prophets was absorbed into the nature of both the druids and the bards in later years, as the cognate words came to mean poem or poetry in Welsh, Icelandic, and Old English.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the beneficial social roles that druids were described as having within their communities, many of the ancient authors who wrote about them villainized their beliefs and practices. These works placed an emphasis on the druidic practice of human sacrifice, a practice which had been outlawed in the Roman Empire a few decades before Caesar invaded Gaul and was often used by Roman authors as a fear tactic used to scare their audiences into believing the worst about another culture.<sup>50</sup> This may have been a simple case of othering; however, the great disapproval of the druids could have also been in reaction to learning just how much power they held in their respective communities. It becomes increasingly difficult to convert new conquests to the invaders' religion or pressure them into submission if there is a powerful group who still holds sway over the native population. The Romans were experts by this time in syncretism when it came to different gods and religious practices, but they were not accepting of strong political and religious leaders because these leaders could oppose Roman power. By the time of

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<sup>47</sup> Diod. Sic., 5.31.

<sup>48</sup> MacKillop, "vates, vatis," *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, n.p., Fowler and Fowler, "vates," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, n.p., and de Vaan, "Vates, -is," in *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages*, 674.

<sup>49</sup> de Vaan, "Vates, -is," 674.

<sup>50</sup> Plin. *HN*, 30.12 as translated in Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 139, claims the consuls officially banned the practice in 97 BCE. This practice is akin to the use of the bogeyman as a method for teaching moral lessons to children.



Claudius, druids had already been mostly eradicated in Gaul.<sup>51</sup> It only took until 61 CE for the Romans to wipe out the remaining druids in Wales and Britain. The only druidic survivors of the Roman invasion were those who fled north to Scotland and those who inhabited Ireland.<sup>52</sup>

The existence of ‘druidesses’ (*dryades*) or female druids as priestesses has been debated and no definitive answer has been produced.<sup>53</sup> The classical accounts of druidesses place them not only in the role of priestesses to female deities but also as powerful prophetesses which mirrors the Greek religious practice, but not the Roman.<sup>54</sup> Earlier accounts include the women who joined the druids in the battle of Mona (discussed below), but these women were not identified as religious figures by Tacitus.<sup>55</sup> Celtic women with religious affiliation included Boudica (British), Camma (Galatian), Veleda and Ganna (Gallic), Namnites (Gallic), and the unnamed prophetesses written about in the *Scriptores historiae Augustae*.<sup>56</sup> While the majority of named Celtic prophetesses come from various locations throughout Gaul, including Belgium and the Loire valley, Boudica is the only named ‘druidess’ from Britain. In Dio Cassius’ account, Boudica was described as a priestess due to her leading the worship of the goddess Andraste, and

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<sup>51</sup> Augustus excluded druids from obtaining Roman citizenship, Tiberius banned druids in Roman territory by decree of the senate, and Claudius attempted to abolish them in 54 CE to wipe out the competing intellectual class. El. *HDru.*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Evidence from ancient British poems and the Triads led to the belief that into the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE there was a seminary of druids in northern Britain that managed to survive the Roman government and may have been responsible for the reintroduction of druidic beliefs after the Roman occupation. See Meyrick, “On the State of Druidic Religion in Britain during the Residence of the Romans,” 17-18. Of course, once Christianity began to make its mark in Ireland, the druids who remained eventually went extinct.

<sup>53</sup> See SHA *Car.*, 14, SHA *Aurel.*, 63.4.5. and Tac. *Ann.*, 14.30 for historical mentions. El. *AWC*, 56 sees no reason to doubt the existence of female druids since later Celtic sources concur with the ancient sources. See AGr. *Caes.* 215 and H. *PRB*, 227 for arguments against.

<sup>54</sup> In Greek practice female deities usually had female priestesses to serve at their cults, whereas the Romans tended to have male priests no matter the sex of the deity being worshipped. The Vestal Virgins, priestesses to Vesta were among the small number of female priestesses in Roman practice outside of mystery cults. The Pythia at Delphi is a good Greek comparison to the Celtic priestesses mentioned above as the Pythia was both priestess and prophetess. Delphi, however, was a shrine to the God Apollo and not a female deity. Roberts, ed. “women in cult,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, n.p.

<sup>55</sup> Tac. *Ann.*, 14.30. For a connection between the women dressed in black from Ynys Môn and the Greek furies, see AGr. *Caes.*, 215.

<sup>56</sup> El. *AWC*, 89-93. Boudica took over the rule of the Iceni tribe (in modern East Anglia) after her husband was killed. After she and her daughters were raped by Roman soldiers, Boudica led the revolt against their oppressors in 61 CE. She was not the first Celtic woman who led an army into battle, but she is the most famous. Just as the Romans villainized Cleopatra once she gained power, however, instead of making her a seductress they made Boudica out to be a large, intelligent, and fiercely intimidating woman. See Cass. Dio, 62.6 and for later opinions see Gild. *Ex.*, 2.6.

the use of a rabbit as an auspicious omen during the Icenian Revolt.<sup>57</sup> Boudica's affiliation with the sacred is also recorded by Tacitus in his *Annals* when he discusses her reasons for engaging in battle: lost liberty and to avenge the gods who were offended by the Romans' presence in Britain and stood behind the Celts in their revolt.<sup>58</sup> Those mentioned in the *Scriptores historiae Augustae* are all referred to as *druide/druidas*, but only because they provided prophecies.<sup>59</sup> Due to the lack of evidence about the religious roles of women in Celtic society, these brief mentions of them as priestesses or prophetesses being the only extant examples, it is extremely hard to place them into an everyday sacred vocation.

## **1.2 Derwyddon Ynys Môn (Druids of Anglesey)**

Much of the information discussed above comes from authors who were writing about the druids of Gaul. It must be acknowledged that with different Celtic tribes, different religious practices were present, yet the presence of druids in Roman-era Wales is undeniable and as a whole, they would have played similar roles in society.<sup>60</sup> It is not beyond the realm of possibility that when Caesar spoke of the British druidic school, he was referring to the druidic inhabitants of Ynys Môn (the island of Mona, Anglesey in modern English). After the Romans had proved to be a threat to druidic teachings, specifically to the teachers themselves, Ynys Môn became a haven for those escaping persecution. Moreover, due to the high concentration of druids, the Romans saw Mona as a centre for superstitious activity.<sup>61</sup> Mona was attacked for the first time in 61 CE in an attempt to quell the Welsh tribes before Roman forces were pulled out of Wales in order to suppress the Boudican revolt which began in the same year.<sup>62</sup> The destruction of Mona

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<sup>57</sup> Cass. Dio, 62.6.

<sup>58</sup> Tac. *Ann.*, 14.35.

<sup>59</sup> SHA *Alex. Sev.*, 60, SHA *Aurel.*, 44, and SHA *Car.*, 14.

<sup>60</sup> Compare the description of the druids in Caes. *B Gall.*, 6.13, 6.14, 6.16 with Tac. *Ann.*, 14.29-14.35.

<sup>61</sup> Thomson, "Remarks on Nero," in Suet. *Ner.*

<sup>62</sup> Tac. *Ann.*, 14.29-14.35.

was best recorded by Tacitus in his *Annals* where he describes what met the men following the orders of the new consul Paulinus Suetonius:

On the beach stood the adverse array, a serried mass of arms and men, with women flitting between the ranks. In the style of Furies, in robes of deathly black and with dishevelled hair, they brandished their torches; while a circle of Druids, lifting their hands to heaven and showering imprecations, struck the troops with such an awe at the extraordinary spectacle that, as though their limbs were paralysed, they exposed their bodies to wounds without an attempt at movement. Then, reassured by their general, and inciting each other never to flinch before a band of females and fanatics, they charged behind the standards, cut down all who met them, and enveloped the enemy in his own flames. The next step was to install a garrison among the conquered population, and to demolish the groves consecrated to their savage cults: for they considered it a pious duty to slake the altars with captive blood and to consult their deities by means of human entrails.<sup>63</sup>

This complete devastation of the island remains out of character for the Romans who usually left religious locations standing, and still usable, after their conquest. Roman religion expanded with every territory that the empire gained as they welcomed in new deities and shared their own.<sup>64</sup> In order to combine the worship of Roman deities into colonized cultures, altars were needed for proper veneration, which is why it appears so odd that in this instance the Romans destroyed everything sacred that could have been used on the island. The purposeful destruction of sacred groves by axe and fire by invaders is difficult to distinguish in the archaeological context from accidental forest fires or deforestation for construction purposes since most of the material artifacts have been discovered in Llyn Cerrig Bach and not within a burn layer.<sup>65</sup> The claimed

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<sup>63</sup> Tac. *Ann.*, 14.30, “Stabat pro litore diversa acies, densa armis virisque, intercurantibus feminis; in modum Furiarum veste ferali, crinibus deiectis faces praeferebant; Druidaeque circum, preces diras sublatis ad caelum manibus fundentes, novitiate aspectus perculere militem ut quasi haerentibus membris immobile corpus vulneribus praerent. Dein cohortationibus ducis et se ipsi stimulantes ne muliebre et fanaticum agmen pavescerent, inferunt signa sternuntque obvios et igni suo involvunt. Praesidium posthac impositum victis excisique luci saevis superstitionibus sacri: nam cruore captive adolere aras et hominum fibris consulere deos fas habebant.” Shannon-Henderson suggests that by the time Suetonius became consul the Romans had drifted away from cult practice and proper worship, and into impious territory under the rule of Nero. Shannon-Henderson, *Religion and Memory in Tacitus’ Annals*, 285-287. The frustration that Tacitus felt towards this slow deterioration of religious scruple may have aided in his description of the protectors of Mona. This specific section of Tacitus’ *Annals*, however, is not discussed by Shannon-Henderson.

<sup>64</sup> Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> See Chapter 3.2 for more information on Llyn Cerrig Bach and underwater deposits in Wales.

destruction, whether or not it occurred, of the sacred infrastructure on Ynys Môn shows how important the druids were in Celtic everyday life, even beyond the sacred realm, and how the thought of human sacrifice was just too reminiscent of the Roman past for them to accept its continuation.<sup>66</sup> No matter the motivation, the Romans succeeded in eradicating the druids, but not their practices, from the territory for many centuries.

After the first raid on Ynys Môn, there is not a single written record of druids in Wales or anywhere else in Europe until the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE when a druidess provides Severus Alexander with a prophecy.<sup>67</sup> It is thus clear that the Romans did not eliminate the druidic presence completely before they withdrew their troops from the island at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The mention of a druid in the *Scriptores historiae Augustae* implies that the religious caste never fully disappeared, their role in religious worship being absorbed into the responsibilities performed by the bards or the *vates*. In addition to the example which survives in the *Scriptores historiae Augustae*, the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE Gaulish author, Ausonius Decimus Magnus, mentions that he has an aunt whose name was Dryadia (or in English, Druidess). This name, which denotes a caste long eradicated, seems out of place unless the druids never completely vanished from Gaul. These examples suggest that the caste never was eradicated but simply stopped being a threat, possibly due to women taking over the role, as most surviving accounts of druids after 61 CE describe women in the role of prophetesses.<sup>68</sup> Being referenced again many generations after they were removed from power in Wales proves that it was

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<sup>66</sup> Aldhouse-Green, "Doom, Druids and the Destruction of Mona," 240-241.

<sup>67</sup> AGr. *GC*, 26. SHA *Alex. Sev.*, 60. A second invasion of Mona took place in 77 CE under Agricola, see Ma. *Imp.*, 116.

<sup>68</sup> El. *HDru.* 96. In the cities, Roman priests potentially took over the roles that the druids had previously held. It is likely, however, that in smaller communities, druids were not available and a substitute religious leader (possibly a chief) led rituals instead. An example from Germany of a Celtic woman named Veleda who lived and was held in high regard as a seer or druidess during the reign of Vespasian (69-79 CE) could also prove that the druids continued to practice, but outside of the Romans' awareness.

possible for aspects of pre-Roman Celtic religion to survive Roman occupation, even if the oppressors made it clear that the practice was not welcome.<sup>69</sup>

### **1.3 Philosophic Beliefs: Pythagorean Parallel**

When ancient authors wrote about the philosophic and religious beliefs of the Celts (specifically those of the Gallic druids), they frequently compared the druidic system to the teachings of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras.<sup>70</sup> The majority of ancient sources agree on the similarity; however, they all tend to have their own ideas about why these religious beliefs were so similar. The role of the Thracian Zalmoxis is repeated often by multiple authors from both antiquity and modern day.<sup>71</sup> St. Hippolytus introduces Zalmoxis as the slave of Pythagoras who personally introduced his master's philosophic thought to the druids.<sup>72</sup> The author explains how the druids investigated this philosophy and were impressed by the 'prophetic' nature of the thought, this 'prophecy' being prediction based on calculations from Egyptian teachings.<sup>73</sup> Herodotus' description of Zalmoxis did not include discussion of the druids but presented him as a philosophical teacher to his own people.<sup>74</sup> Scholars speculate as to whether Zalmoxis even existed in the roles ascribed to him, with some suggesting the slave was a Celt himself.<sup>75</sup> Besides Zalmoxis, the origin story of druidic philosophy introduces Abaris the Hyperborean. The Hyperboreans were a mythical society of giants who, according to the authors of antiquity, lived in the North beyond Gaul.<sup>76</sup> Abaris is credited as a Gallic (or more northern) priest of Apollo as

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<sup>69</sup> While the term druid by this point could be a general term used for discussing any priest associated with the Celts of Britain, the druid described in SHA, *Alex. Sev.*, 60, provides prophecies which was one of the tasks originally attributed to the druids or the *vates*.

<sup>70</sup> Valerius Maximus does not dwell on the origin of the 'foolish' druidic beliefs, but he does equate them with the opinions held by Pythagoras. Val. Max., 2.6.10.

<sup>71</sup> Zalmoxis is also called Zamolxis by St. Hippolytus and Salmoxis by Herodotus. Zalmoxis is mentioned by El. *Caes.*, 31-32.

<sup>72</sup> Hippol. *Haer.*, 2 and 22.

<sup>73</sup> Hippol. *Haer.*, 22. According to St. Hippolytus, this is the thought that eventually led the druids to heretical and magical beliefs.

<sup>74</sup> Hdt. 4.95.

<sup>75</sup> El. *Caes.* 31-32.

<sup>76</sup> Diod. Sic., 11.47, n.47.

well as a seer who went to Greece in order to escape a plague. It was while in Greece that Abaris is said to have met with Pythagoras.<sup>77</sup> It has also been suggested that the connection between Pythagorean and druidic thought was probably just a conflation made by someone who was familiar with Greek philosophical thought and not due to any influence that the cultures may have had on each other.<sup>78</sup>

Pythagorean philosophy is often referenced as an early development of the doctrine of immortality of the soul.<sup>79</sup> Sotion of Alexandria (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE) is the oldest authority on soul transmigration as a true Celtic thought rather than a reiteration of the Pythagorean theory after cultural interaction between Celts and Greeks.<sup>80</sup> Pythagorean doctrine describes the soul as escaping the body when it dies and being reborn into this world in another form, be it plant, animal, or human. Celtic archaeology, however, provides evidence against there being a close equivalent to such notions in the druidic faith as many Celts were buried with objects intended for human use in the next life.<sup>81</sup> The druidic version of the doctrine of immortality focused not only on the survival of the soul, but also on the constant exchange of souls with the Otherworld. The belief in the soul's movement to another world can be seen in the descriptions of funerary festivities being joyous occasions and those surrounding birth being mournful.<sup>82</sup> Caesar describes a very Pythagorean outlook on the soul when he discusses what is publicly known of druidic beliefs. Hutton suggests that this was another example of the authors of antiquity using ideas

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<sup>77</sup> Both Strab., 7.3.8 and Hdt., 4.36 mention Abaris as a Hyperborean with connections to philosophic thinking and judicial practice. There is no mention here of what El. *HDru.*, 173-174 brings up in reference to Abaris being a British Celt whose name was Ap Rees.

<sup>78</sup> Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 21.

<sup>79</sup> Extensive scholarship has been conducted on Pythagorean philosophy. For further insight on Pythagoreanism consult Kahn and Graf, "Pythagoras, Pythagoreanism," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, n.p., Rowe, "transmigration," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, n.p., and Luchte, *Pythagoras and the Doctrine of Transmigration: Wandering Souls*.

<sup>80</sup> El. *HDru.*, 173-174.

<sup>81</sup> Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 21. This is not to say that Pythagorean beliefs would never include grave goods only that the goods usually included with Celtic burials appear to be more of use by humans living an everyday existence in the next life rather than believing they might be reborn as an animal or plant. Chapter 3 will discuss burials and the Otherworld in more detail.

<sup>82</sup> El. *HDru.* 177. W. B. Oth., in Gr.CW, 495.

familiar to their Greek and Roman audiences to discuss and ‘other’ the Celts.<sup>83</sup> Caesar states that, according to the druids, “[t]he cardinal doctrine which they seek to teach is that souls do not die, but after death pass from one [person] to another; and this belief, as the fear of death is thereby cast aside, they hold to be the greatest incentive to valour.”<sup>84</sup> If the soul simply moved into an unknown being, as is the basis of Pythagorean theory, after death, one would think that a fear of dying would still be present in most of the population since one would cease to exist as oneself after death. If, however, the Celts were taught, similarly to the Egyptians, that the person and their soul were reincarnated in the Otherworld after death, then the doctrine could be behind the reputed increase in valour and ferocity for which Celtic warriors were famed.<sup>85</sup>

In support of the argument that the soul was taken to the Otherworld after death, the description of the island of Brittia by Procopius in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE provides detail of an ancient service of soul conduction which men dwelling on the island must perform. Islands of similar description, but different in name and location, are referred to in native Insular medieval sources as well.<sup>86</sup> Later medieval Welsh texts, however, show support for a more Pythagorean version of reincarnation. One story tells of how the sorceress Cerridwen ingested a grain which was really a man named Gwain Bach. Gwain Bach, who had enraged the sorceress by accidentally using her potion of beauty, had died from this act and was reborn as the gifted bard

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<sup>83</sup> Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe*, 21. This could also be the Romans attempting to understand the Celtic religion using their previous knowledge.

<sup>84</sup> Caes. *BGall.*, 6.14, “In primis hoc volunt persuadere, non interire animas, sed ab aliis post mortem transire ad alios, atque hoc maxime ad virtutem excitari putant metu mortis neglecto.” Diog. Laërt., 1.6 also includes the practice of courage in his list of the three druidic philosophic teachings, the other two being reverence of the gods and abstaining from any wrongdoing.

<sup>85</sup> Diod. Sic., 5.28 compares the Celtic thought to the Pythagorean thought of a new body reviving the soul. Pomp., 3.19, mentions the eternal soul and the second life that one lives after death as a factor in war strategy. This ferocity is also noted by a Roman soldier stationed at Hadrian’s Wall when he notes that the Britons fought without armour and did not need to mount horses (of which they had plenty) in order to throw javelins at their enemies. *Tab. Vindol.* 164, in *RIB*.

<sup>86</sup> Procop. *BGoth.*, 8.48-8.58. and Meyer, “The Voyage of Bran - Text and Translation,” in *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal, to the Land of the Living*, 1-35. The example of Bran is Irish, but this idea did persist in the beliefs of the Britons as well. See El. *AWC*, 181. See El. *HDru.*, 121 for information on the god Beli as a psychopomp.

Taliesin.<sup>87</sup> This tale, while it could represent transmigration of the soul from one being to another, presents the idea of shapeshifting or even the rebirth of a hero which are common tropes in Insular Celtic mythologies and legends. Both Cerridwen and Gwain Bach change their form multiple times throughout the pursuit and the end result of Cerridwen giving birth to Taliesin, who was renamed by a stranger when discovered as an infant, could also be viewed as Gwain Bach's final shifted form or as the same man reborn.<sup>88</sup>

#### **1.4 Philosophic Beliefs: On the Soul and Head Cults**

For the Celts, the human soul was defined as one part of a whole of a person, the other parts being the body and the spirit. The death of a person was seen as a transitional period during which the soul and body of the deceased both became immaterial and shapeless while being transported into the Otherworld.<sup>89</sup> The indestructible soul resided in the head which was the power source needed for the human spirit and body to function.<sup>90</sup> This belief was held by the Celts, but was not an exclusively Celtic belief as this can also be seen emulated by some Romans in the form of offerings (of their head) made to underworld deities during battle and in the use of elaborate death masks.<sup>91</sup>

Since the head of a person was believed to hold their soul, the Celts coveted the head, which can be seen in their art as well as in their preservation of human heads. It was often noted with horror by ancient sources that the Celtic warriors would decapitate those they killed in combat in an act of triumph. Strabo records the Celtic practice of nailing enemy heads to the

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<sup>87</sup> "Taliesin," in *G.Mab.*, 472-474.

<sup>88</sup> *El. HDru.*, 178.

<sup>89</sup> *W. B. Oth.*, in *Gr. CW*, 495.

<sup>90</sup> *El. AWC*, 172 and 177.

<sup>91</sup> Forcey, "Whatever Happened to the Heroes? Ancestral Cults and the Enigma of Romano-Celtic Temples", 91. Two masks dating between 50 BCE and 80 CE were discovered in Standwick. *Ros. PCB*, 68.



gates of their communities after parading them around on the necks of their horses as well as the act of embalming the illustrious decapitated heads of loved ones or powerful enemies in cedar oil.<sup>92</sup> The embalmed heads would often be left as a votive offering in a river or a temple. There are hundreds of skulls, dating to between 50 and 155 CE, found in the archaeological record of the Thames river in London, specifically at Walbrook, which point to water disposal as a votive offering of a head (usually missing the lower jaw bone) being a common occurrence in Britain.<sup>93</sup> In later Welsh tradition skulls discarded in wells were viewed as the guardians of their resting places.<sup>94</sup> Venerated decapitated heads appear not only in ancient sources of war, but also in the medieval Welsh myth “Branwen uerch Llyr,” where Bran the Blessed, brother of Branwen, asks his friends to decapitate him when he is mortally wounded in battle. The talking head of Bran then continues the journey with his comrades until they reach their destination, at which point the head begins to decompose and is finally laid to rest. After the inhumation, Bran’s head becomes one of the Three Concealments of the Island of Britain protecting the island from oppression.<sup>95</sup>

Such practices, and the overwhelming presence of ‘*tête coupée*’ in Celtic art, are usually thought to indicate a head cult within society.<sup>96</sup> Native Celtic art, especially that related to Britain, Ireland, and Gaul include spiral patterns and expressionless heads often with enlarged eyes and no discernible body. Several recovered weapons include bodyless heads as decoration on the hilts or in the case of smaller weapons give the appearance of knives being anthropomorphic.<sup>97</sup> This is also seen in the case of the ‘male medusa’ plaque found at Bath which combines the sacred liminal nature of the natural hot spring at Bath with the liminality of

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<sup>92</sup> Strab., 4.4.5. Diod. Sic., 5.29 also refers to these acts. El. *AWC*, 177.

<sup>93</sup> Me. *Rit.*, 27-29, El. *AWC*, 177, and El. *HDru.*, 121.

<sup>94</sup> Ros. *PCB*, 107. Presumably, these were inactive wells and not used as a fresh water source.

<sup>95</sup> Me. *Rit.*, 74, Bromwich, Trans., *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*, 88-96, and “Branwen the Daughter of Llyr,” in G. *Mab*.

<sup>96</sup> Ross according to Finlay, *Celtic Art*, 98.

<sup>97</sup> Ros. *PCB*, 68, Finlay, *Celtic Art*, 97, and Rankin, “The Celts Through Classical Eyes,” in Gr. *CW*, 31.

the head as host for the soul.<sup>98</sup> Janiform heads were also common in Celtic art, including on coinage, where a single being has two, and sometimes three, heads facing different directions. In Celtic practice these depictions were often thought to be a deity keeping an eye on the different worlds.<sup>99</sup> The head cult was much more popular in Gaul than in Britain and often was associated with the wheel god Taranis as decapitated heads (or artistic representations of such) were often left as offerings.<sup>100</sup>

As demonstrated above, the Insular Celtic tribes coveted the head for various reasons. Cults devoted to the head in Britain predate the Celtic inhabitation of the area and potentially the Insular Celtic worship of the head. There is some evidence, however, in La Tène artworks from the Continent – specifically the *Gundestrup Cauldron*, which places emphasis on the head – that suggests such cults also played an important role in Continental Celtic religious celebrations.<sup>101</sup> The adoption and adaptation of foreign religious practices were the foundation of many Roman celebrations and worship. It is not surprising that the Celts, who traveled quite a distance into Britain, would have encountered and adopted a head cult from a foreign religion as the Romans did with many practices. Although the head cult was not as prominent in Roman practice as in Celtic, the continuous display of Celtic ‘*tête coupée*’ art, both by Celts and Romans in Britain,

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<sup>98</sup> According to Ros. *PCB*, 90-91, gorgon heads have a long history of religious significance as solar symbols in Indo-European cultures and the Celts connected serpents with water which is why the ‘male medusa’ appears at Bath. It is also worth noting that Bath was associated with Sulis Minerva, a combination of two goddesses, one Celtic and one Roman, the latter of which in Greco-Roman mythology carried an aegis (shield) with the head of medusa affixed to the front.

<sup>99</sup> Ros. *PC*, 157. For examples of this in art on the Continent, see Finlay, *Celtic Art*, 52, 54, 65-66. For examples of this art in Wales, see Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, 211, and on coins in Britain in general, see Ros. *PCB*, 69.

<sup>100</sup> Ros. *PCB*, 96 and Finlay, *Celtic Art*, 64.

<sup>101</sup> An aspect of religion does not have to be native to the people who are worshiping, since many religions integrate ideas and practices from earlier religious traditions. Finlay, *Celtic Art*, 98 and Ros. *PCB*, 61-62, 66. For information on the *Gundestrup Cauldron*, see El. *HDru.*, Illustration 1, and El. *AWC*, 59, 168 for images and 145-146, 171 for information on the connection with head cult.

throughout the Roman period shows that this practice was not entirely at odds with the Roman belief system despite the ancient authors' disgust at displaying real decapitated heads.<sup>102</sup>

In conclusion, all the religious castes were integral parts of Celtic society as they held roles in both the sacred and secular realms. The druids received the most attention as they held the highest, and therefore most influential, position in society which made them a political threat to the Roman invaders. Most women with power were only briefly mentioned regarding their actual roles within society and were not taken seriously as a threat to Roman superiority. In Wales, the ancients focused on the druids who inhabited the sacred Ynys Môn, and how easy it was for the Romans to annihilate that 'superstitious' stronghold. The theory of transmigration of the soul also outlasted the Roman control of Britain as the idea of the Otherworld made it into the Insular Welsh and Irish texts of the Middle Ages. The physical head cult, although persevered during the Roman occupation, dwindles after the Romans leave Britain but the tales remain intact and appear in later myths. Both the religious castes and the katabasis of souls to the Otherworld are mentioned in literature after the Roman era and with their endurance comes the potential for the survival of other Celtic religious views and practices.

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<sup>102</sup> For Celtic style heads affixed to Roman military buildings in Caerleon, see Green, *The Sun-Gods of Ancient Europe*, 96; for combined Insular Celtic and Roman style art of Roman gods with Celtic features in Gloucester, see Finlay, *Celtic Art*, 97, 102-203; ancient authors who expressed disgust towards decapitated heads being displayed include Strab., 4.4.5. and Diod. Sic., 5.29.

## **Chapter 2: Celtic Deities and Sacred Spaces**

Romans and Celts held similar religious beliefs which included their respective polytheistic pantheons of nature deities. One of the differences between them was, according to Caesar's writings, that the Celtic peoples believed their deities to be not creators but their ancestors.<sup>103</sup> Throughout the Celtic territories, 374 names of deities survive. Out of those names, 305 of them survive in single mentions and are thought to be local or tribal deities, while another twenty names can be found in frequent use across the entire Celtic region. This mirrors Roman religion which also worshiped different local deities throughout the Empire. The twenty frequently named deities, however, did not necessarily make up the entire Celtic pantheon. Ellis suggests that the Celts would have had a total of thirty-three gods in their official pantheon, which mimics the thirty-three gods of the Hindus and Persians as mentioned in the Vedas.<sup>104</sup> The fluctuation in number of 'universal deities' of the Celtic pantheon differs from the more fixed number of 'universal deities' (the Roman adaptations of the Olympian Gods) worshiped across the Roman Empire.<sup>105</sup> Caesar only recorded the Gallic worship of six deities and used Roman names to identify five of them: Mercury was the supreme god, later identified as Llew through the archaeological record; Apollo was a healer, although he also retained many other epithets; Mars, the war god, who could be any of the three gods worshiped in Lucan's account (Esus,

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<sup>103</sup> El. *AWC*, 182.

<sup>104</sup> The statistics of Celtic deities can be found in El. *HDru.*, 114. Ellis speculates that the number of main Celtic gods (those found multiple times across the areas inhabited by the Celts) would have totalled thirty-three based on the prominence of the number in Indo-European culture and the parallels in Vedic writings and Hinduism. The number thirty-three also appears in Irish mythologies regarding the number of companions which venture on heroic journeys. El. *HDru.*, 114-115.

<sup>105</sup> Occasionally foreign gods were given 'universal' status within the Roman Empire such as Mithras and Isis. Even the Celtic horse goddess Epona received more than just local worship once she was adopted by the Roman army. Epona is discussed later in this chapter.

Taranis, Teutates); Minerva; Jupiter; and the sixth, Dis Pater, was simply referred to as the ancestor deity.<sup>106</sup>

When it comes to identifying the deities that were specifically worshiped by the tribes of Wales and the Marches, there are very few archaeological and epigraphic records to rely on.<sup>107</sup> Most of the information on Celtic gods and their names that survive in Welsh are in their heroic forms which are found in the 11<sup>th</sup> -13<sup>th</sup> century *chwedllau*. According to these poems, there existed many deities who never received physical veneration by means of surviving dedications at temples or in the form of art, as much of druidic worship occurred in natural sacred settings and not in the vicinity of purpose-built wooden or stone structures. Of the deities worshiped in antiquity within the tribal areas of the Silures, Ordovices, Decangi, Dobunni, Demetae, Cornovii, and Gangani, there are only a handful whose names are extant in the epigraphic record and another few which survive in ancient and modern placenames. It is, however, the presence of corresponding names (Figure 4) in the surviving epigraphy and art of other tribal areas which lends credence to these Welsh heroes having names that are variants of the ancient deities.

## **2.1 Epigraphic Dedications**

The epigraphic evidence of local religious worship from the period of Roman Wales is sparse. This is due in part to the nature of the offerings presented to the gods in Celtic Britain. The chthonic or earth aspect of a lot of the deities led to many offerings being buried or deposited in deep water which makes recovery difficult especially since many of these locations

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<sup>106</sup> Luc., 1.342-351 and Caes. *BGall.*, 6.17; Stead, *Celtic Art in Britain before the Roman Conquest*, 86; Caes. *BGall.*, 6.18. The only 'Gallic' name Caesar provides in his account is Dis Pater, whom he claims is seen as the ancestor of all the Gauls and that this connection between the deities and the mortals was taught by the druids. With how Caesar describes Dis Pater, the deity is often identified with the Roman Pluto (the Welsh Beli) because the Celts calculate "the divisions of every season, not by the number of days, but of nights" placing the power of time with a night/dark deity; Eliade and Couliano, *Eliade Guide to World Religions*, 49 describes the 'Gallic Jupiter' as an ancestor of the druids, but it is unclear whether or not this is a separate deity from Dis Pater.

<sup>107</sup> These will be discussed below in Chapter 2.1 and 2.4.

long ago ceased to be considered sacred.<sup>108</sup> What does survive in Britain are the many dedicatory altars which were erected by freed men and women in early years of the Roman occupation, mostly by Roman themselves.<sup>109</sup> Unlike in other Roman provinces, the epigraphic evidence from altars exceeds the evidence from burial sites in number.<sup>110</sup> The dedication of altars and plaques to deities on the frontier, as well as elsewhere, was usually to acknowledge the fulfilment of a vow which was probably made verbally in a prayer to the god which may indicate belief in a higher participation from the gods in the conquering of Britain than in other provinces.<sup>111</sup> Many of the surviving altar inscriptions, specifically dedicated to named deities, were created as offerings to Roman gods. In Britain as a whole there survive 246 religious inscriptions, 169 of them refer to British gods alone and 65 of them showcase name-pairing, with Mars mentioned 36 times.<sup>112</sup> In Wales, however, these numbers dwindle significantly. Wales, for most of its time under Roman influence, was a battle ground, hence the prevalence of Roman forts and strongholds along the English-Welsh border and along the coast.<sup>113</sup> This concentrated military presence impacted the deities which were worshiped by the literate population in Wales, which at this point was made up of mostly Roman citizens and a smaller number of elite Celts.<sup>114</sup>

### 2.1.1 Silures: Caerwent

Mars, as the god of war, was frequently mentioned alone in dedications, although sometimes he was mentioned in combination with Celtic gods or with epithets that call upon nonwarrior

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<sup>108</sup> Watts, "Celtic Religion in Western and Central Europe," 379.

<sup>109</sup> *Ma. Imp.*, 300.

<sup>110</sup> Zoll, "Names of Gods," n.p.

<sup>111</sup> *Ma. Imp.*, 304. The example from Caernarfon (Ordovices territory) is a vow fulfillment to the Roman goddess Minerva. *RIB*, 429.

<sup>112</sup> *Ma. Imp.*, 215-216.

<sup>113</sup> Price, "The Chester 'Command' System c. 71-96 C.E.," Figure 1 = Map 1, 4. Also see Ros. *PCB*, 128 and Davies, *The Celts*, 108 for similarities with the forts and worship along Hadrian's Wall.

<sup>114</sup> This can be seen by the lack of individual metal alphabetic characters (which will be discussed below in section 2.1.3.) in favour of extensive written dedications at military and urban sites. *Ma. Imp.*, 483. The literate Celtic elite includes the Canton of the Silures tribe c. 220 CE who set up a dedication in Caerwent to the Roman legate of the province Lugudunensis in Gaul *RIB*, 311.

Celtic deities. In Caerwent, previously the Silurian capital *Venta Silurum*, two dedications survive which gave Mars the epithets *Lenus* and *Ocelus*.<sup>115</sup> The former inscription also includes what appears to be a separate pair of combined deities referred to as *Ocelus Vellaunus*. *Lenus* appears to have been a Gallic deity of healing who is frequently named in dedications found in Eastern France, while *Ocelus* is associated specifically with the *Silures* tribe of southern Wales.<sup>116</sup> Also in Caerwent, a partial stone carving depicting two pairs of feet, one human and one goose, survives and has been linked to the god Mars in combination with either *Ocelus* or *Lenus*: in Celtic Wales the goose was a warrior symbol. The *Genii Loci* or “Spirits of the Place” were often worshiped by Roman soldiers at their various military posts throughout the British Isles, including Caerwent.<sup>117</sup> Even though the local spirits by definition would have been local Celtic spirits and deities, the worship of these spirits was a Roman practice and will not be discussed beyond the Romans’ ‘adoption’ of the Celtic protective spirits for their own aid.<sup>118</sup>

### 2.1.2 Silures: Caerleon

The surviving epigraphy from Caerleon consist solely of dedications to Roman deities, which is not surprising given that Caerleon was an active military fort during the Roman occupation of Wales constructed in 74 CE.<sup>119</sup> *Fortuna* was the recipient of two dedications, one made by a Roman military man and the other, in combination with *Bonus Eventus*, by a couple – *Julia Belismicus* and *Cornelius Castus* – whose names may represent an intercultural marriage.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> *RIB*, 309 and *RIB*, 310. A third reference to Mars in relation to *Ocelus* survives from Carlisle in north Britain *RIB*, 949.

<sup>116</sup> *CIL* XIII 3654, 3970, and 4030 from Trier; *AGr. GC*, 114. *Ros. PCB*, 173.

<sup>117</sup> *RIB*, 3076 and *RIB*, 646.

<sup>118</sup> This is an example of the Roman practice of *evocatio*. The dedications to these local gods appear in high activity military locations such as Caerwent and along Hadrian’s Wall. See *RIB* entries from Housesteads, Carlisle, and Carrowburgh. There are also examples surviving from Bath *RIB*, 139. Masculine *Genii* (Roman ancestral or guardian spirits, according to Warrior, *Roman Religion: A Sourcebook*, 25 n.1) were interchangeable with Celtic deities in British worship, Yeates, *The Tribe of Witches*, 62. It is likely that the Romans would have associated these local gods with their own so this would not be a case of cultural adoption, Meyrick, “On the State of Druidic Religion in Britain,” 19.

<sup>119</sup> Blair, *Roman Britain and Early England*, 51 and Frere, *Britannia*, 109.

<sup>120</sup> *RIB*, 317 (1<sup>st</sup> -2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) and *RIB*, 318.

While Castus is very Roman sounding, Belismicus appears to be Celtic. It is difficult, however, to determine the nationality of either partner as the Romans settled in Celtic areas tended to Celticize their names and the Celts tended to Romanize their names.<sup>121</sup> A dedicatory tablet and a partial statue of the goddess Diana which were found in a meadow near the remains of the fort at Caerleon are evidence of a temple dedicated to the Roman goddess near the site.<sup>122</sup> Jupiter and Mercury appear to have been worshiped by the soldiers from the fortress as well. The final Roman deity mentioned by name is Lady Nemesis, to whom a curse tablet was dedicated in retribution for a pair of stolen boots and a cloak.<sup>123</sup> While there are no surviving names recorded which represent worship of Celtic deities, art in the form of Celtic-style head designs on tiles associated with a solar wheel and other celestial symbols suggests Celtic religious motifs were implemented as protection symbols in military forts by Romans in hostile Celtic territory. The solar wheel symbol appears frequently throughout Britain despite the lack of a specified sky or sun deity being identified in epigraphy. Aldhouse-Green suggests that this solar deity is to be linked with Jupiter as a warrior or potentially with Mars (with an appropriate light-evoking epithet such as Loucetius or Belatucadrus) which would make the presence of his image less out of place in a Roman fort.<sup>124</sup>

### **2.1.3 Silures: Lydney**

Unlike with other sites in Wales and the Marches, Lydney was home to a temple for which the primary deity worshiped was Celtic. The temple to Nodens was established around 376 CE, post-dating the arrival of Roman Christianity, which makes it an invaluable source for

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<sup>121</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 305. There are also names which appear on gravestones from Caerleon which suggest local Celtic women frequently married Roman soldiers; Davies, *The Celts*, 108. *RIB*, 369 also includes a feminine Celtic name from 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE Caerleon.

<sup>122</sup> *RIB*, 316 (pre-258 CE).

<sup>123</sup> Jupiter: *RIB*, 319, *RIB*, 320, *RIB*, 3079 (dating between 161-180 CE); Mercury *RIB*, 321; Nemesis: *RIB*, 323.

<sup>124</sup> Green, *The Sun-Gods of Ancient Europe*, 96.



the survival of Celtic pagan religion in Roman Britain, as this temple was a Roman site.<sup>125</sup> Nodens was worshiped as a god of healing and frequently associated with dogs as healing animals or as the deity's zoomorphic form.<sup>126</sup> On one of the dedicatory altars which survive from Lydney, an engraving of a barking dog precedes the acknowledgement of Nodens Mars.<sup>127</sup> Cunomaglos (meaning houndlord) can be found paired, or used as an epithet, with the Roman god Apollo at Lydney, Wroxeter, and Wiltshire.<sup>128</sup> While multiple dedications to Nodens survive in Lydney, two statues dedicated to Mars Nodens, both now lost, were discovered in Cockersand Moss in Lancashire.<sup>129</sup> In most cases, Nodens is associated with the healing aspects of Mars, but he does also appear on his own.<sup>130</sup> Nodens was called upon (and bribed) in at least one curse tablet by one Silvianus to harm the health of the thief who stole his ring.<sup>131</sup> Although many sophisticated dedications and offerings survive from this location, Lydney also is home to a large collection of punctured metal votive Latin alphabetic characters. It is likely that these letters were sold at the shrine to those who were not literate enough to write their own dedications but wished to offer something to the healing god.<sup>132</sup>

#### **2.1.4 Dobunni: Bath**

Bath, perhaps the best known of Britain's ancient Roman sites, has a reputation of being the place where people, including lots of scorned lovers, dedicated their curse tablets in the name of Sulis Minerva.<sup>133</sup> There is overwhelming evidence of the Celtic goddess Sulis being

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<sup>125</sup> Chadwick, *Celtic Britain*, 35.

<sup>126</sup> Gr. *Ani.*, 198-199. For Nodens as a shapeshifter, see Ros. *PC*, 172.

<sup>127</sup> *RIB*, 307 the name here is spelled Nudens Mars but has been standardized in the text above.

<sup>128</sup> These dedications are dated to around 69 CE which makes them an early conflation. AGr. *GC*, 163 and Melrose, *Magic in Britain: A History of Medieval and Earlier Practices*, 31.

<sup>129</sup> *RIB*, 616 and *RIB*, 617.

<sup>130</sup> *RIB*, 305 is another example of name pairing between Mars and Nodens. The two gods are also both represented in a mosaic found in front of a triple altar at the temple of Lydney. Ling, "Inscriptions on Romano-British Mosaics and Wall-Paintings," 69.

<sup>131</sup> *RIB*, 306.

<sup>132</sup> *RIB*, 308 includes the letters A, C, D, E, F, I, L, M, N, O, P, R, S, T, and V. Ma. *Imp.*, 483.

<sup>133</sup> Me. *Rit.*, 139. Curse tablets will be discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to the Otherworld.

worshiped on her own and in combination with the Roman Minerva, and many of the inscriptions record vow fulfillment. As a double deity, the healing goddess appears on fewer inscriptions than as a single Celtic entity. These single mentions include dedications from members of the Roman military force (including a resident artist), a Gallic stonemason, and a self-declared haruspex or soothsayer.<sup>134</sup> Among these mentions there is also a funerary inscription for a man, Gaius Calpurnius Receptus, who was a priest of the goddess Sulis. Unfortunately, no definitive date has been established for this source.<sup>135</sup> In addition to large dedications, coins were also frequently deposited into the water at the sacred bath as smaller offerings to the healing goddesses, but this practiced had ceased completely by the year 390 CE.<sup>136</sup>

Although Sulis and Minerva were the local deities associated with the natural springs, Bath seems to have been a destination for other Celts who traveled to Britain, as other gods received offerings at this location as well. An altar dedicated to the Hallowed Diana survives from the site as does one dedicated to the Suleviae, which is an alternative name for the Matres, a triple mother deity, revered by the Gauls.<sup>137</sup> Loucetius Mars and Nemetona, deities commonly worshiped along the Rhine, also have their names preserved in stone at the site of the Roman baths despite not receiving much mention elsewhere in Britain.<sup>138</sup> It is difficult to determine if the many foreign gods were present in Bath because the sacred spring was a pilgrimage site or if these gods were brought by casual travelers, refugees, merchants, or soldiers. The Gallic deities

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<sup>134</sup> Sulis Minerva or Minerva Sulis is evoked on *RIB*, 141, 146, and 150; Sulis on her own was evoked by Roman soldiers: *RIB*, 143, *RIB*, 144; artist: *RIB*, 147; stonemason: *RIB*, 149; soothsayer: *RIB*, 3049; and two unspecified vocations *RIB*, 145 and *RIB*, 148.

<sup>135</sup> *RIB*, 155. All *RIB* sources are dated between 43 and 410 CE unless otherwise recorded.

<sup>136</sup> This practice was just one of many to cease with the increased zeal of the Christian conversion efforts in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, *Ma. Imp.*, 348.

<sup>137</sup> Diana: *RIB*, 138; Suleviae: *RIB*, 151. The Suleviae also have altars in Chichester *RIB*, 105 (dedicated by the same man, a sculptor, as *RIB*, 151) and *RIB*, 106.

<sup>138</sup> *RIB*, 140.

in Eastern Britain arrived with the refugees who fled Caesar's wrath during the Gallic Wars while many Germanic gods were brought over by Germanic legions within the Roman army, but no specific reasons are provided in the inscriptions at Bath.<sup>139</sup>

## **2.2 Welsh Deities from Native Sources**

Beyond the Latin inscriptions which survive from Roman Wales, the next best source for the identification of deities is the medieval collection of Welsh *chwedlau*. Although these tales post-date the period of study that this paper focuses on by almost a millennium, within the field of Celtic Studies, they are commonly relied on as an additional collection of sources which still retains some amount of authentic information about ancient Celtic deities.<sup>140</sup> This thesis will use these 'myths' to examine the continuation of Celtic deity names and the descriptions of the Otherworld. Religion is a very personal thing, hence why the names and functions of deities can differ between cultures and tribes. Just as the Roman deities have equivalents in Greek religion, some Welsh gods are also identifiable with the gods of the Irish and Gallic speaking Celts. Due to the similarities in their functions or attributes, gods can be associated with analogous partners from other places. Such associations will be used here to justify the inclusion of some of the Welsh heroes from the medieval poems in the discussion of earlier Celtic deities (Figure 4).<sup>141</sup>

Most deity-based heroes come from the *The Mabinogi* and the associated native tales.<sup>142</sup>

In the tales, the gods are all anthropomorphic, mostly of royal birth, and most of them are

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<sup>139</sup> Gallic refugees, El. *Caes.*, 84. The area where Bath is located is sometimes included in the territory of the Belgae tribe which migrated from modern Belgium, a Gallic territory, into Britain; Germanic legions, Ma. *Imp.*, 217.

<sup>140</sup> Ros. *PCB*, 18. See Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, 122-130 for an in-depth discussion on the scholarly use of the medieval Welsh texts.

<sup>141</sup> No mythical hero will be discussed if there is not reference to a comparable deity or hero found in another language. Irish myths are considered much more reliable in terms of their authentic Celtic origins, as discussed by Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, 122-130.

<sup>142</sup> *Y Mabinogi* (as it survives in the Llyfr Gwyn Rydderch and Llyfr Coch Hergest manuscripts) is made up of the *Pedeir Ceinc*, or *the Four Branches* (main tales) ("Pwyll Pendeuc Dyfed," "Branwen uerch Llyr," Manawyddan fab Llyr," and "Math fab Mathonwy"), four native tales ("Lludd a Llefelys," "Breuddwyd Maesen," "Culhwch ac Olwen," and "Breuddwyd Rhonabwy"),

members of the same family or house.<sup>143</sup> The pertinent characters in this discussion are Don, Beli, Gofannan, Lludd, Gwyn, Lleu, Llyr, Manawyddan, Rhiannon, Bran, Mabon, and Madron.<sup>144</sup> Each of these heroes, or relatives of heroes, can be linked to a Celtic deity worshiped in Britain or Gaul during the Roman period. Don, although she plays a fairly insignificant role as the matriarch in the *chwedlau*, is the easiest to link to the pan-Celtic goddess Danu and the very important mother goddess, Dana, of Ireland. Her persistent survival in Welsh history could be attributed to the influence of the early Irish tales. Beli, like his wife, plays a small role in the main plot of the tales, yet his name-sake deity, Belenus, was worshiped in Britain and Gaul as well as having a central role in the Insular festival of Beltane.<sup>145</sup> Gwyn ap Nudd (or Lludd) is also associated with the festival of Beltane in the tale of “Culhwch ac Olwen,” which reports that he is to fight another suitor for the maiden Creiddylad every May 1<sup>st</sup> until the end of time.<sup>146</sup> Lludd, unlike his brother Gofannan, the blacksmith god, who survives solely in Welsh and Irish legends, can be linked through his alternative name Nudd to the solar/sky aspect of the healing god Nodens worshiped in Lydney Park in addition to his Irish counterpart, Nauda.<sup>147</sup> Lleu, the son of siblings Arianrhod and Gwydion, has Lugh as his Irish counterpart, the recipient of the

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and three romances (“Owain, neu, Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn,” “Historia Peredur, neu Peredur fab Efracw” and “Gereint”). These are the Welsh titles for each text. The English titles provided by G. *Mab.* are used when citing the individual stories.

<sup>143</sup> Just because these tales have the heroes divided into houses does not mean that the ancient Celts would have viewed any of these gods as ‘related’. The Celts saw their gods as ancestors not creators. The story tellers, either through mistakes accreted over time or inserted deliberately, rearranged the names into a family tree that fits the tales. The characters in the Arthurian legends can also be described as further adaptations of these deities which once again had the names and attributes rearranged to suit the tale. See Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*, 352.

<sup>144</sup> There are many more names included in the *chwedlau*, but the external evidence does not support a strong enough argument to include them in a discussion on ancient deities. In Welsh medieval texts, Don is the mother by Beli of Gwydion, Arianrhod, Gilvaethwy, Amaethon, Gofannan, Lludd, Penardun, Nynniaw, and Peibaw. Of these nine children, six play important roles in the *Mabinogi*, but only two, Gofannan and Lludd, are given equivalents outside of their respective stories. Arianrhod gives birth to twin sons Lleu and Dylan, the former of which shares a name with the Irish god Lugh. Penardun does not appear in other mythology but her partner Llyr and children Manawyddan, Bran, and Branwen all have equivalents found in the Irish myths. These children, Bran and Branwen, became important cultural figures in both nations, remaining tied to Ireland through politics and marriage and both meeting their doom when they went to Wales. Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*, 350-351. Ellis, *Chronicles*, 275-345.

<sup>145</sup> Celtic festivals will be discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>146</sup> “Kilhwch and Olwen” in G. *Mab.* Gwyn has also been connected to the Irish hero Fionn (or Vin in Gaul) as an Otherworld ruler by Davies, *The Celts*, 80. Davies also makes a tentative connection between the aforementioned heroes and the Irish father deity Dagda who was sometimes referred to as a primitive version of Lleu/Lugh.

<sup>147</sup> Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*, 346.

Lughnasa festival celebrated in Ireland. Llew only survives in heroic form or in placenames in Britain. He was, however, worshiped as a god in Gaul and elsewhere on the Celtic Continent as Lugus.<sup>148</sup>

The children of Llyr, Manawyddan, Bran, and Branwen, play a larger role in *The Mabinogi* than he does himself. Still, Llyr does survive in Irish myth and in some British place names. Manawyddan married Rhiannon who was the queen of the Otherworld through Pwyll,

Welsh	British	Irish	Gallic	Roman
Don		Danu/Ana/Dana	Danu	Demeter
Beli (Belenus)	Belenus	Bile	Belenus	Apollo, Pluto
Llew/Llew		Lugh/Lug (Dagda)	Lugus	Apollo, Mercury
Mabon	Maponus		Maponus	Apollo
Madron/Modron	Matres/Suleviae		Matrona/Matronae	Minerva
Ffraid	Briganti	Brigid/Brigit		Minerva, Diana
Gwyn/Gwyn ap Nudd	Sucellus	Dagda/Fionn	Sucellus/Secellos (Vin)	
Gofannon		Goibhniu/Goban		Vulcan
Rhiannon* (Rigantona)	Epona	Macha	Epona	Epona
Bran/Bendigeidfran	(Belatucadros/Cocidius)	Bran	(Belatucadros)	Mars, Jupiter, Pluto
Llud/Nudd	Nodens	Lud/Nauda	Nodens	Mars
Llyr		Lir		
Manawyddan		Mananan		

Figure 4: Welsh deities with equivalent counterparts in other Celtic territories and Rome. The information in the table was compiled by the author with the aid of Ros. *PC*, El. *HDru.*, Gr. *GC*, and Davies, *The Celts*.

her first husband.<sup>149</sup> While Manawyddan as a god of the sea only survives in Irish and Welsh literature, Rhiannon, through the search for her infant son, received comparison to the pan-Celtic, and later Roman, horse goddess Epona. Epona was the only Celtic deity fully accepted into the Roman religious calendar beyond the reaches of Celtic populated areas. The role of Bran in *The Mabinogi*, or as he is referred in the text, Bendigeidfran (meaning “blessed”), remains one of the most prominent characters in Welsh tales even though he is not a title character of any *chwedlau*. He is the focal point in the tale named after his sister, “Branwen uerch Llyr,” and

<sup>148</sup> Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World*, 267.

<sup>149</sup> Rhiannon was an Otherworld goddess before she married Pwyll. Her father, Heveydd Hên, had a palace in *Annwfn*, but was not one of the fighting rulers. “Pwyll Prince of Dyved,” in G. *Mab*.

survives in Ireland as a national hero and prophet as a decapitated head.<sup>150</sup> Bran is believed to be a derivative of either the ancient Gallic god Belatucadros or the British god Cocidius.

Mabon ap Modron appears in two ‘Arthurian’ tales in *The Mabinogi*, “Culhwch ac Olwen” and “Breuddwyd Rhonabwy.”<sup>151</sup> His name derives directly from the Gallo-British deity Maponus, meaning ‘the Youth,’ a name which assigns the deity the role of child protector and the hero as a boy coming of age.<sup>152</sup> Maponus was also an epithet given to the Roman Apollo in Britain.<sup>153</sup> His mother in *The Mabinogi*, Modron, is representative of the generic mother goddess, usually worshipped as Matrona, in singular form, and the Matres, when in the classic trinity, on the Continent.<sup>154</sup>

### **2.3 Sacred Spaces: Sacred Land and Divine Nature**

Celtic faith and religious practice, like many ancient religions, was deeply indebted to the natural world. Many of the well-recorded deities had at least partial association with an aspect of nature or the natural process of life (Figure 5). While the Romans were able to welcome the Celtic deities (in combination with their Roman counterparts or consorts) into their extended pantheon, the places of worship used by the Celts of Britain were not up to the Roman standard of religious architecture. Prior to the Roman invasion, the Celtic populations of Europe are thought to have mostly worshiped without confining their deities (in statue form) within walls.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ellis, *Chronicles*, 276.

<sup>151</sup> *The Mabinogi* contains what are referred to as Arthurian Tales because of the presence of Arthur or his known associates. These tales are not the same as the Arthurian Tales based on the French stories.

<sup>152</sup> Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World*, 266 and Haverfield, *The Romanization of Roman Britain*, 69; also see Mabon’s roles in “Kilhwch and Olwen,” in *G. Mab.* for examples of his coming-of-age tale.

<sup>153</sup> *RIB* 1120 and *RIB* 1121; Burn, *The Romans in Britain: An Anthology of Inscriptions with Translations and a Running Commentary*, 131.

<sup>154</sup> Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, 127-130. For the sole reference to a Welsh trinity of mothers, *y mamau*, who appear as fairies or nature spirits in Welsh tradition, see Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World*, 268.

<sup>155</sup> A few enclosed ritual centres have been identified in England but not in Wales. Cunliffe suggests that there may have been religious centres within the confines of Iron Age hillforts in Britain based on the shrines found at three separate locations. He does not specify if this worship was confined in a building or a courtyard. Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, 320-321.

Most examples given by the Classical sources describe the Celts as worshipping outside in nature, specifically in a *nemeton*, a Gallic word (potentially of Greek origin) used by the Romans to denote sacred groves.<sup>156</sup> The destruction of the sacred groves of Ynys Môn has already been discussed, but this was not the only *nemeton* in the British Isles, as altars for druidic sacrifice were present in other locations.<sup>157</sup> Aldhouse-Green suggests that access to these sacred groves was potentially restricted to practice only by the *cognoscenti* class (druids, bards, *vates*) and would not have retained such use after the druidic class was suppressed in Britain.<sup>158</sup> Even

Water Deities		Earth/Flora Deities	
Don (f.)	River Danube/Rain	Amaethon (m.)	Agriculture
Dylan (m.)	River Conwy	Nemonta (f.)	Sacred Grove
Ner (m.)	Ocean	Rigonemetis (m.)	Sacred Grove
Gwyddno (m.)	Sea Monster	Cerridwen (f.)	Grain/Nature
Morgen (m.)	Sea	Elestron (f.)	Lily
Llyr (m.)	Sea	Coll/Callirius (m.)	Hazelwood
Manawyddan (m.)	Sea	Coedius (m.)	Greenery
Tegid Voel (m.)	Lake Tegid/ Water	Olloudious (m.)	Great Tree
Sabra/Sabrina (f.)	River Severn	Ialonus (m.)	Glades
Deva (f.)	River Dee/Dyfrdwy	Andraste (f.)	Earth/Tilling
Vaga (f.)	River Wye	Arianrhod (f.)	Chthonic Earth
Armmanta (f.)	Sacred Spring	Uley Horned God	Chthonic Earth
Sulis (f.)	Sacred Spring	Gwyn (m.)	Otherworld
Celestial Deities		Fauna Deities	
Arianrhod (f.)	Moon Track/Dawn	Epona (f.)	Horse
Cerridwen (f.)	Moon	Rhiannon (f.)	Horse
Taranis (m.)	Sky/Thunder	Matunus (m.)	Great Bear
Loucetius (m.)	Lightning	Aderrta (f.)	Great Bear
Gwydion (m.)	Milky Way	Henwen (f.)	Sow (zoomorphic)
Belenus (m.)	Sun	Bran (m.)	Raven
Nwyvre (?)	Atmosphere/Space	Lleu (m.)	Raven
		Vitiris (?)	Boars and Serpents

Figure 5: Various Welsh deities associated with aspects of the natural world. The information added to the table was compiled by the author with the aid of G. Mab., MacLeod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, Dames, *The Goddess in Wales*, and Gr. CW.

though the sacred groves and altars therein may have been abandoned after 61 CE, natural shrines (specifically the water-based ones) saw continued use. The Romans replaced the use of sacred natural land by constructing stone temples, in some cases on previously untouched land, and by erecting many altars and dedications to their own nature deities.

<sup>156</sup> H. PRB, 166. MacKillop, "Nemeton," in *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*.

<sup>157</sup> Stead, *Celtic Art in Britain before the Roman Conquest*, 86.

<sup>158</sup> AGr. *Caes.*, 127.

### 2.3.1 Roman Accounts of Pre-Roman Sacred Spaces

The Celtic peoples, both Continental and Insular, used their natural surroundings as temples. The Romans themselves were familiar with outdoor worship, as many of their festivals took place outside of physical temples, but their records of the Celtic populations contain no indication that the Celts had any constructed temples.<sup>159</sup> The works which discuss the Celtic *nemeton* are all dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE after the suppression of druidic power in Gaul. It is possible that the druids took to residing and practicing in secluded areas such as dense forests or caves in order to protect their religion from Roman scrutiny.<sup>160</sup> There is some speculation on whether the accounts which discuss the druidic practices in sacred groves are truly referring to the Celtic populations of Britain and Gaul or if this is an example of the confusion and conflation with Germanic practices which was common during this time.<sup>161</sup> The sacred groves, however, have been accepted by scholars as Celtic for centuries and are ingrained in the study of Celtic religion, and as such will be discussed here as Celtic.

Again, most of the works here are discussing the practices in Gaul because little to no written evidence survives from Wales and the Marches before their Romanization. One exception is Tacitus' second-hand accounts of military action which described the razed groves of Ynys Môn as being devoted to dark superstition.<sup>162</sup> The general consensus of the ancient authors was that these sacred groves, whether adopted into Celtic practice by choice or by necessity, were dark and secret places which belonged to the spirit world and not to the humans

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<sup>159</sup> For more information on the Roman Numen located in ancient groves or deep caves, see Sen. *Ep.*, 41.3. H. *PRB*, 166 for Celts worshipping outside.

<sup>160</sup> This is an idea put forth by Nora Chadwick according to El. *HDru.*, 64, as an alternative reason (to the idea that sacred groves come from conflation of the German practices with Celtic practices) for sacred oak groves to suddenly appear in the ancient texts.

<sup>161</sup> Compare Tacitus' *Germania* and Pliny's work, see El. *HDru.*, 63-64. Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars from the Third Century to Alaric*, 73.

<sup>162</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 14.30. The other British example has already been discussed in Chapter 1, when Cassius Dio demonizes Boudica's worship of war goddess Andraste and the behaviour of her followers in 62.1-62.7.



who worshiped there.<sup>163</sup> This is clearest in Lucan's accounts where he speaks of the grove as a living entity, or the earthly form of a Celtic deity. The groves of the Celts are described by Lucan as being eternally untouched by man, beast, or light.<sup>164</sup> Lucan's account, dating to 39-65 CE, describes these groves thus:

On those boughs—if antiquity, reverential of the gods, deserves any credit—birds  
feared to perch; in those coverts wild beasts would not lie down; no wind ever  
bore down upon that wood, nor thunderbolt hurled from black clouds; the trees,  
even when they spread their leaves to no breeze, rustled of themselves [...]  
[and that l]egend also told that often the [caves] quaked and bellowed, that yew-  
trees fell down and rose again, that the glare of conflagration came from trees that  
were not on fire.<sup>165</sup>

Lucan's description includes myths about the worship in caves as well as in sacred groves. Unlike when Lucan was discussing Roman reverence of their native groves and caves, the ones mentioned in this passage are made to sound sinister, and thus deserving of destruction by Caesar. Lucan compares the worship of Roman nature deities, Pan and the Sylvan Nymphs, to the Celtic gods who "were worshiped [in the woods] with savage rites, the altars were heaped with hideous offerings, and every tree was sprinkled with human gore."<sup>166</sup> The devotion showed to the gods worshiped in these trees were represented by "images of the [Celtic] gods, grim and rude, [which] were uncouth blocks formed of felled tree-trunks. Their mere antiquity and the ghastly hue of their rotten timber struck terror; men feel less awe of deities worshipped under

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<sup>163</sup> AGr. *Caes.*, 127, the Celts may have been forced to take their religious practice into groves or caves to escape Roman intervention.

<sup>164</sup> Luc. 3.399-3.401.

<sup>165</sup> For biographic information on Lucan see the Introduction to Luc., ix; Luc., 3.406-3.411, "Siqua fidem meruit superos mirata vetustas, illis et volucres metuunt insistere ramis/et lustris recubare ferae; nec ventus in illas/incubuit silvas excussa que nubibus atris/fulgura; non ulli frondem praebentibus aerae/arboribus suos horror inest," and Luc., 3.417-3.420, "Iam fama ferebat/saepe cavas motu terrae mugire cavernas,/et procumbentes iterum consurgere taxos,/et non ardentis fulgere incendia silvae." This episode is discussed extensively by Augoustakis, "Cutting Down the Grove in Lucan, Valerius Maximus and Dio Cassius." The argument presented, however, does not discuss the grove as a grove but as a literary device used to foreshadow the murder of Caesar. Here this passage will be discussed as an elaborated description of a Celtic grove and not as a prophetic comparison.

<sup>166</sup> Luc., 3.403-3.405, "sed barbara ritu/sacra deum; structae diris altaribus aerae,/omnisque humanis lustrata cruoribus arbor."

familiar forms; so much does it increase their sense of fear, not to know the gods whom they dread.”<sup>167</sup> These sacred spaces would probably not have struck fear into the minds of the Celtic population as Lucan assumes. Lucan describes the gods of the Celts as terrifying beings, which does not agree with the Celtic belief that the gods were not all-powerful creators of the world but their own ancestors. Lucan was writing what he knew about the Celts and filling in any gaps with what the Roman readers would have been familiar with or how they would have expected the dark location being described as a common literary trope.

In comparison to Lucan’s writing, Pliny’s description provides a much brighter view on the druids and their practices in sacred groves. He describes the practice in secluded forests as part of a specific sacred act which took place when the sacred mistletoe grew on a *robur* (oak) tree in an oak grove.<sup>168</sup> The mistletoe rite was performed on the fifth day of the moon and included the sacrifice of two pure white bulls after the mistletoe was cut down from the oak tree with a gold sickle by a druid dressed in pure white. Once all of this was done, the participants would pray to the gods (none mentioned by name or vocation by Pliny) in order to bless the mistletoe with its healing powers.<sup>169</sup> The drastic differences between Lucan and Pliny’s descriptions of druids worshiping in sacred groves represent the possibility that neither is completely true, but that the Celts did probably use groves in dense forests for sacred rituals.

### **2.3.2 Nature Deities and Divine Places Names**

As is common in polytheistic cultures, some deities and aspects of nature had a shared nomenclature. It is probable that the deities were themselves named after these aspects in several

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<sup>167</sup> Luc., 3.412-3.417, “simulacraque maesta deorum/arte carent caesisque extant informia truncis,/ipse situs putrique facit iam robore pallor/atonitos; non volgatis sacrata figuris/numina sic metuunt: tantum terroribus addit,/quos timeant, non nosse deos.”

<sup>168</sup> Plin. *HN*, 16.95. Pliny is the only ancient source which refers to any reverence of the mistletoe among the Celtic peoples of Europe and should not be blindly taken at face value.

<sup>169</sup> Plin. *HN*, 16.95.

instances, especially those which, once translated, remain very similar to Celtic or Welsh words for the aspects of nature they presided over. Names such as Nemetona, Arnemeta, and Rigonemetis, which contain variations on *nemeton*, all thus retain the idea of (Roman) sacred nature in their names, since they were worshiped in their own sacred groves or sacred springs.<sup>170</sup> While many deities' names are associated with their realm of rule, the retention of a name to designate an urban settlement (or a natural place whose name does not reflect the location) could indicate continued knowledge of the god in that area after the Roman period.

The names of the rivers which run through Wales seem to retain their ancient names and deity affiliations well. The issue with relying on the names of rivers is that they are the most likely to pre-date Celtic settlement in Britain.<sup>171</sup> That being said, the Severn (*Hafren*), Wye (*Gwy*), and Dee (*Dyfrdwy*) all have a goddess which has been attributed as their name-sakes: Sabrina (the ancient name of the river recorded in the *Ravenna Cosmography*), Vaga, and Deva.<sup>172</sup> While there are myths associated with a father mountain who had three river daughters, no inscriptions survive to confirm that these names were associated with deities worshiped during the Roman era.<sup>173</sup> Gobannium and Luentinum were also names for rivers recorded in the *Ravenna Cosmography* and again these names could be related to divine beings, Gobannium being the river of blacksmiths and Gofannan as the god of blacksmithing, it is unlikely that these names had influence on each other.<sup>174</sup> Without related inscriptions it is difficult to claim any

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<sup>170</sup> MacLeod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 40-41.

<sup>171</sup> Dames, "The Goddess in Wales," n.p.

<sup>172</sup> Rivet and Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, 450-451. The modern Welsh name for the Severn is Hafren which probably came from the name for 'summer': haf. Yeates, *The Tribe of Witches*, 33. The Dyfrdwy runs through the town of Glyndyfrdwy. When broken down, the name *Dyfrdwy* means goddess' (dwy) water (dyfr): Morgan, *Handbook of the Origin of Place-Names in Wales and Monmouthshire*, cc-cci.

<sup>173</sup> Yeates, *The Tribe of Witches*, 35.

<sup>174</sup> Gobannium: Rivet and Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, 369. The river Gavenny shares the same prefix related to the vocation of blacksmithing and potentially the god of the trade: Johnston, *Place-Names of England and Wales*, 74; Rivet and Smith suggest Luentinum as Luentina could possibly have been a divine name, 400. Aventius as a potential spring goddess associated with the Ewenni river in Glamorganshire, 260-261, and Bovium as related to Bormo/Borvo the Gallic god of hot springs could also be related to the word for cattle, 273.

connection between deities and place names. The best example is the Roman city of Aquae Sulis, named for the spring associated with the goddess Sulis, who was worshiped (and given epigraphic dedications) at the site. The modern names, Bath (English) and Caerfaddon (Welsh, meaning Fort of Bath), pay tribute to the original idea behind the name, but they have unfortunately dropped the connection to Sulis and no longer retain any Celtic religious affiliation.

Besides the traditional gods, the heroic versions written about in the Middle Ages also have certain locations, both inside and outside of Wales, associated with their names. Many of these associations are tentative as no inscriptions exist detailing the reasoning behind the names given to such places and are only related due to name similarities.<sup>175</sup> Most gods were only attached by name to one location, as seen in the case of the river Tarannon, named for the thunder god Taranis; the river Aeron/Ayron, which holds a connection to the goddess Arianrhod, the son of Llyr; Mananwyddan, who lends his name to the Isle of Man; and according to *The Mabinogi*, the city of London, which was once called Caer Lludd, associating the major city with the god Nudd/Lludd.<sup>176</sup> While siblings Bran and Branwen have a few locations named between the two of them, including Ynys Bronwen, Twr Bronwen (now Harlech), Cwmbran, and Aberbran, the use of ‘bran’ has the potential to be an abbreviated form of the word *brean*, meaning mountain brook.<sup>177</sup> Carlisle has a potential connection to the god Lleu as seen in the modern Welsh names for the city, Caer Liwelydd, as this name refers to the *caer* ‘fort’ of

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<sup>175</sup> Many of these name associations come from the antiquarian historians Rev. Thomas Morgan and Rev. James B. Johnston and must be used carefully.

<sup>176</sup> Tarannon: Johnston, *Place-Names of England and Wales*, 467; Aeron/Ayron: Johnston, 74, 94. The Aeron is thought to be a contraction of the words *air* (meaning bright) or *aer* (meaning battle) and the word for river *afon*. Johnston connects the word more with the war aspect and the British goddess of war Aerfen (sometimes associated with the Dee) or alternatively Agrona, a proto-Celtic name which does not survive anywhere. Arianrhod, however, is the moontrack goddess and also shares the same initial pronunciation; Isle of Man: El. *HDru.*, 82-83; Caer Lludd/London: “Lludd and Lleuelys,” in *G. Mab*. This is a medieval tale and cannot be taken as an accurate representation of historic fact.

<sup>177</sup> Branwen: Morgan, *Place-Names in Wales and Monmouthshire*, I, ccii; Bran: Morgan, ccxii, lxxxii.

Lleu.<sup>178</sup> In Roman times Carlisle was called Luguwallum, ‘Wall of Lug/Lleu,’ which further attaches the name to the popular Celtic god.<sup>179</sup> The deity which saw the best survival in place-names was Ffraid who, due to her merger with the Christian saint St. Ffraid (or St. Brigit), survives in the towns of St. Bride, Llansantffraid (which is a common place name, appearing also as Llansantffraid-Glan-Conwy, as it means church of St. Ffraid), and Pontllanfraith.<sup>180</sup> The root of Beli’s name also survives in some place names, but the modern Welsh word ‘bel’ and the Latin word *bellum* both mean war and do not necessarily have anything to do with the Celtic deity associated with light.

#### **2.4 Sacred Spaces: Roman-Celtic Temples and Shrines**

After the Romans had established a substantial military hold on the populations of Wales and the Marches, it did not take very long for them to begin construction of stone temples throughout the land. There survives no trace of any physical structures or sanctuaries from pre-Roman Wales beyond the potential Iron Age origin of a shrine at Llyn Awel in Gweneleg.<sup>181</sup> Many of the sacred groves of Britain are thought to have been the sites of the Romano-Celtic temples and votive hoards, including Uley.<sup>182</sup> Very frequently, these sites were used for religious purposes, whether as a temple, a burial site, or a theatre.<sup>183</sup> The Romans used the ancient earthworks of the Marches when constructing their Roman Celtic temple at Lydney Park.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Lleu has many places associated with his name on the Continent including Lyons in France and Leiden in the Netherlands, (both stem from Lugdunum); see Rankin, *Celts and the Classical World*, 267.

<sup>179</sup> Johnston, *The Place-Names of England and Wales*, 186-187. There was also a river called Lugg in Leominster which may have been another instance of river worship or, as Johnston suggests, follows a tale where a god was buried or drowned in the river and hence the water was named after the deity, Lug/Lleu: Johnston, 355, 74.

<sup>180</sup> St. Bride: Morgan, *Place-Names in Wales and Monmouthshire*, cxcii; Llansantffraid: Morgan, lxxv, cxv; Pontllanfraith: Morgan, ccxviii. The name in this last place may actually be a misnomer, as the Welsh word for forest is *ffridd*.

<sup>181</sup> Green and Howell, *A Pocket Guide: Celtic Wales*, 32.

<sup>182</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 62.

<sup>183</sup> Williams, “The Ancient Monument in Romano-British Ritual Practices,” 71.

<sup>184</sup> There are also English examples of this at Maiden Castle and Chanctonbury Ring. The Romans may have also built temples above Neolithic long barrows at Uley, Brean Down, Mutlow Hill, Harlow, and Maiden Castle. Williams, “The Ancient Monument in Romano-British Ritual Practices,” 72.

There exists archaeological evidence that may suggest some Iron Age and early Roman construction of false groves in modern England, where trees had been systematically planted in close proximity to each other or felled trunks were stood upright in the ground to simulate the natural feeling of a forest.<sup>185</sup> There are no similar sites in Wales or the Marches, but many stone structures are still extant. Romano-Celtic temples hit their peak in popularity and use during the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE before paganism began to dwindle in the Roman Empire. This can be seen at Lydney Park where a 4<sup>th</sup>-century temple was built and dedicated by the superintendent of the shrine and the dream interpreter, both of whom were employed at the same temple.<sup>186</sup>

While many shrines in military areas bear the names of Roman soldiers as dedicators who had begun to worship Celtic deities or solely Roman gods, the temples built in Britain are considered Romano-Celtic in nature.<sup>187</sup> The Romans would occasionally build a local shrine to a Celtic deity and begin worshipping their own god alongside the native one(s) in order to create a hybrid Romano-Celtic temple. These temples replaced the physical pre-Roman shrines, but retained their original worship practices which, like at Bath, became integrated with the worship of the new combined deity.<sup>188</sup> Temples existed in both urban and rural settings, with the former usually being dedicated to a singular (or combined Roman-Celtic) god and the latter having a larger variety of dedication recipients.<sup>189</sup> Dedication tablets made of various metals or stone were offered in urban and rural settings. Not all of these tablets had written components, which could

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<sup>185</sup> AGr. *Caes.*, 128-131. These appear to be similar to Neolithic wood henges but date to much more recent eras; see Wood, *Collins Field Guide to Archaeology in Britain*, 60-61, 139. These wooden structures could also be what Stead is referring to when he mentioned that the Celts worshiped in wooden structures which were later replaced by the Romans with stone. Stead, *Celtic Art in Britain before the Roman Conquest*, 86.

<sup>186</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 348, 482.

<sup>187</sup> Davies, *The Celts*, 108. Many Romans married Celtic women, and the cross worshipping of deities could be a phenomenon founded in these intercultural relationships. Sites along Hadrian's Wall host most of these examples, but a few can also be found in Wales. See *RIB*, 318. See the various *RIB* entries on Jupiter Optimus Maximus (IOM).

<sup>188</sup> Ros. *PCB*, 20, 30.

<sup>189</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 308, 483.

be a symptom of a non-literate society or a non-written connection with the gods. There appears to be no systematic way that one worshiped a Roman-Celtic deity at a shrine or temple in Britain, unlike in Rome, where there was a correct way to call upon a god.<sup>190</sup>

Only a few true Celtic deities manifest in epigraphic evidence from the Roman occupation of Britain, those being Sulis in Bath and Nodens in Lydney Park. That, however, does not negate the survival of other deities in more rural settings for longer periods of time. The existence of the heroes and their families in *The Mabinogi* proves that the names of these Celtic gods were still present in the memories and bardic poetry of Wales and Ireland well into the Middle Ages when they were committed to parchment. The names of the ancient Celtic deities were preserved by collective heritage and tradition, but the use of sacred land lost favour to the Roman's stone temples, and later to the early Church. What emerged in Britain, before the introduction of Christian practice in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, was a hybrid Romano-Celtic religion with Romano-Celtic deities practiced in a Romano-Celtic setting.

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<sup>190</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 308.

### **Chapter 3: Life After Death**

Just as with most religions, the Celtic religion had specific beliefs about what happened after someone died.<sup>191</sup> For the Celts, this involved rebirth in the Otherworld.<sup>192</sup> The earliest description of the Welsh Otherworld comes from medieval texts dating to the 11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Irish equivalents, however, date to the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries and are freer from Roman influence as Ireland was never part of the Roman Empire. These sources still contain some Christian contamination since they post-date St. Patrick's 5<sup>th</sup> century CE mission, but they provide a more authentically Celtic view on the afterlife. This thesis agrees with Aldhouse-Green's argument that the ancient Welsh tribes would have perceived their afterlife similarly to what is described in the medieval Irish and Welsh sources.<sup>193</sup> While the beliefs of the afterlife retold in the medieval tales imply a universality in Celtic religious beliefs, the Iron Age burials of Britain differ greatly from one area to another and present a more varied belief system. It is possible that these burial practices differed between tribal zones during the Iron Age and only began to resemble each other after the Roman occupation. The problems relating to describing what a 'normal' practice of burial looked like come from the lack of surviving evidence. Scholars posit that excarnation by advantageous corvids, exposure, and to lesser extent cremations, were common across all tribal territories until the Common Era. The outside influence of both Gallic and Roman traditions on British burial practices can be seen by an

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<sup>191</sup> See Chapter 1.3 and 1.4 for the discussion on Celtic beliefs.

<sup>192</sup> Val. Max. 2.6.10, Pomp. 3.19, Diod. Sic. 5.28. The term 'Otherworld' will be used here instead of the Welsh name *Annwfn* when discussing the broad descriptions of the Otherworld as many of these ideas come from Gallic and Irish sources. *Annwfn* was introduced into the Welsh narrative during the Late Middle Ages and appears to be different from the earlier sources.

<sup>193</sup> AGr. *Caes.*, 173.



increase in cremations, as a replacement for the practice of exposure, and later in inhumation burials.<sup>194</sup>

While most of the religious aspects of Iron Age Britain were easily translated into Roman customs, the dedicatory and deposition habits of the native populace changed with the increased Roman influence during the occupation.<sup>195</sup> Although many new religious customs, such as curse tablets and written dedications, began to arise in the British Isles during the Roman period, the continuous worship at sacred wells, springs, and lakes never disappeared. Written dedications are found almost exclusively in association with rural villas or urban military sites, both subject to Roman influence, while sacred water sources were found throughout the countryside in addition to being in densely inhabited areas.<sup>196</sup>

### **3.1 Description of the Otherworld**

The Underworld (or, Hades in classical Greco-Roman myth) was believed to lie beyond Ocean, or another body of water, to the west of the Mediterranean. Insular Celtic beliefs followed a similar trend where the Otherworld was associated with locations in the south-west of Britain. Both Munster, Ireland and Dyfed, Wales follow this location pattern and were perceived as primeval worlds of origin.<sup>197</sup> The Celtic gods were thought to be inhabitants of the Otherworld, just as the Roman gods lived in Olympus, and as the ancestors of the Celtic peoples, the home of the deities was thought of as the origin of humanity. This divine Otherworld was seen as superior to the mortal world as there was no illness, ageing, or death for those who dwelt

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<sup>194</sup> W. B. Oth., in Gr. *CW*, 492, 496, 498, 507 and Davis, "Iron Age Burials in Wales," 65. Serjeantson and Morris, "Ravens and Crows in Iron Age and Roman Britain," 101.

<sup>195</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 306.

<sup>196</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 459, The only example of a rural tomb stone is from Wood Eaton, Staffordshire. Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales*, Maps 1, 5 and 6.

<sup>197</sup> El. *HDru.*, 121. The origin of life, in Celtic thought, and the realm where the dead go are one in the same, since the universe was seen as cyclical, when you are born into this world you have died in the Otherworld and when you die in this world you return to the Otherworld.

there. These are all common characteristics in many religions where the afterlife is the final destination, but the Roman authors were adamant that the Celtic religion included a belief in reincarnation.<sup>198</sup> The idea of reincarnation for the Celts consisted of the cyclical nature of human life, as they believed that after death they would be reborn in the Otherworld and then reborn again into the mortal world when they died in the Otherworld. The problem with this description is that it contradicts the Irish tale of Bran where there is no death in the Otherworld, which means there is no reincarnation into the mortal world, thus ending the cycle of rebirth. This Irish tale was written after the introduction of Christianity to Ireland and could have been influenced by the idea of Heaven as an infinite resting place.<sup>199</sup> The idea of reincarnation into the Otherworld seems incoherent when viewing the Otherworld as a better world and as a transitional location and not a final destination for the soul. If the soul, however, remained in the Otherworld for eternity, as suggested by “The Voyage of Bran,” there would be no need for the birth of a child to be a sad occurrence and inevitably no perpetuating cycle of life as described by the Romans and later Welsh sources.

In the Irish and Welsh traditions, the souls of the departed were held on a small island to the south-west of the mainland (for Wales this was the Island of Lundy) before they were taken by a psychopomp deity to the Otherworld. This island is referred to by many names throughout the sources, but it is usually called *Tech Duinn* (House of Donn) in Irish after one of the two gatekeepers of the dead, the other being Beli.<sup>200</sup> The Irish tale of Bran, from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, describes the Otherworld as a series of islands that can be reached by boat when sailing west,

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<sup>198</sup> Val. Max., 2.6.10, Pomp., 3.19, Diod. Sic., 5.28. Also H. *PRB*, 184.

<sup>199</sup> “The Voyage of Bran,” Meyer, trans., *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal, to the Land of the Living*, 1-35.

<sup>200</sup> Procopius referred to the island as Britta, Procop. *BGoth.*, 8.48-8.58. Donn as a god of the Otherworld should not be confused with the Welsh mother/water goddess Don. El. *HDru.*, 120-121, and Ellis, *AWC*, 181.

which is a common trope in ancient Greek and Roman tales as well.<sup>201</sup> A woman from the Otherworld entices Bran to begin his journey by describing many of the 150 islands which lie to the west, including the Island of Joy and the Island of Women, the latter which keeps mortal men trapped for centuries with the supernatural replenishment of food and companionship only for them to perish if they leave.<sup>202</sup> When the men attempt to return to Ireland they discover that once they step into the mortal world, time catches up and their bodies turn to ash.<sup>203</sup> Beyond the handful of names mentioned in Bran's tale, Irish legends also discuss many additional islands which were considered as either the whole Otherworld, or as a part of it, the most common names being: *Tir tairnigiri* (Land of Promise), *Magh Mell* (Plain of Happiness), and *Asa* (Truth or Paradise).<sup>204</sup> The discrepancy between all of these islands' descriptions, and the large number of surviving names, make it clear that there was not one single belief about where the soul went after death. A similar uncertainty would apply to Wales when the Romans introduced their burial practices.

While the majority of the Irish sources place the entrance to the Otherworld to the west across a body of water, most of the native Welsh sources take another classically sourced route to the afterlife: a decent below ground. Both nations' literature was recorded by Christian monks during the Middle Ages, but the monks in Ireland were more likely to be of Irish decent as there had been fewer invasions of Ireland than of Wales and Britain which, by the High Middle Ages

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<sup>201</sup> "The Voyage of Bran," Meyer, trans., *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal, to the Land of the Living*, 1-35. For ancient examples see Homer, *Odyssey*, 4.549-488, Diod. Sic. 4.27, and Virgil, *Aeneid*, 3.147-3.171.

<sup>202</sup> Bran makes his voyage by boat and identifies all the lands he passes as islands. When translated, the names of these islands contain the descriptor "plain" (*Mag*). "The Voyage of Bran," trans. Meyer, 1-35. The Island of Women can be compared to the Island of the Lotus Eaters in Homer's *Odyssey*, 9.39-132. Both are described by their flowers and harmless-looking inhabitants. Circe's island also comes to mind when reading about the constant feasting provided by the island inhabited solely by women, see Homer, *Odyssey*, 10.1-574.

<sup>203</sup> "The Voyage of Bran," trans. Meyer, 1-35.

<sup>204</sup> Other names for the Irish Otherworld include: *Tir na mBeo* (Land of the Living), *Magh Da Cheo* (Plain of two Mists), *Tir fo Thuinn* (Land Under the Wave), *Hy-Breasail* (Breasal's Island), *Hy-Falga* (Falga's Island), *Dun Scaith* (Fortress of Shadows), and *Tir na tSamhraidh* (Land of Summer). See El. AWC, 181 and El. *HDru.*, 169.

had been occupied in succession by Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman cultures. The darker aspects of the Otherworld were emphasized more in Welsh literature than they were in the Irish versions, possibly be due to the Christian scribes recording the tales being more foreign to (and disapproving of) the Celtic beliefs in Wales than the scribes in Ireland.<sup>205</sup> *Annwfn* is the Otherworld of *The Mabinogi*, and in the First Branch, it is the site of a civil battle between its two divine rulers: Arawn and Hafgan. After this war is won by Arawn's mortal champion Pwyll, *Annwfn* becomes a place full of celebratory feasting in the subsequent tales of *The Mabinogi*.<sup>206</sup> While the Welsh *Annwfn* was sometimes perceived as an island near Gwales or Dyfed, the term itself comes from the words *an* (in/under) and *dwfn* (world) suggesting that when the Otherworld is referred to as *Annwfn*, the location is deep within the earth and not across the sea.<sup>207</sup>

### **3.2 Entrances to the Otherworld**

The most common placement for the entrance to the Welsh Otherworld combines both the water passage of Irish tradition and the underground aspect of *Annwfn*: the entrance was thought to lie beneath various bodies of water or where the waves meet the land.<sup>208</sup> Many folktales confirm this as a popular concept as various Lady of the Lake stories often described the Lady as a deity from the Otherworld (Figure 2). The tale of Llyn y Fan Fach describes how a young farmer fell in love and married a lady from the lake of Fan Fach. She eventually returns to the Otherworld through her lake portal with her Otherworldly cattle when her husband neglects

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<sup>205</sup> H. *PRB*, 324.

<sup>206</sup> "Pwyll Prince of Dyved" and "Branwen the daughter of Llyr" in G. *Mab.*; also see Davies, "Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales," in Gr. *CW*, 788.

<sup>207</sup> Davies "Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales," in Gr. *CW*, 789. In his tale, Pwyll meets the Otherworld goddess Rhiannon while sitting on a specific mound which leads to *Annwfn*. The entrance which Gwydion takes to *Caer Sidi* (another name for the Welsh Otherworld) is also an earthen mound. See El. *HDru.*, 133.

<sup>208</sup> "The Black Book of Carmarthen XIX," in S. *FABW*, 309-318. In modern scholarship, the term "liminal spaces" is used when referring to the locations in the ancient world where the dead were thought to be closer to the living.

her.<sup>209</sup> The most well-known Lady of the Lake (outside of Arthurian legend) is the sometimes-divine mother of the poet Taliesin, Cerridwen. Taliesin wrote of his mother as a sorceress who was in possession of a magic cauldron which she used either in or near her watery home, Llyn Tegid, which happens to be fed by the River Dee (Afon Dyfrdwy).<sup>210</sup> Cerridwen was also an Otherworld goddess in other versions of her tale.<sup>211</sup>

These later sources on the watery entrance to the Otherworld are corroborated by the material remains, which have been identified as offerings, that are found in various bodies of water throughout Wales and Britain.<sup>212</sup> Curse tablets or *defixiones* were a staple of Roman religious practice which was incorporated into Celtic religious practice in Britain, most commonly for the return of lost items or the punishment of thieves.<sup>213</sup> These metal tablets were often deposited into water shrines, most notably at the shrine to Sulis Minerva in Bath where over one hundred tablets survive, including two written in a Celtic language.<sup>214</sup> Not all *defixiones*, however, were deposited into water or at watery shrines, so cannot be intrinsically linked to being answered by chthonic deities. Curse tablets were also found, albeit in fewer numbers, in many shrines and temples in more rural Dobunni territory, including Lydney, Brean Down, Pagan's Hill, and especially in Uley (Figure 3).<sup>215</sup> The finds at Uley, although mostly dating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, are important because the Romano-British temple was built upon the

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<sup>209</sup> Ellis, *Chronicles*, 301-307. Other tales include the ladies of Llyn cwm y Llwch, Llyn y Forwyn, and Llyn Alfach. Rhys, *Celtic Folklore*, 21-25.

<sup>210</sup> "Taliesin," in G. Mab., 471. Also, Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal, to the Land of the Living*, 88-89. Dames, "The Goddess in Wales," n.p.

<sup>211</sup> Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal, to the Land of the Living*, 85-86 and 88-89. El. *HDru.*, 105.

<sup>212</sup> It is important to note that labeling artifacts as 'ritualistic' or 'religious offerings' is common when no other explanation is readily available for the origin or source of a find. Llyn Cerrig Bach, which has been questioned by Roberts, "Accident not Intention," will be discussed here due to its prominence in previous scholarship on Celtic religions in Wales. See Frere, *Britannia*, 104, AGr. *GC*, 142, and Ros. Rob. *DP*, 121, 126.

<sup>213</sup> Me. *Rit.*, 141. See Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 142-146 for examples of Roman binding spells (*defixiones* and *devotiones*).

<sup>214</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 311, 458. Many of the curse tablets found at Bath and Uley were written by individuals with poor handwriting and Latin skills. These people are thought to be Celtic natives.

<sup>215</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 458-459.

site of a pre-Roman temple whose resident deity began to be worshiped under the Roman names of Mars-Silvanus or Mars-Mercury.<sup>216</sup> Between Bath and Uley the personal names that appear on the curse tablets are 95 to 83 in favour of Celtic (British and Gallic) names over Latin ones.<sup>217</sup> Although many Celtic names appear on the curse tablets, this is truly an adopted Roman practice as every inscribed tablet can be linked to a Roman rural villa or military site in Britain. While there are hundreds of *defixiones* which survive from Roman Britain, there are merely a small handful which survive from Roman Gaul, which is due to the increased time spent, by the Romans, on influencing the religion of the British Celts as opposed to banning the religious practices outright which occurred on the Continent.<sup>218</sup>

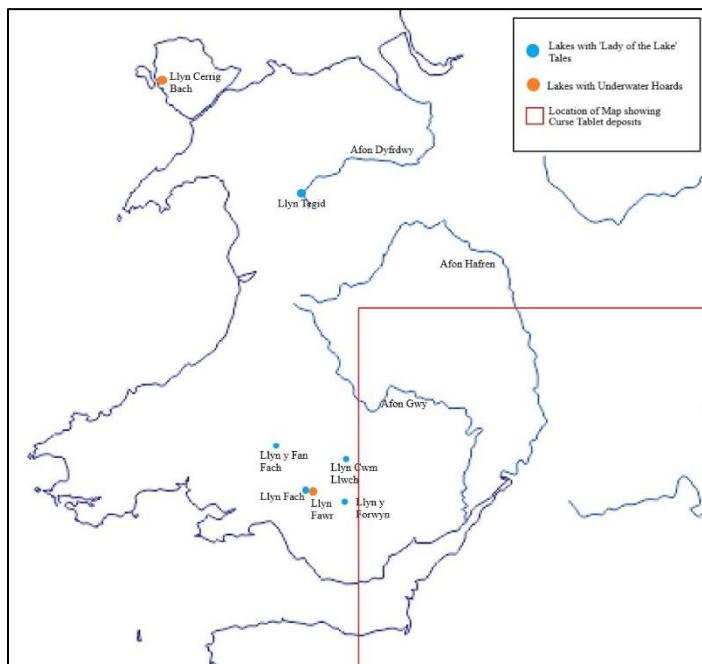


Figure 2: Lakes which are associated with ‘ladies of the lake’ legends and underwater hoard discoveries. The contents of these hoards do not include the curse tablets which appear in Figure 3. Blank map “England (United Kingdom): coasts, hydrography (white)” from [https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=5579&lang=en](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5579&lang=en). The information added to the map was done so by the author with the aid of Rhys, *Celtic Folklore*, “Taliesin,” in *G. Mab.*, Gr. *GC*, and Green and Howell, *A Pocket Guide: Celtic Wales*.

<sup>216</sup> *Ma. Imp.*, 480. *Me. Rit.*, 35. Although these tablets date to the later Roman period in Britain, the Bloomberg (Walbrook, London) and Vindolanda (Hadrian’s Wall) Tablets date from the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Unfortunately, these tablets provide little information on the customs of the Celtic Britons. “Roman Inscriptions of Britain,” <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/TabVindol890> and <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/TabLondBloomberg23>.

<sup>217</sup> *Ma. Imp.*, 463. Only a small number of duplicate tablets have been found, although many appear to be copied from a standard or example curse, making it appear that the act of personally inscribing the curse was important to its success. *Ma. Imp.*, 458.

<sup>218</sup> *Ma. Imp.*, 459. Celtic religious officials (druids) were banned, but the practices continued and were merged with Roman practices. Curse tablets, and other Latin inscriptions, were found in urban areas where the Roman populace and higher-class Celts resided. A rural tombstone with inscription survives in Wood Eaton and is the only example of something outside of direct Roman influence. For curse tablets in Gaul, see Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, 74, 143, and compare to the number of those from Britain, 177, 193-198.

Lake (*llyn*) and river (*afon*) cults perhaps remained just as important as structured temples to the Romano-Celtic populations of Britain as they had been during the Iron Age.<sup>219</sup> In Iron Age Wales, Llyn Fawr (c. 700-600 BCE) and Llyn Cerrig Bach (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE to 1<sup>st</sup> century CE) held significance for the native tribes of the Ordovices in the north and the Silures in the south (Figure 2).<sup>220</sup> Both lakes contain ancient finds consisting mostly of native Celtic items, and in the case of Llyn Cerrig Bach, which can also be classified as a bog, only non-Roman artifacts have been discovered.<sup>221</sup> By depositing inanimate objects into a body of water, or disfiguring them into an unusable state, these objects were thought to have been subjected to the ritual practice of ‘killing’ and despatching the object into the Otherworld as a form of sacrifice.<sup>222</sup> Llyn Fawr has produced many metal items, including iron weapons (mostly axes), a bronze sickle, and two Welsh-made cauldrons, one of which is also made of bronze.<sup>223</sup> Cauldrons held a connection to the Otherworld and chthonic deities in later Welsh folklore, such as in the case of Cerridwen, and when Bran gifts a magic life-restoring cauldron to his brother-in-law.<sup>224</sup> There is also material evidence to suggest that a man-made structure of unknown use existed, built upon the water in Llyn Fawr, at one point in its history.<sup>225</sup> As for the finds found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, there is more disagreement as to how the artifacts ended up at the bottom of the lake. While there are plenty of scholars who argue that some of the artifacts found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, which is located on Ynys Môn, represent centuries of religious deposits and offerings at a druidical shrine,

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<sup>219</sup> Wood, *Collins Field Guide to Archaeology in Britain*, 146.

<sup>220</sup> Gr. *GC*, 142, and Green and Howell, *A Pocket Guide: Celtic Wales*, 20, 27.

<sup>221</sup> Ros. Rob. *DP*, 126 and Me. *Rit.*, 29 and 31. Some of the non-Roman objects discovered at Llyn Cerrig Bach include chariot fixtures, smithing tools, animal bones, and the only known example of Celtic slave chains.

<sup>222</sup> Me. *Rit.*, 30-31, Merrifield with supporting arguments from S. Piggott and W.H. Manning as well as C. Forcey, “Whatever Happened to the Heroes?” 88-89. Examples of ritual killing on inanimate objects also exist from Waltham Abbey, England where no fewer than 150 objects have been uncovered. Laing and Laing, *Celtic Britain and Ireland: Art and Society*, 42. In addition, bent weapons have been discovered buried with bird bones in a ritual pit in Jordan Hill, England, Frere, *Britannia*, 370.

<sup>223</sup> Wheeler, *Prehistoric and Roman Wales*, 202, 204 and Gr. *GC*, 142.

<sup>224</sup> Taliesin, “The Omen of Prydein the Great: Book of Taliessin VI,” “Book of Taliessin XIV,” and “The Chair of Ceridwen: Book of Taliessin XVI,” in S. *FABW*. “Taliesin” and “Branwen the daughter of Llyr” in G. *Mab*.

<sup>225</sup> Wheeler, *Prehistoric and Roman Wales*, 202.

others argue that any connection made to the druids is completely speculative due to the type of goods which have been uncovered.<sup>226</sup> Many of the items found were weapons, including iron swords, one of which was purposefully bent before being tossed into the bog, and spears, which led to the belief that the Celtic tribes of Wales were likely more war-like than those on the Continent where La Tène art pieces make up much of the water hoard discoveries.<sup>227</sup> The remains of war chariot fittings were discovered in the lake during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which at the time remained an odd find for a place as mountainous as Wales. This find remained the only chariot in Wales until early 2018 when an intact chariot burial was discovered in Pembrokeshire.<sup>228</sup> Roberts suggests that the location of Llyn Cerrig Bach makes it likely that during the Roman period the lake could have been more of an inlet off the coast and the hoard found in the underwater peat was from an accidental shipwreck and not a series of individual deposits.<sup>229</sup>

While the water hoards of Wales are becoming less associated with the Otherworld in modern scholarship, the connection between the Otherworld and watery or chthonic entrances remains strong. Shaft burials and deposits became less popular over the centuries, but the sanctity of the well continued to thrive under many of the invading religions. The deposition of objects or bones into pits or shafts dates to pre-Roman practices in Britain, and these objects are

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<sup>226</sup> For the argument in favour of religious associations, see Ros. Rob. *DP*, 121 and Frere, *Britannia*, 104. For the argument against religious associations, see Roberts, "Accident Not Intention," 25, and for Fox's argument according to Roberts, "Accident Not Intention," 27.

<sup>227</sup> Watts, "Celtic Religion in Western and Central Europe," 271 and Me. *Rit.*, 29 and 31. On the continent, there exist many potential representations of bent objects being left as votives for deities in artistic depictions from shrines in the form of v-rod and z-rod shapes. Harding, *The Archaeology of Celtic Art*, 284. The bending or 'killing' of inanimate objects as sacrifices to the deities continued in other forms into the modern period, with bent coins being tossed into water during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and bent pins into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Me. *Rit.*, 112.

<sup>228</sup> For the chariot fittings found in Llyn Cerrig Bach, see Stead, "The Celtic Chariot," 259. As of the writing of this thesis, nothing has been officially published on this discovery due to a nondisclosure contract, so only speculations on the importance of this burial find in comparison to the find in Llyn Cerrig Bach can be made. See Hiltz, editor, "New finds from the Pembrokeshire Chariot Burial," *Current Archaeology*, no. 355, n.p.

<sup>229</sup> Roberts, "Accident Not Intention," 25-27, 32.



often regarded as offerings for the Otherworld. Although this practice was not as common in pre-Roman or Roman Wales as it was in such places as Jordan Hill in Somerset or in pre-Roman Gaul, Welsh tales often include *Sedd* (meaning ‘seat’ in Welsh) which fulfill a similar purpose.<sup>230</sup> *Seddi*, also called fairy mounds, were often seen as an entrance for mortals to gain access to the Otherworld, especially during the feast of Samhain when the Otherworld was visible to the mortal realm.<sup>231</sup> While water was not necessary for a place to be a potential entrance to the Otherworld, as seen in the description of shaft deposits above, wells saw continued ritual use through the Roman period and into the Christian era despite many wells being closed up around 400 CE due to the increased use of aqueducts.<sup>232</sup> The practice of well worship in Wales stemmed from the worship of the deities accredited with the creation or the inhabitation of the well which led to the Otherworld.<sup>233</sup> Female deities were commonly associated with water and wells as symbols of fertility and motherhood. The connection with water establishes many goddesses in a position of power within the Otherworld.<sup>234</sup> While throughout Roman Britain dogs were associated with wells and chthonic ritual, in Wales it was the skull, usually human, which held specific importance in relation to wells. In a well in

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<sup>230</sup> Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*, 129. And Me. *Rit.*, 41-43. At the site of Jordan Hill, many votives, including Roman coins, were discovered in a shaft associated with a Romano-British temple.

<sup>231</sup> El. *AWC*, 181. Macleod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 13. Rhys, *Celtic Folklore*, 677-678. The word *Seddi* directly translates to ‘seats,’ and refers to the seats of the gods. ‘Fairy mounds’ is the English term for these doors into the Otherworld. Small, winged fairies, although commonly depicted as seminal in Celtic mythology, originated in Germanic and Scandinavian cultures. The fairies of Irish and Welsh folklore were human-sized beings (when in the mortal world at least) who were often worshiped by the Celtic populations in the pre-Christian world. The term fairy replaces the word for a god when speaking of Otherworld deities, as Rhiannon is often referred to as a fairy in Welsh mythology, as were many Irish deities. For more information on Welsh fairies in later folklore and legend, see Sikes, *British Goblins*, 11-56; for references to fairies in *The Mabinogi*, see Gruffydd, “Folklore and Myth in the Mabinogion.”

<sup>232</sup> Ros. *PCB*, 136. Many modern female saints in Britain and Ireland have holy or sacred wells associated with their worship. Ros. *PCB*, 20, 31. In 20<sup>th</sup> century Welsh tradition, holy wells were thought to help heal and cleanse afflicted people through either washing oneself clean with the well water and leaving the rag near the well or by using a pin, bead, or button as a vehicle for the disease which is discarded into the well. Rhys, *Celtic Folklore*, 354-358; for statistics on wells in Wales, see Jones, *The Holy Wells of Wales*, 10. For information on the closure of wells in Britain, see Ma. *Imp.*, 341.

<sup>233</sup> El. *HDru.*, 134. For a Gallic comparison, see the god Grannos. Me. *Rit.*, 41.

<sup>234</sup> Coventina, a Celtic goddess worshiped widely along Hadrian’s Wall, had a well in Northumberland where many votives were dedicated to her. In the numerous inscriptions and offerings dedicated to her, she is referred to as a water nymph, a goddess, or a combination of the two, and was often sought for safe passage to the Otherworld. Ros. *PCB*, 29-30. *RIB*, 1522-1535. Macleod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 40-41. El. *HDru.*, 121.

Caerwent, on land previously belonging to the Silures tribe, five human skulls were found without any other bones.<sup>235</sup> Whether this occurred for the same reason that hundreds of human skulls from the pre-Roman period have been found in the River Thames, namely for transporting

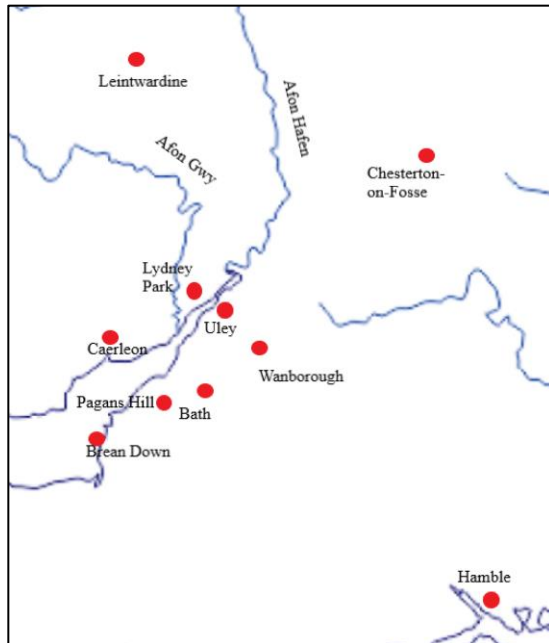


Figure 3: Map of locations where Romano-British curse tablets have been discovered. Blank map “England (United Kingdom): coasts, hydrography (white)” from [https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=5579&lang=en](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5579&lang=en). The information added to the map was done so by the author with the aid of Ma. *Imp.*, *Me. Rit.*, and *RIB*.

the soul to the Otherworld through Billingsgate (Bíle’s gate), or as another ritual associated with the Celtic head cult, is unknown.<sup>236</sup> Welsh and Irish literary tradition, specifically Bran in the tale of Branwen, does support the idea of decapitated heads (and souls) being transferred before the death was considered final.<sup>237</sup>

### **3.3 Inhabitants of the Otherworld**

Celtic mythologies across Britain and Ireland disagree on who lived in the Otherworld.<sup>238</sup>

The Irish tradition claims that the Otherworld is home to gods, but on occasion, kings and mortal

<sup>235</sup> Gr. *Ani.*, 104. Ross, *PCB*, 107.

<sup>236</sup> El. *HDru.*, 121.

<sup>237</sup> “Branwen the daughter of Llyr” in G. *Mab*.

<sup>238</sup> This is also true of Graeco-Roman beliefs. In some mythologies Hades is a prison for the Titans, or a home to the dead, or inhabited by the Lord of the Underworld and his partner. In other accounts dead Greek heroes inhabit the Isle of the Blessed which is quite similar to some Celtic variations. For examples of this in Greco-Roman tradition, see Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.1-640, Plato, *Republic*, 10.614a-10.621d, Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 170, and Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.399-6.751.

heroes can embark on a katabasis through fairy mounds, islands, or seabeds. It is not specified in any source if the Otherworld, home of the gods, is the same as the destination for deceased souls. Irish mythologies also refer to Donn's house or the Country of the Dead, which is described as a very depressing place in comparison to the elysian Otherworld described in Bran's katabasis.<sup>239</sup> While in the ancient accounts it appears that the souls of the mortal dead are reborn into the Otherworld, the Welsh tales tell of an Otherworld inhabited by deities and heroes.<sup>240</sup> Irish and Welsh mythology agree on the Otherworld association of female deities with ravens. While the Irish tradition presents the triple raven goddesses collectively known as the Morrígan (Badb, Macha, and Nemain) as being maleficent deities of war and destruction, the Welsh Rhiannon is presented with ravens as beneficent Otherworld creatures.<sup>241</sup> Throughout Britain hundreds of corvid bones have been found buried in graves or deposited in shafts both before and during the Roman occupation. While not all of these can be proven as intentional burials for returning the corvid to the Otherworld, ravens as intermediaries between the two worlds are attested in Welsh and Irish folktales.<sup>242</sup> Birds were very important in Celtic religious practices, and each had their own associations with mortal activity. Aquatic birds were often associated with healing cults while some Otherworld birds, such as ravens or songbirds, were thought to aid in the dulling of

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<sup>239</sup> H. *PRB*, 184. El. *AWC*, 80 refers to the elite naked warriors of Ireland, the *Gaiscedach* (Gallic: *Gaestae*), who believed that increased contact with mother earth (by not wearing clothing) improved one's relationship with the gods, which guaranteed rebirth in the Otherworld.

<sup>240</sup> For Welsh examples, see Gwydion's descent to Caer Sidi (Otherworld) to become a prophetic poet: El. *HDru.*, 133; and the tale of Pwyll's occupational trade with the king of Annwfn (Otherworld): G. *Mab*. For an Irish example, see "The Voyage of Bran," trans. Meyer, 1-35, Val. Max., 2.6.10, Pomp., 3.19, Diod. Sic., 5.28.

<sup>241</sup> Gr. *GC*, 188. And Ros. *PCB*, 244.

<sup>242</sup> MacLeod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 49: the Irish Morrígan are frequently associated with ravens and the Otherworld in the Irish tale of Cú Chulainn. MacLeod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 47, 119: Rhiannon and Epona share these attributes of sacred birds and psychopomp status. See "Branwen the daughter of Llyr," in G. *Mab*. for the use of Rhiannon's birds to wake the dead and lull the living to sleep. The crow is often conflated with the raven as both birds look similar from afar and are carrion feeders. The name of title character of "Branwen the daughter of Llyr," in G. *Mab*. means White (*wen*) Crow (*brân*). The name of her brother, Bran, whose decapitated head was seen as liminal and prophetic, translates directly to Crow.

pain and to be bringers of happiness.<sup>243</sup> The druids would use ravens as divination tools, with their flight or call patterns being examined and interpreted as messages from the Otherworld, a practice also common in Graeco-Roman cults. Ravens, as carnivorous corvids, were known to eat the exposed dead and aid in the disposal of bodies which would allow for the soul to find its way into the Otherworld.<sup>244</sup> Both ravens and dogs were kept as pets in Celtic Britain, as evident through burial records, and were possibly also seen as ‘familiars’ with connections to the Otherworld.<sup>245</sup> The raven as an intermediary between the living and the dead (or the mortal world and the Otherworld) can also be seen in the *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* XXXIII when Gwyn ap Nudd claims that “the ravens of the battle-field screamed [...] over blood [...] and] over flesh” when various important Welsh heroes, including Bran, were killed.<sup>246</sup> While Bran was associated with ravens, the god Lleu, equivalent to the Roman Mercury, was often portrayed as a Celtic psychopomp and was thought to have the ability to change into a raven.<sup>247</sup>

Evidence of the ritualistic killing of animals has been found in multiple sanctuaries, graves, and even domestic settings indicating that this ritual was not just for the elite and probably not monitored by priestly officials. Animals frequently found buried in Romano-British sanctuaries such as Caerwent include oxen, cows, dogs, pigs, and various birds.<sup>248</sup> Nefarious activity, such as necromancy, has been suggested as the reason behind mass graves with various

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<sup>243</sup> Aquatic birds related to healing include swans, cranes, ducks, and herons. The former also holds ties to divine Otherworld women. Ravens and songbirds are both featured in *G. Mab.* in association with Rhiannon. MacLeod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 119-122.

<sup>244</sup> Serjeantson and Morris, “Ravens and Crows,” 101.

<sup>245</sup> Bones found: Serjeantson and Morris, “Ravens and Crows,” 89, 94; messages from the Otherworld, Serjeantson and Morris, “Ravens and Crows,” 99; as pets: Serjeantson and Morris, “Ravens and Crows,” 96 and 100; and Ros. *PC*, 168-169.

<sup>246</sup> “The Black Book of Caermarthen XXXIII,” In *S. FABW*, vol. 1, 295. “Ban rŷerint brein garthan [...] ar crev [...] ac] ar cic.” The original Welsh can be found in “The Black Book of Caermarthen XXXIII,” *S. FABW*, vol. 2, 55. The association between ravens and death also occurs in “Branwen the daughter of Llyr” in *G. Mab.* when Bran and Branwen die, the birds of Rhiannon sing. Also see Davies “Mythology and the Oral Tradition: Wales,” in *Gr. CW*, 788-789.

<sup>247</sup> Lleu as equivalent to Mercury: Eliade and Couliano, *Eliade Guide for World Religions*, 49; transformation into raven: Serjeantson and Morris, “Ravens and Crows”, 100; the Morrigan also had this ability.

<sup>248</sup> For bovine burials, see *Gr. Ani.*, 92, 122 and *Gr. GC*, 178. For canine and various birds in Roman Britain, see *Me. Rit.*, 30, 36 and Serjeantson and Morris, “Ravens and Crows,” 86-103.

animal remains and material objects, but other animals, mostly dogs, have been identified as domestic or cared-for creatures.<sup>249</sup>

### **3.4 Funerary Rites and Burials**

Death in the Celtic world, specifically in Gaul, was a cause for celebration as the soul of the deceased made a journey to the Otherworld where life would continue.<sup>250</sup> Death was considered a transitional period or as a change of location for the soul as it was in between two physical bodies. Lucan claims that the souls of druids specifically do not find their destination in a Graeco-Roman style underworld but are reincarnated in an Otherworld.<sup>251</sup> The rebirth of the soul in the Otherworld was the general belief described by the ancient authors, as Celts made loans repayable in the Otherworld, seemed unafraid of death while at war, and in some cases, they would cast letters to the deceased onto the funeral pyre, but various tribal areas celebrated this rebirth in different ways.<sup>252</sup> The Irish practice appears very similar to Roman funerary rites and other festivals where games (*cluiche eaintech*) and feasts were held in honour of the deceased. The bodies of the dead, and the living who were present, would be cleansed in order to purify the soul before passage to the Otherworld and rid the living of the pollution of death before the wake and burial.<sup>253</sup> Although the ancient authors had many theories on where the Celts believed their souls went after death, there is nothing in native Welsh written sources that directly links funerals to the resurgence of the soul in the Otherworld.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Necromancy: *Me. Rit.*, 36; domestic: Serjeantson and Morris, "Ravens and Crows," 96, 100.

<sup>250</sup> *El. AWC*, 179. *H. PRB*, 183.

<sup>251</sup> *Luc.* 1, 450-8. *W. B. Oth.*, in *Gr. CW*, 195. *El. AWC*, 179.

<sup>252</sup> *Val. Max.*, 2.6.10. *Diod. Sic.*, 5.28. Bryce, "Translator's Introduction," in Le Braz, *The Celtic Legend of the Beyond: Omens, Premonitions, Wakes, Magic Books, Strange Rites, Ghosts, and Exorcisms*, 7.

<sup>253</sup> *Me. Rit.*, 59 and *El. HDru.*, 137.

<sup>254</sup> *W. B. Oth.*, in *Gr. CW*, 490.

The belief in a new life in the Otherworld may not have any literary backing, but there are plenty of burials discovered which contain grave goods. The method of burial did not appear to affect the passage to the Otherworld as grave goods have been found with both inhumed and cremated bodies.<sup>255</sup> The presence of grave goods, however, does not require a belief in an Otherworld. The most convincing argument for a belief in another life after death is the abundance of food, drink, foot lamps, and boots discovered as grave goods across Celtic Britain.<sup>256</sup> Many of the other objects found buried in graves were not as useful for travel into the next life, such as ceramics, weapons, jewelry, and sometimes heirloom mirrors. These high-value items could have represented an older payment method for entering the Otherworld than the Roman introduction of being buried with coins.<sup>257</sup> Gifts left for the Romano-Celtic deities are often thought to be anything placed between the feet of the deceased, which appears to be a Celtic practice.<sup>258</sup> The paired items discovered in graves are often thought to be gifts for a Lord and Lady of the Otherworld and a product of Roman intervention, as the Celts did not typically have a ruling couple of the Otherworld.<sup>259</sup> Weapons were common grave goods as the British Celts were a warrior culture and this practice seems to dwindle once Roman customs become established. Many iron daggers or swords have been found in various graves, but at Castell y Lligaid in Glamorganshire, a burial of three bodies was discovered with a hoard which included metal helmets of Italo-Celtic design decorated with silver and gold.<sup>260</sup> On the Continent and in

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<sup>255</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 345. This includes the ‘Welwyn’-type cremation burials which were common for chiefs between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Laing and Laing, *Celtic Britain and Ireland*, 34. Although plenty of examples survive, most Romano-British burials contain no grave goods. H. *PRB*, 236.

<sup>256</sup> Laing and Laing, *Celtic Britain and Ireland*, 34 and W. B. *Oth.*, in Gr. *CW*, 496-497 and H. *PRB*, 235-236.

<sup>257</sup> W. B. *Oth.*, in Gr. *CW*, 496-497 and Me. *Rit.*, 68-70.

<sup>258</sup> Me. *Rit.*, 68. 8% of complete inhumations in Oxford were found with the decapitated head of the deceased placed between the feet. W. B. *Oth.*, in Gr. *CW*, 507.

<sup>259</sup> Me. *Rit.*, 66-67. A pair of bronze spoons is sometimes discovered in the graves with female remains.

<sup>260</sup> H. *PRB*, 235: For the lack of weapons in Romano-British burials. Wheeler, *Prehistoric and Roman Wales*, 205-208: metal helmets were very rare, implying that this was a high-ranking burial which dates to c. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Unfortunately, this hoard is now lost.

England, war chariot burials have been discovered and associated with great warrior kings, as these burials usually include many weapons and armour.<sup>261</sup> The inclusion of grave goods in burials dwindled during the rise of Christianity in the British Isles, with the exception of German and Anglo-Saxon burials.<sup>262</sup>

### 3.4.1 Burial practice evolution

Very little evidence of Iron Age burials survives in Britain and even fewer have been recognized in Wales.<sup>263</sup> The soil conditions in Wales are very acidic and not conducive to the survival of soft tissue, bones, or uncontained ashes, which is why the majority of bodies discovered in Wales were located near areas with a high density of limestone or less frequently in bogs and marshes.<sup>264</sup> If inhumations had been the burial practice of choice in Wales, one would expect that anywhere with sufficient limestone would provide plenty of preserved remains. This, however, is not the case at locations such as the hillfort of Dinorben, which thrived between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE, where only fifteen inhumations have been recorded, none of which included complete skeletons.<sup>265</sup> While inhumation, both complete and fragmentary, was practiced in pre-Roman Britain, the paucity of evidence leads to the conclusion that cremation as well as excarnation were also practiced.<sup>266</sup> Many early Iron Age graves contained only singular bones, many of which showed evidence of violence. Burials containing full skeletons in a flexed or curled position facing north became more prominent in the Late Iron

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<sup>261</sup> El. *AWC*, 44. Kings in Gaul were also often buried in full armour facing their enemy's territory in order to continue the fight after death, El. *AWC*, 48. Also refer to the Pembrokeshire find mentioned above.

<sup>262</sup> Ma. *Imp.*, 249.

<sup>263</sup> Davis, *Iron Age Burials in Wales*, 62-63: 106 Iron Age burials have been identified in Wales as of 2018. For more information on these 106 burials, see Davis' Appendix 1, 79-95; W. B. *Oth.*, in Gr. *CW*, 492: the 'Pit Tradition' (full or partial inhumation in storage grain pits) burials of south-central England only accounts for around 5% of the estimated population during that time.

<sup>264</sup> Davis, *Iron Age Burials in Wales*, 64. Davies, "The Early Celts in Wales," in Gr. *CW*, 692.

<sup>265</sup> Davis, *Iron Age Burials in Wales*, 68-69. Burials within settlements only make up roughly a quarter of all inhumations in Britain.

<sup>266</sup> Davis, *Iron Age Burials in Wales*, 65 and Serjeantson and Morris, "Ravens and Crows," 101.

Age. While often these types of burials are seen as having ritual intention, most pit burials were probably out of convenience.<sup>267</sup> The speculation over these partial burials and pit burials is that the deceased would have either been laid on a hilltop for excarnation before having a secondary inhumation, or that these were the remains of human sacrifice victims.<sup>268</sup> In Roman and Greek heroic tales, not all souls pass into the next life if the proper funerary rites were neglected. A similar practice may have occurred in Celtic culture where the burials which have been discovered could have represented those disposed of without proper rites: criminals, heretics, murder victims, witches, those struck by lightning, those who died by suicide or drowning, and those who died in childbirth.<sup>269</sup> Excarnation involving corvids has been suggested in an attempt to explain ancient Wales' lack of remains, possibly involving the intermediation of a druid to call upon the sacred raven for the transport of the soul to the Otherworld.<sup>270</sup>

The Roman accounts of death rituals in Gaul all involve a funeral pyre, which would also account for the small number of remains discovered; however, cremation was a popular Roman custom which could have influenced the Roman authors' recorded version of the Celtic practices.<sup>271</sup> Once the Romans had suitable control over the British population, there was a uniform increase in the practice of cremation and internment in urns or canisters. Inhumations and cist burials of Celtic nature, however, saw some continuation in Britain until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. It is highly unlikely that the Celtic peoples saw these containers, and later graves, as confining the dead and probably treated them as meeting spots for living to visit the dead as did

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<sup>267</sup> Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, 316. Pit burials in Britain date back to pre-Celtic times, c. 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Ros. *PC*, 138.

<sup>268</sup> W. B. Oth., in Gr. *CW*, 492, 495-496. Murphy and Pollack, as cited in Davis, *Iron Age Burials in Wales*, 62-63, 65, and 70.

<sup>269</sup> W. B. Oth., in Gr. *CW*, 495.

<sup>270</sup> Serjeantson and Morris, "Ravens and Crows," 101.

<sup>271</sup> Caes. *BGall*, 4.19, and Diod. *Sic.* 5.28.



the Romans.<sup>272</sup> The Roman practice of libation pipes has also been discovered in Caerleon and Bulmore where the practice of designated graveyards, with gravestones, was implemented during the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.<sup>273</sup> Atop a hill in Llangranog stands one of the earliest epigraphic grave markers for a Celt which dates the cremation of an Ordovician tribe member buried there to c. 150 CE.<sup>274</sup> Romano-British pagan funerary practices continued into the late Roman period in Britain, surviving long enough to compete with incoming Christian rites during the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>275</sup>

Celtic beliefs surrounding death and the Otherworld share some similarities with the Roman practices of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE. While the medieval sources which survive cannot be taken as completely accurate due to the time separating the events and the recording, the Irish and Welsh folktales provide some insight into the popular thought among the Celts surrounding the Otherworld, its location, and its inhabitants. Water as a liminal space for connection with the Otherworld (or as a portal into the mortal realm) appears to be a long-standing Celtic tradition, but the depositing of curse tablets in such locations was a Roman addition to the practice. The burial practices imported by the Romans provide the greatest evidence of a shift in ritual practice. Before the Roman occupation of Britain, the survival rate of material evidence from Celtic burials was very low as few bodies were inhumed or cremated, and most are thought to have been exposed for excarnation by the birds of the Otherworld. Once

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<sup>272</sup> See Serjeantson and Morris, "Ravens and Crows," 101 for information on excarnation and corvids. Cremation became very popular in Britain around the year 100 CE, *W. B. Oth.*, in *Gr. CW*, 496, 507 and *Me. Rit.*, 58, 61, and 63. See Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, 315-316 for the continuation of Celtic practice.

<sup>273</sup> Fanthorpe and Pawelko, *Talking Stones*, 32-33. Most of these early cemeteries were not located in Wales but in south-west England or Yorkshire. Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, 316.

<sup>274</sup> Fanthorpe and Pawelko, *Talking Stones*, 49.

<sup>275</sup> *Ma. Imp.*, 346 and *Me. Rit.*, 80.

again, a unique Romano-Celtic ritual practice was developed and routinely used for centuries until Christianity established its influence.

## **Chapter 4: Celebrations and Offerings**

The druids were a necessary part of Celtic religious practice, especially when communication with the gods was needed. The absence of any mention of druids between 61 CE and the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE does not mean that Celtic religious practices disappeared. After the destruction of the religious centres on Ynys Môn it is likely that the people took their religion into their own hands.<sup>276</sup> Even though the ancient authors stress the importance of a druid being at every ritual and every sacrifice, there is enough archaeological evidence to support that animal sacrifice was not solely a political or upper-class activity. The vast number of sacrifices, deposits, and accounts of continued celebrations found in Britain make it clear that the lower classes also participated in ritual actions, and probably did so unsupervised on at least some occasions before and after the banishment of the druids.<sup>277</sup> The sacrifice of human victims, although exaggerated in frequency for the vilification of the Celts by the ancients and by later antiquarian imaginations, does not survive in the archeological record at the same rate as animal sacrifice.<sup>278</sup> Human sacrifice can be tentatively linked to larger annual Celtic festivals. The festivals and celebrations held by the Celtic peoples of Britain are usually discussed under the names of their Irish counterparts. Within the ancient Roman sources there is an absence of druidic festivals and only a few mentions of funerary rituals.<sup>279</sup>

### **4.1 Sacrificial Rites: Animals**

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<sup>276</sup> Ross, "Ritual and the Druids," in Gr. *CW*, 428.

<sup>277</sup> H. *PRB*, 193. For more information on the statistics of sacrificed victims, see H. *PRB*, 190-199.

<sup>278</sup> For examples of antiquarian focus on human sacrifice in art, see "The Wicker Image" by Sammes, *Britannia antiqua illustrata*, in Piggott, *The Druids*, 111.

<sup>279</sup> Funerary rituals were discussed in Chapter 3.

Many cultures, including the Romans, made sacrifices to their gods to appease, to pray to, or to thank them. The Celts also participated in this type of religious activity, sacrificing domestic animals and most notably, even though less frequently, humans during their rituals.<sup>280</sup> Although less interesting and abrasive to modern audiences, the sacrifice of animals played a very important role in ancient religious rites. In many cultures, the animals which were used in the sacrifice held a special connection with the specific deity being called upon. The Romans used only unblemished animals when sacrificing to non-chthonic deities.<sup>281</sup> While it is unknown what the coats of the sacrificed animals looked like in Celtic Britain, the archaeological evidence points out other patterns. Like the Romans, each Celtic god had their preferred species of animal, usually local domestic breeds, but they also preferred sacrificing animals which were of the same sex as the deity being worshiped.<sup>282</sup> The favoured animals of the Celts were dogs, horses, and cattle. For certain annual celebrations, lambs or fully grown sheep were used in specific locations.<sup>283</sup> All animals which held importance in the everyday life of the Britons also held importance in their death rituals and the realms of the sacred.<sup>284</sup> Generally the sacrifice of these animals was done in order to both appease and receive word from the gods. Sometimes this meant offering the whole animal to the deity, while other rituals called for something less substantial like a single limb or the head of the victim.<sup>285</sup> All sacrifices made to the gods needed to be destroyed in one way or another to pass over into the divine realm, hence the act of killing

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<sup>280</sup> Gr. *Ani.*, 96. It should also be noted that even though the Romans had banned human sacrifice before their conquest of Britain, during the rules of the emperors Caligula and Nero brutal and public killings of prisoners of war, for the reverence of Mars were common. The only group of people who would describe the Romans as adverse to the idea of human sacrifice would be the Romans themselves. El., *HDru.*, 17.

<sup>281</sup> Ekroth, "Animal Sacrifice in Antiquity," n.p.

<sup>282</sup> For information on the preferred use of domestic animals over wild species, see AGr. *Arch*, 126. For information on the sex of the animals, see H. *PRB*, 232-233.

<sup>283</sup> H. *PRB*, 232; Ma. *Imp. Pos.*, 476.

<sup>284</sup> Gr. *Ani.*, 92.

<sup>285</sup> H. *PRB*, 193.

the animals.<sup>286</sup> Whoever oversaw the sacrifice, *vates* or druids, would then interpret the entrails of the animal in hopes of gaining divine knowledge or insight into the future, a practice which the Greco-Romans also held.<sup>287</sup> Due to the secret nature of Celtic religion, none of these divinatory readings survive and the only evidence comes from the sacrificial remains which are found in the archaeological record. It is in this record that pits containing discarded animal carcasses are found dumped after ritualistic sacrifices and feasts.<sup>288</sup> Animals which were commonly used in rituals, including cattle and dogs, have been found both in their own graves and accompanying humans in Wales and England.<sup>289</sup> The act of reading the entrails of a sacrificed animal is attested in the Roman sources, but there are no surviving works detailing how these sacrifices continued after the banishment of the Celtic priests. The burial of these animals, however, continued well into the Roman occupation.

#### **4.2 Sacrificial Rites: Humans**

When the Romans learned that the druids sanctioned the sacrificial murder of humans, they became outraged.<sup>290</sup> Aldhouse-Green suggests that the period between when the Romans first made contact with Celtic populations of Gaul and Britain and when they were able to gain almost complete control over those territories was a period of crisis for the local population. Such circumstances would likely have caused an increase in ritual activity – especially human

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<sup>286</sup> The act of tossing a sword into a lake or bending a metal object also amount to destroying the offering in order to deliver it to the gods. Gr. *Ani.*, 94.

<sup>287</sup> The Romans had haruspices who examined the livers (and sometimes other entrails) of the sacrificed animals. This practice they attributed, historically, to the Etruscans. de Cazanove, “Etruria,” in Johnston, ed. *Religions of the Ancient World*, 221.

<sup>288</sup> Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots*, 71.

<sup>289</sup> Me. *Rit.*, 30, Gr. *Ani.*, 122, and AGr. *GC*, 178.

<sup>290</sup> According to Diod. Sic., 5.32 and Caes. *BGall.*, 6.16, these people were usually convicted criminals or prisoners. If no prisoners were available, however, then upstanding members of the community would be sacrificed instead. By the time Caesar invaded Britain, human sacrifice had been considered murder for almost 30 years in the Roman Empire. Being such a new law, this could explain why there was such a slanderous emphasis on the ‘barbarian’ nature of the Celts who still practiced human sacrifice.

sacrifice, as this was the ultimate gift to the gods.<sup>291</sup> As much as the Romans probably exaggerated what they witnessed at these rituals, it is too bold to assume that everything they said was fabricated. There are multiple Roman reports of how these victims were killed, even though there are no Insular texts which corroborate the notion, archaeological evidence dating to the Roman period supports the concept of ritual killing does survive.<sup>292</sup> In the case of Gallic Celts, Caesar explains the need for human sacrifice as an exchange: ending one life to save another.<sup>293</sup> By far, however, the most common image of Celtic human sacrifice is the ‘wicker man,’ popularized by Aylett Sammes in 1676. Sammes was referring to ancient sources which describe an oversized wicker man packed with human sacrifice victims which was then lit on fire during festivals.<sup>294</sup> Although this is the image which has been perpetuated in the minds of the modern world, the other possibilities for human sacrifice discussed by Strabo are more conducive to the purpose of consulting the victim’s entrails after the fact. These include stabbing a man in the back, piercing him with arrows, or crucifying him in a temple.<sup>295</sup> Evidence from Britain also adds a draw by lots, or receiving a burnt bannock (oat cake), as being the deciding factor in who becomes the unfortunate victim.<sup>296</sup>

#### **4.2.1 Lindow Man**

The case of the Lindow Man is often included in discussions on human sacrifice in Britain due to some peculiarities about his burial. Bog bodies are common across the marshier

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<sup>291</sup> Aldhouse-Green, “Gallic-British Deities and their Shrines,” in Todd, *A Companion to Roman Britain*, 195. For more information on the ancient idea of humans being the supreme sacrifice, see Pomp., 3.2.18 and Plut. *Super.*, 13.

<sup>292</sup> El. *HDru.*, 17. For an archaeological example see section 4.2.1 on the Lindow Man.

<sup>293</sup> Caes. *BGall.*, 6.16.

<sup>294</sup> For information on “The Wicker Image” by Sammes, *Britannia antiqua illustrata*, see Piggott, *The Druids*, 111. For ancient mentions of the wicker men, see Caes. *BGall.*, 6.16 and Strab., 4.4.5.

<sup>295</sup> Strab., 4.4.5.

<sup>296</sup> Ros. Rob. *DP*, 36.

lands of Europe, especially in Scandinavian and northern British areas. 106 bodies have so far been discovered in England and Wales, and another 24 in Scotland.<sup>297</sup> Between 1984 and 1987, at least three bodies were found in a peat bog located in Cheshire. Two male bodies as well as one female skull (which has been deemed Lindow I) were discovered in this peat bog. Lindow II, which is commonly referred to simply as Lindow Man, consists of only a head, torso, and disconnected lower right leg. The lower half of this man is speculated to be the lower abdomen, bottom, and left leg which survives under the classification of Lindow IV.<sup>298</sup> There has been plenty of debate over when this young man (archaeologists place him at between 25 and 30 years old) was killed and disposed of in the bog, with dates ranging from 300 BCE to 100 CE.<sup>299</sup> Radiocarbon dating places the remains at around 50 to 100 CE, making Lindow Man a resident of Britain during the Roman invasion.<sup>300</sup>

Lindow Man belongs in this conversation due to the numerous wounds which cover his body. On just the upper half of the body (Lindow II) there is evidence that the young man's skull was fractured, his jaw was broken, his ribs were shattered, there were various axe wounds, a deep stab wound in his jugular, and his neck had been broken in a manner consistent with hanging.<sup>301</sup> The axe blows to the back of the head would probably have been enough to kill the man, yet it is clear that after being knocked unconscious, Lindow Man was hung by the neck until dead using a garrotte which remained tied around the victim's neck when he was disposed

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<sup>297</sup> Unfortunately, most of the bog bodies discovered in Britain only survive in antiquarian records as they were unearthed before long-term preservation methods had been developed. The closest surviving example to the Lindow Man is the Gallagher Man found in Ireland. Giles, *Iron Age Bog Bodies in North Western Europe*, 77. In Denmark, bodies killed by similar means to the Lindow Man have been discovered in bogs accompanied by other sacrificed items such as cauldrons, food, weapons, and ornamental items. Laing and Laing, *Celtic Britain and Ireland*, 23-24.

<sup>298</sup> Giles, *Iron Age Bog Bodies in North Western Europe*, 83. Lindow III consists of a headless torso with surviving limbs, hands, and a disfigured thumb according to Sitch, *Bog Bodies and Sacrificial Theory*, 160.

<sup>299</sup> Sitch, *Bog Bodies and Sacrificial Theory*, 155. For detail on the age and health of the Lindow Man, see Ros. Rob. *DP*, 26.

<sup>300</sup> Ros. Rob. *DP*, 16-17. As mentioned by Ross and Robins, ancient artifacts and remains are always carbon dated by multiple laboratories. In this case, Harwell Laboratory, Oxford Radiocarbon Unit, and the British Museum were involved. Initially, the dates given were 300 BCE – 500 CE. This was narrowed down as technology advanced to around the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE due to new analysis of the skin, bone, and stomach's contents.

<sup>301</sup> Ros. Rob. *DP*, 26-27.

of in the bog.<sup>302</sup> It was during the process of hanging that archaeologist Dr. Anne Ross suggests this man was stabbed in the neck, quickly draining him of blood and killing him instantly.<sup>303</sup> Through an examination of the history of the Lindow Moss bog, botanists have concluded that Lindow Man was probably dropped face first into a pool of water (now a peat bog), symbolically drowning him.<sup>304</sup>

If Lindow Man was in fact disposed of in a pool of water for symbolic purposes, it is not difficult to connect his death with human sacrifice.<sup>305</sup> The Celtic peoples were known to hold certain numbers as sacred, specifically odd numbers, including 3, 7, and 9.<sup>306</sup> In the case of Lindow Man, the number 3 could be invoked through a triple death. The first involved the three blows to the back of the skull (itself a triplicity), the second being the garrotting, and finally the drowning. The puncture in the neck of the victim is presented as solely for drainage purposes by Ross who speculates that each death the Lindow Man suffered would have represented an offering to a different god.<sup>307</sup> In addition to the overly macabre method in which the young man was killed, the contents of his stomach also suggest that this death was special. The last meal consumed before the demise of Lindow Man consisted of a burnt bannock with sphagnum moss intermixed, charred heather leaves, and pollen from mistletoe.<sup>308</sup> Unfortunately, it is in these instances that antiquated speculation becomes an increasingly important source. The information recorded about festivals and ritual practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been retroactively applied to

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<sup>302</sup> The garrotte (a cord used as a noose) used here was a triple knotted animal sinew which had been tied so tightly that it left a visible ligature three-quarters of the way around the victim's neck. Ros. Rob. *DP*, 27.

<sup>303</sup> Ros. Rob. *DP*, 28.

<sup>304</sup> Ros. Rob. *DP*, 29.

<sup>305</sup> Caution must always be exercised when discussing 'ritual' deaths, as much of what cannot be explained is often relegated to the category of 'ritual practice,' which leads to the misunderstanding of a culture and its beliefs.

<sup>306</sup> El. *AWC*, 46 and Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*, 194-195 provide information on sacred numbers in astrological calendars. Part 3 of the tale of "Kilhwch and Olwen," in *G. Mab.*, speaks of the cultural importance of numbers in the Middle Ages, as do the 96 medieval triads which make up Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*. The triplicity of Celtic deities was discussed briefly in Chapter 3 above.

<sup>307</sup> Ros. Rob. *DP*, 49.

<sup>308</sup> Ros. Rob. *DP*, 39-40.



the distant ancestors of those practicing the rites.<sup>309</sup> It has been suggested that Lindow Man was an upper-class man selected for sacrifice at the annual festival of Beltane (May Day/*Calan Mai*) by his ending up with the burnt bannock, marking him for death.<sup>310</sup> It remains unclear whether the death of Lindow II/IV was for ritual purposes or just an extremely violent murder, execution, or retribution killing.

### **4.3 Celebratory Fêtes and Divine Festivals**

Festivals that honour deities and sacred days, especially relating to the cyclical nature of the seasons, are common in many religions. Both the Romans and Greeks frequently held similar celebrations in their own communities. There is very little written evidence from ancient sources on the practices at Celtic festivals. Diodorus speaks of how hospitable the Celts were as they invited strangers to join their feasts before requiring any personal information from their visitors. Strabo mentions the importance of elemental magic within festival contexts, and Caesar simply states how being banned from sacred sacrifices by a druid was considered to be the equivalent of a capital offence and the highest form of punishment.<sup>311</sup> Cassius Dio also presents a negative view of Celtic festivals, which is to be taken with a grain of salt due to the negative perception of the Celts he wished to project to his audience in the aftermath of the Icenian revolt. In his account, the Britons mutilated captive Romans (specifically noble women whose breasts they cut off) as part of their sacrifice to the goddess Andraste before feasting and participating in orgies which were held in a sacred grove.<sup>312</sup> The only actual depiction of an ancient Romano-British

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<sup>309</sup> Antiquarians such as Wirt Sikes, author of *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions*, studied the recent Celtic culture and rituals which have been used by scholars to infer what may have been the case 2,000 years ago. These claims must be treated with caution.

<sup>310</sup> Ros. Rob. *DP*, 37. This case is backed up by the presence of this practice in Perthshire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but in a less deadly fashion. Local boys would gather together on the first of May and whoever received the burnt bannock would have to ‘sacrifice’ himself by leaping over the sacred fire three times.

<sup>311</sup> Diod. Sic., 5.28, Strab., 4.4.4, Caes. *BGall.*, 6.13.

<sup>312</sup> Cass. Dio, 62.7.

festival or ritual practice comes from Pliny the Elder's work on *Natural History*, where he describes the druids' collection of mistletoe.<sup>313</sup>

The Druids [...] hold nothing more sacred than mistletoe<sup>314</sup> and a tree on which it is growing, provided it is Valonia oak. Groves of Valonias are chosen even for their own sake, and the magicians perform no rites without using the foliage of those trees [...] Mistletoe is, however, rather seldom found on Valonia oak, and when it is discovered it is gathered with great ceremony, and particularly on the sixth day of the moon (which for these tribes constitutes the beginning of the months and the years), and after every thirty years of a new generation, because it is then rising in strength and not one half of its full size. [...] they prepare a ritual sacrifice and banquet beneath a tree and bring up two white bulls, whose horns are bound for the first time on this occasion. A priest arrayed in white vestments climbs the tree and with a golden sickle cuts down the mistletoe, which is caught in a white cloak. Then finally they kill the victims, praying to God to render his gift propitious to those on whom he has bestowed it.<sup>315</sup>

Unfortunately for scholars, most of what Pliny records on Britannia in his work is unreliable as he himself never made it that far north, nor is his work completely sound in historical or scientific reasoning despite the multitude of sources he cited.<sup>316</sup>

Although Roman authors record the practice of various Celtic festivals, very few details are provided as to when these festivals took place and for what purpose(s) they were held. The lack of ancient written sources leaves the Insular Irish and Welsh tales as the main primary sources on the subject. Within the known Insular Celtic calendar, there are four annual festivals which were celebrated to welcome in a new season.<sup>317</sup> Most sources have these festivals

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<sup>313</sup> H. PRB, 228.

<sup>314</sup> Plin. *HN*, 16.95, The passage quoted ends with Pliny describing why the druids held mistletoe in such high regard, claiming that “[t]hey believe that mistletoe given in drink will impart fertility to any animal that is barren, and that it is an antidote for all poisons;” “fecunditatem eo potio dari cuicumque animalium sterili arbitrantur, contra venena esse omnia remedio.”

<sup>315</sup> Plin. *HN*, 16.95, “nihil habent Druidae [...] visco et arbore, in qua gignatur, si modo sit robor, sacratius. iam per se roborum eligunt lucos nec ulla sacra sine earum fronde conficiunt, [...] est autem id rarum admodum inventu et repertum magna religione petitur et ante omnia sexta luna, (quae principia mensum annorumque his facit) et saeculi post tricesimum annum, quia iam virium abunde habeat nec sit sui dimidia. [...] sacrificio epulisque rite sub arbore comparatis duos admovent candidi coloris tauros quorum cornua tum primum vinciantur. sacerdos candida veste cultus arborem scandit, falce aurea demetit, candido id excipitur sago. tum deinde victimas immolant praecantes, suum donum deus prosperum faciat iis quibus dedit.”

<sup>316</sup> Piggott, *The Druids*, 117 and El. *HDru.*, 138.

<sup>317</sup> According to Hywel Dda, *The Laws of Hywel Dda*, 254, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, the king of Wales was free to attend only three unnamed principal festivals during the year. It is unclear if by this time only three major festivals were present in the Welsh calendar, or if the king was not permitted to attend certain festivals.

occurring every three (modern) months, or 90 days.<sup>318</sup> The Irish names for each festival are the ones that survive in modern popular culture; the Welsh names, however, are also known and will be used in this discussion. Most of the descriptions of ritual practices survive from Irish sources, which is why the term ‘quarter days’ will be used in the following paragraphs despite it being solely an Irish term for these festivals. The Irish calendar year (the Welsh calendar follows this as well) is divided into two seasons: the cold (in Welsh *gaeaf*), and the warm (*haf*). Each season contains two quarter days which are set for holding social and spiritual gatherings.<sup>319</sup>

#### 4.3.1 Quarter Day Festivals

In the order usually attributed to the Celts, the new year’s celebration began after the harvest that was celebrated on the eve of November first, commonly known now as Halloween.<sup>320</sup> The festival of Samhain (*Calan Gaeaf*) – celebrated in Wales as the final harvest of the year and featuring the slaughter of animals prior to winter – took place at the end of October. *Calan Gaeaf* is recorded as one of the most spiritually active and mythically important days in the Celtic year. The feast which was prepared is sometimes referred to as the Feast of the Dead because offerings were tossed into the fire to appease those in the Otherworld who were thought have open passage between worlds on that day.<sup>321</sup> Variations of this festival survive to the modern day as Halloween, but in the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods, the fête

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<sup>318</sup> In the Celtic calendar, months were made up of 29 or 30 nights; see El. *HDru.*, 230. The Celtic calendar ‘year’ is based on the Gallic Coligny Calendar (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), discovered in 1897. Just like their Vedic cousins, the Celtic peoples of Europe used a lunar calendar to mark the passing of time which accounts for them celebrating the beginning of winter (at Samhain) on the eve of November 1<sup>st</sup> instead of on the day itself. There is evidence that the druids had their own astrological system in place before the merger with Greco-Roman practices before the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE when a manuscript called *seraul cichol* was written in Old Welsh about the zodiac and probably as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE which is to when a sculpture, found in Hastings, depicting the zodiacal signs dates: see El. *AWC*, 125-126. The Coligny Calendar, created in a similar fashion to Vedic calendars, is thought to be based on astrological calculations done in 1100 BCE; see Ellis and Sadasivanathaswami, “Our Druid Cousins,” n.p. The Coligny Calendar records the solar and lunar movements during a five-year (62 month) period. El. *HDru.*, 230.

<sup>319</sup> Ross, “Ritual and the Druids,” in Gr. *CW*, 434.

<sup>320</sup> There is some debate, based on the evidence found in medieval texts (specifically *Culwch ac Olwen*), that the new year did not start in the Welsh calendar during *calan gaeaf*, since the tale begins at the midwinter New Year feast. See Whittock, *Celtic Myths and Legends*, 40 and “Killwch and Olwen,” in G. *Mab*.

<sup>321</sup> Macculloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, 259-262 and Ros. *PCB*, 153.

retained much of its earlier spiritual and mythical importance. In early Welsh literature, *Calan Gaeaf* was a time for noble male bonding in the royal hall as referenced in poem XXI of *Llyr Taliesin*, and joyous male singing mentioned in *Y Gododdin*.<sup>322</sup> The surviving Welsh records include the practice of jumping through the sacred fire for protection against *yr Hwrch Ddu Gwla*, the mythical black sow who was said to hunt people down during *Nos Galan Gaea* (the night following *Calan Gaeaf* festivities).<sup>323</sup> It does not appear that the Romans had any influence over this practice as the beliefs associated with *Calan Gaeaf* survived into the Christian era with little modification.

Chronologically, the next Insular festival to be celebrated was the Irish festival, *Imbolic*, which has been equated to the British festival of *Brigantia* and took place on the eve of February first. In Britain, this festival was named after the patron goddess of the Briganti tribe. In Wales, this goddess is called Ffraid and in Ireland she goes by the name Brigit/Brigid.<sup>324</sup> Under the Irish name, *Imbolic*, this festival was only celebrated by Gaelic tribes in Ireland and Scotland.<sup>325</sup> Not much was recorded about this festival in relation to specifically Welsh practices. The west coast of Wales was frequently visited by Irish Celts throughout the post-Roman era and saw a merging of Gaelic and Brythonic Celts. The festival is associated with the time of the year at which the ewes were typically milked and therefore classified as a feminine pastoral festival.<sup>326</sup> In a description from the 1800s, it was common practice to preserve some of the firewood from previous quarter day festivals to burn at the next, which would necessitate the presence of a sacred fire at the feast of *Brigantia*.<sup>327</sup> After Britain and Ireland converted to Christianity, Brigit

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<sup>322</sup> Aneirin, "The Gododin: Book of Aneirin I" and Taliesin "Book of Taliessin XXI," in S. FABW. Whittock, *Celtic Myths and Legends*, 40.

<sup>323</sup> Macculloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts*, 259-262 and Whittock, *Celtic Myths and Legends*, 50.

<sup>324</sup> Dames, "The Goddess in Wales," n.p. and Ros. *PC*, 151-152.

<sup>325</sup> There is some debate as to when the Gaels migrated into Wales and how long they stayed. H. *PRB*, 182.

<sup>326</sup> El. *Caes.*, 33-34 and Ros. *PC*, 151-152.

<sup>327</sup> Trevelyn, *Folk-lore and Folk-stories of Wales*, 23 and Dames, "The Goddess in Wales," n.p.

became conflated with Brigid, the 6<sup>th</sup> century Irish saint. Her feast day remains the first of February in Ireland, while Candlemas is celebrated the following day.<sup>328</sup>

Arguably the most important festival in the ancient British calendar was that of May Day (Beltane/*Calan Mai*), which was celebrated on May 1<sup>st</sup>. As mentioned above, the cyclical use of firewood creates the need for a sacred bonfire at every quarter day festival. According to the 9<sup>th</sup> century Irish *Glossary* compiled by a Christian priest named Cormac, the name of the festival (and the god it worships) draws a connection between lucky/goodly (*Bil*) and fire (*tene*).<sup>329</sup> Beli/Belenus was primarily worshipped as a deity of light, specifically the Sun, which is why the sacred fire of Beltane is thought to be sent straight from the Sun.<sup>330</sup> This is also where druids enter the festival scene with their important role of reciting incantations as the community's cattle was driven between two fires to rid them and their herd of disease for the coming year.<sup>331</sup> This practice is only attested in Ireland as the Britons favoured the Maypole (*bedwen*) as their continued practice of choice until the use of the Maypole was banned by Christians due to its pagan associations.<sup>332</sup> Until the beginning of World War I, Beltane was celebrated in the still-Celtic areas of Cornwall.<sup>333</sup> In the medieval context, Beltane was viewed as a day which held great power and had the potential to result in disastrous outcomes. The medieval text *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* speaks of the second plague of Britain, the screams of dragons, which produced weakness, infertility, and madness to all who heard them during the celebration. Just as *Calan Gaeaf* was associated with strong supernatural powers due to the opening of the Otherworld,

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<sup>328</sup> Dames, "The Goddess in Wales," n.p.

<sup>329</sup> Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries: Cormac's Glossary, O'Davoren's Glossary, and The Glossary of the Calendar of Oingus the Culdee*, xxxv and Ross, "Ritual and the Druids," in Gr. CW, 436.

<sup>330</sup> Trevelyn, *Folk-lore and Folk-stories of Wales*, 22.

<sup>331</sup> Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries*, xxxv, and Ross, "Ritual and the Druids," in Gr. CW, 437, and Ros. PC, 152.

<sup>332</sup> Sikes, *British Goblins*, 274-275 and H. PRB, 182-183. The Maypole (Máj or Májka) is still used in Czechia during the celebration of Máj (or první Máj) which occurs on May 1<sup>st</sup>.

<sup>333</sup> El. *Caes.*, 34.

*Calan Mai* was also associated with supernatural powers that caused rulership to be challenged and otherworldly plagues to appear.<sup>334</sup> Again, this festival appears to have survived the Roman period in a pure Celtic form. This could suggest that either the practices survived in rural areas which remained untouched by Roman rule or that they were brought over by the non-Romanized Irish Celts.

To round out the Celtic year, the festival Lughnasa (*gwyl aust*/feast of August), dedicated to the god Lleu was held in celebration of the opening of the harvest.<sup>335</sup> This feast was part of an elongated festival which lasted for either a full month, beginning in mid-July, or for about 15 days, ending on August 15<sup>th</sup>.<sup>336</sup> In Wales, there are accounts of people climbing the Brecon Beacons during the festivities.<sup>337</sup> Beyond such reports, very little is known about this festival in Britain. This celebration, however, is attested to have survived in Wales and West Britain until the Anglo-Saxon invasion which solidified a harvest festival as an ancient Welsh tradition that survived Roman occupation.<sup>338</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Smaller Celebrations and the Cult of Epona

Besides the four major seasonal feasts, there were other festivals, celebrations, and fêtes which occurred in Wales in association with deities (feast days) and ritual practice.<sup>339</sup> These celebrations are attested by 19<sup>th</sup>-century antiquarians such as Sikes and Rhys and do not come

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<sup>334</sup> Whittock, *Celtic Myths and Legends*, 49. “The Story of Lludd and Llevelys” G. *Mab*. Geoffrey of Monmouth and Nennius both speak of the power of dragons in their own texts on Ambrosius (Merlin) and Vortigen. See Nen. *HB*, 19, and Mon. *HRB*, “The Prophecy of Merlin,” 113-114.

<sup>335</sup> Whittock, *Celtic Myths and Legends*, 47-48 and H. *PRB*, 182.

<sup>336</sup> Month: Ros. *PC*, 152-153; 15 days: El. *Caes.*, 34.

<sup>337</sup> Whittock, *Celtic Myths and Legends*, 47.

<sup>338</sup> H. *PRB*, 182.

<sup>339</sup> Some of these festivities worth mentioning include: *y nawnos alau* (the nine light nights), which may have been part of *gwyl aust*, a festival which occurs just after the lightest days of the year, Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 193; *mari lwyd* (grey mare) which was practiced as part of a midwinter (Twelfth Night of Christmas) celebration until 1932, according to Owen in Dames, “The Goddess in Wales,” n.p. and Sikes, *British Goblins*, 256; and *calan ebrill* (April 1<sup>st</sup>), which may have celebrated the renewal of natural power (the regrowth of flora and fauna) in times of druidic prominence, both prior to and after Roman occupation, Sikes, *British Goblins*, 274.

from ancient primary source material, but they are important to include as it is assumed that other festivals were celebrated by the Celtic peoples just as the Romans held celebrations for deities on many days of the year.<sup>340</sup> The celebration of Midsummer (between June 21<sup>st</sup>-24<sup>th</sup>) is still observed by many across the world today, and its origins are commonly attributed to an ancient druidic practice.<sup>341</sup> Midsummer was considered by antiquarians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be one of the three ‘Spirit Night’ festivals (the others being Halloween and May Day) which were sacred to the druids and their followers. In the last 30 years, however, this celebration has been attributed to Anglo-Saxon influence because Midsummer is not celebrated to the same extent in Ireland as it is in Britain and the Scandinavian countries.<sup>342</sup> What little is known about these festivities comes from sources which post-date their practice by multiple centuries. Of all the festivals which the Celts practiced during Roman times, the only one to be adopted into the Roman Empire in full was the feast day of the Gallic horse goddess Epona; the rest were simply pushed to the fringes of society.<sup>343</sup> Portable statues and dedications to the goddess Epona as the protector of calvary have been discovered throughout the ancient world.<sup>344</sup> Epona’s main role within Roman worship was that of a of calvary protector. In Celtic tradition, however, Epona was also frequently associated with the Matres as a fertility goddess, and with the Irish Morrigan and Welsh Rhiannon as an Otherworld deity of sovereignty.<sup>345</sup> The symbolic marriage of the ruling king with the goddess of sovereignty was not transferred into Roman religion, but Epona did receive her own feast day in the Roman calendar: December 18<sup>th</sup>.<sup>346</sup> Active worship of Epona

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<sup>340</sup> See footnote 23 for commentary on the use of antiquarian sources in this thesis.

<sup>341</sup> This originally pagan celebration is often observed around the summer solstice, which has survived in the Christian tradition as St. John the Baptist’s Day, which is widely celebrated on June 24<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>342</sup> See Sikes, *British Goblins*, 275, 281 for Midsummer as a druidic festival and H. *PRB*, 183 for Midsummer as an Anglo-Saxon festival.

<sup>343</sup> El. *AWC*, 76. Christianity also incorporated various Celtic pagan traditions, but those are not covered extensively in this paper.

<sup>344</sup> Linduff, “Epona: A Celt Among the Romans,” 817, 820-822 and MacLeod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 47.

<sup>345</sup> Linduff, “Epona,” 832-837, and MacLeod, *Celtic Myth and Religion*, 47.

<sup>346</sup> In some sects of modern Christianity, the 18<sup>th</sup> of December is celebrated as the feast day of Expectation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a Christian symbol of fertility, motherhood, and sovereignty. This date falls within the timeframe that a Midwinter

by Roman calvary in Gaul and along the Roman frontier lasted into the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, while the Insular Celts preserved their equivalents in mythologies and bardic tales which were recorded in the Middle Ages.

Even though the druids were no longer leading their congregations in learning the sacred doctrines or aiding in the connection between gods and sacrifices on behalf of the people, the practices and beliefs managed to survive long enough to be recorded by early Welsh authors in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Animal sacrifice continued into the Roman period, unsupervised due to the banishment of the druidic priests, as a way for the Celtic population of Britain to maintain a connection with their gods. While human sacrifices were outlawed by the Romans, the existence of Lindow Man points to a potential illegal perpetuation of the practice during annual festivals. The main festivals celebrated in Wales were the longest surviving tradition of Celtic practice, since they were still being observed into the modern era, but without the accompanying act of sacrifice.

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celebration would be held. In Wales, there existed a tradition called *mari lwyd* (the grey mare), where the skull of a horse was decorated with favours from young girls and then paraded around the town. Sikes, *British Goblins*, 256-257.



## Conclusion

This study analyzed many different types of historical sources in order to understand how much of the native Celtic religious practices of Wales and the Marches remained untouched by Roman influence. Celtic religion, as found in Welsh urban centres, had merged quite successfully with the practices introduced by the Roman military while they were stationed in Britain. In the rural context it seems that the ancient Celtic oral traditions did not skip any generations and survived as bardic poetry and oral folk tales long enough to be recorded in medieval legends. The information retained in these *chwedlau* include: the idea of the Otherworld and Otherworldly katabases, the transmigration (or rebirth) of the soul, and the importance of the head as a revered object. Bards thrived well into the Middle Ages across Britain, but the druids became less powerful, even after their ‘reappearance’ around 300 CE, surviving mostly in Irish literary tradition until the post-medieval neo-druidic resurgence.<sup>347</sup> The role of the *vates*, as prophets, however, continued to appear in Welsh literature as a practice that was supported by both Celtic and Roman traditions. The role of the prophet also continued to be held by women in the later Irish and Welsh traditions despite being almost completely left out of the Greco-Roman narratives about Celtic religion.

Before the success of Christianity in Britain from around 400 CE, the religious worship in the urban areas of Wales and the Marches had become a cohesive combination of Roman and Celtic religious practices. This amalgamation was only put into place after the Romans removed

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<sup>347</sup> The rise of Christianity, and the stability of the religion in Britain kept at bay most other religions. Piggott, *The Druids*, 123, 160. Society relearned of the druids in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century through the renewed interest in Graeco-Roman literature. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Welshman Edward Williams, under the ‘druidic’ name Iolo Morganwg, began forging documents to prove that the bardic tradition and lore had survived almost 2,000 years untouched by outside influence. These documents perverted the study of ancient druids as it is very difficult to dispel the misinformation completely. This paper has been written with careful avoidance of any documents originating around the time of Iolo Morganwg and any documents associated with him or his followers. For more information on Early Modern and Modern neo-druidism see El. *HDru*, 251-281 and Piggott, *The Druids*, 123-182.

the Celtic religious leaders from their land, forcing the druids and Celtic prophets to worship in secluded areas and non-Roman territories. The worship of the Celtic gods by the Celts and the Romans was mostly done under a combined name or with epithets traditionally associated with the other culture's comparable deity. Sulis-Minerva in Bath and Nodens-Mars in Lydney Park are just two examples of dual deities being worshipped in Roman-style temples built upon Celtic sacred land by both the native and invading populations. In the rural areas, ancient placenames remain as holdovers from ancient culture, and the deities worshiped were also more local (and familial/tribal) as compared to the larger shrines dedicated to the urban deities.<sup>348</sup> Many of the names which survive in *The Mabinogi* do not survive in Wales or England in Latin inscriptions but do survive in ancient contexts in Ireland and on the Continent, demonstrating the survival of divine, heroic, and ancestral names through oral tradition into the Middle Ages.

The burial practices which the Romans 'introduced' to the Isle of Britain were not that different from what was already used by the Celts in some instances. Both cultures routinely used cremation as a method of body disposal, but the Romans also inhumed many of their dead, whereas the Celts preferred to practice disposal through exposure and excarnation by scavengers, especially carrion-eating corvids. The Roman practices of body disposal caused a shift in the way that the native Celts disposed of their dead, where many began to be inhumed underground, and instances of cremation increased substantially, leading to the survival of many more burial sites than prior to Roman intervention throughout Wales and the Marches. The new preference for underground burial can be attributed to the liminality of the space, which the Celts of Wales usually ascribed to watery depths or very deep shafts, including wells. In urban centres, this shift

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<sup>348</sup> The survival of the Welsh language itself suggests that successive waves of invaders (Romans, Anglo-Saxons, and Normans) did not eradicate the pre-existing culture. This can also be seen in other surviving Celtic-descended areas: Cornwall, Isle of Man, Scotland, Ireland, and Brittany (France).

in practices can be seen along side the shifting of ritual beliefs culminating in Romano-British style burials. Many graves dating to the Roman period have been discovered with both Roman goods, such as coins for payment to the Roman gods, and Celtic wares, usually left as gifts between the dead's feet for the Celtic deities. Many of the graves also include more mundane objects, such as food and shoes, needed for awakening in the next life. A belief in the Otherworld as a place where souls live on as mortal beings before returning to this world, outlasted the Roman occupation of Britain. The cyclical nature of life which was a common Celtic belief continued to be passed down in bardic tales as a separate idea to that of the Graeco-Roman underworld where only underworld gods lived, and criminals were punished.

Criminals in the Celtic world were not given proper burial in order to deny them entrance into the Otherworld, and in some cases were used as human sacrifices during religious festivals. While the idea of sacrificing to the gods was held in common by most ancient religions, the Romans highly disapproved of the Celtic practice of sacrificing people, whether this was a common annual occurrence, or one held for times of crisis. Festivals and celebrations seem to have remained relatively separate and unaffected by the Roman invasion beyond the banning of human sacrifice. The realm of cults and worship seems to be the place when the Celtic religion made its mark on Roman religion when the Roman calvary adopted the cult to the goddess Epona. The four quarter day festivals celebrated by both the Irish and British appear to retain most of their Celtic elements and no specifically Roman components. Due to their absence from Roman written sources, these festivals may have been Irish imports, but it is also just as likely that the Romans just neglected to record the importance of the seasonal festivals, as they also had their own seasonal festivals and nothing nefarious occurred at these Celtic fêtes.

This paper has used a variety of sources, including Roman written and epigraphic evidence, material evidence found in burials and shrines, and medieval renditions of native Welsh tales, as it is meant to reopen the discussion on the subject of Celtic religion in Wales. More work needs to be done in trying to understand the mystical druids and bards who inhabited the Western part of the British Isles, beyond what was posited by various Christian antiquarians who, like the Romans, forced the Celtic practices and beliefs to fit into their own mental categories and used monotheistic ideas to describe completely foreign polytheistic concepts. Each section of this thesis could and should be explored further in hopes of understanding the Celts on their own in Antiquity and into the Early Middle Ages, and how more specifically the religion evolved into the Romano-Celtic religion which existed in urban Britain until the first mass conversion of Christianity.

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## Glossary of Welsh and Irish Terms

- afon:** Welsh for river.
- Afon Dyfrdwy:** the River Dee; associated with the goddess Deva.
- Afon Gwy:** the River Wye; associated with the goddess Vaga.
- Afon Hafren:** the River Severn; associated with the goddess Sabrina.
- Annwn, Annwfn:** name given to the Otherworld which appears in the *Mabinogi*.
- Beli:** he is the husband of *Don* in the *Mabinogi*. Is often associated with light especially during the festival of Beltane, *Cai mai*, as well as the transport of souls to the Otherworld across a water passage.
- bedwen:** Welsh word for a maypole.
- Bendigeidfran:** the name used in the *Mabinogi* for the hero Bran.
- Bran:** a prominent Insular Celtic god, usually associated with the raven, who has strong ties to Wales and Ireland. His severed head is one of the *Concealments of the Island of Britain*.
- Branwen:** a heroic figure who features in the *Mabinogi* and the *Trioedd ynys Prydein*.
- Brigantia:** the eve of February 1<sup>st</sup>, the Brythonic name for the festival *Imbolic*, St. Brigid's Day in modern Ireland, followed by Candlemas, *Gŵyl y Canhwyllau*.
- Brigit, Brigid:** the Irish names for the goddess who was worshiped at the *Imbolic* (*Brigantia*) festival. Brigid became a Christian saint in the Middle Ages and many sacred wells are associated with her.
- Caer Sidi:** the name given for the Otherworld when Gwydion went on his katabasis.
- Calan ebrill:** the eve of April 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Calan gaeaf:** the eve of November 1<sup>st</sup>, the Welsh name for the festival of Samhain, modern day Halloween.
- Calan mai, calan haf:** the eve of May 1<sup>st</sup>, May Day or the Welsh name of the festival of Beltane.
- Cerridwen:** a Welsh figure who is portrayed as a goddess, sorceress, and fairy, in various descriptions. She inhabits *Llyn Tegid* and is known as the mother of Taliesin. Her name also appears spelled *Ceridwen* in some texts.
- chwedleuwr:** traditional Welsh storyteller.
- chwedlau:** Welsh tales maintained in the oral tradition by a *chwedleuwr*.

<b><i>Cornovii:</i></b>	Celtic tribe located in the English Midlands along the Welsh border.
<b><i>cluiche eaintech:</i></b>	Irish funerary games.
<b><i>cyfarwyddyd:</i></b>	traditional oral lore; means ‘the guide.’
<b><i>Decangi:</i></b>	Celtic tribe in Flintshire (north-east Wales and the Marches).
<b><i>Demetae:</i></b>	Celtic tribe in Dyfed County (south-western Wales).
<b><i>Dobunni:</i></b>	Celtic tribe inhabiting the areas in the Severn Valley including Lydney Park, the Forest of Dean, and Bath in the Costwolds before the migration of the Belgae peoples from the Continent.
<b><i>Don:</i></b>	the Welsh equivalent to <i>Danu</i> the primary goddess of the Continental Celts.
<b><i>dryw, derwydd:</i></b>	Welsh for druid.
<b><i>Epona:</i></b>	the Continental and Insular Celtic horse goddess. Her cult is the only one which the Romans incorporated into their own religious practices away from the provinces.
<b><i>faith:</i></b>	Irish for prophet or seer, equivalent to Welsh <i>gwawdawr</i> .
<b><i>Ffraid:</i></b>	the Welsh name for the goddess <i>Brigit/Brigid</i> . Worshipped during the <i>Brigantia</i> festival.
<b><i>gaeaf:</i></b>	Welsh cold season.
<b><i>Gangani:</i></b>	Celtic tribe who inhabited the Llŷn Peninsula in Northern Wales.
<b><i>Gofannan:</i></b>	brother of the god <i>Lludd</i> . Is a deity who appears in Irish and Welsh mythology but not in any extant dedications or inscriptions.
<b><i>gwawdawr:</i></b>	Welsh for <i>vates</i> or prophets, equivalent to Irish <i>faith</i> .
<b><i>gweledydd:</i></b>	Welsh for bards.
<b><i>Gwyl aust, calan awst:</i></b>	feast of August, Welsh name for the festival of Lughnasa which is an extended festival for either 2 weeks or 1 month and ends August 15 <sup>th</sup> .
<b><i>Gwyn:</i></b>	he is the son of <i>Nudd</i> in the <i>Mabinogi</i> and is often compared to the important Irish father-god Dagda.
<b><i>haf:</i></b>	Welsh warm season.
<b><i>Hwrch Ddu Gwla, yr:</i></b>	mythical Black Sow which features during <i>calan gaeaf</i> .
<b><i>Iceni:</i></b>	Celtic tribe in East Anglia ruled by the warrior Queen Boudica.
<b><i>Lleu:</i></b>	the “long-handed” or “skillful handed” deity appears in the <i>Mabinogi</i> as the son of two of <i>Don</i> ’s children, Arianrhod and Gwydion. Equivalent to

the Gallic *Lugus* and the Irish *Lugh*, who is the recipient of the festival *Lughnasa*, *Gwyl aust*.

- Lludd, Nudd:*** a Welsh god in the *Mabinogi* who is often associated with the deity *Nodens* worshiped at Lydney Park.
- llyn:*** Welsh for river.
- Llyr:*** the father of the important *Mabinogi* heroes *Bran*, *Branwen*, and *Manawyddan*. A deity who appears in Irish and Welsh mythology but not in any extant dedications or inscriptions.
- Mabinogi:*** a collection of medieval tales and short romances believed to be retellings of older oral stories. Although the English translations have been entitled *The Mabinogion*, this is erroneous, and the correct nominative plural form is *Mabinogi*.
- Mabon:*** the Welsh god of youth who undertakes a coming-of-age tale in the *Mabinogi*.
- Madron:*** the Welsh Mother goddess who appears in the *Mabinogi*.
- Manawyddan:*** son of the god *Llyr*. A deity who appears in Irish and Welsh mythology but not in any extant dedications or inscriptions.
- mari lwyd:*** the grey mare which features during the Welsh midwinter festival.
- nawnos alau, Y:*** nine light nights also feature during *gwyl aust*.
- Nodens:*** a god worshiped at Lydney Park and often associated with the Roman Mars. *Nodens* is often thought to be an equivalent to the Welsh god *Lludd/Nudd*.
- Nos Galan Gaea:*** night after *calan gaeaf*.
- Ordovices:*** Celtic tribe in Gwynedd County in central Wales.
- Rhiannon:*** the Welsh heroic version of the goddess *Epona* and the Irish *Macha*. She was the princess of the Otherworld in the *Mabinogi* and married into the family of *Don*.
- sedd, seddi:*** Welsh fairy mounds; means 'seat.'
- Silures:*** Celtic tribe in South Wales.
- Sulis:*** the goddess worshiped with the Roman Minerva at Bath, aptly named *Aquae Sulis* by the Romans.
- Taliesin:*** a medieval Welsh bard. His name is sometimes spelled *Taliessin*.

***Tech Duinn:***

Irish name for House of Donn, another name for the Otherworld. Other locations in Irish mythology that have Otherworld connections include: *Magh Mell* (Plain of Happiness), *Tir na mBeo* (Land of the Living), *Magh Da Cheo* (Plain of two Mists), *Tir fo Thuinn* (Land Under the Wave), *Hy-Breasail* (Breasal's Island), *Hy-Falga* (Falga's Island), *Dun Scaith* (Fortress of Shadows), *Tir na tSamhraidh* (Land of Summer), *Tir tairnigiri* (Land of Promise), and *Asa* (Truth or Paradise).

***Ynys Môn:***

Isle of Mona to the Romans and Anglesey to the English.